

SOCRATES AND THE POLITICAL COMMUNITY

An Ancient Debate

Mary P. Nichols

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Introduction

Socrates is one of our heroes—an undaunted inquirer into the truth who sacrificed his life for philosophy. Maintaining to the end that “the unexamined life is not worth living” (*Apol.*, 38a),¹ he was executed by his community for questioning even its most sacred beliefs. We derive our image of Socrates primarily from Plato’s dialogues, in which Socrates’ conversations with others reveal the character of his philosophizing and his way of life. Greek literature, however, presents us not only with Plato’s immortalization of Socrates but also with criticisms of him. One of his most influential attackers, Socrates claims in the *Apology*, was the comic poet Aristophanes, who portrayed him as a ridiculous yet dangerous figure, a subverter of justice and the laws of the community (*Apol.*, 19c). Attacks on Socrates, moreover, come from philosophy as well. Aristotle himself argues that Socrates’ ideas are destructive of political communities (*Pol.*, 1261a ff.).² The question at issue between Socrates’ accusers and his defenders is the effect of philosophy on the political community, or, more generally, of theory on practice.³ Can ideas have a beneficial effect on politics, guiding political action and giving it direction and cohesion? Or do theoreticians lead practical men astray with subtleties that separate them from political realities and enervate political life? Should our admiration of Socrates be unqualified? If not, what should our reservations be? By examining this ancient debate on Socrates, we can explore the relation between theory and practice, between ideas and political life.

My examination of Socrates will take the form of an analysis of three works from Greek political thought, Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, Plato’s *Republic*, and Book II of Aristotle’s *Politics*. My analysis of these

works assumes that each of them is the result of its author's reflection on the conflict between philosophy and politics⁴ and that the details of these works, however minor, have an important bearing on the work as a whole. My discussion of the *Republic*, in particular, demonstrates the relevance of the drama of the dialogue to the philosophic and political issues raised.⁵ I shall be concerned, moreover, not merely with providing an interpretation of each of these works considered individually but also with showing the ways in which they constitute a debate on the proper relation between philosophy and politics. I have chosen, in the first place, Aristophanes' *Clouds* because no other work presents such a classic criticism of the philosopher, such a clear attack on Socrates and what he represents. Its influence is acknowledged in the *Apology* by Socrates himself (19c). While many of Plato's dialogues may be read as defenses of Socrates against Aristophanes' charges,⁶ these charges provide a background or a context for the *Republic*, in particular, because its primary theme is justice. The triumph of justice that Socrates orchestrates in the *Republic* reverses the triumph of injustice that he permits in the *Clouds*.⁷ In this way, the *Republic* constitutes an answer to Aristophanes' play. Finally, in Book II of the *Politics*, Aristotle, in turn, explicitly criticizes Socrates' proposals in the *Republic*. His criticism, moreover, is reminiscent of Aristophanes' attack on Socrates in the *Clouds*. Both, for example, although in different ways, maintain that Socrates undermines the political community.⁸ These three representatives of Greek thought therefore can be viewed as engaging in a dialogue on Socrates and on the relation of philosophy to the political community. Their disagreements shed light on the tension between thought and politics, revealing the difficulty in achieving an alliance between the two that is beneficial to both.

Aristophanes is critical of Socratic philosophy and dramatizes the harm to political communities and family life that Socrates causes. According to Aristophanes, philosophy leads to abstractions that detach men from their concrete lives, to universalities that remove them from the relationships they form in families and political communities. From Aristophanes' point of view, Socrates denies the fundamental truth about human beings, namely, that their lives develop and mature only in limited and particular settings. Socrates' search for universals therefore leads to a dehumanization of men. More specifically, Aristophanes' Socrates does not take the beliefs and the authority of the city seriously. He denies both the existence of the city's gods and the

sacredness of familial bonds as a result of his investigation of natural phenomena. He leads his disciples to look at the world as scientists rather than citizens. Free from society's restraints, they disdain as merely conventional the piety and justice that support families and cities. Socrates therefore undermines these associations in which Aristophanes thought men could best find happiness. Aristophanes, as a comic poet, attempts to mock the pretensions of philosophy and thereby curb its pernicious influence on men.

Plato defends philosophy against Aristophanes' charge by showing that Socrates is a *political* philosopher. He portrays Socrates as talking to men in the marketplace about what most concerns them, while Aristophanes shows Socrates isolated in a "thinkery," where he investigates natural phenomena.⁹ Because Plato's Socrates investigates men's actions and associations, such as families and political communities, he does not lose himself in abstractions that have no relevance to human life. By offering men an understanding of their situation which helps them to accept and temper the tensions and conflicts which arise in their families and political communities, Socratic political philosophy counteracts the attempt to escape from human life that Aristophanes depicts in the *Clouds*. Moreover, that temptation arises not primarily from philosophy, as Aristophanes claims, but from politics itself, as we see when the political community insists on an absolute solution to its problems.

