Parody as Pedagogy in Plato’s Dialogues

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

This dissertation is a study of parody in Plato’s dialogues. In it I argue that parody is not merely a literary, aesthetic, or rhetorical feature of his texts, but a part of his philosophical program and pedagogy. Plato humorously represents the ideas of other intellectuals to show the reader things about them which they might not have seen before such as their hidden assumptions and unintended consequences.

In the Introduction I contrast my position with that which sees Plato’s philosophy as equivalent to some number of doctrines or philosophical positions. Often we try to square what Socrates is saying with what we think Plato believes, instead of seeing that what he says is actually a critical parody of someone else’s views. Here I situate my argument within larger schools of Platonic interpretation and discuss the history and theory of parody. In Chapter One I argue that we can better understand Plato’s use of parody by looking at his dramatic predecessor, Aristophanes. The comic playwright not only humorously represents and subjects to criticism many of the same ideas and habits of thought and speech Plato does, but he too does so in order to educate his audience. He uses humor and the (mis)representation of parody to paradoxically show them the truth. In Chapter Two I analyze Agathon’s speech in Plato’s Symposium, arguing that it serves as a parody of the views of the sophist Gorgias. This recognition allows the reader to see that Agathon’s eros is actually an external, physical, compelling force, something not apparent on the surface of his encomium. It is this underlying assumption about desire that Plato is exposing through the humor of parody. In Chapter Three I show that the theory of music education in the Republic is not representative of Plato’s views, but a parody of the theories of Damon, an intellectual in Pericles’ inner circle. Plato is showing his readers what happens when one adopts Damon’s ideas which, like Gorgias’, rest on materialist principles. In Chapter Four, I argue that Socrates’ etymological demonstration in the Cratylus, far from harboring Plato’s theory of language, is actually a parody of contemporary views about words. In this dialogue, Plato shows how one’s ideas about language go hand in hand with a metaphysics and ethics. He uses parody to show what a materialist view of language means for one’s conception of virtue, reality, and the self.
Dedication

To Joey Lipp

συναισθάνεσθαι ἃρα δεί καὶ τοῦ φίλου ὃτι ἔστιν,
tοῦτο δὲ γίνοιτ' ἂν ἐν τῷ συζήν καὶ κοινωνεῖν λόγων καὶ διανοίας·
(Nicomachean Ethics 1170b)
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INTRODUCTION

I Thesis

While the relationship between a text’s meaning and its author is always the source of interpretive disagreement, Plato has made this an unavoidable issue for his readers. Plato wrote philosophy in such a way that the disparity between what the text says and what Plato means becomes an issue. Because Plato’s philosophy – the texts he left for future generations – is a corpus of fictional prose dramas, we are presented with a number of ideas and viewpoints, various philosophical positions in dialogue with one another. This prevents the reader from fixating on a single authorial voice and identifying it as Plato’s. Nevertheless, it is tempting to assume that the character Socrates’ statements and positions are a thinly veiled disguise for Plato’s own philosophy. Socrates’ ideas so baffle his interlocutors that, if taken as literal presentations of Plato’s doctrines, the reader must account for their ambiguous reception within the dialogues – why would Plato present his own ideas as strange and hard for Socrates’ conversation partners to grasp? One way to answer this question is that Plato’s philosophy is itself bizarre and problematic. With this conclusion, the reader may relegate these strange ideas to a moment or, perhaps, tradition in the history of philosophy. The finer points of his metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics can be haggled over, but they ultimately belong on a dusty shelf to be occasionally praised for their novelty, faulted for their naiveté, or both.

This rather bleak view is not one I share. Beyond the mistaken idea that Socrates’ arguments are Plato’s own, the more fundamental assumption is that Plato has some
number of positions which he is trying to persuade his readers to adopt. It is easy for scholars of Plato to grant this assumption this because it is our job to analyze, explicate, and clearly communicate Plato’s philosophy. I believe, however, we must find a way to understand Plato’s philosophy without attributing Socrates’ arguments to Plato. There might be a number of explanations for why Plato has Socrates make claims that are, in some sense, disingenuous. In this dissertation I explore the possibility that, in several instances, his claims are not Plato’s but, simply put, others’. Plato is constantly repeating, imitating, and representing the words and ways of other people. In some dialogues he does so by bringing a historical sophist, like Hippias, into the scene. Such characterizations are often crafted to comedic effect. Their arguments and manner of speaking betray hints of parodic humor on the part of the author, as if he is having fun at their expense and arranging the trajectory of the conversation to ensure that Socrates prevails over his rivals.

And yet Plato sometimes has Socrates himself serve as a parody of the ideas and arguments of other intellectuals. We too often read the dialogues literally, cataloguing and logically parsing the views of the various interlocutors in order to pin down Plato’s own, instead of literally, understanding how Plato uses all his characters to critically represent various views. Failing to consider the possible parodies doesn’t just mean failing to ‘get the joke,’ as it were. In addition we wrongly ascribe views to Plato which are really parodic representations of someone else’s views. Almost any academic will grant the presence of humor and parody in Plato and agree that a dialogue’s literary features should be taken into account in any interpretation. And yet, beguiled by
assumptions about what philosophy is for Plato, the explication of Socrates’ positions as Plato’s proceeds unimpeded.

In this dissertation I argue that parody, for Plato, is not a mere literary, aesthetic, or rhetorical effect ancillary to his more serious philosophical message, but rather an important tool he uses in his practice of philosophy. It is through parody that he enables the reader to recognize the nature of certain claims, previously unnoticed assumptions that come along with them, and the consequences of holding such views. One such view of primary importance to Plato is that of materialism. This ingrained perspective was so pervasive that Plato had to not only articulate an alternative for his readers, but first make them aware of the materialism underlying many of their beliefs.

The following three sections serve to introduce the reader to my argument and conclusions. I begin by situating my own conception of Platonic philosophy among broader schools of interpreting Plato. Next I discuss what I mean by materialism and why Plato was so concerned with this viewpoint. Lastly, I present the case for my methodological lens of parody. There I analyze the term itself, what it meant to the ancients and why it is a useful term for understanding Plato’s pedagogical practice.

II Interpreting Plato’s Philosophy

There are a few key things one must be aware of when trying to understand Plato’s philosophy. Any attempt to mine the dialogues for Platonic positions or beliefs is bound to end in frustrations or speculations. This is accomplished, chiefly, through the dialogue form itself which stages arguments and denies the reader an authoritative voice; and secondarily, though the characterization of Socrates who frustrates his interlocutors
who look to him for answers, as well as his readers who look to him for Plato’s views. The effect of all this is that the reader is lured into the asking of philosophical questions and confronted with a number of answers. How one can still sensibly speak of Plato’s ‘philosophy’ I will try to address at the end of this section.

Francisco Gonzalez, however, makes a keen observation about the widespread assumption that the dialogues contain and communicate Plato’s doctrines. He has shown how three distinct strands of Platonic scholarship are all outgrowths from it.¹ First, some argue that the radical differences and apparent inconsistencies in Plato’s corpus are evidence that his thought (i.e. philosophy) developed over time. The story usually goes that he represents his wily and argumentative teacher more faithfully in some dialogues, inserts some of his own theories – like the Forms and the tri-partite soul – in others, and eventually signals his break with Socrates by having new authoritative characters (the Eleatic Stranger, Timaeus, the Athenian Stranger) express his ideas more directly. This school of interpretation is usually buttressed by references to stylometric analysis whereby one can determine how similar or different dialogues are with respect to their features of vocabulary, grammatical construction, and sentence style. This has been reinforced by repeated use of the terms ‘early’, ‘middle’, and ‘late’ dialogues.²

Another strategy in interpreting Plato is to explain away all the differences one sees. This is commonly called a ‘unitarian’ view which asserts or assumes that each dialogue gives us a piece of Plato’s overall philosophy which is one and whole, an

¹ Gonzalez 1995, 8.
unchanging system. Sometimes unitarian interpreters even retain the early-middle-late scheme of the developmentalists, but argue that Plato is leading his readers to the truth and initiating them step by step, with more and more complete revelations of his doctrines. One problem with this interpretive lens is that it is unnecessary. What do we gain by claiming that all of the dialogues can be interpreted to support the same set of ‘Platonic’ beliefs?

A third response has been championed by the Tübigen school. For them, the dialogues only gesture toward the truth which was revealed in person at the Academy. This esoteric reading, however, has trouble demonstrating what that truth or wisdom consisted in. Usually a kind of proto-Neo-Platonist system is hinted at, justified by mathematical themes found in Aristotle and the early scholarchs of the Academy. I find these vague reconstructions unconvincing (not to mention uninspired).

Gonzalez notes that these three approaches are all attempts to reconcile the assumption that Plato had a system of doctrines with the unsystematic, undoctrinal dialogues. All these attempts to determine which statements in the dialogues can be safely said to be Plato’s miss the mark. The dialogue form itself prohibits attributing views to Plato. The next question is: why did he write like this if he is trying to communicate some sort of philosophy? Charles Griswold suggests three main reasons for choosing the dialogue form. It may be that their conversational, dramatic scenes are meant to engage readers, serving as an effective protreptic to philosophy. Alternatively,

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4 For interpretations of Plato’s philosophy based on his ‘unwritten doctrines’ see Reale 1997; Szlezák 1999.
5 Griswold 1988, 143.
after Socrates’ execution, Plato might have had political reasons for remaining one step removed from the provocative statements made in the dialogues. Concerns for his own safety (and the survival of philosophy as a discipline) might have led him to choose the dialogue form so that he could engage in the subversive act of toppling the dominant worldview and still disavow any of the claims made within his works. Griswold argues that, beyond these, there are philosophical reasons for choosing the dialogue form. He goes so far as to say “Plato must write dialogues.”

