

interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

January 1985

Volume 13 Number 1

- 1 David Bolotin Socrates' Critique of Hedonism: a Reading of the *Philebus*
- 15 Arlene W. Saxonhouse The Net of Hephaestus: Aristophanes' Speech in Plato's *Symposium*
- 33 Marlo Lewis, Jr. An Interpretation of Plato's *Euthyphro* (Part I, Section 4, to end)
- 67 Donald J. Maletz An Introduction to Hegel's "Introduction" to the *Philosophy of Right*
- 91 Joseph J. Carpino On Laughter
- Discussion*
- 103 Angelo M. Codevilla De Gaulle as a Political Thinker: on Morrissey's *Reflections on De Gaulle*
- 113 Will Morrissey Reply to Codevilla
- Book Review*
- 119 Nino Langiulli *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* by Richard Rorty

interpretation

Volume 13 number 1

Editor-in-Chief Hilail Gildin

Editors Seth G. Benardete • Charles E. Butterworth • Hilail Gildin • Robert Horwitz • Howard B. White (d.1974)

Consulting Editors John Hallowell • Wilhelm Hennis • Erich Hula • Arnaldo Momigliano • Michael Oakeshott • Ellis Sandoz • Leo Strauss (d.1973) • Kenneth W. Thompson

Associate Editors Fred Baumann • Patrick Coby • Christopher A. Colmo • Derek Cross • Edward J. Erler • Maureen Feder-Marcus • Joseph E. Goldberg • Pamela K. Jensen • Will Morrisey • Charles Rubin • Leslie Rubin • John A. Wettergreen • Bradford Wilson • Catherine Zuckert • Michael Zuckert

Assistant Editors Marianne C. Grey • Laurette G. Hupman

Design & Production Martyn Hitchcock

Annual
subscription rates individual \$13; institutional \$16; student (3-year limit) \$7. *INTERPRETATION* appears three times a year.

Address
for correspondence *INTERPRETATION*, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y. 11367, U.S.A.

Authors submitting manuscripts for publication in *INTERPRETATION* are requested to follow the *MLA Style Sheet* and to send clear and readable copies of their work.

Copyright 1985 • Interpretation

The Net of Hephaestus: Aristophanes' Speech in Plato's *Symposium*

ARLENE W. SAXONHOUSE

University of Michigan

Socrates especially praises that the city be one, a unity he says to be the work (*ἔργον*) of love (*τῆς φιλίας*) just as in the speeches about love (*ἔρωτικοῖς λόγοις*) we know that Aristophanes says how on account of their strong love (*διὰ τὸ σφόδρα φιλεῖν*) lovers (*ἔρώντων*) are eager to grow together and become one instead of two. In such a case it is necessary that both or one be destroyed, but in a city it is necessary that love (*τῆν φιλίαν*) become watery on account of the community and one will least of all say "mine" whether it be a son for a father or a father for a son.

—Aristotle, *Politics*, Book II (1262^b9–17)¹

Socrates' mistake, according to Aristotle, is that he fails to distinguish between lovers and cities. For us, the distinction is obvious. Lovers are two people devoted to each other, ready to say, "Yes, we want it," if offered the net of Hephaestus which would bind them together for an eternity. The city encompasses many people and its expanse must "water down" the intensity of the passion felt between lovers.² Love is the desire to appropriate someone else, make him or her your own, to obliterate the distinctions between you. The city as we know it evokes no such intensity, no such specificity. We may feel fond of "the city"; we may even become, as Pericles urges his Athenians to do, *ἔρασταί* of the city in our defense of it or pride in it, but we cannot visualize a unity with and appropriation of the city in the way that we can visualize such a unity with a lover. Sexuality is not part of our relationship with the city. However, for the Socrates and the Aristophanes of Plato the passion is the same. It is the passion for unity, the creation of one out of more than one, the desire to overcome our individual inadequacies and incompleteness through a union with another or many others. While sexuality may not be a part of relationship with the city, it arises from the same source: our needfulness of others.

Greek philosophy developed among the pre-Socratics from a concern with the relationship between the one and the many, the eternal and the changing. The problem of politics (and the problem of lovers) is precisely the same—the relation of the one and the many—how individual units (people, families, villages,

The author gratefully acknowledges financial support for work on this paper from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan.

1. The terms *ἔρως* and *φιλία* appear interchangeable here. According to Dover (1980; p. 50, n. 20) they are not distinct in the classical period.

2. Aristotle is not so concerned with the watering down of love as he is with the consequences of that watering down, that is, impiety.

states) can be transformed through the casting on of some unseen net into a unified whole. *E pluribus unum* is not a meaningless phrase. It reveals the fundamental political question, whether we are talking about contemporary federalism, monarchy, or the ancient polis. Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium* suggests why we must engage in that quest for unity, while Aristotle's reservations suggest why the solution which Aristophanes seems to offer for his lovers and Socrates for his city is unsatisfactory for both. The intensity of the desire for unity that both Aristophanes and Socrates appear to encourage is self-destructive in its abstraction from bodily limits—that which defines our separation from others. Aristotle in his turn encourages moderation and the wise rejection of the net when offered, for he refuses to separate body and soul or to suggest that complete unity without death is possible.

But why does Plato give to both Socrates describing the city and Aristophanes describing lovers the same drive, the eros for unity? While Aristotle in his moderation is clearly correct to espy the differences between lovers and cities, for Plato the differences seem to be less significant than the similarity. Both reveal the needfulness of the human species, the inability of the individual to be self-sufficient. One's eros is an acknowledgment of that inadequacy; at the same time, it is a desire for one's true form, one's *εἶδος*, a condition in which there is no needfulness.