The city Socrates founds in the *Republic*, I shall argue, is meant to illustrate this extreme to which politics can be brought. In its communistic institutions, it detaches men from particular relationships and asks them to identify with the city as a whole. Plato thus replies to Aristophanes that it is politics rather than Socratic philosophy, especially a politics motivated by a desire for a perfect justice, that leads men to lose themselves in empty abstractions. He even suggests that politics is able to corrupt philosophy. The communistic city requires philosophic rulers in order to come into being. These philosophers, unlike Socrates, pursue mathematical studies with perfectly homogeneous objects. Their studies prepare them to institute communism in the city, which imitates the homogeneity of their mathematics.¹⁰

Plato implicitly contrasts the philosophers required and educated by the city with Socrates. Socrates' philosophy, far from imposing homogeneity, explores the differences among men and the conflicts that stem from those differences. Socrates reveals the diversity that makes the city in speech impossible, especially when he describes its

degeneration. Moreover, Socratic philosophy not only examines the differences among men that stand in the way of a homogeneous community, it involves Socrates in a heterogeneous community with his interlocutors, one which recognizes the integrity of men, or their irreducible differences. The community constituted by the characters in a Platonic dialogue is an alternative to the city in speech. At the core of political philosophy for Socrates and Plato, then, is not a search for *the* good, of which the various goods that men seek are pale reflections. The desire for such unity or perfection, the *Republic* teaches, underlies the city in speech and its mathematically oriented philosophers. Political philosophy, in contrast, is an exploration of the complexity of human life. Socrates reveals the different things that are good for men and that are nonetheless good although they lie in tension with other goods.¹¹

Because through Socratic political philosophy man exercises his capacity to reflect on the world and his place in it, it is, according to Plato, the best way of life. It is not clear, however, that Aristophanes would find Plato's defense of philosophy satisfactory. Although Socratic philosophy recognizes the necessity of the families and political communities Aristophanes defended, it nevertheless does not resolve the conflict between them and philosophy. Although Socrates devotes himself to understanding the value of these communities and his own relation to them, the best way of life still lies in thought, rather than in the activities of family and political life. Aristophanes would not be likely to accept Plato's defense of philosophy because it denigrates politics in favor of thought. The guidance philosophy provides for politics is only negative: philosophy tries to moderate the city's excesses by turning the most ambitious men away from politics to a philosophic understanding of the city's limitations.¹²

Aristotle addresses the questions at issue between Aristophanes and Plato when, in Book II of the *Politics*, he criticizes the city that Socrates founds in the *Republic* and offers an understanding of the relation between philosophy and politics different from either Aristophanes' or Plato's. Aristotle argues against the political proposals of men, especially Socrates, who lack practical experience of politics (*Pol.*, 1273b28–30). He claims, in effect, that their proposals are the result of abstract thought divorced from the concrete realities of political life. In particular, Aristotle criticizes the excessive unity at which the *Republic's* city aims and the abolition of the family which that

unity necessitates. Political communities, he claims, are not homogeneous. They are composed of diverse human beings and groups, with different characters and interests. Aristotle therefore defends the particular associations that Aristophanes thought so important. In his criticism of a philosophy that overrides these associations in the interest of abstract truth, Aristotle comes close to Aristophanes' position. Moreover, by showing that political life does not necessarily lead to the homogeneity of the city in speech, Aristotle defends politics against Plato's criticism in the *Republic*.

In Book II, however, Aristotle also criticizes the most highly reputed cities that exist in his time or that existed in the past. He claims that their laws and institutions are defective because they are too much the product of chance, rather than the intentions of lawgivers or statesmen. In later books of the *Politics*, Aristotle shows how to preserve and even improve the different regimes in which men live. His political science therefore provides more positive direction for politics than the political philosophy of Socrates and Plato. It demonstrates that philosophy, or thought, can and should guide political development. Just as Aristotle defends politics against Plato's critique, he defends philosophy against Aristophanes' critique. Aristotle's political science offers an alternative not only to the *Republic*'s homogeneous city but to the abstract life of philosophy portrayed by Aristophanes.

Part I

Aristophanes' Laughter (The Clouds)

Introduction

Aristophanes' *Clouds* presents a classic criticism of the "intellectual" or philosopher. Aristophanes portrays the philosopher as living in the clouds and being unaware of what is going on in the world. Socrates lives in a "thinkery" with a group of students and spends his time suspended in a basket contemplating the heavens. Aristophanes shows how ludicrous such "abstraction" or "drawing away" from the world is. He makes us laugh at such follies, and, because we laugh at them, we are less likely to commit them ourselves. His comedy is conservative, protecting the community by mocking what diverges from it.¹ Aristophanes, however, does not merely defend the community by laughing at Socrates; he also shows us how the ordinary life of a common man generates the tensions and the desires that lead to the Socratic way of life. Aristophanes is therefore much more sympathetic to Socrates than he is usually taken to be, for while he criticizes Socrates' ethereality he also understands why it exists.² If men are drawn to the Socratic way of life because political communities inevitably fail to satisfy their desires, Aristophanes' defense of the community is qualified. Man must live within the community and not "up in the air" with the philosophers, but he should not expect complete happiness. Aristophanes is a conservative who sees the limitations of what he is trying to conserve.

