

Interpretation

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Poetic Justice: An In-Depth Examination of Aristophanes's Portrait of Socrates*

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Abstract: Do great minds think alike? In particular, do the great minds Aristophanes and Socrates agree about the most fundamental things? The “ancient quarrel” between philosophy and poetry, mentioned by Socrates in the *Republic* (607b5–6), would lead one to assume that the answer is no. But what are the precise character and grounds of their disagreement? This article will consider one plausible first step in the investigation by attempting to state as precisely and thoroughly as possible what Aristophanes understood Socrates to believe. In other words, this article will attempt to do full justice to Aristophanes’s poetic portrait of Socrates.

Pinning down precisely what views Aristophanes attributes to Socrates is essential to understanding fully Aristophanes’s genuine criticism of Socrates and the alternative that he believes poetry offers to philosophy. Without seeing exactly what Aristophanes believes Socrates believes, we cannot be sure where or even whether a disagreement exists, and we cannot properly judge the quarrel between poetry and philosophy.

The only place Aristophanes offers an account of Socrates’s views is in his *Clouds*. But there are many problems with trying to glean from the *Clouds* what Aristophanes believes Socrates believes. In the first place, the *Clouds* is a comedy, not a philosophic treatise. In fact, the *Clouds* seems to present Socrates as a ridiculous natural scientist, too caught up in the study of flea jumps and gnat farts to anticipate, let alone protect himself from, an attack by a former student. Nevertheless, Aristophanes calls this his wisest comedy,

*I am greatly indebted to Fred Baumann, Abbie Eler, Robert Goldberg, Pamela Jensen, Tim Spiekerman, and my three anonymous reviewers for their extremely helpful comments on this paper, to Timothy Burns, editor of *Interpretation*, for his sage advice, and to my husband, David Leibowitz, for more than I can ever say.

implying that there is much more to the Socrates of the *Clouds* than meets the eye (522). But how much more? Does Aristophanes see the same Socrates as Plato did? And how can we know? To figure out Aristophanes's serious view, we will have to try to translate the comic depiction of Socrates and his views into their noncomic equivalents.¹ However, there is an additional problem. There is reason to suspect that Aristophanes may be concealing some of Socrates's reasoning in order to do him the least harm. Plato, in his *Symposium*, depicts the two in a friendly exchange in which Aristophanes's interest in speaking to Socrates and his respect for Socrates's opinion are clear (223c–d). Aristophanes's *Clouds* and *Birds* demonstrate Aristophanes's awareness of the city's hostility to philosophy. A friend of Socrates would do what he could to decrease or, at least, not increase this hostility.² Thus we see neither Strepsiades's nor Pheidippides's indoor education, nor do we see a conversation between Socrates and any of the think tank students. In other words, Aristophanes, in order to protect Socrates, hides from his audience those depictions of Socratic education that might give us a much more candid and indisputable understanding of it. Nevertheless, if Aristophanes is going to mock Socrates in his self-described wisest comedy, he must believe that he is wiser than Socrates, at least in some things. If not, the joke is on him. We therefore expect that he will somehow have to show to the wise, meaning the careful and thoughtful, members of his audience his fullest understanding of at least the most fundamental of Socrates's views. We therefore assume that, although it will not be easy, we can find Aristophanes's fullest understanding of Socrates's views in the *Clouds*.

Because excavating Aristophanes's fullest view of Socrates's beliefs will be so difficult, I believe that this undertaking warrants an article devoted to it alone.³ Also, owing to this difficulty, I have adopted a different procedure from the ones I have found in the scholarship.⁴ I start by identifying those

¹ Leo Strauss offers several invaluable discussions of this topic. See, for example, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 50–51. Aristophanes himself claims to be speaking not only to the laughers but to the wise in his audience (see, e.g., *Clouds* 518–21, 575; *Assemblywomen* 1155–57).

² See Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 5, and Devin Stauffer, "Leo Strauss's UnSocratic Aristophanes?," in *The Political Theory of Aristophanes*, ed. Jeremy J. Mhire and Bryan-Paul Frost (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 332.

³ While most of this article is devoted to presenting only the views Aristophanes attributes to his Socrates, one argument I make requires that I also consider Aristophanes's opinion of Socrates's view. More on this below.

⁴ Devin Stauffer considers what we can learn about Socrates from Aristophanes in his examination of *Socrates and Aristophanes*: "Leo Strauss's UnSocratic Aristophanes?," 331–51. But Stauffer is examining Strauss's entire book, and Aristophanes's own opinions of philosophy and poetry. His

opinions or conclusions of Aristophanes's Socrates that seem most important to the question of the best way of life for a human being and I look for Socrates's arguments supporting those opinions and conclusions. When Socrates's own statements in the *Clouds* fail to offer a sufficient justification for his conclusions, I look for other evidence in the play that supports them. In order to demonstrate that he understands Socrates's deepest arguments, without increasing the danger to Socrates, Aristophanes will sometimes have to put those arguments in the mouths of other characters. But he will have to use the details of the play to signal subtly which of these characters he means to link to Socrates. The need to use these Socratic surrogates will become

description of Aristophanes's account of Socrates's deepest opinions and especially the grounds of those opinions is therefore necessarily limited. Paul A. Rahe also offers an interpretation of Aristophanes's Socrates's philosophy in "The Aristophanic Question," in *Recovering Reason: Essays in Honor of Thomas L. Pangle*, ed. Timothy Burns (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 67–82. But, contrary to my interpretation, Rahe claims that the Aristophanic Socrates "betrays no interest at all in moral and political questions" (69; see also 71). He therefore argues that according to the Aristophanic Socrates the world is governed by necessity, matter and motion, and that the debate between Just and Unjust Speech shows that human actions are merely the product of our passions (see 72–75). David Konstan, "Socrates in Aristophanes' *Clouds*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, ed. Donald R. Morrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 75–90, focuses on the similarity of such things as the habits, subjects of interest, methodology, and word use of the Aristophanic and Platonic-Xenophontic Socrates. He does not consider the basis of Aristophanes's Socrates's impiety and contempt for law. In "Rethinking the Quarrel Anew: Politics and Boasting in Aristophanes' *Clouds*," in Mhire and Frost, *The Political Theory of Aristophanes*, 47–66, Jeremy J. Mhire argues that Socrates's impiety is the product of his study of nature. He implies that this study requires confronting convention (53). But although he exposes a contradiction in Athenian political beliefs, he does not explain how this contradiction could be used to prove that Zeus does not exist (see esp. 59). In fact, he questions whether Socrates has the necessary evidence for his claim that Zeus does not exist (56). Michael Zuckert argues that Aristophanes criticizes Socratic philosophy for undermining the teachings that the city needs to survive, particularly those concerning traditional piety and justice: "Rationalism and Political Responsibility: Just Speech and Unjust Deed in the *Clouds* and the *Apology of Socrates*," *Polity* 17, no. 2 (1984): 271–97. But owing to the larger plan of the article, Zuckert offers only a brief account of the Aristophanic Socratic arguments challenging justice and traditional piety (see, e.g., 280–81). Martha Nussbaum defends the accuracy of Aristophanes's picture of Socrates: "Aristophanes and Socrates on Learning Practical Wisdom," *Yale Classical Studies* 26 (1980): 43–97. But her discussion does not include an account of the basis of Aristophanes's Socrates's impiety. Further, she claims that the *Clouds* attributes no "positive program" to Socrates (see, e.g., 75, 81, 89). Christopher Moore, "Socrates and Self-Knowledge in Aristophanes' *Clouds*," *Classical Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2015): 534–51, argues that Plato agrees with the picture of Socrates offered in the *Clouds*, in particular the suggestion therein that Socrates is most interested in self-knowledge. But his account does not include an examination of the precise character or grounds of Socrates's self-knowledge. He gives his reader a general picture of Aristophanes's Socrates's self-knowledge: it is not "concerned explicitly with general anthropological, psychical or metaphysical knowledge of the human being *per se*, but rather with one's commitments and the skills appropriate for meeting those commitments" (548). Khalil M. Habib, "The Meaning of Socrates' Asceticism in Aristophanes' *Clouds*," in Mhire and Frost, *The Political Theory of Aristophanes*, 29–45 (see esp. 36–38 and 41), explains Aristophanes's Socrates's impiety and contempt for convention including justice as a product of his natural science. But he does not consider the problem that natural science cannot disprove the existence of the gods or fully refute the claims of justice, nor does he consider the significance of the refutations found in the debates between Just and Unjust Speech and between Strepsiades and Pheidippides.