Thomas Hobbes, an early spokesman for the modern period, rejected the notion of our true form or *εἶδος*. There is no *summum bonum*, no *finis ultimus*, (he tells us in *Leviathan*) such as the philosophers of old described. Neither lovers nor cities help us to attain our *εἶδος*, since for Hobbes that *εἶδος* does not exist. Our sociability comes not from the pain which drives us to seek our *εἶδος*, a pain which Aristophanes—and the Diotima of Socrates—equate with love, but from the pain of conflict. Associations of lovers or cities for the Platonic characters assuage the pain we feel in our recognition of our distance from an unattainable perfection—an individual wholeness. Moderns begin with individual wholeness, with men like atoms in a void, where others stand as impediments to our happy enjoyment of the goods around us. The natural condition for us of the modern period is one of a-sociability. Aristotle and Plato's Socrates and Aristophanes would all agree that sociability, one's natural drive toward union with another, is necessary for human completion, that sociability is natural. Where Plato's characters and Aristotle disagree would be how widely and how tightly the net is to be cast, not on the source of our desire for it.

The story of the net of Hephaestus is told in the *Odyssey* by the singer Demodocus to entertain Odysseus, a guest in the palace of Alcinoos. It is the story of the secret love affair of Ares and Aphrodite, the wife of Hephaestus. Alerted to this affair Hephaestus goes to his smithy and hammers out a net "thin like spider webs, which not even one of the blessed gods could see," which he hangs over the bed to catch the two lovers in their act of love. They are trapped "so neither of them could stir a limb or get up," unable to escape their pleasure or their

shame. All the gods, though not the goddesses, come to observe and laugh uncontrollably. All laugh, that is, except Hermes who when asked by Apollo as to whether he “caught tight in these strong fastenings would be willing to sleep in bed by the side of Aphrodite the golden,” responds that he only wishes it could be he with “thrice the number of endless fastenings and even with all the gods and goddesses looking on” (VII.266–366). For him even shame cannot limit the desire for unity with the beautiful. Our partiality or incompleteness leads towards this desire for union with others and more specifically others who are beautiful as Aphrodite is in body, if not in character. The net of Hephaestus would ensure the permanence of that union, the cessation of our desire to be complete and bound with beauty. We would all want it—or would we?

The lame Hephaestus understands more than swift Hermes. For Hephaestus says to Zeus and the other gods: “I think they will not go on lying thus even for a little, / much though they are in love, I think they will have no wish / for sleep, but then my fastenings—and my snare will contain them.” Sexual intercourse assuages the longing for completion which haunts those who are partial, but only momentarily: the pleasure passes with the act itself. Sexuality so ignored by modern liberal theorists announces vividly our incompleteness, our dependence on others, but it is only one sign of that characteristic human partiality and its transitory resolution is not a final answer. As the tragic playwrights of the ancient stage show us, seldom if ever can we find that union which will make us whole, complete in unity with beauty. The vision of a human telos carries with it its own tragic knowledge that it can never be achieved by mortals limited by the boundaries of their bodies. Sexuality illustrates sharply the inadequacy of a union dependent on bodies. It is of course the comic poet who most vividly portrays us as bodily creatures and thereby shows us the limits of our endeavors.

Aristophanes has made us laugh often. He has shown us fantastical images and feats on the Attic stage, images of men as they could never be—transformed into birds, sailing to heaven on dung beetles, returning from Hades to defend their poetry. Along with these fantastic images, he shows us ourselves, as we would not like to see ourselves. By focusing on our bodies he reveals how ugly we really are at the same time that he evokes our laughter at our own ugliness. We become as we watch an Aristophanic comedy vividly aware of our bodily functions which transform our amazing potential on the comic stage into grotesque expressions of our dependence on our physical bodies, bent and crooked bodies, bodies in need of being filled and in need of being purged, bodies needing to be scratched or soothed.

Aristophanes in the *Symposium* is transformed into one of his own comic characters, one who is stuffed and then emptied. But Plato does not only turn Aristophanes into a buffoon in the dialogue. He turns Aristophanes’ comedy into tragedy and thus turns Aristophanes’ speech into the work of an ugly tragedian. The final question of the dialogue, whether one person can write both tragedy

and comedy, is answered in the affirmative by the portrayal within the dialogue of Aristophanes. The tragic poet on the Attic stage shows to the Athenians their mortality, their distance from the divine. But in the process, he makes mortals beautiful as they struggle against the net of necessity that surrounds them. The piety of the tragedian is evident in his respect for that divine power which we cannot conquer. Aristophanes under the control of the Platonic literary art is transformed into a tragedian who evokes fear and pity with his praise of love; he does this not with beauty, though, but through the depiction of what is ugly. The tale he tells here is a grotesque one filled with absurd images which offend the decorum the other speakers had shown even in their descriptions of indecorous actions. Unlike his brother dramatists, Aristophanes here does not uplift us with the beauty of our necessary tragedy. Plato plays the ultimate trick on Aristophanes: he leaves him without the beauty and gentleness of the prize winning Agathon, and yet makes his speech a tragic portrayal of the human condition. Eryximachus, the doctor, the technician, reacts to Aristophanes' speech: he says that Aristophanes has spoken sweetly or cutely (*ἡδέως*, 193e4). The unpoetic doctor fails to recognize the tragedy that Plato's Aristophanes intends and that Aristotle understands when he describes the Aristophanic lovers. The passion which arises from our incompleteness can only be satisfied by our death.

Aristophanes appears briefly at the beginning of the dialogue to admit to his excesses of the night before, his drowning, as he phrases it, in drink (176b4). But his true entrance comes at the point at which he is to speak after the first two of several elegant orations: "Aristodemus said it was necessary (*δεῖν*) that Aristophanes speak, but there chanced (*τυχεῖν*) to come upon him a certain hiccough from some fullness or other cause and he was not able to speak" (185c5–7). The hiccoughs of Aristophanes have caused many a commentator to reflect on the significance of the change in the order of the speeches. For our purposes, we need merely note on one level that they are a sign of Aristophanes' bondage to his body. Most of the others at Agathon's house are similarly controlled by their bodies—a bondage which has allowed them this evening to discourse on the topic of love. Like Cephalus, they are not true lovers of speech; they turn to logos because the avenues of bodily satisfaction have been closed to them by earlier excesses and the current weakness of their bodies.