Plato’s dialogues contain no assertions by Plato, only depictions of people becoming and failing to become philosophers…. Plato presents us with dramatic imitations of the practice of philosophizing. Indeed, by withholding his own answers from his texts Plato seduces the reader into finding an answer for himself (just as Socrates did with respect to his interlocutors).

Griswold argues that it is the dialogue form which allows Plato to adopt a critical pose without being straightforwardly subject to criticism himself. One might respond that, without any substantive positions or doctrines, whatever ‘philosophy’ he has is hollow or empty of its own meaning. If Plato has only a negative stance against others, like his character Socrates, how can this be said to be a philosophy? Drew Hyland, in an article exploring the virtues of the dialogue form, has this to say about Plato’s philosophy:

I believe that it is here, in an understanding and comparison of the dialectic between the various participants and the positions they represent, that an insight into something like a “Platonic teaching” will emerge, primarily in the form of a conception of the nature of the philosophic enterprise.

Hyland claims that Plato’s teaching does not amount to a set of doctrines being taught. His philosophy is rather a kind of ‘enterprise,’ a pursuit or practice. The purpose of the

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6 Cf. Persecution and the Art of Writing Strauss 1952.
7 Griswold 1988, 160.
8 Hyland 1968, 40.
dialogues is not to convince readers to adopt his metaphysical beliefs but to usher them into the philosophical life. And what exactly does that mean or entail? – the critical re-examination of the self and others.

Aside from the dialogue form, Plato’s characterization of Socrates provides yet another reason to be skeptical of grand ‘Platonic’ systems. Not only is it impossible to attribute any views to Plato, but the character Socrates’ belief-sets are also notoriously out of reach (and, since he is a fictional character, his belief-sets are non-existent). He himself often emphasizes that the ideas he presents are not his own, referring to Diotima in Symposium, a certain Sicilian in the Phaedo, some priests and priestess in the Meno, divine inspiration in the Cratylus, a dream in the Theaetetus etc. Quite often an interlocutor seeks Socrates’ wisdom by demanding he share or explain the knowledge he has. But Socrates either points elsewhere or turns the interlocutor back on himself. This mirrors the dynamic between Plato and the reader. And as for his wisdom, he famously says in the Apology that he is wise only in that he knows how much he does not know. It is as if Plato thought becoming wise and practicing philosophy had nothing to do with discovering and agreeing with someone else’s beliefs.

What then does it mean to become wise and practice philosophy? In a word: to critically reflect on one’s own beliefs in order to live more responsibly. This dissertation is about how Plato’s dialogues enable the reader to do this. What Socrates exemplifies is a commitment to the examination of serious matters like love, justice, death, the soul,

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9 For philosophy as a practice and way of life, see What is Ancient Philosophy? Hadot 2002.
virtue, happiness, education, truth, etc. Although we might not be able to saddle Plato with any particular doctrines, he has crafted a Socrates who thinks that these issues are important, that we all value them, that we already have intuitive, if not explicit, beliefs about them, and that it is possible to articulate our views and discuss them. When a view in the dialogues is presented as trying to thwart one of these positions, Socrates either dismantles it or finds a way around it. Consider the so-called paradox found in *Meno*.

After Socrates has cross-examined Meno’s conception of virtue and shown it to be lacking, Meno aggressively fires back and demands that Socrates explain his view, since he’s the expert. Socrates, of course, denies knowing what virtue is. Meno then presents his famous paradox (*Meno* 80e). If neither of them knows what virtue is, but they decide to keep searching for a definition, regardless, how will they know which of the various definitions they might come up with is the right one? It is as if they cannot ever know or recognize what virtue is unless they already know it. This is a rather sophistical objection, but Plato does not address it by attacking its logic or definitions. Instead, Socrates counters that we do already know what virtue is because we retain such knowledge from past lives we have lived. What we call learning is really a kind of recollection (*anamnesis*) of the knowledge already present in our soul.

This is an example of what some take to be a Platonic doctrine presented by Socrates. It is strange to Meno and strange to us as well. There is a lot about the view one might find unsatisfying, the least of which is that it requires a belief in the immortality of the soul and its retention of experiences from past lives. There is also an infinite regress which occurs when you try to account for how each past life learned what it knew, i.e. if it only ever recollects knowledge from past lives, then it is difficult to imagine a life or
state of the soul in which it had perfect knowledge, and more difficult to believe in one.

But, this scene does not need to be interpreted as ‘Plato’s epistemology.’ The safest thing we can say is that it is a story, way, and strategy for getting around Meno’s objection. The ‘theory’ or Recollection allows them to continue the search for virtue. After Socrates demonstrates the truth of this theory by eliciting a geometrical proof from a slave, he concludes thus:

I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it. (Meno 86b)

This makes Socrates’ priorities clear. One might not need to believe in an immortal soul or the details of the ‘theory’ of anamnesis nor need one insist that it is Plato’s or Socrates’. The important thing is that it allows Meno to believe one can learn things one doesn’t know. Plato might very well have had firm metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical beliefs. Our attempts to reconstruct those beliefs mistakenly assume that in doing so we are elucidating his philosophy. But we engage in philosophy when we engage in the dialogues themselves because the dialogues not only stage an encounter with others but also ourselves. Consider what Nikias says in Laches.

Whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and associates with him in conversation will necessarily, even if he started off talking about something else, be led around by the man’s arguments until he submits to answering questions about himself concerning both his present manner of life and the life he has lived so far… I realized some time ago that, if Socrates were present, the conversation would not be about the boys but about ourselves.10

10 Laches 187e-188c.
Part of examining oneself is recognizing oneself in others. Parody is a fundamental part of Plato’s pedagogy because it allows him to foster this double-recognition. Plato stages the representation of popular beliefs not to make fun of or criticize them, but to highlight for the reader views he must be aware of and reckon with, views he might already entertain without knowing it.

III Materialism

We find in the *Symposium* that a philosopher is one who desires and pursues wisdom. Many dialogues feature a concern about just how one becomes wise or acquires wisdom. If it is about knowing right from wrong or knowing, at the very least, what it means to be wise, how does one then acquire this knowledge? Wisdom might sound like a particularly philosophical and woefully ancient thing to be concerned about but this really amounts to a concern with education and what it means to be educated. The *Protagoras, Meno, Euthydemus,* and *Republic* are all explicitly concerned with this and, indeed, each of the dialogues are in their own way. Part of the function of Plato’s dialogues and his parodic pedagogy is to stage various claims or pictures of education in order to bring them to the reader’s attention. Two views we find problematized in the dialogues are 1) that knowledge is a *technē,* and 2) that virtue can be taught. The problem inherent in both of these is in the conception of knowledge and teaching entertained by most of Socrates’ interlocutors and most of Plato’s readers.

The idea that knowledge is something which can be handed over from one reader to another is easy to accept if knowledge is viewed as facts or definitions or answers. And yet, a moment’s reflection will tell us that one might be able to parrot back a memorized
fact and have no true knowledge or understanding. This skepticism regarding knowledge as having at one’s disposal some number of propositions is at the heart of Socrates’ myth about the invention of writing in the *Phaedrus* (274c-275b). The Egyptian god Theuth exulted in writing because it is “*pharmakon* for memory and wisdom.” But Thamus explains that writing, far from improving one’s memory, will destroy it. Instead of knowledge being inside oneself, men will now rely on these external symbols, written by others, effectively outsourcing knowledge. This is not strictly a critique of writing. It is a critique of a certain attitude toward knowledge.

The most common worldview that Plato stages as problematic is what I am calling a materialist perspective. This view is important for Plato to address because it is not really, or not only, a kind of abstract metaphysics one might endorse – a view about the fundamental constituents of reality – but a view which affects what one thinks knowledge or learning is, what a human being is, as well as what it means to act virtuously or ethically. If philosophy is about investigating and assessing the merits of alternative worldviews, Plato must first lay bare for his readers the worldviews at stake.

In each of my chapters, what Plato subjects to parody are the consequences of a materialist perspective. My second chapter analyzes Plato’s presentation of Agathon in the *Symposium*. Socrates says that Agathon reminds him of Gorgias. For most this is a comment about the rhetorical and sophistic qualities of his speech. But it is really Agathon’s description of *Eros* which is derived from Gorgias’ own ideas about desire and language, as described in the *Encomium of Helen*. Agathon thinks desire and beauty are physical aspects of the body; and, furthermore, that it works like a body, invading one’s senses and instilling desire inside us. This is exactly how Gorgias says that persuasion
and *logos* work: from the outside in, molding our minds and wills in a kind of impersonal, automatic, natural process. In order to truly see Agathon’s conception of desire for what it is and responsibly assess it, Plato highlights and exaggerates the physical, Gorgian aspects of his speech.