clearer once we see the particular conclusions the surrogates' arguments are meant to support. I begin this part of my interpretation by trying to identify Socrates's closest surrogate and mine his statements for further justification of the Socratic opinions and conclusions. When these statements prove to be incomplete, I look for further evidence. At each point, I will defend my steps in the argument including the need to proceed in a nonchronological order through the text of the *Clouds*. This process will sometimes require referring to the Platonic Socrates to support my claims. This procedure has its risks as one must avoid making Aristophanes into Plato and thereby undermining the project of identifying the difference between poetry and philosophy. However, while the evidence that Aristophanes's Socrates is a natural scientist is crystal clear, the evidence that he also examined political and moral phenomena is largely obscured.⁵ But the *Clouds* was produced in 423 BC, at which time Socrates would have been around forty-six years old. According to Plato's depiction of Socrates, this would have been almost ten years after Socrates began having dialectical arguments about moral and political phenomena with interlocutors in private and public.⁶ The only access we have to these dialectical arguments is in the works of Plato and Xenophon. Since it is not unreasonable to assume that Aristophanes chose to mock Socrates because he was a figure whom both Aristophanes and many in his audience knew relatively well, it does not seem unjustifiable to use Platonic evidence, carefully, to help translate Aristophanes's comic account of Socrates's arguments into their noncomic equivalents. In fact, without such evidence, it may be very difficult for an audience who did not know Socrates (as Aristophanes's audience would have) to be able to pick up on Socratic arguments at which Aristophanes only hints.

ARISTOPHANES'S CLAIMS ABOUT SOCRATES

In the *Clouds*, Strepsiades, a rustic farmer, is in deep debt owing mainly to the purchases of his horse-racing son, Pheidippides. He plans to get out of his debts by sending his son to learn a speech from Socrates that is reputed to allow one to win court cases unjustly. When Pheidippides refuses to go, Strepsiades must go himself. But when Strepsiades proves to be ineducable, he is ejected from Socrates's school and has no other choice but to force

⁵ In fact several scholars take Aristophanes's Socrates to be merely a natural scientist. See, for example, John Zumbrennen, *Aristophanic Comedy and the Challenge of Democratic Citizenship* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2012), 44. Also Rahe, "The Aristophanic Question," 69, 71.

⁶ For a similar account of the Socrates that Aristophanes knew and depicted in the *Clouds* consider Stauffer, "Leo Strauss's UnSocratic Aristophanes?," 332.

Pheidippides to go. In the course of the play, both Strepsiades and Pheidippides receive Socratic educations, parts of which are given indoors and not reported to the audience. We see more of Strepsiades's failed education than we see of Pheidippides's successful one. But examined carefully, they reveal a consistent picture of Aristophanes's Socrates's conclusions and the grounds of those conclusions.

We gather from such an examination that Aristophanes's Socrates is an atheist and a scofflaw. He declares unqualifiedly that Zeus does not exist (367). And the thin veil of seeming piety found in Socrates's claim to worship the Clouds is torn away during the course of the play. Socrates makes the claim that he worships the Clouds only to Strepsiades. Socrates uses his account of these cloud-goddesses, who form the chorus of the play, as part of his demonstration to Strepsiades that Zeus does not exist. But after Strepsiades's indoor education, the Clouds are never called, or treated like, goddesses by anyone but themselves. Pheidippides shows no signs of having been instructed to worship the Clouds as part of his Socratic education. And after his indoor education, Strepsiades calls Socrates "the Melian" (830).⁷ All of this implies that during Strepsiades's indoor education, Socrates revealed that he does not believe in any gods, including the Clouds. As for Socrates's view of law, we see consistent evidence throughout the play that he does not respect it. Upon presenting himself as a would-be student, Strepsiades is regaled by a think tank member with stories of Socrates's many feats, including a clever use of geometry to steal a cloak. Further, Socrates is willing to give Strepsiades, and then Pheidippides, an education that they plan to use to defraud their creditors. Socrates's claims about Zeus and his investigation of the sun and moon are contrary to Athenian law. On what grounds does Aristophanes's Socrates justify these opinions and this behavior?

Let me first discuss Socrates's atheism. The reader might conclude, based on an initial examination of the proofs Socrates offers to Strepsiades, that the grounds of his atheism are supplied by natural science. For example, if by Zeus we mean a being with supernatural or miraculous powers, why can he not make rain without the clouds (370–71)? Socrates's characterization of some of these proofs, however, leads the reader to wonder whether the comic poet is not comically pointing to Socratic dialectic. Socrates says to Strepsiades that he will "teach [him] from [himself]" (385).⁸ The Platonic Socrates teaches his

⁷ See K. J. Dover, *Aristophanes Clouds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 200–201. This is a reference to Diagoras of Melos who became "proverbial for impiety."

⁸ Translations from the *Clouds* are from Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West, *Four Texts on*

interlocutors from themselves by examining the interlocutors' own opinions dialectically (see, e.g., *Euthyphro* 6e–8b). Aristophanes's Socrates teaches Strepsiades from himself by examining Strepsiades's own bodily functions (385ff.). While this examination seems like a comic equivalent of Plato's Socratic dialectic, it is not equally persuasive. Aristophanes shows his reader that even someone with intellectual abilities as limited as Strepsiades's can see that these and similar arguments cannot definitively refute the existence of the gods. They cannot eliminate the possibility of the gods as ultimate causes of seemingly natural phenomena (see, e.g., 374–81). The subject of Aristophanes's wisest comedy must have a more compelling argument for his impiety. Moreover, when confronting Strepsiades's deepest concern with respect to the gods—divine punishment—Socrates merely denies the gods' role and mocks Strepsiades's foolish, old-fashioned beliefs (398–402).⁹ He does not offer sufficient proof that the gods do not punish human beings for their injustice in this life or the next. Given the deficiencies of these proofs, and their pointing to Socratic dialectic, we are justified in examining other parts of the play for hints about the substance of the dialectical support for Aristophanes's Socrates's atheism.

As for Aristophanes's Socrates's disrespect for the law, one might assume from his mocking Strepsiades's fear of divine punishment that Socrates's atheism is at least partly responsible for his attitude to the law. More investigation will be needed to confirm this, but it is reasonable to begin by testing the possibility that his atheism and lawlessness are linked. His disrespect for the law may also be connected to his reputed ability to use rhetoric to avoid human punishment for breaking the law (see, e.g., 112–18). But being able to avoid human and divine punishment would not give us a reason to break the law unless doing so was sometimes beneficial. The argument explaining the benefit of not following the law will have to be seen as well.

So where in the play should one look for compelling arguments justifying Socrates's atheism and lawlessness? A natural choice would be to look at the rest of the things that Socrates himself says. We do not, however, find in any

Socrates (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 115–76. Other scholars also notice the similarity between this procedure and the Platonic Socrates's distinctive conversations with his interlocutors: Konstan, "Socrates in Aristophanes' *Clouds*," 83; Moore, "Socrates and Self-Knowledge in Aristophanes' *Clouds*," 537 with 548–89; Nussbaum, "Aristophanes and Socrates on Learning Practical Wisdom," 73–74.