However, the hiccoughs also change the orderly progression of the speeches and introduce the theme of *τύχη*. Chance appears to place Eryximachus and Aristophanes in direct counterpoint with each other. Their speeches become a pair—offering opposing visions of reality and the place of humanity, *τέχνη* and politics in the world. Eryximachus talks about order, the *κόσμος* (187d5), the beauty and harmony of that order. Occasionally that order must be reasserted through the efforts of the doctor's craft, but order is for Eryximachus the natural condition. And yet the hiccoughs of Aristophanes had come by chance, disrupting the order of the speeches which had been agreed to in an orderly vote of

the dinner party. The hiccoughs need to be treated by creating yet more disharmony, the tickling and the sneezing to which Aristophanes must subject himself as the doctor discourses on the harmony of the universe. Eryximachus with his vision of a natural harmony and a benevolent nature is the sugar coating for the harsh reality that Aristophanes has to teach us about love and ourselves, about the inadequacy of medicine as practiced by doctors of the body, and about the tyranny of nature. While Eryximachus talks about order, Aristophanes reveals human suffering (*πάθος*). It is the comic poet who shows love to be indeed a doctor (189d1; 191d2; 193d5) as Eryximachus could never do.

Eryximachus, who envisioned nature as inherently harmonious, ignored political life. Indeed, he made politics irrelevant. Politics as the resolution of conflict, as the choice of actions, as the protection of the city can be ignored for the doctor's art assures us that that order exists by nature. Opposites complement each other and are drawn by nature into a harmonious whole. Aristophanes' nature illustrates none of this harmony. His own body is not harmonious and the nature he describes demands political life as a means to work against the chaotic world which arises from our individual incompleteness and the disharmony within ourselves which the doctor cannot always easily heal. At the beginning of his speech Eryximachus suggests that he will complete the speech offered by Pausanias, whose own speech was not sufficiently completed (*οὐχ ἱκανῶς ἀπετέλεσε*, 185d7–186a1). Eryximachus initially has a vision of the world in which completion is possible; it is necessary that he try to put an end (*τέλος*) to the speech (186a1). At the conclusion of his speech Eryximachus no longer pretends to completion. The order he has posited, the possible comprehension of the whole is placed in question as he suggests now that Aristophanes fill in (*ἀναπληρῶσαι*) what he, Eryximachus, has left out (188e3). Aristophanes abhors a vacuum; any emptiness offends. His comedies parody men (and women) eager to fill up the holes in their bodies. But as he fills up the holes in Eryximachus' speech, he makes more apparent the incompleteness of the human form and thus the impossibility of ever achieving the harmony and filling in which Eryximachus' reflections assume. Aristophanes' destruction of this vision will set the scene for Socrates' more elaborate account of the harmony which eventually arises from and transcends the bodily disharmony Aristophanes describes.³

Let us now begin to look at the actual speech of Aristophanes. The task which Aristophanes sets for himself is to discover the power (*δύναμις*, 189c5, d4) of love; he specifically does not talk of good love and bad love, of heavenly love and earthly love as the two previous speakers had. All three previous speakers had given to love a moral value, seen it within the context of virtue and vice. Aristophanes eschews such an approach. Throughout his comedies he had sug-

3. Edelstein (1945) makes a valiant effort to resurrect Eryximachus before generations of readers who have scoffed at this pompous doctor. The argument from the perspective of dramatic role is persuasive—but it falls short when considered in conjunction with what exactly Eryximachus says.

gested the problem of establishing a standard capable of objective verification according to which we might be able to measure what is good and bad. He does not pretend to discover one here either. Rather, his concern in this speech is with the conflict between men and gods, love's role in making men powerful against divinity and the alien hostile forces that tyrannize men.

Aristophanes begins by describing love as most friendly to mankind, *φιλανθρωπότατος* (189c8–d1). In Greek thought Prometheus was the famous philanthropist. The story of Prometheus is told twice in Hesiod's poems; in both, Prometheus' role is to heighten the conflict between men and gods. As he helps men, he does nothing to assuage the gods' hostility towards them. Prometheus in his love for mankind had given them the fire he stole. He thereby gave them the power to survive on their own, to learn to tame the natural forces of the gods and to become civilized rather than bestial creatures. Thus both Prometheus and Aristophanes' Eros show their philanthropy by helping men in opposition to the hostile divinity. Aristophanes mentions at the beginning of his speech that love should have the sacrifices, the temples, the altars which men reserve for the gods. He is replacing the Olympian divinities with a truly philanthropic force which works towards the easing of pain rather than its exacerbation. The inversion is captured by the notion that we are to be "initiated" into an understanding of love's power.⁴ The phrase recalls the mystery religions. Both Pausanias and Eryximachus in their praise of love found the good love in the heavenly love, rather than the popular love. They looked towards the Olympians—the gods of the city—for their model of their orderly noble homosexual relations, not towards the popular religious forces with all their passionate human frenzy. Aristophanes rejects the Olympian visions. The love he describes is passionate; it does not justify itself through reason or with appeals to the noble and orderly. It is a power, a primal force which does not depend on the Olympians' approval. He intends to educate others, make them teachers ready to proselytize to others about the power of love. All men are to learn that love, like Prometheus, is *φιλόανθρωπος* and that Aristophanes is his prophet.⁵

In order to describe the power of love and explain its philanthropy Aristophanes turns not to psychology, not to armies nor to female seers, but to the fantastical images which are the mark of his trade. Specifically he turns to the image of the human being as he once was—or could have been only in the imaginings of an Aristophanes. Aristophanes offers us a picture of a changing human nature. The past was different from the present and the present may be different from the future. Human nature is not static. In the past, in what I shall call Time A, there were according to Aristophanes' mythology three sexes—the double

4. Bury (1909; p. 56) translates *εισηγήσασθαι* (189d3) as "initiate into."

5. Cf. Rosen (1968; pp. 144–45) on Prometheus. However, I disagree profoundly with Rosen's claim that Aristophanes' speech is filled with "philothoism" for the Olympians and that his "philothoism is the same as his patriotism" (p. 121).

male, the double female, and the hermaphrodite.⁶ Now there are only two, the male and the female. Who knows how many there will be in the future?

