**Comic Socrates? – The *Clouds*, taste and philosophy**

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**Abstract**

In the *Clouds*, Aristophanes apparently ridicules Socratic philosophy as a useless, essentially passive preoccupation, which, ‘twisted’ in wrong hands, can seriously harm the City. But such an instrumentalist reading of the *Clouds* (and of philosophy) misses a crucial point regarding the relation between philosophy and comedy. Insofar as philosophy, love of wisdom, is irreducible to wisdom, insofar as, in other words, philosophy is also a matter of taste (a concept which seeks to combine knowledge and pleasure), the *Clouds* can be read as an ironic-comic defense of philosophy. To discuss this, the paper reads the *Clouds* in the perspective of free use. This reading makes it possible to articulate two distinct but related senses of perverting philosophy, which are evidenced with material from within the play: the reduction of reason to instrumental reason and/or to State philosophy. To end with, the paper discusses the relationship between comedy and philosophy in more general terms.

**Keywords**

Free use – instrumental use – philosophy – comedy – the multitude – the state of exception

[C]omedy is more ancient and profound than tragedy … but also … closer to philosophy, so close that the two ultimately seem to blur into each other. (Agamben 2018: 4)

Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, performed first in 423 BC, opens with the complaints and worries of an ordinary citizen, Strepsiades (the ‘Twister’), who cannot fall asleep and turns around in his bed because of the debt which his extravagant son Pheidippides has run him into. Trying to organize his debts, Strepsiades asks his son to enroll in Socrates’ school, Pondertorium, and to learn ‘how to successfully argue any case, right or wrong’ (Aristophanes 1998: 99). Strepsiades has heard that there reside in the school two different kinds of arguments, the ‘Superior Argument’ and the ‘Inferior Argument,’ and that the Inferior Argument can win even if it debates an unjust case. ‘All you have to do is learn this Inferior Argument for me’ (119). But Pheidippides declines his father’s suggestion, and so, with no alternative, Strepsiades decides to enroll himself in Socrates’ school.

As such, the desire for perversion is what triggers the events in *Clouds*. Strepsiades is interested in philosophy merely to deceive his creditors, to ‘twist justice around’ (433-434). But sending Strepsiades, an old farmer, to Socrates’s school also produces a comic account of Socrates. The philosopher, in the end, ‘is necessarily ridiculous in the eyes of the multitude and therefore a natural subject for comedy’ (Strauss 1966: 5). But the *Clouds* wants more than merely provoking laughter. It is also a paradigmatic case where the comic encounters, unsettles, politicizes thought by showing it in a ridiculous light.

Thus, in the *Clouds*, we get a glimpse of comedy thinking and philosophy laughing. Yet, a philosophy that can think with comedy cannot define itself merely as ‘wisdom.’ Such philosophy must become ‘love of wisdom,’ that is, a mode of life grounded in taste and reason at once. The comic, in other words, does not only ridicule philosophy; it also calls for another philosophy.

But why to insist on comedy? And why should one re-read the *Clouds* in order to attain a new understand the relationship between comedy, philosophy, and politics today? Ours is a political culture marked by media spectacles, populism, and demagogy. In this world, in which democracy is ‘twisted’ in countless ways, politics tends to be suspended by bio-political provocations, and knowledge politics, even the university as a mode of life, is sought to be aligned with the demands of instrumentalism, a despotism of the useful that seems to be determined to extinguish everything ‘useless.’ Even the ‘concept,’ as Deleuze and Guattari used to complain, is perverted in this political culture and put in the service of advertisement industry with a view to commodifying creativity (see 1994: 10-11). How can one put a distance to this increasing banalization and stultification? Where can one find a language to intimate the significance of free use as against instrumental use, of love of knowledge rather than sheer knowledge, and combine politics and reason, and reason and taste, as against contemporary populist (read totalitarian) cultural politics? Perhaps the first thing to recall in this context is that ‘contemporary’ problems are really untimely in the sense that they are not only our problems. A classic, Italo Calvino (2002: 8) argued, is ‘a work which persists as background noise even when a present that is totally incompatible with it holds sway.’ The *Clouds* is significant to cultural politics today in this sense, that is, it helps to articulate the problematique of instrumental use and political perversion which seems to be our contemporary predicament. However, unlike its previous interpretations, we approach the *Clouds* distinctively through the concepts of fee use and taste, and we do this emphasising the significance of the ‘erotic’ dimension of thought. In other words, ‘our’ classic is not indifferent to the contemporary world; we read it from within the context of contemporary cultural politics.

Further, our reading of the *Clouds* offers a focused discussion of the agonistic relation between tragedy and comedy. In this, we assume that human life is always already governed, and this problematical condition can be approached in two ways: through comedy or tragedy. Which implies two ways of philosophising. ‘Democritus and Heraclitus were two philosophers, of whom the first, finding the human state vain and ridiculous, never appeared in public except with a mocking and ribald expression. Heraclitus, on the other hand, felt pity and compassion for this state of ours, so his expression was always melancholy and his eyes full of tears’ (Montaigne 1993: 132). Siding with comedy, the article is an exercise in reading philosophy comically and comedy philosophically, the relevance of which is discussed in the end of the article.

The article progresses along two axes: a close reading of the *Clouds* and a commentary on the relationship between comedy, philosophy, and politics. We open with discussing the *Clouds* as an alternative way of imagining godly transcendence understood as a realm of the virtual. The second section links the virtual and the actual through the concepts of taste and love of knowledge, which also calls for a different understanding of philosophy. In this prism philosophy is not defined as a master’s superior knowledge but by a desire provoked not by the known but the unknown. The philosophical community shares not only knowledge but also a libidinal investment in the field of philosophy as such. We share a taste for philosophy. Next, we re-articulate the distinction between instrumental use and free use as two different ways of relating to knowledge, both with political consequences, and we link this distinction back to the idea of love of wisdom. We end with discussing the divergence between tragedy and comedy. Our pivotal argument in this context is that there is an alliance between comedy and philosophy on the basis of the dialectic of lack and desire. It is also here that the political relevance of Aristophanes’ play is most visible.