⁹ Socrates offers a natural explanation of lightning which weakens the claim that it is an instrument of divine punishment. But Socrates never proves that the gods do not punish perjurers, either with lightning or otherwise.

of his speeches either anything dialectical or anything that offers a sufficient justification for atheism or lawlessness.¹⁰ We are going to have to look for Socratic surrogates. At this point it should be much clearer why someone friendly to Socrates, as we think Aristophanes is, would use surrogates to articulate his understanding of Socrates's views. If only those in the audience who scrutinize the play carefully—putting Socratic conclusions together with reasoning from Socratic surrogates—discover the complete view Aristophanes is attributing to Socrates, Socrates will be better protected from the anger of the many. Solid or plausible reasoning that justifies atheism and lawlessness is much more corrupting, and therefore more galling to the city, than one kooky guy flying around in a basket who claims not to believe in Zeus and who is so poor he has to steal to pay for his supper.

COULD JUST AND UNJUST SPEECH BE SOCRATIC SURROGATES?

One reasonable place to look for more clues to the grounds of Socrates's beliefs is the debate between Just Speech and Unjust Speech. After Strepsiades is ejected from the think tank, he returns with a very unwilling Pheidippides. Socrates announces that Just Speech and Unjust Speech will introduce Pheidippides to the art Strepsiades wants him to learn. It is plausible that Aristophanes wants us to regard the debate between the Speeches as a surrogate for Socratic reasoning because the content and manner of the debate remind us both of things Socrates says and of the manner in which he conducts himself. Like Socrates's declaration that "Zeus doesn't even exist," Unjust Speech denies that "Justice even exists" (367, 902). And like Socrates, Unjust Speech plans to prove this with an argument he will base on what Just Speech says (385, 901, 941–44, 1031–40). He will use Just Speech's opinions, not his bodily functions, to persuade him from himself. The Clouds, of whom Aristophanes at one point acts as leader, claim that in this debate "the whole hazard of wisdom is being risked" (954–55; see 518–62). This sounds very much like the comic equivalent of a treasure map's injunction to dig here. Finally, the two speeches seem to live in Socrates's think tank, implying that they are somehow a part of that way of life. All of this leads one to expect that the debate will tell us what Aristophanes believes are the genuine grounds of Socrates's beliefs.

However, there are problems with trying to use this debate in this way. First, Socrates leaves the stage during the debate, allowing the Speeches to

¹⁰ We will, however, see in some of Socrates's statements agreement with the arguments attributed to the Socratic surrogates.

speak for themselves, thereby implying that he does not simply endorse the views of either. Second, neither Speech's understanding of the good life pointed to by their arguments matches Socrates's way of life, which raises further doubts about Socrates's agreement with their arguments. Even more importantly, both Speeches' arguments seem to presume the existence of the gods (although Unjust Speech may merely be adopting Just Speech's view for rhetorical reasons).¹¹ How could there be an argument supporting Socratic atheism here? Perhaps most important of all, the one successful Socratic student of whose education we get to see the start and finish (although nothing in between) is not impressed by the debate. After witnessing it, Pheidippides has as much contempt for Socrates and his education as he did at the beginning of the play (compare 102–4, 1112). The debate does not seem to present the arguments that converted Pheidippides to Socrates's views about justice and the gods.¹² So maybe we need to look elsewhere to find a better surrogate to show us the grounds of Socrates's beliefs.

PHEIDIPPIDES IS OUR BEST SOCRATIC SURROGATE

In spite of his objections, Pheidippides is forced to attend Socrates's school. When Strepsiades comes to pick him up, after a course of study that has lasted long enough for Pheidippides to lose his tan, Socrates tells Strepsiades that Pheidippides has successfully completed his education (1149). The boy is taken home for a celebratory feast during which a fight breaks out between father and son which ends in Pheidippides beating his father. Pheidippides offers to use his new education to prove to Strepsiades that father beating is just. Perhaps the closest thing that we get to seeing Socrates's actual arguments for his way of life are the arguments made by his successful student in a debate with a former, although failed, fellow student. Pheidippides's role as a surrogate is further confirmed by his plans to make radical and decidedly Socratic changes to his life (1399–1405). Also, during this debate, Pheidippides appeals to what Socrates himself would think (1432). Pheidippides is, of course, not a perfect representative of Socrates, but all the indications in the *Clouds* suggest he is Socrates's closest surrogate.¹³

¹¹ Compare Zuckert's claim that Unjust Speech's arguments are "unphilosophic and traditionalist" ("Rationalism and Political Responsibility," 291).

¹² See Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 50. Strauss's claim here that Pheidippides has been converted "by Socrates to Socrates" is provisional (compare 52). But it is clear that Pheidippides has made a profound change in his life owing to his Socratic education and therefore it is reasonable to consider his opinion of this debate.

¹³ Consider also Stauffer's claim that the "Pheidippides-Socrates saga is the most important part of

So how do Pheidippides's arguments support atheism and lawlessness? Unlike Unjust Speech, who practically begins by denying Justice's existence, Pheidippides begins by offering a proof that father beating is just, a proof that seems to assume the existence of justice (902, 1405). In other words, Pheidippides begins where we often see the Platonic Socrates begin. Instead of rejecting ordinary opinion, he starts with it and tries to show what conclusions are reached when that opinion and its implications are thoroughly examined. Pheidippides gets Strepsiades to admit that he beat Pheidippides when he was young. Strepsiades claims that he did so because he was well-intentioned toward Pheidippides. Using and expanding on this claim, Pheidippides's first three arguments appeal to what one might call the class characteristics of justice or, to use the parlance of the Platonic Socrates, to the idea of justice. Strepsiades introduced one of these characteristics himself when he implied that his beating of Pheidippides was just because it was well-intentioned. When we call an action just, some of the things we mean, Pheidippides implies, are that (1) the actor is well-intentioned, (2) equals are treated equally, and (3) each individual gets what he deserves (1410–19). Using this account of what justice requires, part of which was derived from Strepsiades's own statements and the implications of his statements, it is not difficult to envision an instance in which a wise and well-intentioned son might beat his foolish and vicious father in order to benefit the father and perhaps also the community. In fact, Aristophanes's *Wasps* is the story of just such an instance. In other words, using these standards, one can justify ignoring certain Athenian laws when following them would not produce a simply just result. From this we can see not only a reasonable but a morally respectable ground for Socrates's failure to obey Athenian law.

These arguments also offer support for the next step in Pheidippides's proof, a step that seems to link the question of justice to the question of the gods' existence. In response to Strepsiades's assertion that the law everywhere forbids father beating, Pheidippides claims that this law is merely the work of one man who persuaded others, that is, merely conventional and not divine, and so he could make a new law allowing sons to beat their fathers. If the law forbidding father beating, and plausibly all laws, fail consistently to meet the standards of justice outlined in Pheidippides's initial arguments—if all laws, therefore, are at best imperfectly just—it is at least a question whether any law is divine.

the *Clouds*" ("Leo Strauss's UnSocratic Aristophanes," 335–36).

Now one could argue that gods, dealing with flawed beings like men, had no choice but to give them laws that provided imperfect guidance but better guidance than they could provide for themselves. A law prohibiting father beating (and allowing fathers to beat their sons) in most instances meets the standards appealed to in Pheidippides's arguments. It supports the authority that the father needs to discipline his son effectively and thereby produce a good man and citizen. Thus this law benefits the son, the family, and the community at large. In short, this law produces just results most of the time and therefore might plausibly still be a divine law. But if this were the truth about the law against father beating—that it is merely a good rule of thumb—it would not be reasonable for the gods to expect wise men to obey it, or any other such law, when doing so would not be just. In other words, no such law could reasonably command absolute obedience or be sacred. This raises the question, which the city might consider corrupting, of when we should obey the law, or what standard we should use to determine when we should obey the law. Pheidippides's first three arguments suggest that the answer should be that we use the class characteristics of justice, the idea of justice, to determine our behavior. For example, we should act so as to benefit others or the common good. But that is not the step he takes next in the argument.