This portrait of the changing human form raises important questions about the status of nature, the φύσις, of the human being. If human nature is changing, where are we to find our standard of the good human form? The problem is suggested by Aristophanes himself. The term “androgynē” which once described one of the three sexes is simply a term of reproach now (189e2–5).⁷ What once existed by nature as a natural human form has been destroyed. Perhaps a new form of human perfection has yet to arise. When the Sophists introduced the conflict between nature and convention, φύσις and νόμος, φύσις was seen as permanent, the standard by which we could evaluate good and bad; unlike the variable world of νόμοι, it offered a measure which might be true in Persia and in Greece. With his myth, Aristophanes raises questions about that measure. Is the standard to be what once was by nature—or what is now by nature? Is the human form understood by what we see around us today—and beauty defined by the perfection of that form—or can we, must we look elsewhere for an understanding of perfection? Are we left by Aristophanes mired in a world of relativity?

It is at this point that eros enters into Aristophanes’ analysis, for it is eros that tells us what our true nature is, that drives us towards our ancient perfection. The contemporary human form is not the true form, not the real τέλος according to Aristophanes, because it is a form characterized by a sense of loss, of pain, of what Aristophanes chooses to call love. Love is worthy of being honored because it alerts us to what we really are—halves—and shows us what we can strive to be—wholes instead of partial beings at a distance from our true selves. Pausanias and Eryximachus had tried to separate good and bad loves according to their own prejudices. Pausanias had tried to justify his vision of the good love with an appeal to virtue, but as his own reporting of the varied customs throughout Greece suggests, virtue is not easily identified within the city. Eryximachus had found his vision of good love in order—an order that had been belied by Aristophanes’ own hiccoughs. Aristophanes turns away from these good and bad loves and instead finds in love the drive to become again what we once were. The evaluative standards of the two previous speakers is rejected and ancient nature becomes again the standard. We know that it is the true, final form because love forces us to seek, to recover it. The drive or longing (πόθος) that love is comes from the pain (πάθος) of our present state, and it is pain that uncovers truth (191a5–6).⁸

Why then for Aristophanes is our ancient form our τέλος? It is a form without ἔρωσ (pain) because it is self-complete. Its spherical shape indicates the absence

6. As Neumann (1966; p. 421) notes there are problems with using the phrase “double-male” since the original beings were not double, which implies divisibility, but unified unities.

7. Cf. Aristophanes’ own *Thesmophoriazousae* for a portrayal of Agathon as such a shameful androgynē.

8. Consider the frequent references to pain and truth in Alcibiades’ speech.

of a beginning or an end. It requires nothing more to be complete.⁹ There is no interdependence among the spherical bodies. They do not need each other, even for the sake of procreation. The absence of need makes them divine rather than human. Their perfection makes them the models towards which humans can strive, that is, the gods we have now are inferior representations of perfection. The ancient spherical beings, our ancestors, are our true gods. There is no political life among these ancient beings. There are no families. Both cities and families (and lovers) indicate the absence of perfection. Both reveal men as needful creatures who cannot survive or procreate on their own. Political life and families arise from a sense of partiality, something these spherical creatures do not feel.

The sense of completion and wholeness gives to these ancient creatures, in addition to their wondrous strength and speed, terrible thoughts and proud looks.¹⁰ What are these great thoughts? Rebellion against the gods. In their completion and fullness they no longer need the gods as the mortals of later time, those to whom Aristophanes speaks, shall. Wholeness opens the door for impiety because it raises the question of our need for the divinities. When men are partial, piety re-enters as a confirmation of our inadequacy and dependence on others. Pride comes from the arrogance of completion, not from a sense of inadequacy and it is this pride that leads the ancient beings to contemplate an attack on the gods. They do not attack the gods because they desire to have what the gods have. They rise up because their completion engenders arrogance.¹¹

Aristophanes compares the rebellion against the immortals to the actions of Ephialtes and Otus. The story is told in the *Odyssey* where we learn that these two were giants even as children and that they “made threats/ against the immortal gods on Olympus, that they would carry/ the turmoil of battle with all its many sorrows against them” (XI.312–14) [Lattimore trans.]. However, we cannot ignore a different story told about these two in the *Iliad*. There we learn of Dione, comforting Aphrodite who has been injured by the mortal Diomedes. Dione remarks on the pains that the gods on Olympus must suffer from mortals: “Ares had to endure it when strong Ephialtes and Otus/ sons of Aloeus, chained him in bonds that were too strong for him/ and three months and ten he lay chained in the brazen cauldron;/ and now might Ares, insatiable of fighting have perished” had he not been rescued at the last moment by Hermes (v.375–91) [Lattimore trans.]. What portrait of the gods is painted in this story? The three and ten months that Ares remained chained is a period without conflict among

9. Cf. Nussbaum (1979; p. 139 and p. 171, n. 13) for her discussion of the spherical creatures and their relationship to Xenophanes’ and Aristotle’s conceptions of divinity.

10. Bury (1909; p. 58) translates τὰ φρονήματα μεγάλα (190b6) as “high-minded” or “proud looks.”

11. We cannot here ignore the question of Socratic piety—the completion which Socrates achieves prepares him to revolt against the Olympian gods. Consider how Socrates is called arrogant (hubristic) in this dialogue (175e2; 215b7; 219c5), how impervious he is to Alcibiades’ affections, and how in this dialogue he claims to know (177d6–7).

mortals. Ares' release unleashes again the pains and sufferings of war. The gods do not only give gifts to mortals; they are the cause of much hardship (as the story of Prometheus shows as well). Had the assault of Otus and Ephialtes been successful, they would have accomplished great things. Had the assault of the high-minded spherical beings been successful, they too would have accomplished great things, for example, eternal happiness and the absence of pain (πάθος/πόθος) for mortals.¹²

The spherical humans of Time A were not successful in their revolt. The gods met in counsel to discourse on how to counter the attack. The gods here, in contrast to the spherical rebels, appear human, with political institutions. They depend on men to give them honors and to send them sacrifices. The human gods must defend themselves against the divine mortals. To do this they must become politicized. Their dependency on others leads to the development of political life. Had they not needed men, they simply could have disregarded men and killed them all off. The challenge put before them is to keep men alive at the same time that men are made their servants. The solution to the gods' dilemma is arrived at by Zeus who in most human and ungodly fashion devises a plan which makes humans weaker at the same time that it makes them more numerous.¹³ It is a plan which forces men into families and into political life, that is, makes them similar to the gods ruling over them. The first step in this process leading to what I shall call Time B is the famous splitting of the round human beings in half. Zeus is to make humans as partial and incomplete as he is. They can no longer have proud thoughts since all the attention is now focused on what they lack—their partner, their other half. From unity they have become divided—from one many and in multiplicity there is weakness.