The education of the guardians in the *Republic*, and in fact the whole construction of Kallipolis, proceeds from a materialist perspective. Instead of seeing the flaws in the city as flaws in Plato’s political philosophy, I contend that Plato is staging a thought experiment where he constructs a system of education based on materialist principles. That is what his interlocutors seem to be familiar with and what they are able to understand: the idea that one becomes virtuous by being exposed to virtue, which is to say virtuous sights and sounds. This culminates in the invocation of the music teacher and theorist Damon. Socrates’ vision of education in Kallipolis is really a kind of parody of Damon’s views. He elicits agreement from his interlocutors on some of his basic principles and then takes them to their absurd but logical conclusion. The results are *supposed* to be puzzling and laughable, even disturbing, as if to say ‘This is what a just city would look like if Damon was in charge of the music.’ The reader is shown what an impoverished view of education and the soul this really is. As readers continue on, Socrates will eventually offer a different view of education in the heart of the *Republic*:

*Education is not what some people claim it to be. What they say, roughly speaking, is that they are able to put knowledge into souls where none was before. Like putting sight into eyes which were blind. … Whereas our present account indicates that this capacity is in every soul, this instrument by means of which each person learns, is like an eye which can only be turned away from the darkness and towards the light by turning the whole body. The entire soul has to turn with it, away from what is coming to be, until it is able*
to bear the sight of what is, and in particular the brightest part of it. This is the part we call the good, isn’t it?¹¹

Education for Plato, at least by Book VII, doesn’t happen from the outside in. It is not something handed over from one who has it, to one who doesn’t. It is an internal process. But back in Books II and III, the guardians’ education in virtue was framed in terms of external stimuli. The character of one’s soul depended on the kinds of things he or she is exposed to: hence the hyperbolic anxiety over what the young see and hear. This narrow conception of education is ultimately shallow. Plato knows this and slowly leads the reader to a modified view in Book VII. A critic might point out that Socrates’ new description after the analogy of the Cave still relies on the same notion of sight as in Books III and IV. The soul is ‘like an eye’ and must be turned ‘toward the light’. The difference is that whereas the concept of sight in the earlier books is crassly literal in its materiality, in Book VII this is emphatically a metaphor. It is not clear what it means to set one’s sights on the Good. The soul is like an eye and the Good is like the Sun; looking at the Sun is an analogy for directing one’s soul toward the Good. Importantly, unlike eyes and the Sun, the soul and the Good are invisible and immaterial. The interlocutors had previously been very much concerned with what images and sounds would foster virtuous souls, and which vicious. In order to identify the positive features of permissible

¹¹ τὴν παιδείαν οὖν οίαν τινὲς ἐπαγγελλόμενοι φασίν εἶναι τοιαύτην καὶ εἶναι, φασὶ δὲ ποιν οὐκ ἐνοοῦσεν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ἐπιστήμης σοφεὶς ἐντιθέναι, οἴον τυφλοὶ ὁφθαλμοὶ ὠφὶς ἐντιθέντες. … ὁ δὲ γε νῦν λόγος, ἣν δ’ ἐγὼ, σημαίνει ταῦτην τὴν ἐνοοούσαν ἐκαστὸς δύναμιν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ καὶ τὸ ὀργανὸν ὃ καταμανθάνει ἐκαστος, οἴον εἰ ὀμμα μὴ δυνατὸν ἢ ἀλλ’ ἢ σὺν ὅλῳ τῷ σωματὶ στηφέιν πρὸς τὸ φανὸν ἐκ τοῦ σκοτῶδος, οὕτω σὺν ὅλῃ τῇ ψυχῇ ἐκ τοῦ γιγνομένου περιστέραν εἶναι, ἔως ἂν εἰς τὸ ὀν καὶ τοῦ ὄντος τὸ φανότατον δυνατὴ γένηται ἀνασχέσθαι θεωμένη· τοῦτο δ’ εἶναι φαμὲν τἀγαθόν. ἢ γάρ: (518c). translation Griffith (2000).

¹² This is Agathon’s view in the Symposium.
stories, they had to resort to questionable, sophistic logic which resulted in the banishment of Homer, Hesiod, and polyphonic poets. In order to determine which musical rhythms would be permitted, they had to rely on the authority and expertise of Damon. But the real question, the philosophical question isn’t “Which stories are good?” or “What kind of music is good?” but “What is the good?” Here the methods and authority of the sophists fail us. We might expect Plato to set them up as straw-men, knock them down, and then simply replace them as he trumpets his own view. On the contrary, when Socrates is confronted about the character of the Good in Book VI, he does not give a direct answer or his own definition (506b). That is why he then resorts to the analogies of Sun, Line, and Cave. In this way Plato is able to direct his readers towards the nature of the Good without having to play the sophists’ game of ‘having’ knowledge which he can package up and hand over to the reader. This might seem like an evasion on Plato’s part, to his discredit. But it is consistent with Socrates’ pedagogy in other dialogues. Even if Plato had some certain specific conception or definition of the Good, one doesn’t know or encounter the Good by being told what it is. Learning is a power or capability that everyone already has in his own soul.

In the Cratylus chapter Socrates subjects a conventionalist view of language to elenchus. He does so by endorsing a linguistic naturalism which sees a word’s meaning as somehow naturally reflected in its material composition. Scholars are not sure what to make of Plato’s strange theory here, but I do not believe Socrates’ demonstration is a representation of Plato’s views. Plato is exposing a materialist view of meaning to criticism. By thinking that words, syllables, and sounds are perfect reflections of reality, the etymologist wrongly believes that he has access to the truth embedded in language.
By having Socrates humorously represent this view, Plato exposes what is lacking: the immateriality and extra-linguistic nature of meaning, intention, virtue, the self and other.

This materialist view which infiltrates itself into so many other domains of thought, had been previously parodied and subjected to criticism by the comic playwright Aristophanes. He serves as a precedent to and model for the philosopher Plato. For this reason I begin the dissertation with an analysis of Aristophanes’ own pedagogy. The parody produced by these two authors is not just a literary, rhetorical, or comic feature they happen to have in common. Both use parody to deflate the pretensions of authoritative figures and ideas. They do so by exaggerating certain recognizable features of these perspectives to humorous effect. But the result is more than just a laugh at someone else’s expense. I argue that Aristophanes imitates the styles and statements of others in order to lead the audience to a self-conscious recognition. Given the political and philosophical views making the rounds in Athens of his day (or any city in any age), it is not always apparent what questionable assumptions prop them up, what agendas motivate their promulgation and propagation, and what the consequences are for holding such a perspective. The recognition essential to ‘getting’ a parody helps Aristophanes show his audience truths about familiar characters and ideas.

The *Clouds* and *Frogs* are especially useful to my project because they are both concerned with education. Here we see Aristophanes mock the penchant certain intellectuals have for treating language, learning, and even poetry as if they were physical processes. A crass kind of literalness and an absurd emphasis on the materiality of things is not only funny, but makes the audience wonder whether this is really a perspective they
should want to adopt. It is ironic that this clarity is provided through the absurd, fun-house mirror of parody.

IV Parody

Although there is no disagreement about the presence of parody in Plato’s dialogues, arguing that it is an important part of his philosophical practice leaves me with something of an uphill battle. I must explain what I mean by parody, how I am going to determine a claim, character, or scene is parodic, and show why this has philosophical significance.

Parody is a Greek word with a long history. The earliest use of the term παρωδία is in Aristotle’s Poetics when he is discussing different literary genres of imitation. There he says that Homer makes men better than they are and Hegemon the Thasian, inventor of parodies, worse than they are. These works were probably derivative from Homeric poems, and either featured comic takes on epic themes or, in the case of works like the Batrachomyomachia, an epic take on a comic or low theme. The term παρωδός opposed ραψωδός, and such a singer produced imitations, adaptations, and remixes of familiar songs. Parody then, at first glance, has a penchant for low comedy and humor founded in ridiculing other, serious genres. Householder, however, catalogues instances of the word-group and specifically the verb παρωδέω which do not necessitate criticism. The Batrachomyomachia need not be seen as denigrating the epic style or

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13 Poetics 2.3 (1448a).
14 Householder 1944.
significance of Homer’s poems. The use of the term by scholiasts is often quite general – the borrowing of a phrase or imitation of a scene from tragedy and placing it in a comedy.\footnote{Scholiast on Aristophanes’ *Acharnians* 8. τοῦτο παρωδία καλεῖται ὅταν ἐκ τραγωδίας μετενεχθῇ λόγος εἰς κωμῳδίαν}

The term parody and its relationship to other forms of imitative humor and criticism has been examined most-thoroughly by Margaret Rose. She provides an “analysis of parody as a reflexive form of meta-fiction which ‘lays bare’ the devices of fiction to refunction them for new purposes.”\footnote{Rose 1979, 14.} She deftly distinguishes parody from satire by arguing that while parody is dependent on the performed language (or text) of the original, satire is “not restricted, to the imitation, distortion, or quotation of other literary texts.”\footnote{Ibid. 44.} She also distinguishes parody from irony. While parody contains two ‘codes’ with two distinct messages (because of the two authors), irony combines two messages in a single code.

… the difference between the ‘apparent’ message of the ironist’s code and its ‘real’ message is generally left concealed for the recipient of the irony to decipher, the parodist usually combines and then comically (and, thus, noticeably) contrasts a quoted text or work with a new context… with the aim of producing laughter from the recognition of their incongruity.\footnote{Rose 1993, 88. On incongruity and other theories of laughter see the introduction to *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* Morreall 1987.}

In my dissertation I define parody as the representation of someone else’s words or ideas which, through humorous exaggeration or recontextualization, enables them to be seen
anew and reassessed. In doing so, Plato is not unfairly characterizing ideas he opposes. He is exposing them, allowing the reader to see them more clearly.  

My emphasis on pedagogy is not an attempt to shoehorn philosophy into a purely literary concept. Even literary critics recognize that parody can be educational. “What a parody most reveals is that any good poem becomes funny if you change one or more of the assumptions behind it… These comic transformations also teach us something essential about the original poems.” While Kennedy is talking about works of poetry parodying other literary works, I see Plato’s effort as similar. His is not a purely aesthetic or literary endeavor, but rather philosophical. This means engaging the reader in dialogue and providing him or her both the opportunity and tools to reflect on the assumptions and consequences of the views being bandied about before them.