**Initiation to the Virtual**

On arriving at Socrates’ school, Strepsiades is told off by a student of Socrates for knocking on the door too forcefully. He might have interrupted the conception of ‘a brilliant new idea on the verge of discovery’ (Aristophanes 1998: 136). Strepsiades apologizes asking what that brilliant idea might be. ‘Just now, Socrates asked Chaerephon how many feet a flea could jump, calculating the equation of one flea foot for a foot’ (145). The student also references a concept Socrates recently announced showing that ‘the hum of a gnat is generated via … its anus’ (158). Strepsiades is impressed: ‘I’m sure Socrates could easily fend off hostile legal actions with such a deep understanding of arseholes’ (165-168). The student lets Strepsiades in. Strepsiades finds himself among pallid, barefooted and shabbily dressed students. ‘By Heracles! What on earth are these creatures’ (184)!

At one point, Strepsiades sees a man aloft. The man turns out to be Socrates. ‘Socrates! What are you doing up there?’ ‘I walk the air in order to look down on the sun’ (220-225). Strepsiades asks Socrates whether he could come down for an earthly affair and teach him how to debate. ‘Name your price, whatever it takes, I swear by the gods to pay you!’ (245). But Socrates has renounced Zeus and the other traditional gods which Strepsiades swears by, practicing now a new religion with new divinities, namely the Clouds. Thus, he asks Strepsiades to lie down on a sacred couch in order to establish communion with the Clouds.

‘What do I get out of it’ (259)? Strepsiades only wants to learn the type of argument ‘that can argue a wrongful case and defeat the Superior Argument’ (884). Socrates starts the rite. ‘O master, our lord, infinite Air… Reveal yourselves, sacred ladies, emerge for those with higher thoughts’ (263-266)! The Clouds hear the summons and come making sounds of ‘godlike thunderclaps,’ but while Socrates answers them devoutly, Strepsiades answers them ‘with a rumbling fart’ (294). Socrates asks him to stop ‘behaving like one of those wretched comic playwrights!’ (296). Strepsiades endures the process in order to become what he is, a twister.

But he cannot comprehend the Clouds. ‘Are they some new breed of female idols?’ (315) ‘No, no, no. They are the heavenly Clouds, magnificent goddesses for men of leisure. They grace us with our intellect, argumentative skills, perception…’ (316-318). People take the clouds merely to be ‘a load of old vapor, all drizzle and fog’ because of ignorance, because they do not know that they are goddesses who encourage ‘sophisticated scholars’ whose ‘insubstantial idleness’ is ‘sustained by waxing lyrical about the Clouds!’ (330-334).

But Strepsiades’ thoughts are elsewhere; he is thinking why the clouds look like beautiful women if they are gods. Socrates explains that the Clouds, as divine imitator-artists, can assume any form, can mimic anything (350). They always change form; their being is becoming, a flux. Apropos of Deleuze’s definition of virtual events as ‘an atmospheric variation … or a cloud of droplets’ (Deleuze and Parnet 2002: 66), the clouds in the play can be thought of as the virtual. They can actualize themselves in infinite forms but they cannot be grasped in themselves for they ‘become what they see’ (Nussbaum 1980: 76).

Interestingly, when they address him, the clouds mock Socrates as a ‘priest of pedantic prattle’ (358-359). They say that there are only two otherworldly experts they approve: ‘Prodicus for his sheer wisdom and knowledge, and you, for the way you strut around like a grand gander, roll your eyes, go barefoot, endure all, and hold such high opinions’ (362-363). But Socrates does not respond to this comparison. Is it because of self-contentment, the true ‘blessedness’ that consists in the assent of the soul achieved through understanding (Spinoza 1993: 214)? Or is it because philosophy, in Socrates’ perspective, is not reducible to ‘sheer wisdom and knowledge’ anyway? This is one of the important details which we will return to, while we acknowledge that Aristophanic characters are exceptionally resistant to rationalization.

What follows is a demonstration that the Clouds are ‘the only true gods’ (Aristophanes 1998: 365). ‘What about Zeus?’, asks Strepsiades (366). Socrates replies that ‘Zeus? Don’t be absurd! Zeus doesn’t exist’ (367). There is something higher than the Clouds. But it the Vortex, not Zeus (381). Then, to end the initiation, Socrates asks Strepsiades to renounce the old gods. Strepsiades’ answer indicates that he is not really converted: ‘I wouldn’t even speak to a god if I met one’ (425). But the Clouds do not problematize this. Instead, they ask Strepsiades what he wishes from them. Strepsiades wants ‘to be the finest speaker in all of Greece’ (430). But not in the field of politics or in the public spaces. He only wants to be a ‘twister, and a master of deceit’ in order to avoid paying of his debts (452). The Clouds decide to grant his wish. Then Socrates and Strepsiades enter a room and teaching starts. Importantly, we do not get to know what happens indoors. This, too, we will return to.

Next, the parabasis, where Aristophanes speaks to the audience as the leader of the chorus, announces that ‘it is time to hear the truth’ (Aristophanes 1998: 519). What truth? Aristophanes complains that the *Clouds* – ‘the most intellectual,’ the wisest of all his comedies (521-522) – was defeated when it first appeared, a ‘disgrace’ for which Aristophanes blames the audience who has not valued the play (526). But never mind, he says, ‘I will always be here for those with the good taste to fully appreciate the quality of my work’ (529). Let us note the references to wisdom and taste here.

In the parabasis, the Clouds present themselves as gods and, importantly, address Zeus as ‘*the highest god of all*’ (563), which implies that they, unlike Socrates, recognize Zeus. Further, they address the City as a political entity, accusing its citizens of ingratitude (577). Before Athens embarked on its futile war with Sparta, the Clouds had sent rain as a warning. Similarly, they had expressed their disagreement as to the election of Cleon – a notorious tyrant – as Athens’ ruler. ‘But in spite of everything, you still went ahead and voted for the man’ (587)! The Clouds want to be adopted as Athenian deities in a catastrophic time in the City’s history. Socrates is their ‘favorite’ citizen for he is the only Athenian who worships them. But they disagree with Socrates about the traditional gods. Thus, as Strauss stresses, they remain silent about their relation to Socrates when they have a chance to address the City directly (1966: 24).