While they were spherical, these beings were associated with the heavenly bodies, the double men with the sun, the hermaphrodites with the moon, the double women with the earth. They were luminous in their divine origins.¹⁴ Upon being split by the fearful Olympians they are transformed into lowly objects—objects such as one might find on the dinner table of a poor peasant. They are like an egg split by a hair, or they are like flat fish and when Apollo applies his healing art they are compared to a sow's bladder. As a result of their slicing, they move from the heavenly realm to the mundane world of food. Apollo is the one who refashions these new human shapes and works much like a shoemaker with a last. He leaves a few wrinkles around the navel to remind humans of the "ancient suffering," as Aristophanes puts it. But the language is not precise. The suffering is present, what we feel now and have felt since the slicing. What is

12. We should also consider here the tale of rebellion Aristophanes tells in *The Birds*.

13. Bury (1909; p. 59) suggests the irony of Zeus the omniscient "cudgel(ing) his brains over the business!"

14. Neuman (1966; p. 422) suggests that the heavenly bodies indicate the barbarian proclivities of these spherical beings, descendants of divinities worshipped by non-Greeks. However, we must consider these divinities in contrast to what they become.

ancient—and now lost—is a sense of completion and wholeness. The heads of the split beings are turned around so that men are to be constantly reminded by the sight of these ugly wrinkles of what they had been and of the power of the gods to destroy that human perfection.

The tale of Aristophanes is the tale of the conflict between men and gods—the warring which must go on with the niggardly gods. Throughout the speech Aristophanes urges us to be pious, but he himself is not pious. He mocks and belittles the gods at the same time that he invokes a piety based on fear. The humans viewing their cut forms accept the rule of Zeus, but the order then comes from terror and not from love as Eryximachus pictures it. The tickling of Aristophanes' nose and his consequent sneezing created order. Order is bought at a price which often is not pleasant to pay (189a3–4). Zeus with his plan brings about order by destroying an ancient unity. He is a tyrant controlling others for his own self-interest, the honors he desires and the sacrifices he craves. Our navels and the wrinkles around them serve the same function as men hanged in the city square or heads on stakes at the outskirts of the city do. They remind us of the power of the tyrant to destroy those who threaten his position. Our simple navel which enters human history at the same time as eros reveals our dependence on divine authority. It reminds us of our former glory and high thoughts, as well as our present inadequacy and dependence on others, humans as well as gods. Eros is our response to the tyranny of Zeus. Our honor for love is our only form of rebellion against the tyranny of the gods left to us.

As often happens, however, the tyrannical exercise of power misfires. The suffering which Zeus creates in his subjects is too great. The screws are being twisted too tightly. The people cannot respond to a tyrant so violent; all they can acknowledge is their pain. Zeus' aims are thwarted as men fail to give him his desired honors and sacrifices; they spend their time instead searching for their other half, the wholeness they once had. Instead of having twice as many servants, as he had initially anticipated, Zeus now has none. Humans so busy pursuing their mates not only ignore the gods, they ignore their own bodies' demands for food and rest. The human race in Time B is dying off.

Again Zeus devises a *μηχανή*: sexual procreation. The *πάθος* and *πόθος* which had controlled the half-beings in their search for their mate up to this point had been asexual. The longing for unity with another had had nothing to do with genital contact. When they had met their mate—or one that they hoped might be their mate—they would stand with their arms around one another, ignoring all need for food, clothing and shelter. The pain of separation had overridden all other pains. Procreation in Time B had been accomplished from the earth—not from each other, that is, not sexually, but by autochthony.

We can question whether there was procreation in Time A. The spherical beings are described as *ἐκγονον* of the heavenly bodies, but no reference is made to birth among these creatures. The absence of generation is an indication of their original perfection. Seth Benardete (1963) in his article on Plato's *Statesman* dis-

cusses with regard to that dialogue the obvious absence of eros and sexual reproduction in the golden age when Cronos ruled the universe. “The human herd deprived of any desire beyond itself necessarily leads to men of the golden age who apparently have neither philosophy nor the use of their sexual organs. As they spring up already perfect and then live their lives backwards, they lack on all levels ‘potentiality.’ They are born what they are” (p. 199). Benardete’s comments are relevant for understanding Aristophanes’ speech as well. Benardete is concerned with the form, the *εἶδος* which precludes eros, just as the spherical shape of Aristophanes’ original creatures had precluded eros. Both represent completion and the absence of potentiality, being other and more complete than what one currently is. In such circumstances, procreation is not only impossible, but unnecessary.¹⁵

Aristophanes’ ancient nature is that human *εἶδος* towards which men are now forced to direct themselves after they are split by the gods. However, at first, these humans attempting to re-assert their ancient *εἶδος* destroy themselves. Eros in Time B, when there is no sexuality and only longing, leads to death. It is to these humans that Aristotle refers in his discussion of unity from diversity—the individuals for whom the discovery of the appropriate mate is of such importance that they destroy themselves and each other—their diversity—in their unity. It is not only a lack of clothing and shelter that kills them; the unity which they achieve, despite their diversity, transforms them into beings who no longer show any potential. They are whatever they might be. At such a point they need no others; they become asocial and apolitical. In Aristotle’s model they become either gods or beasts.