Something must be said about how one identifies parody. A parodic scene or text is both similar to and different from another text. How similar or different must it be, and in what ways, to count as parody? In general, I follow Andrea Nightingale. She says that one must either identify an entire text from a given genre, a cluster of allusions to a specific text from a given genre, or the sustained use of the discourse, *topoi*, themes, or structural characteristics of a given genre. Identifying a scene or argument as parodic is thus not a precise, scientific matter. The reader will find the identification more or less

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19 Because parody is a representational act, it may be viewed as a form of Platonic *mimesis*. This is a can of worms I chose not to open in this dissertation. I will, however, say that I do not believe Plato is as hostile to mimetic representation as he might seem. Not only is this apparent hostility at odds with his general practice of literary representation but he frequently has recourse to images to convey philosophical concepts. Plato found a way to write, despite Socrates’ criticism of writing in the *Phaedrus*. Might not the dialogues (and parodic representations therein) be a similarly satisfying response to the problems with *mimesis* he outlines in the *Republic*?
20 Kennedy 2007, 304. (emphasis mine)
21 Nightingale 1995, 8.
compelling. In the case-studies examined in this dissertation I have endeavored to show who or what ideas are being parodied, what allusions and references make this connection, and, importantly, why Plato would have Socrates represent other people’s views.

Each of the topics discussed in this Introduction are interrelated. This dissertation is not just a survey of parody in Plato, but an argument about how and why he uses it. The critical representation of other views is a fundamental aspect of Platonic pedagogy. This is most evident when he is trying to make his readers aware of the materialist assumptions which determined and limited how people approached essential human questions.
CHAPTER 1: ARISTOPHANES

… there is nothing that has caused me to meditate more on Plato’s secrecy and sphinx nature than the happily preserved *petit fait* that under the pillow of his deathbed there was found no “Bible,” nor anything Egyptian, Pythagorean, or Platonic – but a volume of Aristophanes. How could even Plato have endured life – a Greek life he repudiated – without an Aristophanes?

- Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 28

I Introduction

In the last chapter I reviewed ancient παρωδία, modern parody, and mapped out my project for analyzing Plato’s use of parody in his dialogues. Parody is a kind of *mimesis*. It is an imitation whereby the original is subjected to a critical re-examination through humor, often through the exaggeration of particular traits. On this view, parody is not a matter of words standing in some relationship to other words, or a text to another text, but a *practice* on the part of the author; insofar as this practice affords an opportunity for the reader or audience to learn something about the object represented, parody is furthermore a kind of pedagogy. Through parody, the audience can recognize something true in the critical representation of a person, idea, or behavior.

In future chapters I will demonstrate that parody, understood in this way, is an important part of Plato’s project. He wrote in such a way that readers would recognize the various authors, ideas, and styles parodied in his dialogues. Andrea Nightingale argues that Plato makes these ‘alien genres of discourse’ part of his own texts in order to at once
subvert and subsume them. But before we embark upon an analysis of this phenomenon in Plato, we should ask: how would his readers have experienced and understood this practice, this feature of Plato’s dialogues? To answer this question I turn to Plato’s parodic predecessor: Aristophanes, the comic playwright who had already parodied and appropriated various genres of discourse decades earlier. Thus the status of Aristophanes’ plays as a precedent for what Plato is doing needs to be taken seriously. Understanding what, how, and why Aristophanes parodies will allow us to better understand what how and why Plato parodies. Although the motivations and purposes of the dramatist and philosopher might very well be different, it will become clear that, for both authors, parody is a fundamental aspect of their pedagogy. Indeed, although Plato muddles the generic distinction between comedy and philosophy, as Nightingale argues, this is not his primary goal. He and Aristophanes were both educators, in many ways cut from the same cloth. They shared more than a parodic methodology.

In this chapter I examine Aristophanes’ use of parody in order to show just how much Plato made use of his techniques. As a case study, I start with Aristophanes’ parodies of Euripides’ *Telephus*. In subsequent sections I will focus on his parodies of

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22 Nightingale 1995, 1-12, 133-171. For Nightingale, Plato’s treatment of other thinkers and ideas is primarily antagonistic because each is trying to assert his own views over against the other. Plato’s view of wisdom and philosophy historically won out only because he so effectively handled his rivals. Although Nightingale has many valuable insights into Plato’s deployment of parody, one can’t help but wonder whether, on her reading, it can be anything but a tool of persuasion. I want to suggest that the kind of pedagogy Plato consistently displays in the dialogues is dependent not on convincing the reader of something (namely his perspective) but rather of enabling the reader to recognize something (about other authoritative discourses).

23 For Plato’s relation to an even older form of critical humor, Athenaeus reports that Gorgias called Plato a “new Archilochus” (νέον τούτον Ἀρχιλόχον) and marveled at how well Plato knew how to *iambizein* (ὡς καλῶς οἶδε Πλάτων ἰαμβίζειν). *Deipnosophistae* XI.113.

24 While the specific nature of their relationship is contested, that Plato drew a lot from Aristophanes is not controversial. Nightingale (1995, 192): “It was Old Comedy that offered Plato a model for dramatizing and criticizing the ‘contest of public voices’ in Athens.” cf. Brock 1990, 39-49; Strauss 1966, 11-53.
sophistic speech, cosmological speculation, and poetic/aesthetic theory. One might imagine that in each of these cases Aristophanes is mocking a particular literary genre (tragic poetry, rhetorical handbooks, scientific treatises) and their particular authors. Aristophanes’ parodies are not mere textual relations but represent ways of writing, speaking, arguing, and thinking. Every discourse uses its authority and particular mode of persuasion to spread a particular view of the world and human nature. In staging parodies of these discourses, Aristophanes does not only humorously imitate their styles and mocks their positions for a laugh. In doing so he also undermines their authority and reveals to the audience first, the ways in which the discourse attempts to shape them and second, the potential effects of being shaped by them. This is also how and why Plato employs parody and why I begin by making the case for Aristophanes as a predecessor.

II Parody as Pedagogy: Aristophanes stages Euripides’ Telephus

The protagonist of Aristophanes’ Acharnians is Dicaeopolis, an Athenian farmer whose economic livelihood has suffered as a result of the war raging against Sparta. He tries to bring his grievances to the Assembly in the beginning of the play but the Council refuses to let him speak. What is a citizen to do when he disagrees with the military actions of his state and finds no recourse in the usual political channels? Aristophanes’ comedy stages an impossible solution: Dicaeopolis enters into his own individual, private peace treaty with the Spartans. Thus he is able to enjoy the benefits which accrue to him

25 Produced in 425 BCE, Athens had been at war for six years. Farmers especially had suffered since the Spartans annually marched to Athens in order to burn the surrounding fields. Pericles’ official policy (Thucydides II.14) was to abandon the country, stay behind the city’s walls, and rely on the navy to import necessities.
through peace (security, trade, leisure for drinking and women). The end of the play sharply contrasts the happiness of his new life with the harm which befalls other citizens suffering from the violence of war and disruption of trade.

The chorus in the play is composed of citizens from Acharnia who are particularly zealous proponents of the war-effort. When they first discover what Dicaeopolis plans to do, they enter onto the stage calling for his stoning. Aristophanes stages their confrontation as an extended parody of Euripides’ tragedy *Telephus*. Produced in 438, the myth is as follows: Telephus, a Mysian king and son of Heracles, is suffering from a wound inflicted by Achilles on the Achaean’s first misdirected voyage to Troy. He has however received an oracle telling him that his wound-er will be his healer. Thus he sets out to Aulis where the Greeks are assembling for their second campaign. He stalks through the Achaean camp dressed as a beggar looking for Achilles, the cause of his wound. Fragments indicate that Telephus has a conversation with Clytemnestra and enlists her assistance. When he is discovered as an enemy intruder and faces imminent destruction, he somehow gets a hold of or produces Clytemnestra’s son, the infant Orestes, and threatens the child in order to stave off his attackers. By this tactic he obtains a hearing, explains his presence, and wins over half of the chorus.

In Aristophanes’ comedy Dicaeopolis is threatened by the chorus of Acharnians who refuse to listen to him. In order to halt their advance and force them to listen, he mimics Telephus’ tactic, telling the chorus “Of all the things dear to you I will destroy

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26 280 ff.
27 For these speculative reconstructions of the tragedy’s plot see Miller 1948 and Heath 1987.
28 Chorus: “Listen to you? You are going to die. We’ll bury you with stones!” (295).
Dicaeopolis: “When I was talking just now, you weren’t listening to me.” (337).
those you care for most. Seizing those hostages I have, I will slay them.”

He runs into his house and, instead of producing a baby, he comes back with a bag of coal. The idea that one could even be capable of threatening a bag of coal or that this is somehow comparable to harming someone’s child is ludicrous, but (we might imagine) just like the Greek soldiers in Euripides’ play, the Acharnians react with horror. Coal was a major export of the region and the source of their economic livelihood. The substitution of a threatened sack of coal for an infant and the chorus’s reaction are both unbelievable and inappropriate; but the audience laughs because they recognize just how fitting Aristophanes’ joke is: the Acharnians love coal as much as they do their own children. It is through his parody that Aristophanes gives the audience a sort of double-vision. They see both the original baby (in Euripides’ serious tragedy) and the present basket of coal (in Aristophanes’ comedic parody).

Even after this borrowed stratagem, the Telephus continues to play an important role in Dicaeopolis’ encounter with the Acharnians. After his threats of violence convince them to listen to him, he swears that he will defend his treaty with the Spartans ‘on the chopping-block’ (ὑπὲρπεὶ ἐπιξήνου, 355). If Telephus has said something like this in Euripides’ tragedy, he was surely speaking metaphorically, the meaning being that his life was on the line. In Aristophanes’ comedy, this statement is taken literally.