In the meanwhile, teaching continues on the sacred couch. But the couch is too old, damaged and full of fleas. Thus, imperiled by fleas ‘feasting’ on him, Strepsiades is unable to concentrate (Aristophanes 1998: 699). In the end, Strepsiades proves himself unteachable and Socrates expels him from the school. Now, risking total bankruptcy, Strepsiades turns to the Clouds for advice. They tell him to send his son to the school instead of himself. Strepsiades returns to his house and asks Pheidippides to do this. ‘What for? There’s nothing even vaguely useful they could teach me’ (840). After a long fight, however, Pheidippides is persuaded. ‘Oh, all right then, but you’ll regret this’ (865). A claim, which will turn out to be ironically visionary.

Pheidippides must be taught by both arguments so that he can make his mind up. At this point, the Superior Argument and the Inferior Argument enter the stage in a personified style. The Superior Argument praises discipline and punishment, promoting a de-politicized, *oikos*-orientated lifestyle, the grandeur of which is to detest public life, to keep away public baths, to avoid the shameful, and, finally ‘to burn with indignation when you are ridiculed’ (993). But the Inferior Argument easily refutes the Superior argument and wins the argument. This defeat of the Superior Argument is part of the Socratic art of argumentation. But is it also a part of the Socratic way of life? Is Aristophanes’ Socrates merely a sarcastic simulacrum with no real referent? Why else should he ridicule Socrates as an idle chatterer, as a pure theorist with no respect for ephemeral things, including social conventions, religious beliefs and, even more importantly, perhaps, as an apolitical thinker who has turned his back to the City?

**Wisdom, Taste, and Aristophanes as a Defender of Philosophy**

Many commentators have started from this assumption and sought to show that Aristophanes’ Socrates had nothing to do with the real Socrates. In this view, Aristophanes ‘twists’ Socrates’ teaching. This charge amounts to accusing Aristophanes for unfriendly ignorance or, alternatively, for friendly envy. Leo Strauss, for instance, holds the view that the *Clouds* is not an unfriendly attack – friends can attack each other under agonistic circumstances – but the expression of a friend’s envy, the crucial object of which is ‘not Socrates’ wisdom but his sovereign contempt for that popular applause on which the dramatic poet necessarily depends, or Socrates’ perfect freedom’ (Strauss 1966: 5).

But this claim is neither interesting nor convincing. Aristophanes assaults and ridicules Dionysus, the guardian of comedy, in The *Frogs*, and this does that mean that he is envious of Dionysus. What if Aristophanes trusted Socrates’s sense of humor? And what if they had, at least partially, a shared understanding of philosophy? This is not to say that the portrait of Socrates Aristophanes paints in the *Clouds* fully mirrors the real Socrates. But it is reasonable to assume that Aristophanes knew that Socrates knew that the *Clouds* is a fiction. There is anecdotal evidence that Socrates, when he saw the *Clouds* in the theatre, was not angry; on the contrary, it is said that after the play he went to the stage and showed himself to the spectators so that they could compare the reality and the fiction (Erhat 2006: 174).

What if, further, Aristophanes had a point in his criticism of Socrates as, for example, an apolitical thinker? In this respect, one could read Plato’s and Xenophon’s accounts of Socrates, written a few decades later than the *Clouds*, in dialogue with Aristophanes’ Socrates. Plato, especially, was an admirer of Aristophanes. Thus, he kept, as Nietzsche claims in *Beyond Good and Evil*, ‘under the pillow of his death-bed … no “Bible,” nor anything Egyptian, Pythagorean, or Platonic—but a book of Aristophanes. How could even Plato have endured life—a Greek life which he repudiated—without an Aristophanes!’ (Nietzsche 2014: 28). Unsurprisingly, therefore, the *Republic* presents a Socrates who can think politically, while in the *Symposium* Aristophanes appears as Socrates’ only serious challenger in a competition involving impromptu rhetoric in praise of Eros. This suggests that Plato’s ‘Socrates may have learned something from Aristophanes’ (Bloom 1977: 323).[[1]](#footnote-1)

But how can we establish a relationship between philosophy and comedy internally, within the *Clouds*, despite Aristophanes’ apparent mockery of Socrates? Let us recall, to start with, the scene where Socrates goes indoors with Pheidippides for tutoring, the content of which Aristophanes does not show. Why? According to Strauss, for instance, Aristophanes does this to conceal Socrates’ ‘victory’ in converting Pheidippides, which, in turn, signifies Aristophanes’ failure ‘to present to us Socrates’ charm’ (1966: 50). This failure, he goes on to suggest, also shows the limit of comedy: ‘He could not show it without ruining his comedy as comedy’ for there is ‘no comic equivalent’ for Socrates’s charm (50). But the problem is that there is no philosophical equivalent for it either. Therefore, it is naïve to look for something concealed indoors.

In order to discuss this point, let us approach the *Clouds* with the concept of taste. The mainstream assumption that in the *Clouds* philosophy (Socrates) stands in for wisdom misses something essential. The ideal of philosophy is not wisdom (*sophia*) but love of wisdom (*philo-sophia*). Philosophy signifies not only knowledge but also pleasure, a desire that seeks knowledge. However, philosophy is not merely pleasure either. Reducible to neither knowledge nor love, philosophy is an attempt at bringing together ‘a love of knowledge and a knowledge of love’ (Agamben 2017: 75).

Let us recall that, for Plato’s Socrates, wisdom has no image, it is invisible in itself, but it can become visible in beauty. Similarly, the Clouds appear as beautiful women to Strepsiades, to the multitude. Plato’s *Symposium* defines philosophy, love of wisdom, as ‘a mean between ignorance and wisdom’ (2011: 202b). For ‘No god pursues wisdom or desires to be wise because gods are wise already, and no one who is wise already pursues wisdom. But neither do ignorant people pursue wisdom or desire to be wise, for the problem of ignorance is this, that someone who is neither fine and good nor wise is still quite satisfied with himself. No one desires what he does not think he lacks’ (Plato 2011: 204a).