The political is the realm inhabited by those who remain in a state of potentiality—that is, who are still dependent on others to attain their telos. When the split in our forms occurs, the ancient nature remains a standard towards which we strive and are driven by the force of eros. Our ancient nature shows what we are not but what we might be. It incorporates our potentiality and it is just our potentiality that moves us into the world of politics. Again Benardete helps to explain: “Arithmetic handles beings that are without having become [for example, the spherical men of our ancient natures] . . . but statesmanship handles beings that become. It deals with beings that have eros” (p. 201). When Zeus splits his humans in half he takes away their perfection and casts them into the world of political and social interdependence, the realm of statesmanship rather than arithmetic—of antiquity rather than modernity.

Zeus who had inadvertently created eros, is no longer threatened by rebellious humans; in Time B he is threatened by their death. By giving them sexuality in what we shall call Time C he gives life back to them. Eros is thus transformed from a source of death to one of life. Zeus introduces sexuality among humans by placing the genitals in front and “through these he made generation through

15. See Neuman’s discussion (1965) of Diotima’s speech and the nature of reproduction there.

the male in the female (*διὰ τοῦ ἄρρενος ἐν τῷ θήλει*)” (191c3–4). Now the unity is no longer the clasping of arms around the other but includes penetration which leads to the creation of a new individual. Generation, though, is not the only consequence. There is now the satiety that is achieved when copulation takes place. Instead of striving to be unified always, unity can be achieved and then relaxed. The term used to express this satiety is fullness, *πλησμονή* (191c6)—the same fullness that caused Aristophanes’ hiccoughs (185c6). Once satisfied, men are able—and want—to turn to other activities. Hephaestus well understood that the love-making of Ares and Aphrodite could not last forever. The desire for unity ceases at the moment that fullness is achieved. Thus men can live, can turn to other activities—can indeed honor the gods and offer them sacrifices.

Eros during Time B turns us away from daily chores and thus kills us. Only when sexuality is introduced at Time C are we able to take care of ourselves. During Time B there can be no art, no philosophy, no family, no city; the human race is governed exclusively by the eros for one’s ancient form, one’s true nature. At Time C we are released from the unrelenting power of eros to build other realms of satisfaction. Satiety allows for activity which enables us to survive despite our partiality. Eros draws us back to our original natures, but it is precisely our sexuality and the potential for sexual satisfaction that prevents us from becoming what we once were. By soothing our pain as the result of sexual fulfillment, by making us disregard our telos, we are able to become the servants of the gods. We become ignorant of the chains which the gods have put over us and which Aristophanes reveals to us. The soothing of our pain through sexuality makes us eager servants. The sexual eros that arises during Time C is thus portrayed by Aristophanes as a trick of the gods to keep the human race alive. It does not come as Aristophanes had at first suggested from the pity which Zeus felt for the human species. Zeus does not have pity in mind; he has self-interest. What Aristophanes offers is not a praise of eros such as Phaedrus had requested. Instead he uses his story of love to damn the gods. His plea to honor love with temples and sacrifices is part of his arrogant rebellion against the Olympians.

Aristophanes spends a fair portion of his speech describing our current existence in Time C as partial beings. If our original form was that of the hermaphrodite, we turn for sexual satisfaction to members of the opposite sex; the result is a child and in some cases the family. The family becomes the expression of the search for one’s original unity transformed into a complex of individuals interacting to preserve their mutual existence. Nevertheless, when Aristophanes himself describes the life of the original androgynes in Time C, he makes them adulterers. He ignores the family. Is this because eros is not part of the family once it has been created; that is, the family serves as a whole which brings men back to their original unity, but does not need eros to remain together. Custom now preserves that unity and replaces eros as the means to meld two or more into one. The other unions Aristophanes describes, those which come from the original

double men and double women are not sanctioned by custom or preserved by tradition. They rely on our drive to regain our original form.

Aristophanes talks at greatest length about the double men. These are the ones who receive the greatest praise: they are the bravest, the most manly by nature (192a2). They will find satiety in each other, but satiety in this case does not lead to natural offspring. They thus turn themselves to other tasks—namely, the tasks of politics and the creation of the civilized world of the polis. They are unconcerned with the public opinion which says that they must marry and become part of the community which produces children. The family unity draws men away from the polis, from the public life in which they might demonstrate their courage and their manliness. Offspring do not divert their attention from great deeds and thus Aristophanes claims, “upon becoming mature, these sorts of males alone go into τὰ πολιτικά” (192a6–7). Political life is thus also born of our sexuality, but the homosexuality which does not make lasting demands on the individual after the moment of satiety, as would be the case in the structure of the family. Men attracted to political life “love young boys and do not love marriage and childrearing” (192b1). In opposition to Aristotle’s later formulations, the family is not necessarily natural, at least for those whom Aristophanes considers worthy of praise.

Why does Aristophanes have this view of the family? For him procreation or reproduction is not the aim of eros. Genesis was no part of the life we once led; if there was any birth, it was autochthonous and autochthony requires no female participation. Heterosexual genesis is a response to and evidence of our subordination to the gods, of our contemporary weakness. If nature is what is old, what existed in Time A, then marriage cannot be based on nature. The males in Aristophanes’ story are forced (ἀναγκάζονται, 192b2) to marry by custom. Marriage thus becomes sanctified by the gods as a means of keeping men from becoming too powerful. The family prevents men from uniting and threatening the gods again, from finding once again power and arrogance in unity such as their ancestors had experienced.

The city is based on the exclusion of the female. Procreation in the family is based on the union of opposites whereas the double males, who are political, delight in those who are similar [τὸ ὅμοιον (192a5) and τὸ συγγενές (192b5)]. The political realm is the arena of similarity, where one is free through interaction with those who are similar. Freedom is to live among men who are the same as one—who share similar values and have similar potential. The Greek concept of ἐλευθερία is dependent on life among those who are similar. To live within the confines of the family is to live among differences and therefore not to be free, but bound by custom rather than nature.