Dicaeopolis rushes inside and brings out a block over which he will eventually deliver his

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29 326-7.
30 Aristophanes parodies the same Telephus scene fourteen years later in Women at the Thesmophoria (411 BCE). There Euripides’ kinsman is surrounded by women and holds hostage not a baby, but a skin of wine (lines 689-758). This is a joke about the not-so-pious priorities of the female celebrants. On this scene see Sommerstein 1994, 198 ff.
defense. But before he begins his speech, he insists that he must get properly attired. He
stalls the chorus further by begging leave to visit Euripides in order to borrow a suitably
tragic and pitiable costume and they acquiesce.

Once he arrives at the tragedian’s house, and explains what he needs, Euripides
runs through a list of wretched characters whose outfits would suit the occasion. But it is,
fittingly, Telephus’ costume that Dicaeopolis chooses. Once they finally determine what
is needed the playwright calls out to a slave:

ὦ παῖ δὸς αὐτῷ Τηλέφου ράκωματα.
κεῖται δ᾽ ἀνώθεν τῶν Θυεστείων ρακῶν.

Boy, give him the vestments of Telephus.
They’re laying above the Thyestean rags. (lines 433-4)

Here Aristophanes is parodying not a specific play of Euripides’ but tragic language, its
way of speaking. The Attic word for ‘rag’ or ‘tattered garment’ is τὸ ράκος. The variant
in the previous line (ράκωματα) is used nowhere else in Aristophanes. The point of
juxtaposing the rare, poetic, tragic diction with the common parlance is precisely to alert
the audience to the change. There is a further incongruence between the prosaic genitive
‘of Telephus’ modifying ράκωματα and the more poetic possessive adjective
‘Thyestean’ modifying ρακῶν. We might have expected the plain ‘rags of Telephus’ to
contrast with the elegant ‘Thyestean raiment’, but instead the registers are mixed.31

Edward Hope explains the significance of this linguistic clash:

It is repeatedly the case that after a poetical word has been used by one character in the
drama, another, within the next line or two, will refer to the same object, but in doing so
will use the prosaic equivalent for the poetic word. … a clear proof that Aristophanes

31 On speech registers and sociolects see The Languages of Aristophanes: Aspects of Linguistic Variation in
Classical Attic Greek. Willi 2003, 8 ff.
used the unusual word designedly, since the plain word following would make the other
more conspicuous.32

Dicaeopolis isn’t just looking for tattered clothes; he needs to look and sound sufficiently
tragic. Aristophanes alerts the audience to the artificiality of tragic language by
highlighting the linguistic dissonance in Euripides’ words above.

Helene Foley provides some insight into the significance of this theatricality.

Dicaeopolis is staging a play (a warped version of Euripides’ *Telephus*) within a play
(Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*). But there is a difference between the chorus of Acharnians
as spectators and the Athenians as spectators.

… comedy reveals the important truths that tragedy (drama that depends on dramatic
illusion) hides behind the stage. Whereas the politicians of the first scene or the
tragedians may use costume or rhetoric to deceive their audience, as the disguised
Dikaiopolis does to the chorus, Aristophanes uses it to reveal the truth to his audience.33

What truth, here, is Aristophanes revealing? He is showing his audience, by means of
humorous parody, something about the wrongheaded priorities of the war-mongering
Acharnians as well as the artificial theatricality of defendants in Athenian courts. In this
way the parody is not just an intertextual relationship between two plays or two authors.
It is a mode of pedagogy, a critical imitation of something which, through exaggeration,
(paradoxically) allows the audience to see something about the original more clearly than
before.34

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32 Hope 1905, 3.
33 Foley 1988, 44.
34 For an interpretation of this scene as a ‘metatheatrical critique’ of tragedy, see Platter 2007, 143-175.
III Sophists and Persuasive Speech

Aristophanes’ parody of Euripides’ Telephus in his Acharnians provided us with a good example of how parody can be a kind of pedagogy. While my study of Plato will not be primarily concerned with his parodies of tragedy, there are several other objects of parody that he and Aristophanes have in common. In the next two sections I will focus on Aristophanes’ representation of intellectual speech. In Clouds Aristophanes uses the familiar figure of Socrates to embody a variety of sophistic theories and mannerisms. But the character Socrates is not just a generic nutty professor. Nearly all of his positions can be traced to specific intellectuals. And this is significant. It is the difference between laughing at the man on stage and laughing at him as someone else, the person he represents. The kinds of views represented can be generally separated into two categories: linguistic theories about language and rhetoric and ‘scientific’ investigations into the natural world. I will turn to the latter in the next section. Here I focus on Aristophanes’ parody of sophistic speech.

The Clouds opens with the farmer Strepsiades lamenting the debt he’s in because of his son’s expensive habits. But Strepsiades knows just where to turn: those clever guys in that building down the road, the ones who know how to win any argument, even when they’re in the wrong. The first description we have of the sophists is when he points out this curious building:

ψυχῶν σοφῶν τούτ’ ἔστι φροντιστήριον.
...
οὗτοι διδάσκουσ’, ἀργύριον ἢν τις διδὼ, λέγοντα νικάν καὶ δίκαια κάδικα. 

27
That is a brain-barn of wise souls.

... 

As long as you pay a large fee, these guys teach a speaker how to win both just and unjust arguments. (lines 94-99)

Strepsiades knows that he has a legal obligation to pay the money he owes, but if he learns to become the best speaker for a hundred miles, he can evade the law.\(^{35}\) For the sophists are able to make even an unjust argument prevail. This is not perhaps a wildly unfair characterization since Aristotle later calls making the weaker argument the stronger “Protagoras’ promise.”\(^{36}\) Strepsiades has heard the advertisement and is there to learn exactly that – the most unjust argument (τὸν ἀδικώτατον λόγον).\(^{37}\) When he begins his lessons, however, Socrates never teaches him this and insists instead that he ought first to learn which animals are rightly masculine.\(^{38}\) Many Athenians, like Strepsiades, likely wanted practical benefits and skills from a sophistic education. But to the expert theorists, the study of speaking meant not just how to speak well in public, but rather the study of correct speech.

Strepsiades naturally thinks he knows which animals are masculine and responds with a list including the ram, bull, and rooster. Socrates objects that, unlike the other animals with their gendered differences (ewe, cow), people unreasonably call both the male and female chicken ἀλεκτρυνῶν. Strepsiades is dumbfounded and asks what he

\(^{35}\) ὦ δέσποιναι δέομαι τοίνυν ύμων τούτι πάνυ μικρόν,

τῶν Ἑλληνῶν εἶναι μὲ λέγειν ἐκατὸν σταδίων ἄριστον. (429-30).


\(^{37}\) 657.

\(^{38}\) ἀλλ’ ἔτερα δὲι σε πρότερα τούτου μανθάνειν,

τῶν τετραπόδων ἀττ’ ἔστιν ὀρθῶς ἄρρενα. (658-9).
should be doing instead. Socrates proposes the alternatives ὁ ἀλέκτωρ and ἡ ἀλεκτρύαινα (660-6) in order that the male (rooster) be distinguished from female (hen). However admirable Socrates’ desire for clarity, the same kind of argument would appear just as odd today: for those who think it appropriate or useful to distinguish the male actor from the female actress, should they distinguish the male director from the female directress?

However compelling or useful the ἀλέκτωρ/ἀλεκτρύαινα distinction, Aristophanes comically takes the principle to its absurd extreme. While the case of a distinction between genders in animals seems practical enough, that ‘kneading trough’ (κάρδοπος) should be spelled κάρδοπη because it is a feminine noun is less clear.\(^{39}\)

Next Socrates claims that Cleonymus (Κλεώνυμος) ought properly to be called Cleonyme (Κλεωνύμη) because of his feminine qualities. Strepsiades readily grants this; he already treats Amynias like a woman, since he hasn’t enlisted in the army.\(^{40}\) Andreas Willi says of this passage, “The ‘phrontistic’ attachment to true meanings and etymological connections is so strong that it overrides all common-sense knowledge: the world (and its theoretical perception) must be adapted to language.”\(^{41}\) Aristophanes reveals that subverting functional language to the standards proposed by elite wise men is absurd.

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\(^{39}\) 679.

\(^{40}\) Σω: ὁ ρᾷς; γυναῖκα τὴν Ἀμυνίαν καλεῖς.

Στ.: οὐκ εὖ δικαίως Πρὶς οὐ στρατεύεται; (692-3).

Note that while several inflected forms of Amynias’ name follow the pattern of first declension feminine nouns, it is not this that makes him seem feminine to Strepsiades, but his nature or character.

\(^{41}\) Willi 2003, 98.
The audience is encouraged to laugh at Socrates’ insistence on linguistic purity, but this is actually not something we find attributable to Socrates in our other sources. Aristotle tells us that he was the first to search for the universal and definitions in ethical matters.\textsuperscript{42} But, even if the historical Socrates looked for definitions, the Platonic Socrates is careful to avoid a technical vocabulary. To be sure, the ‘Forms’ certainly seem like technical concepts for Plato, but he uses the words ἰδέα and εἶδος interchangeably and both simply indicate the ‘look’ or ‘appearance’ of a thing. What exactly a ‘Form’ is, metaphysically, is never systematically or explicitly defined; the provisional definitions for various virtues never stand up to scrutiny (often leading to aporia); and when it is claimed that a virtue or phenomenon can only be understood in its relation to a Form, not only is the precise nature of this relation also never explained, but Plato does not feel it necessary to fuss over the particular words used to describe or characterize this relation.