In the *Clouds*, Socrates is the mediator between the wisdom of the Clouds (gods) and the ignorance of Strepsiades (the multitude). The Clouds already have wisdom and thus do not seek it. It is Socrates who seeks/loves wisdom for he lacks it. Strepsiades, in turn, is neither wise nor seeks wisdom, expressing no desire for what he lacks most. Along these lines, in the *Clouds*, we move from the beautiful body (the women) to the philosopher (love of wisdom) and to the clouds (the Idea of beauty, the beauty as such). The task of philosophy is, in this prism, to relate the most visible (the women signifying the clouds) and the most invisible (the clouds signifying the truth). While it is impossible to grasp the truth of the clouds from the standpoint of visible beauty (which is why Strepsiades remains ignorant), Socrates (philosophy) is a stand-in for the desire for the salvation of the virtual idea of the clouds. But Socrates also signifies a desire for the salvation of appearances, of beauty, for the clouds (the abstract truth) cannot found a knowledge of beauty without actualizing themselves. Which brings us to back to taste.

Taste is the knowledge of appearances, of the sensible, as true, and of the truth as appearance (Agamben 2017: 18). It is a form of knowledge that enjoys the beautiful, presenting itself as ‘another knowledge’ that cannot account for its judgments rationally but finds pleasure in them, and as ‘another pleasure’ that knows (6-7). What is crucial for us is that this knowledge cannot be objectified. Hence the *Clouds* must keep the philosophy session indoors, without depicting the object of knowledge in determinate terms. What one cannot conceptualize can only be shared as a form of life and, for the same reason, remains invisible to others.

In this regard, Bourdieu’s concepts of ‘field’ and ‘illusio’ might be helpful (1989, 1993). A field emerges when a group of people fights about the same thing, a field-specific capital, thanks to a shared *illusio*, the self-referential belief that the game is worth playing (Bourdieu 1994: 151f). That is to say, involvement with philosophy is never merely theoretical but also a form of practice that involves libidinal involvement. As such, the *illusio* of philosophy, the philosopher’s self-referential belief in the value of the (love of) wisdom, is what grounds the sense of the field, which, of course, makes no sense to an outsider who does not share the same *illusio*. Only those who contemplate in the Pondertorium, and passionately believe in the value of this practice regardless of how idiotic it seems to others, can perceive this object of desire without reducing it to something determinate.

Socrates does not merely teach an objective knowledge. Socratic wisdom is an unspecified object or a pure signifier with no determinate signified. It is a knowledge that, ultimately, cannot be explained. If Aristophanes had shown the conversation inside, he would have fetishized the Socratic wisdom. For taste is nothing else than an ‘excess of knowledge’ that is not known but produces pleasure, and ‘an excess of pleasure’ that is not enjoyed but ‘presents itself as knowledge’ (Agamben 2017: 43). Socratic wisdom is an Idea, a concept that cannot be signified and an image that cannot be shown, an excess of imagination over reason and of reason over the image at once.

If Aristophanes is silent on the indoors teaching, and, for that matter, if he keeps Socrates at a distance from the fight between the two arguments (Socrates is absent during the debate in this scene), this is because taste is an excessive sense positioned at the threshold between knowledge and pleasure. Thus, nothing is more wrong than claiming that Aristophanes in the *Clouds* ‘speaks from the position of someone to whom all philosophical and scientific speculation … is boring and silly’ (Dover quoted in Nussbaum 1980: 49). Science is the knowledge that is known. Then there is taste, the knowledge that is not known, or, to use Donald Rumsfeld’s language, the ‘unknown knowns’. Philosophy, on this account, is an attempt at holding together science and taste, knowledge and pleasure. Thus, we must read Aristophanes philosophically and Socrates comically if beauty and truth are to save each other.

**Free use, and Instrumental Use as Perversion**

Convinced, Strepsiades entrusts Pheidippides to the Inferior Argument. And unlike his father, Pheidippides proves to be a quick learner. He effortlessly discovers how to talk the talk in order to defeat justice with ‘the look-of-righteous-indignation-even-when-you’re-in-the-wrong expression’ (1175). Strepsiades’ dream has come true. ‘Ha ha! You poor fools! You don’t stand a chance! Look at you simpletons sitting out there, just begging to be ripped off by us members of the intelligentsia!’ (1201-1202). What is at issue here is a mode of action whose principle is that ‘the knowers have no obligation toward the ignorant’ (Strauss 1966: 36). This is why the main tension that finds expression in the *Clouds* is the one between instrumental use of wisdom as a means and the ‘love of wisdom’ which is its own reward.

It is worth mentioning in this context that the Superior Argument is as instrumental in its approach to wisdom as the Inferior Argument for it depicts hedonistic pleasure as the reward of virtuous behavior (Aristophanes 1998: 1066; see also Nussbaum 1980: 64). Thus, Socrates’ absence during the debate between the Superior and Inferior arguments marks him as a proponent of free use, positioning him at a distance to both arguments for the antagonism between them is a false one, a disjunctive relation in which they feed upon and justify one another’s instrumentalism.

Strepsiades is warned by the chorus of the Clouds about the consequences of his actions (Aristophanes 1998: 1311-1320). Thus, it comes as no surprise when Pheidippides discovers that he can make use of his new art to defeat not only his father’s debtors but all values. Next, he beats his own father. This is, of course, a sign of social disintegration. The social is, as Freud observed, held together by the totem (the father figure) and the (incest) taboo. When Strepsiades protests that it is nowhere ‘legitimate’ to beat one’s own father, Pheidippides answers ‘it is men who make legislation’ (1425). Nothing prevents Pheidippides from declaring ‘a new law’ for a society to come in which sons can beat their fathers just as ‘farmyard animals … freely attack their fathers’ (1427, 1436). Beaten, Strepsiades resigns to his suffering (1437).