Aristotle in the *Politics* criticizes Socrates’ city as he argues against too much similarity: we cannot have a city comprised only of doctors or only of carpenters. There must be diversity. On the other hand, in Book III of the *Politics*, Aristotle emphasizes the unity which comes from a similarity between citizens; they must

all be able to engage in reasoned discourse. Again Aristotle returns to the men. There cannot be too much diversity nor can there be too much similarity. The city is a midpoint. Aristophanes' description of eros and the drive back to the original nature appears originally destructive of the city. But with the introduction of sexuality the city can arise and become the arena for those who are similar in their masculinity, but not self-destructive in the monomaniacal search for union. Aristotle may indeed be criticizing the lovers of Time B but not of Time C.

Whereas in the first part of his speech Aristophanes had distinguished clearly between Time B and Time C, towards the end of his speech he begins to conflate the two. This happens as we shall see because he slyly moves from an exclusive focus on the body and its drives to the psyche. He no longer distinguishes between the three original sexes. He talks about all and describes the chance meeting of those "made" for each other. The encounter with our true mate occurs by chance as we all go running around the world searching for that elusive individual. The meeting is not predetermined and we may spend our whole lives searching in vain. The naturally orderly universe which Eryximachus envisions—one disturbed occasionally by the bad sort of love—does not exist in Aristophanes' model. For him, the world is as chaotic as the hiccoughs which interrupted the order of this most orderly symposium. If and when one does finally chance on one's mate, one is wondrously struck by the *οἰκειότης* (192c1), the sense that the other is one's own, belongs to one. One is moved by the feeling that this is someone who is kindred. This is the person made for me, with whom I can be unified so as to end all pain, all the seemingly ceaseless searching, all the chaos I sense. Aristophanes does not propose random promiscuous joinings of bodies as the resolution to the search for the other. There is one body, one specific other to whom we can attach ourselves.¹⁶ This other body which we may chance on has no specific qualities of goodness or badness, beauty or ugliness, brown or red hair which evoke our sense of awe upon discovery. We do not desire union with the other because he or she is beautiful—just because there is a certain kindred sense. The values of Pausanias in his attempt to justify his own homosexual longings are avoided. Love is not for Aristophanes the love of beauty—it is the love of ourselves. It is based not on logos or reason, but simple passion. Eros for Aristophanes is thus neither orderly, nor necessarily directed towards the good. In his description of Apollo's surgery he has shown us how ugly are the bodies of those we desire—covered with wrinkles, paunchy, full of holes—quite unlike the perfection of the spherical shapes and hardly the image of beauty itself. Yet we overlook all that is ugly and grotesque and see only something kindred in our mate.

At this point the bodies—round bodies, cut bodies, sewn-up bodies, ugly

16. Nussbaum (1979) describes the importance of this focus on a specific other with reference to the significance of Alcibiades' speech.

bodies—yield to that which has no shape and is incapable of being cut or sewn, namely the soul. We can love those with wrinkled, paunchy bodies because Aristophanes under Plato's control begins to abstract from the body. The pain is no longer sensed in the body and thus no longer satisfied by physical, sexual union. Those made for each other desire to live out their lives together (*διατελοῦντες μετ' ἀλλήλων διὰ βίου* 192c2–3).¹⁷ This love, Aristophanes now tells us, is not simply sexual coupling (*ἡ τῶν ἀφροδισίων συνουσία* 192c5). Now that the soul has been introduced, sexuality which had freed men to pursue other tasks is no longer an adequate release from pain. With this movement from the body to the soul, the needs which are felt become ineffable. Men cannot express what they desire: *οὐδ' ἄν εἰπεῖν ἔχοιεν* (192c2) and *ὃ οὐ δύναται εἰπεῖν* (192d1). We are able to articulate what the body needs when we talk about sexual union, but now with reference to the soul simple descriptions of sexual couplings, be they homosexual or heterosexual, are quite inadequate. The human being split as a body, now also has a double soul. The soul of one longs for a permanent union with the soul of the other, a permanent union which the body no longer needs because its sexuality allows for momentary satisfaction and the cessation from permanent longing. Zeus' gift of sexuality has placated only the body's longing, but it has ignored the pain of the soul.

It is at this point that Aristophanes turns to the image of Hephaestus' net. He does not tell the whole story of the adulterous lovers caught against their will by the shrewd Hephaestus. He does not tell of the gods' uproarious laughter, of the goddesses' shame or Hermes' desire to be eternally bound with beauty. Rather, he has Hephaestus offer his net to Aristophanes' lovers once they have chanced upon each other. He is to appear before them with the tools of his trade and say:

Are you eager for this, to become as much as possible joined with each other, so as not to leave one another neither night nor day. If you are eager for this, I am willing to fuse and weld you together (*συμφύσῃσαι*) so that being two you will become one and be one so long as you live; as one you will live in common with one another and when you die, there again in Hades, having died, you will be one in common instead of two. But think if you long for (*ἐρᾶτε*) this and if it is sufficient for you should you chance upon it (192d3–e5).

Hephaestus' offer, Aristophanes asserts, would be rejected by no one. Hephaestus offers the lovers the opportunity for revenge on the gods, for he proposes to give to mortals the opportunity to make light of their mortality, of their dependence on their bodies. Bodies having once been split cannot be joined permanently, as the humans of Time B discovered, without death and the separation which death for their bodies then implies. Hephaestus turns not to the body but to the soul with his net as he talks about a life together after death—a continuation of human identity after death. The mortality of the body becomes irrelevant as

17. Pausanias expresses the same thought (181d) but leaves out the *διατελέω*, thus ignoring the issue of death which Aristophanes introduces at this point in his speech.

the joining of the lovers ignores the limits which the bodies create. Aristotle was right. Unity of bodies alone is impossible alone without death, while unity of souls is possible only after death. By preserving the unity of body and soul, he allows for the city, which ultimately fails to satisfy even the double men of Aristophanes.