Instead, he seems to want us to take the chicken and the rest of the beasts as our model. Pheidippides says, "Consider the chickens and the other beasts: they defend themselves against their fathers. Yet how do they differ from us, except that they do not write decrees?" (1427–29). The context of the argument provides some support for this move. It makes some sense to look to what is universally true to determine the just course of action. This must be what Strepsiades had in mind when he appealed to the universal practice of outlawing father beating to counter Pheidippides's arguments. And this is also what Pheidippides's initial arguments seem to appeal to in principle: those qualities that are universally true of justice. If what is universally true is the right standard to guide us, then looking to the facts of nature, which are more universal than any human law, makes some sense. If something is natural to all beasts, it may very well be natural to the animal, man, too. And as Pheidippides's comment here implies, since the beasts do not write decrees, what is natural for them is not in dispute, as it is in the case of human beings, owing to our decree writing. So looking to chicken or beast nature to determine how we should act is not entirely unreasonable.

But there are two problems with this move that suggest Pheidippides might be leaving out part of the argument that supports his conclusion. First,

chickens and the other beasts do not beat their fathers out of a concern to benefit their fathers or the community (and they surely have no concept of treating equals equally, nor a concept of deserving). They beat their fathers to “defend themselves,” to benefit themselves (1428). This contradicts the first principle—concern for the welfare of others—of his initial arguments supporting father beating. Pheidippides has not given sufficient justification for replacing this principle with what seems to be the principle that one should put one’s own good first. Second, it is not true that all beasts beat their fathers. On the contrary, those unique qualities that contribute to making distinct species prevent certain beasts from doing so.¹⁴ This leads the reader to wonder about the true implications of that unique quality that makes human beings a distinct species according to Pheidippides: decree writing. Do decrees merely restrain obviously natural desires, or do they reshape our desires in a permanent way that must be considered when determining the best way of life?

We will treat each of these problems in turn. Having pointed out the selfishness of beast father-beating, we cannot help but notice that many of Pheidippides’s arguments or offhand comments during the debate have implied that one should put one’s own good first. For example, although he starts by speaking of well-intentioned beating, he insists that if children weep, fathers should too, implying that his chief interest in beating his father is something other than benefiting his father (1415). Moreover, this line is an allusion to a line in Euripides’s *Alcestis*, in which a father defends his selfish decision to live instead of dying in place of his son.¹⁵ And in his last argument, Pheidippides states that he should get to beat his father because if he does not have a son he will miss out on the good of beating someone. Either Pheidippides, free of the belief in absolute obedience to the laws, has taken the insufficiently justified step of guiding himself by his own good alone, or we are missing that part of Aristophanes’s understanding of Socratic education that supports this step.

The only part of Aristophanic Socratic education that we saw Pheidippides get was his exposure to the debate between Just and Unjust Speech. But we noted above all the problems with using the debate to discover Socrates’s opinions, including the fact that it did not impress Pheidippides at the time. However, after his indoor education, Pheidippides reacts to insults like those hurled at Unjust Speech in much the way that Unjust Speech does (compare

¹⁴ To offer one extreme example, among some species of black widow spiders, the female eats her mate immediately after mating, making father beating impossible.

¹⁵ See Dover, *Aristophanes Clouds*, 259; Euripides, *Alcestis*, 691.

909–14 with 1327–30). He acts like a proud member of team Unjust Speech. It seems that after his indoor education Pheidippides has reevaluated the debate and Unjust Speech's victory.¹⁶ If we try to translate the comic arguments we see in the debate between Just and Unjust Speech into arguments we could imagine Socrates making during the indoor education, we can discern the grounds of the conversion we are looking for, and the missing steps in Pheidippides's argument. It is only in light of our fuller understanding of Pheidippides's conversion, which we acquire through examining his posteducation arguments, that we can imagine how he might reevaluate the debate. Turning back to the debate now will give us the clearest view of the contribution it ultimately made to Pheidippides's understanding.

JUST AND UNJUST SPEECH REVISITED

The debate between Just and Unjust Speech might initially have seemed comically inadequate to Pheidippides because the crucial evidence depended on behavior ascribed by the poets to gods and heroes. As we can now see from the debate between Pheidippides and Strepsiades, however, Pheidippides is trained in dialectics and therefore has come to recognize the importance of the significant moments of agreement between Just and Unjust Speech. These moments of agreement, brought out by Unjust Speech's questioning of Just Speech, point the viewer to a dialectical analysis of the motives behind just action. This analysis supplies the missing pieces of Pheidippides's argument. Unjust Speech asks Just Speech, "Whom have you ever seen anything good happen to because of being moderate?" (1061–62). Instead of claiming that moderation is good in itself or serves the common good, Just Speech gives an example of someone who was rewarded and the rewards he received.¹⁷ In

¹⁶ Strauss claims that Pheidippides has been converted by Socrates "only to the way of life recommended by Unjust Speech" (Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 52). Zuckert also equates Pheidippides and Unjust Speech ("Rationalism and Political Responsibility," 279). Nussbaum claims that Pheidippides has been converted to the views of Unjust Speech by the more charming, but not philosophically different, arguments of his boss, Socrates ("Aristophanes and Socrates on Learning Practical Wisdom," 66). She further argues that Socrates's leaving the stage at the time of the debate cannot be taken as evidence either of his disapproval of Unjust Speech's victory or of his disassociation with the content of the debate (48). But see Habib, "Meaning of Socrates' Asceticism," 39.

¹⁷ In the *Clouds* there is no one who explicitly expresses the view, let alone defends the view, that justice or moderation is good in itself, and chosen for that reason. Just Speech describes the habituation that was used to inculcate moderation and justice in the past. And one could certainly conclude, as no other defense is given, that those things inculcated were thought to be good or noble in themselves. But Just Speech never makes this claim explicitly. And he certainly does not use such a claim to defend his education when it is attacked by Unjust Speech. For more on the character of the education offered by Just Speech, see Nussbaum, "Aristophanes and Socrates on Learning Practical Wisdom," 54–58. Similarly, neither Just nor Unjust Speech considers the kind of moderation that has intrinsic benefits,

so doing, Just Speech tacitly agrees with Unjust Speech that moderation—which, according to Just Speech’s presentation of the good old times, is the core of the just life—requires a reward. Unjust Speech then claims that the rewards of immoderate behavior are greater. Rhetorically this makes a certain sense. If one is acting for the sake of rewards, the greater rewards ought to determine the correct action. But the examples Unjust Speech gives of the rewards for immoderation ignore the implication of Just Speech’s examples. Just Speech’s examples of the rewards that moderation brings are the sword that Peleus received from Hephaestus just in time to protect him from certain death and his marriage to Thetis, an immortal being (1063–67). It is reasonable to infer, then, that the noncomic equivalents of the rewards Just Speech believes one earns through moderate or just behavior are the protection and love of the gods: protection from danger and death.¹⁸ Unjust Speech’s response here is clearly insufficient. Perhaps one can obtain greater earthly goods, such as money, through immoderation or injustice, but people do not ordinarily believe one can earn divine protection this way. And the love and protection of the gods outweigh any earthly good. By Unjust Speech’s own standard—reward—Just Speech has won the argument. However, a careful consideration of Unjust Speech’s whole presentation, and its agreement with Just Speech’s views, offers a further refutation of Just Speech’s case.

Unjust Speech counts love and adultery among the necessities of nature (1075–76). And he claims that this fact makes committing adultery no injustice since it cannot be unjust to do what we cannot avoid doing, what we are naturally compelled to do, what even the gods, who are far greater, cannot help themselves from doing (1080–82). Many statements by Just Speech seem to confirm an intense, natural desire for extramarital, erotic encounters (973–83, 996–97). But what we are compelled to do does not deserve punishment because we are not free to act otherwise.