Strepsiades' Problem

The *Clouds* begins with Strepsiades' scream of lament (1).³ Strepsiades is distressed because he cannot pay the debts which his son has incurred through horse racing. The action of the play revolves around his attempt to escape this indebtedness. The Greek word for debt (*chreos*) would remind a Greek audience of the word for necessity (*chreon*). Not only do the words sound alike, they are etymologically related. A debt is what one is bound to pay, just as necessity is inescapable. Necessity refers to what binds a man and, consequently, limits his freedom. In portraying a man trying to escape his debts, Aristophanes parodies man's tragic attempt to escape from necessity. Like a tragic hero, Strepsiades, blind to the implications and consequences of his deeds, pursues a hubristic course of action and meets disaster.⁴

The passage of time troubles Strepsiades. Aware that the day on which his debts must be paid is approaching, he cannot sleep. The night seems to him "endless." He longs for day (2–3). Although the night is passing too slowly for a sleepless man, the days are passing too quickly for a man in debt. Strepsiades calls for his slave to bring him a light so that he can read how much he owes. Light, which permits him to see the extent of his indebtedness, only confirms his misery. He wishes he had blinded himself before he incurred such debts (24).⁵

Meanwhile Strepsiades' son, Phidippides, the cause of Strepsiades' debts, is snoring loudly and dreaming of the race. His sound and dreamy sleep shows his lack of concern with the debts his father must pay. Strepsiades soon reveals that the origin of his problem with his son is his own marriage. A match was made between himself, a rustic of simple tastes, and a sophisticated city woman of an aristocratic line. Strepsiades is concerned with life's necessities, while his wife is aware of its niceties. The marriage of two such different human beings is not harmonious. Strepsiades mentions his having had to reproach his wife for her extravagance (53–55). Moreover, they quarrel over the naming of their son. Strepsiades wanted to name him Phidonnides, a name meaning "sparing" or "frugal." His wife wanted to give him a name like Callippides, which contains the suffix "horse" (*hippos*) and is therefore suggestive of an aristocratic way of life. They compromise over his name: Phidippides is a combination of "frugal" and "horse." However, husband and wife continue to compete for their son. Both

want to reproduce themselves in Phidippides. Strepsiades tells his son that when he grows up he will be like his father, driving goats and wearing a simple leather jacket. But his mother gives him an image of himself as a brightly robed charioteer taking part in the city's festivities. Phidippides, taking after his extravagant mother, spends lavishly on race horses. He rejects the limited life his father represents. A desire for freedom underlies his extravagance. Owning race horses is possible only for a man who does not have to use his money to buy the necessities, and racing is possible only for a man who has leisure. Phidippides' love of horses reveals his desire for freedom.⁶ Horses are known for their spiritedness—for their resistance to bondage or restraint. The same man who can forget about his debts in order to sleep, and even to dream, is also the man who refuses to obey his father. And yet, his desire for freedom leads him to accept the extravagant tastes of his mother—to whom he is even more closely connected physically than to his father. His freedom will be only illusory.

Strepsiades asks his son to be instructed in rhetoric. He has heard that there are "wise souls" who can teach a man to conquer in speech, regardless of whether he speaks justly or unjustly (94–99). If Phidippides learns this "unjust speech," Strepsiades "will not have to pay back a penny of the debts" he now owes on account of his son (116–18). Strepsiades is looking for a rhetoric that makes the weaker argument the stronger, in order to escape paying his debts. He imagines that rhetoric will bring him freedom, since it seems to confer on its user a power to persuade others of whatever he desires. If a man possessed the absolute power rhetoric promises, what he says would depend only on his desires. He would be free of any need to speak the truth, or to make his speech reflect the world. Rather than be restrained by the external world, his speech could portray that world to his own liking and make others see it that way. Such a freedom is implied in a rhetoric that makes the weaker argument the stronger and serves to tempt men who resent the constraints under which they live.

Strepsiades asks Phidippides to learn the unjust rhetoric out of love for his father (86). Phidippides, however, will not obey. He will not risk losing his manly tan by associating with people who spend their time talking indoors (119–20). The "pale" Socratics are like shades (103);⁷ they seem to deny life, which Phidippides loves. After his son's insubordination, Strepsiades refuses to feed him any longer and orders him out of the house (121–23). Phidippides claims that