Whereas earlier in Aristophanes' speech bodies had mingled under the control of love, now that the souls are mingling death ceases to be relevant. Unlike the dead Achilles with whom Odysseus speaks in Book XI of the *Odyssey*, who would wish the life even of a serf to a lotless man, the dead bound by Hephaestus' net do not wish life but are satisfied with death. In death they have achieved the wholeness which possession of their bodies had denied them. Aristotle in his reference to Aristophanes' speech understands this. If love is so strong for another, if the two indeed become one and self-complete, life itself ceases to be important. Human life is characterized specifically by potential. The net of Hephaestus as Aristophanes presents it offers an escape from that potential by destroying the meaning of mortality for humans.¹⁸ The city depends on the value of life, on the acceptance of the mortality of one's body and the need to deal with that mortality. The obverse view of those who can ignore their bodies is that neither the city nor death matter.

The net of Hephaestus, though, can only be offered to us in the speech or comedies of Aristophanes. Hephaestus does not stand before us; the souls of two cannot be bound together by the tools of a smithy. The search for our ancient nature when we were whole (*ὅλοι*, 192e1) must be carried on within the realm of the mortal life of our bodies. And Aristotle's predictions hold: the complete melding of those bodies would mean death. We must struggle with the tragic acknowledgment that the net—even if available—could never help us overcome our partiality without destroying us. It is in this way that Plato transforms Aristophanes from a comic artist to a tragedian.

Aristophanes ends his speech with a plea for piety. The gods retain their power over us precisely because the net of Hephaestus is unavailable, because we cannot insure our own completion and immortality by making death irrelevant. Because of an earlier injustice (*τὴν ἀδικίαν*, 193a2) we were dispersed (*διωκίσθημεν*, 193a2) by the god. The term is the opposite of the famous *συννοικισμός* by which Theseus, in Attic legend, brought together the villages of Attica to found the city of Athens. Aristophanes anachronistically compares the gods' first splitting of the human race to the Spartans' dispersal of the Arcadians. The Arcadians had been disloyal to the Spartans, as in effect had the spherical beings been to the Olympian gods. The Lacedaemonians exercised and demon-

18. Rosen (1968; p. 153) suggests that because man is inarticulate concerning what he desires, he takes the bad advice of Hephaestus. This advice, however, is only bad if one values life above the attainment of one's *εἶδος*. Certainly, the life of Socrates suggests that such advice is not unambiguously "bad."

strated their power by destroying the unity which the city of the Arcadians represented. By dispersing them and destroying that unity, they obliterated any power which that city might have had. Weakness came to the Arcadians as the result of their isolation from one another. The punishment which the gods imposed on men paralleled the punishment the Lacedaemonians imposed on the Arcadians and the purpose was the same—the destruction of unity.

We can further analogize and see in the drive of the Arcadians to become a city again the same drive, eros, that motivates men to seek their mates by nature. Not to live in the city is the consequence of a hostile power intent on preserving its own stature of dominance. The city in this analogy is the natural unit—similar to our original nature. Not to be part of the city is to create pain and longing, *πάθος* and *πόθος*, such as experienced by the divided beings of Time B. The power to create such pain in others is divine.

Piety towards the gods who rule over us, according to Aristophanes, will enable us to find our natural unity, just as subordination on the part of the Arcadians might lead the Spartans to allow the re-creation of their city. Piety is a form of political subjection, as Aristophanes portrays it. Should we not be pious, he warns, “if we are not orderly (*κόσμιοι*) towards the gods,” we may once again be split and become like figures on a bas relief, a *στήλη*, such as those which adorn the graves of the dead (193a4–6). In other words, the next split may mean our death—and without the net of Hephaestus around us that death has meaning. Limited as we are by the union of bodies rather than souls, we are forced to submit to the power of the gods. If we had that wondrous net, the power of the gods to keep us from our wholeness would be no threat. Without it, we are subjects of the gods and must give them our sacrifices and honors. One way of showing them this honor Aristophanes suggests is by honoring love—our leader and general (*ἡγεμὼν καὶ στρατηγός*, 193b2). By honoring love we acknowledge the power of the gods, we admit the pain we feel as the result of our actions against them and accept the fact that while sexual satiety may have allowed us a certain release from that pain, never will the gods give to men surcease from the pain in their souls. Aristophanes is finally forced to admit the domination and supremacy of the gods as well as human weakness. We cannot fly to heaven on dung beetles nor return from Hades to defend our poetry. The tragic stage reveals our limits.

The task of politics is to unify many into one. Aristophanes’ parable is concerned only with the making of one out of two. And yet as he plays with the idea, he inadvertently illuminates the problem of politics. What does it mean to be united with another or others? How is this reflected by our understanding of the relationship between body and soul? What happens to the concept of unity when the *finis ultimus* is rejected? Plato does not give to Aristophanes the chance to provide the final answers for these questions. Such privileges he gives to none of his characters—not even to Socrates. But he does allow Aristophanes in his ab-

surd and buffoon-like fashion to give us the image of the net of Hephaestus and thus force us to consider whether we would accept or reject it if offered, whether we should desire or fear unity, whether eros drives us towards completion and thus death, or towards the constant but human search for our unattainable telos.

REFERENCES

- BENARDETE, Seth. 1973. "Eidos and Diaeresis in Plato's *Statesman*," *Philologus*, 107:193–226.
- BURY, R. G. 1909. *The Symposium of Plato*. Cambridge: Heffer.
- DOVER, K. J. 1980. *Greek Homosexuality*. New York: Vintage Books, Random House.
- EDELSTEIN, Ludwig. 1945. "The Role of Eryximachus in Plato's *Symposium*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 76:85–103.
- NEUMANN, Harry. 1965. "On Diotima's Concept of Love," *American Journal of Philology*, 86:33–59.
- . 1966. "On the Comedy of Plato's Aristophanes," *American Journal of Philology*, 87:420–26.
- NUSSBAUM, Martha. 1979. "The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of Plato's *Symposium*," *Philosophy and Literature*, 3:131–72.
- ROSEN, Stanley. 1968. *Plato's Symposium*. New Haven: Yale University Press.