But perhaps we have been too quick to conclude that the behavior discussed by Just and Unjust Speech is irresistible. Just Speech’s description of the good old times implies that back then men did in fact resist their unjust sexual desires (973–83). These desires may be natural and intense according to Just Speech, but they are not irresistible. If one can resist one’s natural desires, then giving into them is voluntary and, when giving in results in an unjust act, deserves punishment. One might say everyone is free to

such as eating moderately so as to avoid a stomach ache.

¹⁸ See also Just Speech’s claim that with his education Pheidippides will “be saved” (930). The Greek *sōthēnai* can mean to save from death.

choose between what he knows is right and what he knows is wrong, and those described by Just Speech chose what they knew was right, and those described by Unjust Speech chose what they knew was wrong.¹⁹ However, we can see by comparing the claims of Just Speech and Unjust Speech that this is not an accurate account of the decision-making process they are describing. Rather, Just Speech seems to encourage resistance to immoderate desires because he ultimately believes that punishment and shame are greater evils than the satisfaction of these desires would be good (see, e.g., 972, 1083–84, 1086–88). Put otherwise, avoiding punishment and shame is, in his opinion, the greater good. What might look like an admirable sacrifice of tempting pleasures is actually the means to a greater good. In that case, both the men described by Just Speech and those described by Unjust Speech are doing what seems, at the moment, best for them; both are acting to benefit themselves. To those influenced by Just Speech, it seems best to avoid punishment, and to those influenced by Unjust Speech it seems best to “use [their] nature” and enjoy those things without which life would not be worth living (1078, 1074–75). If one of them is wrong about what is best, he might benefit from education, but he does not deserve punishment. This helps explain the end of the debate between the Speeches. When Unjust Speech convinces Just Speech that punishment and shame are not really bad, Just Speech gives in and joins Unjust Speech (1085–1104). This implies that Just Speech’s only reason for resisting temptation was his opinion that the punishment and shame were greater evils, not that resistance itself, or behaving in a so-called just manner, is in and of itself good.

This conclusion is further supported, and its broader implications pointed to, in the claim of Unjust Speech: “if you consort with me, then use your nature, leap, laugh, believe that nothing is shameful! For if you happen to be caught as an adulterer, you’ll reply to him that you’ve done him no injustice” (1077–80). On one hand, Unjust Speech is claiming that consorting with him, that is, learning the unjust speech or clever rhetoric, will allow one to escape human punishment by outsmarting one’s accusers whenever one does a deed generally deemed to be unjust. Unjust Speech is in this way like Glaucon’s ring of Gyges (*Republic* 359b–360d).²⁰ But Unjust Speech’s claim actually has a broader implication, just as the ring of Gyges story does. What the ring of

¹⁹ In fact, Unjust Speech even refers to the adultery he is encouraging listeners to commit as a wrong (*hēmartes*, 1076).

²⁰ For a similar interpretation of this general point in Unjust Speech’s victory see Rahe, “The Aristophanic Question,” 74, and J. Peter Euben, *Corrupting Youth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 127.

Gyges story is meant to show is that so-called just people are just only to avoid punishment; they are not morally different from the unjust. This insight in itself allows one to enjoy one's so-called unjust activities since there would no longer be feelings of guilt in acting in a way that is not morally different from the way so-called just people act. Hence, consorting with Unjust Speech, that is, learning the truth about justice and injustice found in his speech, frees one from an especially deep and difficult-to-escape kind of punishment—what we call a guilty conscience. For this reason, those who consort with Unjust Speech are able to obtain and fully enjoy what is genuinely good.

But as we saw above, so-called injustice, even injustice protected from punishment and feelings of guilt, cannot provide the greatest goods human beings hope for. It cannot provide the particular goods that we hope justice will help us achieve, goods for which we are prepared to sacrifice unjustly acquired goods, goods pointed to by the examples of the rewards earned by Peleus from the gods. But Unjust Speech's argument and Just Speech's agreement have implications for these hopes as well. If the just are just to avoid punishment, or to earn rewards, or in other words, if just and unjust alike do what seems, at the moment, best for them, the unjust do not deserve punishment and the just do not deserve rewards—including the rewards Just Speech has in mind: the protection and love of the gods or, to simplify, immortality.²¹

This argument is presented in a comically crude way. Unlike your average just man, Just Speech is blatantly mercenary. His hopes for reward and fear of punishment are right at the surface of his thinking. But by putting these arguments in the mouth of a character named Just Speech, who lives in Socrates's think tank, Aristophanes is suggesting that the Socratic education reveals that the same concerns exist in the half-conscious hopes and fears of even the most refined just people. Most of the time, these people think or feel that their justice is ultimately good for them without making conscious the character of that goodness. But whenever they make a just speech to themselves to explain their just actions and just sacrifices, they inevitably have recourse to more or less clear notions of punishment and reward. And if they are ultimately acting to avoid punishment or receive reward, including punishments or rewards from the gods, their sacrifices are not really sacrifices. They are means to achieving what the just believe will be much greater goods. The just are, then, not morally different from the unjust. This comic

²¹ This does not prove that the gods would not benefit the just and harm the unjust, only that this is not a requirement of justice.

exaggeration we get in the character of Just Speech makes the noncomic and subtler instances of the same phenomena easier to see.

In any case, we can now see the true grounds of Unjust Speech's claim that Justice does not exist (902). He seemed to prove it by pointing out that Zeus was not punished for beating his father as justice, if it existed, would demand. That Aristophanes knows this is not sufficient proof is demonstrated by the fact that Pheidippides's initial arguments proving the justice of father beating could be used in Zeus's case. The real grounds of Unjust Speech's claim that Justice does not exist are found in an examination of the complete debate. If the just and the unjust are both acting ultimately to benefit themselves, then there is not a moral difference between them. But in that case, justice, understood as the virtue that distinguishes the good man and makes him deserving of reward, does not exist.²² But how can we be sure that Aristophanes believes this is Socrates's view? Considering the trouble Aristophanes has taken to distance his Socrates from this argument, we could expect only the very slightest hint from Socrates's own mouth. During their initial meeting, Strepsiades explained that he needed to study with Socrates in order to deal with his great debts. Thereupon Socrates asks, "How is it that you were unaware of yourself becoming indebted?" (242). The question makes Socrates look like an out-of-touch scientist who does not realize that becoming indebted is likely the product of lack of will or lack of sufficient income, not lack of awareness. However, translated into a noncomic argument, we see a very slight hint of agreement with the results of the debate between Just and Unjust Speech. Socrates's question implies that if Strepsiades had only known he was becoming indebted, meaning if he had fully acknowledged that his debts were becoming too big to repay, he would have avoided it; it implies that Socrates believes we do not knowingly harm ourselves (e.g., by becoming indebted beyond our ability to repay). And this in turn implies that he believes we always act to benefit ourselves: we always do what seems, at the moment, best for us.²³ Furthermore, an examination of the debate offers the evidence linking Unjust Speech's claim that Justice does not exist and Socrates's claim that Zeus does not exist. If there is no moral difference between the just and the unjust, then Zeus, understood as a god who gives to

²² One could wonder whether there remains a moral difference between the man who pursues his own good in such a way as to benefit others or the common good, or at least not to harm them, and the man who is indifferent to these concerns. One can see from an examination of the *Clouds* that the difference between these men would not be a moral difference but rather a difference in what they understood to be truly good for a human being.

²³ A very similar case is made by the Platonic Socrates at *Apology* 25d–26a.

the just the rewards and to the unjust the punishments that they deserve, in this life or the next, does not exist.

WHAT IS TRULY GOOD FOR HUMAN BEINGS?