What we have here is not merely a kind of constituent power but something like a state of exception the essence of which is the suspension of the law. Technically, Pheidippides’ action is defined by the ancient Greek law as *hybris*, ‘the offense of treating a fellow-citizen as if he were a slave or foreigner’ (Nussbaum 1980: 65). Pheidippides’ ‘knowledge’ elevates him above the law and allows him to beat his father with impunity, infantilizing and reducing him to the position of a slave. As Thrasymachus, Socrates’ main adversary in Plato’s *Republic*, puts it, that strong and intelligent people must have ‘the courage to do wrong’ while ordinary people keep doing the ‘right’ things ‘only because they are ignorant, or stupid, or afraid’ (Plato 2003, I:3). Thus, differently from Strepsiades (the multitude), Pheidippides’ logic borders on the despotic-biopolitical logic of exception.

But the exception tends to become a rule. Thus, Pheidippides’s transgression is followed by the normalization of transgression. ‘I shall beat Mother just as I beat you’ (Aristophanes 1998: 1443). ‘What! What are you saying? This is going from bad to worse!’ (1444). Signaling a desire to attack two taboos (father beating and incest), Pheidippides shows himself to be not merely a ‘twister’ but also the ultimate destroyer of the social. But he does not attack the third and the final taboo, cannibalism. Let us therefore open a parenthesis here and discuss the possible significance of this absence.

As Lars-Henrik Schmidt (1991: 86-92) has discussed, it is through the sublimated forms of eating together that human beings can avoid eating one another and develop sociability. Eating together, sharing a meal, is a sign of the suspension of or withdrawal from cannibalism, an invitation to share a *bios*, a form of life. What makes the humans social is their impotentiality, their ability not to (practice cannibalism). The smile, the most elementary gesture that frames a shared meal, a peaceful togetherness, signifies the emergence of sociability as something common through taste. Hence the significance of the relation between the *Clouds* and the *Symposium*, both in Plato’s and Xenophon’s versions. Not only because symposium means a social gathering that involves taste, sociability through conversation, eating and drinking, but also because in both works Aristophanes is present; he is himself a participant in the dialogue in Plato’s *Symposium*, while Xenophon’s Symposium refers to the *Clouds* at a strategic moment.

In Plato’s *Symposium* there are seven speakers praising Eros. One of them is Aristophanes, another a tragic poet, Agathon. Hence it can be illuminating to compare the two poets’ speeches and relate them to Socrates’. Aristophanes’ speech starts with the claim that mankind ‘have never … at all understood the power of Love’ (Plato 2011: 189c). He describes this power through a myth that links love to lack. Once upon a time, according to Aristophanes, there were not two but three sexes: male, female and androgynous, and each person had four hands, four legs, two heads and so on. Twice as big, the human beings were so powerful that they ‘dared to scale heaven’ and attacked the gods (190c). Thus, Zeus and the other gods decided, instead of killing the human beings (which would mean stopping the flow of glorification and sacrifice from humans to gods), to cut them in two so that they will be reduced in strength but multiplied in numbers, thus becoming ‘more profitable’ to gods (190c-d). So, divided into two parts, ‘each desiring his other half’, the humans started to seek their other half.

And when one of them meets with his other half, the actual half of himself … the pair are lost in an amazement of love and friendship and intimacy, and one will not be out of the other’s sight, as I may say, even for a moment: these are the people who pass their whole lives together; yet they could not explain what they desire of one another. For the intense yearning which each of them has towards the other does not appear to be the desire of lover’s intercourse, but of something else which the soul of either evidently desires and cannot tell, and of which she has only a dark and doubtful presentiment. (192c-e).

Love, on this account, is the pursuit of one’s other half for reasons that cannot be explicated conceptually. The language of the lovers is the language of taste. And Aristophanes begs in the end of his speech, just as he did before beginning, that his words to be taken seriously and be left ‘unassailed by the shafts of … ridicule’ (193e). The comic is serious and must be taken seriously. What is crucial here is the agreement between Aristophanes and Socrates on taste. Socrates, too, defines desire in relation to a lack (200a-b) and avoids reducing love to sexual love (192c). Socrates agrees, too, that taste cannot be grounded rationally… One can, as Diotima teaches Socrates, be right without being capable of giving a reason (202a).

But how does Plato’s Socrates position himself in relation to Agathon, the tragic poet? Before starting his speech, Agathon claims that his head is not ‘so full of the theatre as not to know how much more formidable to a man of sense a few good judges are than many fools’ (194c). To this, Socrates replies that the participants in the symposium have actually seen Agathon’s play, that is, they belong to ‘the foolish many in the theatre’ (194c). We are not wise. But Agathon does not seem to get the point. Shortly afterwards, the speech he delivers testifies to his mediocrity. He equates Love with the beautiful. Next, he identifies love with the four cardinal virtues; first with justice, then with temperance and courage, and finally, and most importantly, with wisdom (196b-197e).

This, of course, would be totally unacceptable to Socrates who distinguishes between love (of wisdom) and wisdom. Likewise, Love, for Socrates, is neither beautiful nor good. If desire only desires what one does not have, and if Love desires the beautiful and the good, Love can be neither beautiful nor good. But that which is not beautiful is not necessarily ugly, and that which is not wise necessarily ignorant. For there is a mean. It is at this point that Socrates describes philosophy as ‘a mean between ignorance and wisdom’ (202b) and Love as a mean between good and evil, between the divine and the human, like a ‘daimon,’ an ‘intermediate’ between the immortal and the mortal (202b). In short, the way Agathon is presented clearly fosters skepticism about the value of tragedy vis-à-vis comedy in the *Symposium* while there is agreement between Aristophanes and Socrates. But to what extent?

In his speech, Socrates expresses a disagreement as to Aristophanes’ claim that lovers seek their other half because ‘there is nothing which men love but the good’ (205e). And when Socrates finishes his speech, Aristophanes tries to discuss this with Socrates, but further debate is made impossible by Alcibiades’ noisy arrival. This suggests that the ‘agon’ between Aristophanes and Socrates is secondary. There is much more at stake in the antagonism between taste and power, and regarding this antagonism, they are on the same side. Alcibiades’s speech, the last one in the contest, demarcates and justifies such a positioning.