At the climax of Socrates’ postulation of the Forms in \textit{Phaedo} he says:

I hold simply and plainly and perhaps naively to this, that nothing else makes something beautiful other than the presence of beauty or communion or indeed whatever it is called. For I will not insist upon this, but (only) that all beautiful things are beautiful by the Beautiful.\textsuperscript{43}

What Socrates does not want to insist upon, assert strongly, or rely on is what we \textit{call} this relationship. The important part of his claim is that there \textit{is} a relationship in the first place. In \textit{Meno} we get an even clearer picture of Socrates’ aversion to linguistic precision.

\textsuperscript{42} τὸ καθόλου ζητοῦντος καὶ περὶ ὀρισμῶν ἐπιστήματος... \textit{Metaphysics} 987b1-4.

\textsuperscript{43} τοῦτο δὲ ἄπλως καὶ ἀτέχνως καὶ ἱσως εὐθῆως ἔχω παρ’ ἐμαυτῷ, ὅτι οὐκ ἀλλ’ τι ποιεῖ ἄντω καλὸν ἢ ἡ ἐκείνου τοῦ καλοῦ εἴτε παρουσία εἴτε κοινωνία εἴτε ὅτι δὲ καὶ ὅπως τρισγυγομενήν, οὐ γὰρ ἐτὶ τοῦτο διαχρυσίζομαι, ἀλλ’ ὅτι τῷ καλῷ τάντα τὰ καλὰ [γίγνεται] καλά. (100d).
Tell me, is there something you call an ‘end’ (τελευτήν)? I mean something like a ‘limit’ (πέρας) or ‘extremity’ (ἔσχατον) – all these things mean the same thing to me; Prodicus though would probably disagree with us. But you, I assume, call something terminated or ended – that’s the sort of thing I’m talking about, nothing complicated.44

In the dialogues Socrates wants to make sure he and his interlocutor understand each other. But, although this certainly involves language, it does not depend on the precise words they use.

As Plato has Socrates suggest, there were sophists out there, like Prodicus, who believed that using words correctly was of essential importance. In *Protagoras* Prodicus is actually a character and Plato stages an exhibition of the sophist’s pedantic precision by parodying it. In the scene Critias has just suggested that the assembled group of students and teachers listen to Protagoras and Socrates hold their debate publically.

Prodicus steps forward in support. He says that those present at speeches should be common (κοινοὺς) but not equal (ἴσους δὲ μή) listeners. He glosses this distinction by explaining that although they should give both speakers a public and fair hearing, they aren’t obliged to esteem them both equally. While we can agree with the sentiment, Plato has Prodicus repeat the maneuver a few too many times, somewhat like the discussion of words in Aristophanes *Clouds*. The sophist goes on to say that Protagoras and Socrates should dispute (ἀμφισβητεῖν μέν) but not wrangle (ἐρίζειν δὲ μή); that they will be held in high esteem (εὐδοκιμοῖτε) but not praised (οὐκ ἐπαινοῖσθε); and that the listeners will be comforted (εὐφραίνοιμεθα) but not pleased (οὐχ ἡδοίμεσθα).45

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44 λέγε γάρ μοι τελευτήν καλεῖς τι τοιώνυμον λέγω οίνων πέρας καὶ ἔσχατον—πάντα ταύτα ταύτον τι λέγως ἰσος δ ἀν ἡμῖν Πρόδικος διαφέρειται, ἀλλὰ σὺ γέ ποιον καλεῖς πεπεράνθαι τι καὶ τετελευτηκέναι—τὸ τοιῶνυμον βούλομαι λέγειν, οὐδὲν ποικίλον. (75e).
45 *Protagoras* 337a-c.
poking fun at Prodicus’ insistence on the proper distinctions between words, Plato is able to contrast this attitude toward language with Socrates’ less systematic approach. For Plato wisdom may be a kind of understanding but it is not reducible to understanding or correctly using words. The audience of Aristophanes’ Clouds is made to laugh at Socrates’ strange lexical standards. But while this is reminiscent of the views of several sophists, especially perhaps Prodicus, it is not one we find associated with Socrates. Who then is the target of Aristophanes’ gibes here? With so little of the sophists’ own work surviving, it can be hard to say. Aristotle however reports that Protagoras had some remarkable views on the gender of words:

We have said before what kind of thing 'solecism' is (σολοικισμός).\textsuperscript{46} It is possible both to commit it, and to seem to do so without doing so, and to do so without seeming to do so. Suppose, as Protagoras used to say that wrath (μῆνις) and helmet (πήληξ) are masculine: according to him a man who calls wrath a 'destructor' (οὐλόμενήν) commits a solecism, though he does not seem to do so to other people, where he who calls it a 'destructor' (οὐλόμενον) commits no solecism though he seems to do so.\textsuperscript{47}

Aristotle, like us, knows that the second line of Homer’s Iliad begins with the feminine participle οὐλομένην. Nevertheless Protagoras argued that this was incorrect and should have properly been οὐλόμενον. Presumably he was motivated by his assumption that rage and helmets belong more to the ‘masculine’ sphere than the ‘feminine’.

Aristophanes takes Protagoras’ prescriptions and instead of applying them to Homeric vocabulary, applies them to animals.

\textsuperscript{46} When enumerating various goals in disputation lists solecism which he explains as ‘to make the respondent use an ungrammatical expression.’ (165b19)

We know that Protagoras was interested in ὀρθοέπεια; he was the first to divide speech into four parts; and we have the striking testimony that “Dispensing with dianoia he made his arguments a matter of the word.” It is unclear what dianoia should mean here; ‘thought,’ ‘meaning,’ and ‘intention’ are all likely candidates. Protagoras is thus probably the butt of Aristophanes’ jokes in the ἀλέκτωρ / ἀλεκτρύαινα scene.

An obsessive focus on etymology is not restricted to this scene in Clouds. Right from the very beginning, before we hear from any sophists, Aristophanes plays with the idea that words and names ought to accurately reflect reality. Strepsiades laments his son’s costly obsession with horse-racing and blames his wife. She was of high birth and demanded that their son have some sort of hipp in his name, like Xanthippus, Charippus, or Callipides. She thought this would make him sound aristocratic. They added the hipp to a word Strepsiades preferred – phedon (thrifty) – and thus settled on Pheidippides. But the horse in the boy’s name came to designate more than his mother bargained for. It manifests itself literally in the young man’s obsession with actual horses and horse-racing.

Later when Socrates is explaining how the clouds can make such thunderous noise and compares it to the noises that come from Strepsiades own stomach after he’s filled himself on porridge at a festival, it is again Strepsiades who believes he has discerned an etymological connection, saying “Ah, that’s why the words thunder

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48 Phaedrus 267c.  
49 Diogenes Laertius IX.54.  
50 καὶ τὴν ἀδάννουαν ἀφεῖ ἐκ τοῦ ὑπό τοῦ ἐλέχθη. Diogenes Laertius IX.52. On Protagoras and language see Classen 1976.  
51 62-67.
(βροντή) and fart (πορδή) are similar to one another! Socrates argues that the two natural phenomena are similar, but it is the country bumpkin who thinks this must mean the words are thusly connected to each other by nature.

So far I have tried to show the importance of recognizing the specific figures or positions represented in the character Socrates. The audience is not just meant to laugh at the absurdity of Socrates. I argue that Aristophanes is trying to show them what is absurd about the views about language which people like Prodicus and Protagoras hold. There are, however, more general linguistic features of sophistic speech which Aristophanes parodies. Andreas Willi identifies two such habits of intellectual discourse: nominalization and typicalization. Nominalization is the derivation of nouns from another word-class. Typicalization is when a verb loses its definite specificity. He goes on to list those linguistic markers he finds indicative of intellectual speech. 1) verbal compounds in -έω (-άω); 2) The ‘resultative perfect’ (‘he stole a horse’ vs ‘he is a one who has stolen a horse’); 3) Verbal nouns in –σίς; 4) Abstract Nouns in –μα and –ότης; 5) Adjectives in –ικος; 6) Verbal Adjectives in –τέος; and 7) the articular infinitive. In this section I do not intend to provide examples of each of these. Instead I will focus on one, the –ικος suffix in order to show that Aristophanes’ deployment of it is often parodic. Sophists used this suffix much more frequently than the average Athenian. And

52 ταύτ᾽ ἀρα καὶ τωνόματ᾽ ἄλληλοιν βροντῆ καὶ πορδῆ όμοιο. 394.
53 Willi 2003, 120-121.
54 e.g. κακός > κακότης; μανθάνω > μάθησις; φροντίς > φρόντισμα.
55 “Typicalization (as well as integration) is an essential characteristic of scientific and intellectual discourse, which focuses on general principle rather than on fragmented particularities.” Willi (2003: 126).
Aristophanes exposes their pretensions and undermines their authority by depicting its use as excessive and comical.

Socrates at one point wants to know whether his prospective student Strepsiades is in possession of a good memory. Strepsiades responds “If anything is owed to me I remember quite well.” It is significant that Socrates’ adjective (μνημονικός) employs an –ικος suffix, but when Strepsiades answers him he uses the much more common adjective μνήμων. The different social identities of these two characters manifests itself in their different ways of speaking. After Strepsiades has spent some time with Socrates, we find that he adopts some of these mannerisms. He has been taught, among other things, that Zeus does not exist; and when his son, Pheidippides, swears by Olympian Zeus, Strepsiades accuses him of thinking ‘antiquatedly’ (φρονεῖς ἀρχαιϊκά, 821).

Strepsiades’ new sophistication is demonstrated in his penchant for the rare ἀρκαικός over ἀρχαῖος. The point of parodying this linguistic quirk is not just to get a laugh out of how funny or unusual the words sound. Aristophanes puts on display a kind of affectation.