A close examination of the debates between Strepsiades and Pheidippides and between Just and Unjust Speech has explained why Pheidippides seems ultimately to believe he should guide himself by putting his own good first. That examination suggested that this is what everyone in fact does, the only difference being that some are mistaken about what that good is. This leaves us with the momentous question: What is genuinely good for a human being? And in the first place, what does Aristophanes's Socrates believe is good for a human being? To judge from Aristophanes's depiction of Socrates's way of life, what Socrates believes is best for a human being is the single-minded study of the nature of things,²⁴ a study that either requires the sacrifice of, or inspires the indifference to, sensual pleasures and the family. But how did Socrates come to this conclusion according to Aristophanes? Obviously one cannot reach this conclusion by looking at a scientific account of the similarity between humans and beasts. Aristophanes gives us a pointer when Pheidippides, Socrates's closest surrogate, says that what makes us distinct from the beasts is our decree writing.

Let us consider what the *Clouds* implies about Socrates's understanding of this distinctively human characteristic. In the first place, decrees or laws clearly restrain our nature. The evidence from the debate between Just and Unjust Speech points to a natural desire for a degree of sexual freedom that the law seeks to check largely for the sake of the family. In fact, the laws that receive the greatest scrutiny in both the debates between Just and Unjust Speech and between Strepsiades and Pheidippides are those that create and protect the human family, laws prohibiting adultery, incest, father and mother beating. And we see that after his Socratic education, Pheidippides seems particularly eager to display his freedom from the restraint of the laws

²⁴ Although the loudest message of the *Clouds* is that Socrates spends all of his time studying only those things that we would today classify as natural science, there are many suggestions that his studies are much broader. For example, he offers to teach Strepsiades about poetry (638). His comical lessons on the precise use of words could be pointing to the Platonic Socrates's tendency to bring out confusions in his interlocutors by examining their imprecise use of words (e.g., *Republic* 338b–d and context). Pheidippides seems to have learned from Socrates that father beating, mother beating, and incest are not unjust—which is not to say that Socrates would not disapprove of these activities on prudential or other grounds.

and customs governing family.²⁵ The focus of the Socratic surrogates on these laws in particular implies that these laws show us something fundamental about Socrates's understanding of the effect of laws or decree writing on our nature and how this in turn affects our understanding of our genuine good.

But if the only effect of decree writing were restraining our nature, recognizing our natural desires and genuine good would seem to be easy, and would not require the extensive cross-examinations and refutations for which Socrates is famous. The *Clouds* suggests that there is more to the effect of decrees or laws.

The only character in the play who is clearly failing to achieve his own good is Strepsiades, and the reason for his failure is his devotion to his son. We need to look at Strepsiades to see the full effect of the laws that create and protect the family. But using Strepsiades in this way is not without its problems. Socrates was unable to educate Strepsiades and eventually Strepsiades turns violently against Socrates and his education. In the character of Strepsiades we are much more likely to see suggestions of Aristophanes's criticisms of Socrates: suggestions of what Aristophanes thinks Socrates fails to understand. But many characters in Aristophanes's comedies do double duty.²⁶ It is therefore possible that Aristophanes is using Strepsiades to show us both what Socrates understands about the effect of decree writing on our nature and where precisely Socrates's understanding fails.

While Strepsiades is eager to break some laws, and even to train his son to do so with impunity, he is horrified at the mere suggestion that certain other laws might be broken, such as the laws prohibiting father beating, mother beating, and incest.²⁷ In fact, most people feel in their bones that incest, for

²⁵ Of all the Euripidean verses that allow Pheidippides to enjoy looking down on established laws, why pick one in which incest is depicted without criticism (1371–72)? Why is Pheidippides willing to beat his father for not appreciating this particular piece of Euripidean wisdom? Why is he so keen to defend father beating and mother beating? And why is he envisioning a life without a son? Freedom from attachment to the family seems to be a key part of Pheidippides's education and new life.

²⁶ For example, Strauss argues that Pheidippides has been converted to Socrates, but he also argues that he is a comic equivalent of Aristophanes (*Socrates and Aristophanes*, 50 and 52). Strauss also claims that the *Clouds* are “in different ways, Socrates' divinities and Aristophanes' divinities” (46).

²⁷ Strepsiades is at first horrified and outraged by his son's beating him. But he is persuaded to hear the case for the justice of father beating and even to accept it. He ultimately and violently rejects it, however, together with all of Socrates's teaching, when that teaching is linked to mother beating. And his violent fight with Pheidippides began over Euripides's uncritical depiction of incest. Although we do not see Strepsiades restrained by the laws forbidding father beating, mother beating, or incest during the *Clouds*, we see the final effect these laws have had on his soul and his opinions. How they came to have this effect is the subject of this section.

example, is simply wrong. So the law prohibiting incest calls attention to and seems to satisfy something distinctive in human erotic nature. It responds to a concern we do not share with the beasts. But this cannot be the whole truth, since we do not need laws that prohibit things everyone is naturally unwilling to do. There is no law prohibiting people from eating gravel. It would seem that the law prohibiting incest both fulfills and restrains something in our nature. But what precisely is fulfilled? While Strepsiades was willing to turn his back on justice and even piety when what they demanded would not benefit him, he never turns his back on his son no matter the cost to himself.²⁸ It seems he is willing to sacrifice his own good for the sake of his son. For example, he has ruined himself financially to give the boy whatever he wants (consider 437–43, and 451–56 where Strepsiades lists everything he is willing to endure, all ultimately for his son). And he is not alone in this. Many parents, if pushed, are willing to bend or break the law, including religious laws, to benefit their children, and most are willing to sacrifice their good for the sake of their children. This appears to be an exception to the Socratic view that we always do what seems best for us. The laws—against incest, father beating, and mother beating—that help create and protect the human family seem to reveal and fulfill a natural selflessness, connected to distinctively human *eros*, when it comes to family and especially children.

But do they reveal that? Why is Strepsiades willing to make these sacrifices for Pheidippides? The suggestion the *Clouds* offers comically is that Strepsiades hopes somehow to live on through Pheidippides. Pheidippides is named partly after Strepsiades's father whose name means thrifty (65). Strepsiades encouraged Pheidippides to live an economically moderate life like Strepsiades did when he was young (70–72). Strepsiades tells the audience these things as part of the history of his indebtedness which includes battles with his extravagant wife who encouraged Pheidippides's upper class, luxurious tastes. One could therefore conclude that these things are merely part of Strepsiades's effort to raise Pheidippides to be frugal, thereby protecting Strepsiades's household from yet another big spender. But this comically inept plan to influence Pheidippides also points to something deeper. Strepsiades does not want Pheidippides given just any name that implies thriftiness. He wants him to have a name that would identify him as part of the family line. And he does not want Pheidippides to adopt just any frugal life, he wants Pheidippides to follow in his footsteps. Moreover, Strepsiades is proud

²⁸ Amy L. Bonnette makes a similar observation in "Family and Politics in Aristophanes," in *Poets, Princes, and Private Citizens*, ed. Joseph M. Knippenberg and Peter Augustine Lawler (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 121–41. See esp. 124.

of, and eager to take responsibility for, Pheidippides's accomplishments (see, e.g., 1206–12, 1338–41). All of this suggests that what is ultimately motivating Strepsiades's sacrifices is the perhaps only half-conscious belief that through his son, and perhaps his descendants, he will achieve a kind of immortality.²⁹

In the first place, if this is so, his apparent sacrifices for his son do not contradict the view that human beings do what seems best for them, and are not evidence of a natural selflessness. But as the *Clouds* also makes clear, the belief that informs Strepsiades's action is false and, in this particular case, even ridiculous: Strepsiades and Pheidippides share little more than blood. And Strepsiades's seeming devotion to his son has been very bad for him: he is in terrible debt and certain to be sued. His sacrifices have not brought him and will not bring him a genuine good. And this in turn shows, in the second place, the full effect of our decree writing on our nature. Somehow the laws that create the distinctively human family ultimately lead us to believe, falsely, that we can fulfill our desire for immortality though sacrificing our good for the family and especially for our children.