Alcibiades, a powerful figure in Greek politics, is interesting in the *Symposium* because he fully misunderstands what is at stake in the contest. Thus, his whole speech consists in praising Socrates instead of Love (213e). But Alcibiades’ misunderstanding contributes to our understanding of the relation between Aristophanes (comedy), Agathon (tragedy) and Socrates (philosophy). In his speech, Alcibiades likens Socrates to ‘Marsyas the satyr’ (215b). Not only because Socrates’ ugly face looks like that of a satyr, but also because Socrates is ‘a bully’ who ridicules everything and a ‘performer,’ a ‘flute’ player, who can mesmerize and possess one with ‘words only’ (215c-d). Therefore, Alcibiades feels, in Socrates’ presence, that he is forced to put a distance at his own life. ‘For he makes me confess that I ought not to live as I do, neglecting the wants of my own soul, and busying myself with the concerns of the Athenians’ (216a). So ‘marvelous’ is Socrates’ ‘power’ (216d) that Alcibiades is ‘ready to do in a moment whatever Socrates commanded’ (217a).

Alcibiades’ is, in short, a case of erotic ‘enslavement’ (219e). He loves Socrates for the wrong reasons. ‘A lover and admirer of power, Alcibiades loves Socrates … precisely for his power’ (Cooper 2008: 122-3). What is crucial here is that Plato, through Alcibiades, describes Socrates as a ‘monster’ (Plato 2011: 219b). That is, the *Symposium* begins to tell the story of Socrates as a real, historical character but ‘ends up making Socrates a being who is no longer human, the incomparable actor in a satryric drama’ (Agamben 2018: 41). In fact, it is this inhuman feature that makes us laugh in the *Clouds*, where a monstrous, inhuman Socrates does not even notice the fleas while Strepsiades cannot concentrate on anything because of them (see Aristophanes 1998: 699).

Eventually, most contestants in the symposium go to bed. But there remain three, still drinking towards daybreak: Aristophanes, Agathon and Socrates. The Symposium does not recount the details of the conversation (which is reminiscent of the indoors teaching in the *Clouds*). Though it recalls a ‘Socrates compelling the other two to acknowledge that the genius of comedy was the same with that of tragedy, and that the true artist in tragedy was an artist in comedy also’ (Plato 2011: 223d). Philosophy, as life, calls for laughter and tears as well as consciousness. Laughing and crying, after all, ‘are the two ways in which humans experience the limits of language: while in crying the impossibility of saying what one wants to express is painful, in laughter this passes over into joy. Ultimately, however, in the sudden collapse of facial features and the breakdown of language and voice into gasps hiccups, laughter and crying seem to blur into each other’ (Agamben 2018: 12). This brings us to the end of the *Clouds*.

**Happy end?**

In the end, Strepsiades blames the Clouds, not his son, for what happens. But the Clouds say that Strepsiades himself brought this trouble on himself when he ‘took the twisting path of wickedness and deceit’ (1455). ‘When we discover a mortal, who becomes enamored by vice, we drive them to despair. That is how we teach man to have proper respect for the gods’ (1460). Strepsiades accepts his fate. ‘I should never have tried to get out of paying my debts’ (1462-1463). But then he blames it all on Socrates, who had taken from him the respect for the old gods, and suggests to Pheidippides that they take revenge together. Pheidippides refuses the offer by saying that he must not offend his teachers (1467).

Why does Pheidippides remain respectful of Socrates? While Strepsiades wants to get rid of Socrates’ ideas and return to Zeus, the ‘protector of fathers’ (1468), Pheidippides is fully aware that Socrates provides him with his life blood – no Socrates, nothing to ‘twist.’ State philosophy needs philosophy, without which there is nothing to capture, to pervert, and to turn into a means. So Pheidippides leaves his father to his own fate (1475). Finally, we meet Strepsiades on the roof of Socrates’ school, burning it down amidst the scream of students. The man who cannot be educated destroys Socrates’s school, his form of life.

Can one claim, as Strauss (1966: 46) does, that the Clouds indirectly show their ‘disapproval’ of Socrates by not protecting his house from being burnt down? What is at issue here is ‘Socrates’ extremism,’ which, according to Strauss, both the Clouds and Aristophanes avoid. But on the basis of our interpretation, assuming that Aristophanes and Socrates share in common an interest in thinking in terms of taste and mode of life, it is neither logical nor tasteful to claim that the ending of the play is ‘unhappy’ only from the point of view of Socrates. The ending of the play is equally unhappy from the point of view of Aristophanes in so far as the poet and the philosopher are both ‘men of leisure.’

Ultimately, Aristophanes is not problematizing reason (Socrates) but instrumental reason (Strepsiades and Pheidippides) and its violent potentials. And from the point of view of the Clouds, of the virtual, there is no distinction between happy and unhappy. The only happiness, in the perspective of eternity, can be the affirmation of the indistinction between the two terms. It is therefore perfectly sensible that the *Clouds* does not end happily, while all other comedies of Aristophanes do. The *Clouds* is, in this particular sense, a perfect comedy, a comedy perfecting its own (actual) imperfection when dealing with the (virtual) clouds.

The lack of happy ending in the *Clouds* is often interpreted by commentators as an indictment of Socrates. But can Socrates be held responsible for the perversion of his teaching? There are two points to make in this respect. The first relates to the ‘use’ of ideas. Every idea can be captured, used and abused by anybody for any purpose. ‘Twisting,’ the perversion of ideas, is a given in an ontology of becoming. Every dramatization of Socrates necessarily involves producing a difference. In this sense, one could even say that Strepsiades and Pheidippides do not abuse Socrates more than Plato or Xenophon. But the real question here relates to use. Strepsiades and Pheidippides approach ideas in an instrumental way. This is what Socrates, an advocate of free use, is not and cannot be responsible for. Effectively, the real opposition we have is between free use (Socrates) and instrumental use (Strepsiades and Pheidippides).