Aristophanes does not reserve this parody of intellectual jargon and speech patterns for Clouds alone. At the end of Knights a revitalized Demos lists various measures he wants to enact now that he is in his right mind: rowers will be paid on time (1367-8), he will ban favoritism in hoplite assignments and transfers (1370-2), and no

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56 … βραχέα σου πυθέσθαι βούλομαι.
ἡ μνημονικός εἰ (482-3).
57 ἤν μὲν γάρ ὅρθιηται τί μοι, μνήμην πάνυ. (484).
58 Plato in the Gorgias similarly casts the sophist Gorgias not as a ὀρτωτος but a ὀρτοτικός.
one will be allowed to address the assembly until he can grow a beard. The Sausage Seller asks if he has Cleisthenes and Strato in mind, but Demos responds:

\[\tau\alpha\muειράκια\ \tauαυτι\ \lambdaέγω\ \tauά\ \tauω\ \muύρω,\]
\[\alpha\ \sigmaτωμυλείται\ \tauοιαδί\ \καθήμενα:\]
\[\prime\sigmaοφός\ \gammaˈ\ \ο\ \Φαίαξ,\ \deltaεξίως\ \τˈ\ \ούκ\ \απέθανεν.\]
\[\sigmaυνερτικός\ \γάρ\ \έστι\ \και\ \περαντικός,\]
\[και\ \γνωμοτυπικός\ \και\ \σαφής\ \και\ \κρουστικός,\]
\[καταληπτικός\ \τˈ\ \άριστα\ \τού\ \θουμβητικού.ˈ\]

I mean those youths in the perfume shops,  
Who sit around and babble nonsense like  
“That Phaeax sure is wise and cleverly avoided conviction and execution.  
He’s cohesive and penetrative,  
productive of original phrases, clever and incisive,  
and most excellently repressive of the vociferative.”^59 (Knights 1375-80)

Again Aristophanes uses the –ικός suffix (six words in three lines) to describe how young intellectuals talk. And as if this parody of their speech didn’t drive the point home, the Sausage-Seller imitates and vulgarizes the mannerism: “So I suppose you’re apt to give the middle finger to that yackativ e lot?”^60 In his early study on this suffix Charles Peppler calls its use ‘indiscriminate’ and ‘affected’, concluding “To ridicule the practice, Aristophanes both multiplied –κός forms and added the suffix to words that were not suited to receive it.”^61 Part of what distinguishes the wise or faux-wise from others is their different manner of speaking and Aristophanes makes sure to draw attention to this mannerism by parodying it.

Moving away from narrowly linguistic parodies, the *agon* in *Clouds* between the Stronger and Weaker Arguments is yet another parody, this time of a specific author’s

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^59 Translation Willi 2003, 139-140.  
^60 ibid. ούκουν καταδακτυλικός σύ τού λαλητικού; (line 1381).  
^61 Peppler 1910, 441.
text. Once Strepsiades has been deemed unfit for the school, his son Pheidippides is finally forced to go. Aristophanes never depicts Socrates teaching him to be immoral. Instead Socrates announces that he will leave the stage. The young man can hear from the two Arguments themselves and choose which he prefers (887): Enter ὁ κριττῶν and ὁ ἕττων λόγος. The Stronger Argument claims that he will teach the boy to be virtuous and an upright citizen who respects both his elders and the gods (961-999). The Weaker Argument offers Pheidippides the means to enjoy boys, women, gambling, delicacies, alcohol, and laughs. It’s clear that the Weaker Argument is meant to stand for ‘sophistic education’ in general but the confrontation between the two logoi is also a parody of something specific: Prodicus’ Choice of Herakles. Preserved in Xenophon’s Memorabilia, the story tells how Herakles, on the cusp of manhood, is visited by Virtue and Vice, personified as women. Much like Aristophanes’ Weaker Argument in Clouds, Prodicus’ Vice tries to entice Herakles with pleasures, while Virtue argues that the gods give no good thing without hard work and effort (πόνου καὶ ἐπιμελείας). The lesson of Prodicus’ allegory is painfully obvious: one should choose the hard road of Virtue.

The disturbing thing about Aristophanes’ agon and what undermines the simplicity of Prodicus’ allegory is that the virtuous education represented by the Stronger Argument is shown to be unappealing and inadequate. Pheidippides chooses the Weaker Argument, vice, and sophistry. In his analysis of the relationship between these two texts

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62 παιδῶν γυναικῶν κοττάβων ὄφων πότων κιχλισμῶν. (1073).
63 Xenophon Mem. 2.1.21-34.
64 Although in Xenophon’s account of Prodicus’ story we do not see which woman Herakles chooses, there are no subversive hints in the text to suggest that Vice is the right choice. I find it hard to believe that any sophist would have advertised an education in Ἐακία, even if plenty of Athenians (indeed like Strepsiades) sought out the sophists as those who could give them the tools to live a life of pleasure and vice.
Nikolaos Papageorgiou demonstrates the various ways in which Aristophanes responds to Prodicus. For instance, the audience is reminded of Herakles’ virtue in the *Clouds* when the Weaker Argument uses the goodness of Heraklean hot springs to justify lounging around all day in the spa.\textsuperscript{65} Why does Aristophanes stage this part of his play as a parody of Prodicus’ allegory? Papageorgiou concludes, “In inverting the outcome of Prodicus’ famous parable, the playwright achieves two aims: he subverts for humorous purposes a well-known and authoritative text… and at the same time, he reveals the true consequences of sophistic rhetoric.”\textsuperscript{66} On the surface, Prodicus’ tale is a straightforward endorsement of traditional morality. But the sophists as a class, as the promoters of a program of education, whatever their intentions, are revealed through Aristophanes’ parody as *in fact* enticing citizens to immorality. Even the Stronger Argument who insists upon the value of temperance can barely control his own intemperate sexual desire for the young boys he fondly remembers.

Being a play especially concerned with intellectuals, the objects of parody in *Clouds* encompass general linguistic features, specific texts, and specific theories. Thus far we have looked at Aristophanes’ parody of the *way* sophists articulated themselves, their world view, and some of their views of language. We will see that Plato also engages with these same ideas and modes of persuasion in much the same way: through parodic, critical representation. Both Aristophanes and Plato use parody to show their audience/readers what is flawed about the way sophists speak their views about speech.

\textsuperscript{65} (1045-52).
\textsuperscript{66} Papageorgiou 2004, 67.
IV Cosmological Speculation

The second kind of intellectual discourse Aristophanes parodies, not entirely unconnected with the first, is that which endeavors to discover and describe the creation, constituents, and nature of the world. The description of the *phrontistērion* is in fact divided between language (which we examined in the last section) and cosmological speculation. After pointing the building out to Phedippides, Strepsiades says:

\[
\psi χ\acute{\omega}ν \ σοφ\acute{\omega}ν \ τούτ\acute{\iota} \ \varepsilon\acute{\sigma}τι \ \varphiροντιστήριον.
\varepsilon\nuταυ\acute{\iota} \ ένυκοιοσ' \ άνδρες \ οί \ τον \ ούρανόν
\lēγοντες \ \\acute{\alpha}ναπείθουσιν \ ώς \ \\varepsilon\sigmaτιν \ \\pi\nuιγεύς,
\kάστιν \ \\pi\epsilon\roim\acute{\iota} \ \\hmu\acute{\iota}ς \ ούτος, \ \\hmu\acute{\iota}ς \ οί \ \\\ανδρακες. (94-7)
\]

That is a brain-barn of wise souls.
There men live who, when it comes to the sky,
in their speeches argue that it is a pot,
that it is all around us and that we are the coals.

Aside from sitting inside all day learning rhetoric and making arguments, these wise-guys develop crackpot theories to explain the natural world. The description of the sky as a dome and, specifically, the lid to a pot (*\pi\nuιγεύς*) is attributed to several figures. The scholiast for this line tells us that Hippon had been ridiculed in a comedy by Cratinus for likening the sky to a pot. In Aristophanes’ *Birds*, Meton comes on stage with instruments for measuring the sky. He says “The air is in form entirely that of a pot-cover and precisely so.”\(^{67}\) Whoever initially held this theory, the humor in every case depends on taking such a description literally. It is likely that intellectuals, like Hippon or Meton, striving to understand and render understandable the world, claimed the sky is *like* a pot.

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\(^{67}\) αὐτίκα γάρ ἀργ ἐστι τὴν ἰδέαν ὅλος / κατὰ πνιγέα μᾶλιστα. *Birds* 1000-1001.
But Aristophanes makes the idea laughable by turning it into a claim that the sky is a pot. It is unclear, however, who we should be laughing at: natural philosophers for believing the sky is a pot or ignorant rustics like Strepsiades who mistakenly think they believe that.68

While Clouds features discussions of disciplines as diverse as geometry, music, and etymology, most of the claims made about the natural world converge on the element of air. The cloud chorus of condensed air is only the most obvious example. Was this an important part of Socrates’ philosophy? From our other sources (Plato and Xenophon) it does not seem so. In the last section we saw that Socrates’ insistence on linguistic precision in Clouds more accurately reflected arguments and habits of Protagoras and Prodicus than those of Socrates. So too in the case of cosmology, the physical theories found in Clouds are not Socrates’ but rather someone else’s, specifically those of Diogenes of Apollonia. Diogenes flourished in the 430s BCE, just a few years before Aristophanes’ comedy was produced. He is described by Theophrastus as “almost the youngest” of those concerned with the study of nature.69 Thus he is a phusikoi in the tradition of the Ionians, the Eleatics, and Anaxagoras.70 We know of Diogenes mainly through citations in later authors like Simplicius and Diogenes Laertius;71 but the

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68 A modern analogy might be to ridicule proponents of String Theory by suggesting that they think the universe is made out of so many shoelaces. Attempting to visualize the constituents of reality as strings does sounds laughable, but someone who criticizes such a view solely for this probably does not actually understand string theory.