But how does this happen? As we have already seen from our investigation of the *Clouds*, human beings have a natural concern for themselves and a natural desire for immortality. The *Clouds* also depicts our natural sociality, and our particular attraction to those who are akin. The think tank members, who share an intellectual kinship, live together, study together, and eat together. Strepsiades and Pheidippides, who share a kinship through blood, sleep in the same room. And one can imagine much more successful feasts of father and son, before Socratic instruction changed Pheidippides's taste in poetry and his view of the world. The bonds of the fellow knowers of the think tank seem to be on firmer ground. But the law prohibiting incest, by causing us to restrain our sexual activities with respect to our family members, and

²⁹ If this is the case, one could wonder why he does not seem upset by Pheidippides's suggestion, made during his case proving the justice of father beating, that he may not have a son (1435–39). Perhaps Strepsiades is upset by this suggestion and chooses that very moment to concede the father beating argument in order not to force Pheidippides to say anything worse. After all, his grounds for conceding are not that sons will miss out on the joys of beating if they do not have sons of their own. Habib also sees in Strepsiades the desire to live on through procreation (“Meaning of Socrates’ Asceticism,” 38, 42). And as we will see below, both Socrates’s and Pheidippides’s efforts to educate Strepsiades end because of Strepsiades’s inability to see, to remember, or to accept his mortality. These instances lead the reader to wonder if Strepsiades expects to achieve immortality through living on through his son, or through being rewarded by the gods for his devotion to family. Because these hopes are only half-conscious, Strepsiades may sometimes expect one, sometimes the other, or even both at the same time. Because of this lack of clarity, which may be common to many parents, the *Clouds* sometimes points to one and sometimes the other (see note 31 below). As we will see, what unites both expectations is the belief that immortality is achieved through devotion to and sacrifice for the family.

only our family members, creates a relationship and bond among the family members that is unique. The members of our family are our own in a way that no one else is. By restraining our sexual desires, or sacrificing our sexual freedom, in the case of family we fulfill our natural desire for kinship with those who seem to be most fully and profoundly our own. But this experience of fulfilling one natural desire by restraining another may lead us to associate the restraint with deeper fulfillment. From this experience we may develop a hope, or a half-conscious hope, that we can achieve other kinds of fulfillment through other kinds of restraint or sacrifice. From this we may come to believe falsely that our greatest fulfillment is achieved through the greatest restraint or sacrifice. And thus we may come to believe that sacrificing for our children is somehow our own greatest fulfillment, our own greatest good. Moreover, we also come to confuse the good of our children with our own good. This confusion is further supported by the natural characteristics of children and of child rearing. It is very rare for a child not to resemble its parents in something—for example, in looks, gestures, or turns of phrase. If one adds to this the fact that parents do everything for their children for years (1380–85), one could wonder how one would avoid regarding one's child as one's accomplishment: a living, breathing, second and younger self who will carry on after oneself. And thus the laws that help create and support the family through restraining and fulfilling something in our nature ultimately contribute to obscuring our true, mortal nature and our genuine good. One could wonder how many other laws have similar effects on us.

What evidence do we have that Aristophanes's Socrates appreciates this effect of decree writing on human beings? When Pheidippides sets out to prove that father beating is just, he asks Strepsiades to “choose which of the two speeches you wish to be spoken” (1336). Strauss maintains that this offer cannot refer to the Just and Unjust Speeches because the statements of Just Speech could not possibly be used to defend father beating.³⁰ He suggests that it refers instead to poetic and physical (meaning scientific) speeches. But Pheidippides's offer implies that he knows the poetic speech to defend father beating. And he must have learned this from Socrates if we are to believe his claim that prior to his Socratic education he could not “utter more than three phrases before going wrong” (1401–5). If we add to this Pheidippides's newfound appreciation of Euripidean wisdom regarding the family and his ability to use this wisdom in defense of father beating, we are led to conclude that the Socratic education includes a poetic account of the family and

³⁰ Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 38–39.

its capacity to obscure our genuine good (1371–77 and 1415). Pheidippides alludes to the part of Euripides's *Alcestis* in which the father and son are arguing about whether a father qua father should be willing to die for his son. The play shines a bright light on the almost universal view that a father who is unwilling to die for his son is not really a father, that a father somehow feels that he is fully a father when he experiences the willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice for his child (see, e.g., 636–68). But in the precise line to which Pheidippides refers, this particular father, Pheres, is arguing that his son, in asking his father to die for him, has demonstrated that the genuine good for either father or son is to continue living (691 and context).³¹ The play leads us to believe that ordinarily fatherly love and devotion obscures the father's view of his own genuine good, making the father willing to sacrifice his life for his son. In other words, we are led by Pheidippides's reference to this passage to conclude that Aristophanes's Socrates, like Aristophanes himself, understands that and why Strepsiades does not see his genuine good clearly. But in spite of this understanding, neither Socrates, nor his surrogate Pheidippides, can fully educate Strepsiades. What this failure implies about the views Aristophanes attributes to his Socrates will be partly explored below.

For now we can see how the effect of our decree writing explains Aristophanes's Socrates's conclusions about the best way of life for a human being. On one hand, a being like ourselves, who seeks its own good, but whose vision of the good has been profoundly obscured by the interaction of laws and our own nature, will need a thorough study of the nature of things, including its own nature, to see its situation clearly. This would have to be *at least* a first step in living a genuinely good life, although there is also evidence in the *Clouds* that seeing clearly is in and of itself pleasing to beings like us. After graduating from the think tank, Pheidippides spontaneously explains how pleasant he finds his new and higher level of understanding (1399–1405)— so pleasant, in fact, that he plans to give up a way of life to which he was so devoted that he bankrupted his father. This implies a deep natural desire to see ourselves and the world clearly.

On the other hand, the Socratic education that allows us to see ourselves clearly also reveals our deep natural desire for immortality. Some scholars

³¹ The *Alcestis* makes some references to the belief that one lives on or achieves a kind of immortality through one's children (see, e.g., 654–57). But the play makes regular references to the belief that sacrificing one's life for family earns one the greatest rewards, perhaps from the gods (see, e.g., 301, 436–37, 619–20, 625–27, 744–46). In other words, it emphasizes the other way, as many hope, of achieving immortality through sacrifice for the family (see note 29 above). The play also raises doubts about the possibility of divine reward (see, e.g., 142, 527–28, 541, 712).

argue that even Aristophanes's Socrates has, through his study of nature, persuaded himself that he has escaped the limitations of mortality.³² However, I think the *Clouds* shows the opposite. It shows that seeing clearly, according to Socrates, requires first and foremost that we see ourselves as mortal. Hence Socrates harshly expels Strepsiades from his school when Strepsiades comes up with a plan to get out of his debts that shows he has forgotten that there is no afterlife (776–85). This suggests that remembering our mortality is *the* most important lesson of the Socratic education, and forgetting this proves that one is utterly hopeless.³³ And this makes some sense. The Socratic education also teaches how easily false hopes of immortality arise. It teaches that the hopes we have of achieving immortality through justice or the family are based on contradictory or confused beliefs, beliefs that are extremely common but rarely examined. One might even say that it teaches that it is our deep desire for immortality, together with the effect of decree writing on us, that is responsible for the false hopes, conscious or half-conscious, that obscure our true nature and genuine good. If this is so, then Socratic education shows that these two deep desires, perhaps our two deepest desires, are in conflict. Our desire for immortality threatens our clear-sightedness.