Interestingly in this respect, the *Clouds* itself depicts Socrates as an anti-utilitarian, anti-economist par excellence, deliberately turning him into an irreparable figure of the ‘useless.’ Bergson has explained the comic with the image of ‘something mechanical encrusted on something living’ (Bergson 2008: 19). The Socrates of the *Clouds* is essentially comic in this sense; his major activity is thinking with a spontaneous seriousness and, as such, he gives the impression that he cannot act differently. Socrates cannot not contemplate. Through this comic exaggeration, Aristophanes exposes the duality of use.

Paradoxically, however, seen in the prism of instrumental use, free use connotes sheer uselessness. From this perspective, all philosophy is useless unless it can be instrumentalized. The very obsession with instrumental use obscures the ‘use of the useless’ (see Ordine 2017) and de-values activities such as art, philosophy and politics, marginalizing all praxis that is not measurable in terms of utilitarian modes of counting. But whenever certain activities are deemed useful or useless in terms of instrumentality, what is primarily at issue is the question of whether human life has a purpose, a proper function. What instrumental reason blurs is the fact that the human being is ‘the Sabbatical animal par excellence’ (Agamben 2011: 246). Human life does not have a predetermined purpose; it is the very absence of an aim that makes it possible for human beings to dedicate themselves to praxis, to work. As such, Sabbath, inoperativity, is ‘a sui generis “praxis” that consists in rendering all specific powers of acting or doing inoperative’ (251). To be sure, contemplation, too, is a form of inoperativity. Aristophanes’ Socrates makes us laugh because all action is suspended in him. He is essentially without work.

Precisely as such, the figure of Socrates is also a reminder that, if we cannot imagine the human being as a being without work, it is because meaning and purpose is imposed on it by religion, capital, and power. Everywhere human life is put into (instrumental) use, the useless is appropriated by the useful. In the end, all apparatuses of capture need their lifeblood from the outside, from the domain of the useless. And in a world under the yoke of the despotism of the useful, the use of the useless (of contemplation) is overseen or censored. Like the ‘accursed share,’ free use is that which cannot be included within and thus challenges the reality principle of the utilitarian world. However, a world which denies free use can only be criticized, mocked or destroyed by free use, by demonstrating the use of the useless. This is what Aristophanes is really doing while he is apparently mocking Socrates in the *Clouds*. The ironic defense of Socrates here is an early reminder that the real catastrophe is not (Socrates’) uselessness but a world (Stripsiades’ and Pheidippides’ world) dominated by the useful alone.

But free use is not merely a form of negativity. In the prism of free use, the two senses of use – instrumental use and free use – are reversible. They can always transform into each other. This indistinction is the mark of free use. Use always entails a possibility of profanation, an insight into putting things into different uses, challenging, therefore, the consensus on the definitions of use. This is the antagonistic dimension of free use without which we would be left at the mercy of the despotism of the useful (of the market, of the *homo oeconomicus*, of the state…). Any true criticism of power must assume this antagonistic dimensionand a defense of free use. And since what is shared through free use is life as such, existence as form of life, free use is not only political but also constitutive of the political.

To appreciate what is involved here, let us recall a crucial detail from Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*, which is, arguably, the first scientific treatise on economy. Written in the form of a dialogue between Socrates and Ischomachos (an economist), *Oeconomicus* deals with economy, defining economy as a science, that is, as a matter of knowledge. But there is an ambivalence. Even though Socrates is the most knowledgeable person in Athens, he is not the best economist. On the contrary, Socrates describes himself in terms of contemplation, as an ‘idle talker’ who ‘measures the air’ (Xenophon 1998: 11.3). A detail, which becomes more interesting when read together with Xenophon’s most humorous book, the *Symposium*, where it is not the merciless comedian Philippus but the Syracusan, an artist-businessman making money out of mindless entertainment, who spitefully attacks Socrates by describing him as ‘a thinker of the things aloft’ (Xenophon 2006: 6.6) who only cares for useless and valueless things, for ‘the least beneficial things’ (6.7). In the highpoint of his attack, he asks Socrates, with an allusion to the *Clouds*, ‘tell me how many flea’s feet you are from me. For they say you measure these things’ (6.8). At this moment, which borders on abuse, Philippus makes an attempt to attack the Syracusan, but he is held back by Socrates, who saves the party.

Let us now turn to the second point regarding the question of whether Socrates can be held responsible for the perversion of his teaching. An affirmative answer assumes that perversion/twisting is an action which Strepsiades willed, and Socrates sanctioned. But this approach reads the comic in terms of the tragic. The origin of the sanctioned action is usually located in ancient tragedy, where the actor appears to will something not chosen or to choose something unwilled. This tension is inherent in the very form of action: every human action is simultaneously related to a subject and external sanctions which forbid, prescribe, or, condemn actions (Agamben 2018b: 34). In the tragic framework, in which the source of happiness is one’s actions, one is always culpable and innocent at once, never being able to experience being innocent without feeling guilt at the same time. This would be the position of Socrates in a tragic reading of the *Clouds*. But what characterizes comedy in general is its juxtaposition to the tragic another framework in which human happiness is not determined by action, opening a space where ‘the subject is removed from the hold of sanctioned action’ and guilt gives way to innocence (40).

In this way, the opposition between tragedy and comedy reveals its true meaning in the context of the subject, as an opposition between its two destinies, subjection and freedom. Tragedy is often a movement from a happy and serene beginning to guilt. Comedy reverses this movement, designating a movement from guilt to innocence. While tragedy presents ‘the guilt of the just,’ comedy appears as ‘the justification of the guilty’ (Agamben 1996: 7). Hence, in a tragic reading, the *Clouds* appears as a narration of Socrates’ guilt, which consists in corrupting Strepsiades and Pheidippides. But a comic reading insists that Strepsiades and Pheidippides are already corrupt, and intimates the possibility of justifying Socrates. Ironically, in this prism, by staging a critique of Socrates in the way he does, Aristophanes also indicates the very weakness of this critique. This is what the tragic reading of the *Clouds* misses.