This leaves us with further problems. First, which desire is in fact deeper in us, our desire for immortality or our desire for clear-sightedness? And if our desire for immortality is deeper, but immortality is impossible, would a sensible man prefer to believe falsely that we can become immortal, rather than to see clearly that we cannot? Is it obvious that Aristophanes considers Strepsiades's rejection of the Socratic education foolish? Socrates's and Pheidippides's failure to educate Strepsiades seems to be attributable in part to Strepsiades's hopes, probably no more than half-conscious, that he can earn or otherwise achieve immortality. Pheidippides's effort to educate his father ends when he offers to prove the justice of mother beating. Strepsiades should have accepted this argument on the same basis that he accepted the argument for the justice of father beating. Instead he is outraged for reasons he cannot seem to put into words. Strauss explains that if a son can justly beat his mother, he could also justly have sex with her, thereby destroying the family.³⁴ One could say that by accepting the justice of mother beating Strepsiades would be accepting the death of his son, understood as his son

³² See, for example, Rahe, "The Aristophanic Question," 69–71; Habib, "Meaning of Socrates' Asceticism," 33.

³³ Consider Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 26–27, 82.

³⁴ See *ibid.*, 43.

and only his son.³⁵ Unlike Pheres, who was willing to accept the death of his son, Strepsiades chooses instead to make a grand sacrifice of his own good. He does not sacrifice his life, but he does sacrifice perhaps the grandest thing appropriate to sacrifice in a comedy, and surely something very dear to him: his one chance for financial salvation which can be achieved only through Socratic education. He clearly believes this sacrifice will be approved by the gods and in particular by Zeus (see 1468, 1476–77 and context). One could therefore say that he makes this sacrifice owing to the feeling “in his bones” that the Socratic education will cost him what he half-consciously hopes to receive through his devotion to his son and the support that such devotion receives through ancestral Zeus.³⁶ At the very least, Socrates and Pheidippides, in trying to educate Strepsiades, seem to believe, wrongly, that the desire for clear-sightedness would triumph over other desires in Strepsiades. Because it does not, we are led to wonder how Aristophanes might rank our desire for immortality and our desire for clear-sightedness.

Second, the arguments and conclusions that Aristophanes attributes to Socrates do not, in fact, prove that gods do not exist, nor do they prove that gods, if they exist, would not make us immortal. They only raise doubts about the evidence of the gods’ existence and show that justice does not demand that the good be rewarded and the bad punished.³⁷ Clear-sightedness, then, requires that we keep in mind that while there is no evidence that immortality is possible, there is also no basis for the certainty that it is impossible. Given the depth of our desire for immortality, it may be harder to keep our true situation fixed in our minds than it would be if we had certain knowledge we were mortal. And, given this lack of certainty about our mortality, one could wonder about the best way to live one’s life. Aristophanes’s Socrates, as shown by his ejection of Strepsiades from his school, and his addressing Strepsiades as “ephemeral one,” seems to treat our mortality as a certainty (223). Perhaps he overstates the case to forestall the all too easy rise of false and distorting hopes in the souls of his students. Or is this Aristophanes’s way of implying that Socrates is a boaster: that Socrates claims to know more than he actually does?

³⁵ See also Timothy W. Burns, “Anger in Thucydides and Aristophanes,” in Mhire and Frost, *Political Theory of Aristophanes*, 245–46.

³⁶ See Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 45. For a different interpretation of who is meant by the “man who has felt in his bones what the denial of ancestral Zeus means,” see Stauffer, “Leo Strauss’s UnSocratic Aristophanes?,” 335. For an account similar to mine see Habib, “Meaning of Socrates’ Asceticism,” 37–38.

³⁷ See note 21 above.

If one assumes, as Aristophanes's Socrates seems to do, that clear-sightedness is the object of our deepest desire, or that seeing ourselves and the world clearly is our greatest good, one can understand why the think-tankers do not have families. Freed from the irrational hopes associated with family, one would be likely to seek out the company of those who would be most likely to contribute to one's own genuine good: fellow knowers.³⁸ One might even go out of one's way to avoid extensive family participation, knowing the danger it may pose to clear-sightedness. This seems to explain why Pheidippides is so eager to display his freedom from irrational attachment to family.

But what about the absence of sensual pleasure in the life of the think-tankers?³⁹ The enjoyment of sensual pleasures, and acquiring the means to supply oneself with such pleasures, distracts one from the single-minded study of the nature of things (see 221). But the think-tankers endure a level of deprivation that has Strepsiades comparing them to Spartan prisoners of war (186). Aristophanes's Socrates seems to regard sensual pleasures as more threatening than an ordinary distraction. Sensual pleasures, especially those that are intense, can take our mind off our mortality, if only temporarily. So what? As long as we return to recognizing our mortality, is it absolutely necessary, even for a clear-sighted life, that we never take a break from this awareness? Perhaps Aristophanes's Socrates would say that such breaks are no doubt pleasant in themselves (not just because of the sensual pleasure enjoyed, but because of the respite from the pain of the awareness that we are mortal). Too many such breaks might, in his view, undermine the endurance needed for the clear-sighted life. Perhaps this is why Aristophanes's Socrates does his thinking on a flea-infested mattress. This is the comic equivalent of the endurance one needs to live a clear-sighted life. The only way Socrates can continue to enjoy the satisfaction of our deep longing to see clearly is by constantly enduring the flea bite of mortality. We wonder why Aristophanes has Pheidippides decisively reject this aspect of the Socratic way of life. What Pheidippides does not reject is the great pleasure of seeing clearly itself (1399–1405). This points to another possible interpretation of the absence of sensual pleasures in the life of the think-tankers. It could be that the great desire to expand one's understanding of oneself and of the world and the great

³⁸ While the Platonic Socrates is depicted as having children, he is never shown interacting with them. On the contrary, the strong suggestion of the Platonic corpus is that he spent all of his time with other people's children.

³⁹ Habib maintains that Socrates's asceticism is a symptom of his lack of self-knowledge ("Meaning of Socrates' Asceticism," 30, 42).

enjoyment of achieving that goal eclipse the desire for sensual pleasures. At least, this could be the case for some people, if not for Pheidippides.

CONCLUSION

By focusing almost exclusively on what Aristophanes believes Socrates believes, and by piecing his view together both from the things he attributes directly to Socrates and those he conveys through Socratic surrogates, this article has offered a detailed account of the conclusions and the supporting arguments that Aristophanes attributes to his Socrates. In doing so it has sought to offer a more complete and explicit picture of what Aristophanes believes Socrates believes than was previously available. It has shown that according to Aristophanes's Socrates our decree writing together with our deep desire for immortality has given rise to half-conscious hopes and beliefs concerning justice and the family that are contradictory or false. These half-conscious hopes and beliefs obscure our true nature and genuine good. According to Aristophanes's Socrates, the only way we can achieve our genuine good, which is to satisfy our deep desire for clear-sightedness or knowledge, is through a life devoted to the study of the nature of things, which exposes these contradictions and errors and extends our understanding of the world and of ourselves. This life also requires, according to Aristophanes's Socrates, practices that help preserve this hard-won clear-sightedness against the threat posed by the distorting hopes that arise so easily in our souls. It requires limiting one's participation in family and sensual pleasures.

If this is an accurate account of the views that Aristophanes attributes to Socrates, our next question must be, What does Aristophanes think of these views? Where, if anywhere, does he agree, and where, if anywhere, does he disagree? To say it in another way, precisely what is the difference between the teaching of Aristophanes's poetry and the teaching of his Socrates's philosophy? While this article has not focused on this question, it has brought to light several possible starting points for looking into it. Let me mention three. First, as I suggested above, Socrates's and his surrogate Pheidippides's failure to educate Strepsiades seems to indicate a failure to understand that different human beings have different natures. Second, Socrates's calling Strepsiades "ephemeral one" and ejecting him from the think tank when he forgets Socrates's teaching that there is no afterlife raises the possibility that Aristophanes thinks Socrates has more confidence than the evidence warrants that there is no life beyond this one. Third, Pheidippides's rejection of

the life of continence and endurance practiced in the think tank raises questions about whether Socrates is right about the character of the best way of life. These and other indications found in the *Clouds* and in Aristophanes's other plays would have to be considered thoroughly for one to form a comprehensive picture of Aristophanes's agreements and disagreements with his Socrates. Doing justice to this part of the poet's understanding is the work of another article.