The ‘comic’ framework, where happiness is not determined by action, brings us back to the paradigm of free use. ‘Happiness’ can only be imagined insofar as the social machine is de-activated or rendered inoperative, brought to an idle ‘happy end.’ This end is not a teleological end or the effective realization of a potential but a condition in which free use is no longer appropriated or captured. Aristophanes’ ‘comic’ politics also intimates, in this precise sense, the possibility of a happy ending, of salvation or freedom, in the form of de-activation. Philosophical contemplation, after all, is idleness par excellence. This is what is concealed in the end of the play – where Socrates’s school appears to be burnt down – from those who do not share the *illusio* of philosophy (Socrates) and art (Aristophanes).

The link between comedy and happiness becomes clearer if we focus on Marx’s and Deleuze’s writing. Marx said, famously, that history always occurs twice; first as tragedy, then as comedy. In contrast to tragedy, which necessarily causes disharmony and disruption by changing everything, comedy builds upon harmony and consensus; it produces non-events within the confines of a given hegemonic discourse. This is how Marx characterizes the Second Republic: ‘alliances whose first proviso is separation; struggles whose first law is indecision, wild, inane agitation in the name of tranquility, most solemn preaching of tranquility in the name of revolution; passions without truth, truths without passion; heroes without heroic deeds, history without events…’ (Marx 1977: 34). When the (tragic) spirit of the revolution is forgotten, what sets in is a passive nihilist society, which falls back upon bare repetition, a society characterized by the (farcical) absence of events. (11).

But for Marx a clean-cut difference between tragedy and comedy is not enough. There can be no tragedy without comedy, no comedy without tragedy. Thus to avoid ending up in a vicious circle of the tragic and the comic, of revolutions and counterrevolutions, which itself can appear farcical, Marx needs a third repetition, social revolution (13). The social revolution is what takes the revolution beyond tragedy and farce, linking it to a society ‘to come’, to a new people. But to do this the proletariat must abolish the existing society. And in order to abolish existing society, that is, in order to create a society without alienation and exploitation, without the proletariat, the proletariat must ‘abolish itself’ too. Like Nietzsche’s overman who wants to ‘perish’, Marx’s proletariat must counter-actualize itself.

This Marxist-Nietzschean parallel becomes visible in Deleuze’s approach to comedy. In Deleuze, as in Marx, there are three stages of repetition. Differently, however, tragedy and comedy are not taken as pre-given genres. Therefore, comedy does not follow tragedy; rather, tragedy follows comedy. The repetition of temporal series starts with the comic situation, in which the actor ‘falls short’ of creating something new, in which the event is ‘too big’ to become worthy of (Deleuze 1994: 89). In this sense, comedy defines the past, which is also the first time of repetition. The second repetition, tragedy, defines a present, in which the actor becomes equal to the event and, seizing the moment, throws time out of joint. And the third repetition, in which the future appears, ‘signifies that the event and the act possess a secret coherence which excludes that of the self’ (Ibid.). That is, the third repetition implies the perishing or abolishment of the actor.

Comedy, then, is the condition of repetition. Or, Marx would say, comedy is there, history repeats itself, so that man can ‘cheerfully’ destroy it (Marx 1975: 179; see also Agamben 1999: 154). ‘Happiness’ is separation from the pseudo-history. It is the affirmation of an originary, immanent form of life, which is never fully exhausted in the actual or captured by the sovereign exception (Agamben 2000: 115). This immanent origin, form of life, is the core of comic politics.

Comedy, as such, testifies to the persistence of another approach to happiness, free will and free use which deals with responsibility in terms of not will but potentiality. In the Greek culture, the primacy is accorded to potential, not to the will: one is responsible because one carries out an action, not because one has willed the action. This is primarily what is expressed by the Socratic maxim that ‘every evil action is actually ignorance,’ that is, not a consequence of a choice on the basis of free will (Agamben 2018b: 31-2).

This is to say that in the tradition of Western ethical and political thought there are two paradigms, which intersect and incessantly keep separating from one another in the course of its history. The first situates the essence of the human and the proper place of politics and ethics in action and praxis; the second situates it instead in knowledge and contemplation (in *theōria*). The first model is tragic and predominates, at least up to a certain point, in modernity (it is significant that the “tragedy” of Faust resolutely assigns the primacy to action: Am Anfang war der Tat); the second, decisively anti-tragic, prevails, albeit with some ups and downs, in ancient thought. The first looks consistently at becoming; the second holds its eyes fixed on being. And if we wish, according to a gesture by now traditional in the history of philosophy, to mark each of the two paradigms genealogically with a name, the first would be situated in the wake of Aristotle, the second in that of Plato. (35)

When one takes into consideration that the ancients dealt with action in terms of knowledge, referring guilt not to evil will but to ignorance, Plato’s ideal republic, ruled by the philosopher king who excludes the tragic poet, is comprehensible as a ‘comic’ paradigm of contemplation, which posits the necessity of combining politics with reason (35). And, let us add, reason with taste.

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1. To be sure, the Platonic Socrates’ debt to Aristophanes is not limited to the *Clouds*. For instance, the *Assembly-Women*, too, where the protagonist calls for a sexual communism, seems to have deeply inspired the *Republic* where Plato adopts its framework, albeit critically, articulating another vision of communism. In the *Assembly-Women*, communism is established by the revolutionary Praxagora, a young woman married to an old man, so that it can become legitimate for her to sleep with others. Its absurd consequence, though, transpires when a young man is forced into sexual intercourse with a series of old and ugly women. Similarly, Plato’s Socrates claims that in the Republic the philosopher-rulers will, without strife and thus without the danger of civil war, lead a peaceful and ‘a far more blissful life than any Olympic victor’ (Plato 2003: 465d). This is a vision of a society in which philosophy is legitimate even though philosophers do not believe its gods and corrupt its youth, and, as such, it repeats the structure of Aristophanes’ comedy, while the absurd consequence re-appears as the involuntary interaction between the philosopher and the City (Bloom 1977: 327-328). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)