69 Simpl. In phys. 25.a = fr. 64A5 DK.

70 For Diogenes’ place in the pre-Socratic tradition see Graham 2006, 277-293.

71 On the possibility of Diogenes’ authorship of or influence on the Deverni papyrus see Burkert 1968 and Janko 1997.
fragments we do have argue for the primacy of Air and bear a striking resemblance to
many of the positions Socrates adopts in *Clouds*.

ἀνθρώποι γὰρ καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ζώα ἀναπνέοντα ζωεὶ τῷ ἀέρι. καὶ τοῦτο αὐτοῖς καὶ
ψυχή ἐστι καὶ νόησις. 72

Humans and other animals, insofar as they breathe, live by the air. And this is for them
both soul and intelligence.

Διογένης ἐπαινεῖ τὸν Ὄμηρον ὡς οὐ μυθικῶς ἀλλ’ ἀληθῶς ὑπὲρ τοῦ θείου
dieilegμένον. τὸν ἄερα γὰρ αὐτὸν Δία νομίζειν φησίν, ἐπειδή πᾶν εἰδέναι τὸν
Δία λέγει. 73

Diogenes praised Homer since he spoke about the divine not mythically but truthfully.
For he maintains that he [Homer] believes the air is Zeus, since he says that Zeus knows
everything.

καὶ μοι δοκεῖ τὸ τὴν νόησιν ἔχον εἶναι ὁ ἀὴρ καλούμενος ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ
ὑπὸ τοῦτον πάντας καὶ κυβερνᾶσθαι καὶ πάντων κρατεῖν· αὐτὸ γὰρ μοι τούτο
θεὸς δοκεῖ εἶναι καὶ ἐπὶ πᾶν ἀφίχθαι καὶ πάντα διατιθέναι καὶ ἐν παντὶ ἐνείναι.
καὶ ἐστιν οὐδὲ ἐν ὦ τι μὴ μετέχει τούτου. 74

It seems to me that what is called Air by men is that which possesses thought; by it all
things are guided and it exercises power over all things. For this very thing seems to be a
god, and to penetrate to every place and arrange all things and be in every place. And
there is not one thing which does not have a share of this.

A version of these views is endorsed by Socrates in *Clouds*. The portrayal of him in the
play may have struck some Athenians as an irreverent atheist who does not believe in the
gods – in the play he denies the existence of Zeus. But he *does* believe in divinities.

Natural, cosmological phenomena are Socrates’ gods. Strepsiades understands this
crudely: Vortex has dethroned Zeus and is now in charge. 75 For Socrates, those things
formerly explained as being caused by Zeus (rain and thunder), are more accurately

72 Fr. B4 DK.
73 Testimonia 8 DK, in Philodemus *On Piety* c. 6b.
74 Fr. B5 DK.
75 381 ff., 827 ff.
attributed to the clouds. But they are consistently described as divinities. They are either an alternative to and substitution for Zeus or, as Diogenes Fragment 4 indicates, the air is Zeus. Like Fragment 5, Socrates believes that air is the source of intelligence.

[They are] heavenly clouds, great goddesses for the lazy. They furnish us with thought and argument, wondrous feats and circumlocution and casuistry and apprehension.\(^{76}\) (316-318)

Aristophanes caricatures Diogenes’ claims about the all-importance of air. It is no longer a natural force with powers formerly ascribed to the divine, instilling life and thought in man. Instead, for all Socrates’ praise, the clouds are portrayed as patron deities for sophists. What they instill is a lot of hot air.

*Clouds* emphasis on Diogenes’ doctrines about air are highlighted in Socrates’ first scene on stage. He enters, swinging into view like a god in tragedy, “walking on air and examining the sun.” Strepsiades asks him why he has to do his work up there.

Socrates explains like a *phusikoi* in science-speak:

Because I never
would have correctly made discoveries concerning the celestial matters,
if I hadn’t suspended my mind and subtle thought,
mixing them up with their like, the air.
If I were on the ground and looking up from down below,
I would never make a discovery: for the earth forcibly pulls the moisture of thought to itself.
The same thing happens to mustard seeds.\(^{77}\) (227-234).

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\(^{76}\) Like the *Knights* passage with the overabundance of –ικος adjectives, this one features six –σις nouns in two lines: διάλεξιν... παρέχουσιν... τερατείαν... περίλεξιν... κρούσιν... κατάληψιν. Cf. Handley 1953.

\(^{77}\) οὔ γάρ ἂν ποτε

έξηρόν ὁρθῶς τὰ μετέωρα πράγματα,
εἰ μὴ κρεμάσας τὸ νόημα καὶ τὴν φροντίδα
λεπτὴν καταμείξας ἐς τὸν ὀμοιον ἀέρα.
εἰ δ ’ ἄν χαμαί τάνω κατωθεν ἕσκόπουν,
οὐκ ἂν ποθ’ ἴρον: οὔ γάρ ἄλλ’ ἢ γῇ βία
ἔλεκε πρὸς αὐτὴν τὴν ἰκμάδα τῆς φροντίδος.
πάσχει δὲ ταῦτα τούτο καὶ τὰ κάρδαμα.
When the audience laughs at Socrates, they are also laughing at someone else. Paul Vander Waerdt argues strongly for identifying all the views about nature in *Clouds* with Diogenes of Apollonia.\(^7\) While I am persuaded that Aristophanes wanted his audience to recognize Diogenes’ ideas in Socrates, it is hardly necessary to insist that Socrates must represent a single philosophical position since, after all, we know he also voices those of other sophists in the play.\(^7\) What is important for my argument is that Aristophanes isn’t just making Socrates look silly or stupid to earn laughs from the audience. He wants them to recognize in Socrates the pretentions of these reputedly wise men and their authoritative way of speaking.

It is not only in *Clouds*, a comedy explicitly concerned with intellectuals and their teachings, that Aristophanes parodies cosmological speculation. In *Birds* and *Thesmophoriazusae* he also represents this discourse. As the *parabasis* in *Birds* prepares to exalt the power of the avian race, Aristophanes signals to the audience a target of his humor.

Turn your attention to those of us who are immortal and live forever, ethereal, ageless, whose care is undying things, in order that you may correctly hear from us everything about astronomical phenomena. Once you correctly understand the nature and genesis of the birds and gods, the rivers, Erebus and Chaos, you can tell Prodicus from me to go to hell. (688-92).

78 “My suggestion, then, is that we explain Socrates’ conception of the clouds and their powers in terms of Diogenes’ theory of air as the material principle of all things. This suggestion has the dual advantage of accounting very neatly for some central peculiarities in Socrates’ conception of the clouds and of attributing to him, so far as is consistent with comic parody, a single philosophical position.” Vander Waerdt 1994, 74.

79 Andreas Willi takes account of the variety of figures evoked thusly “In a rather schematic way the situation can be described as follows: *Clouds* stages a Socrates who holds Diogenean ideas, lives in a Pythagorean setting, and uses Empedoclean language.” Willi 2003, 116.
Dunbar in her commentary on the play notes that in old comedy ‘astronomical phenomena’ (μετεώρων) “is, like ὀρθῶς, a catchword of intellectuals.” Since Prodicus is repeatedly associated with correctness in our sources, it should come as no surprise that the notion is invoked twice before a disparaging remark about Prodicus himself. The chorus in Clouds associates Prodicus with τῶν νῦν μετεωροσοφιστῶν:

“And of course we would not attend to any of the current astro-brains besides Prodicus, on account of his wisdom and intelligence, except you [Socrates].” While the following cosmogony may not parody some specific text of Prodicus (at least none that we have extant), this is the sort of thinker Aristophanes wanted his audience to have in mind. The birds proceed to give an explanation of their origin.

There was Chaos and Night and dark Erebus in the beginning and wide Tartarus, and there was neither earth nor air nor sky: in the boundless hollows of Erebus Night she who is dark-winged first gave birth to an egg, from which, as the seasons turned, Eros he full of longing was born, glittering because of his back with golden wings, like a swift whirlwind. And Eros mingling with winged Chaos at night down in wide Tartarus hatched our race, and first led us into the light. There was no race of immortals before Eros mixed everything together: the sky, the ocean, and the earth arose out of each mingling with the other and also the undying race of the blessed gods. Thus are we by far the oldest of all the blessed gods. And that we are born of Eros is clear in many ways. (693-704)

80 Dunbar 1995, 434.
81 ὥ τῶν νῦν μετεωροσοφιστῶν πλῆν ἢ Προδίκω, τῶ μὲν σοφίας καὶ γνώμης οὐνεκα, σοι δὲ. (Clouds 360-1). Another link between Clouds and the parabasis of Birds is that each refers to mortal men as ephemeral creatures lasting for only a day. Socrates’ first lines in Clouds in response to Strepsiades’ calls is: τί με καλεῖς ὠφήμερε; (223). The parabasis, describing the nature of man says ἀντίθετος ἐφημέριοι ταλαοὶ ὑπνείς ἐνέρες εἰκελόνειροι (687).
The most obvious model for the speech is Hesiod’s *Theogony* where the universe begins with Chaos, Earth, Tartarus, and Eros, all without apparent parentage or prior causes. Unlike Hesiod, Aristophanes does not place Eros at the beginning of his cosmology but it does precede all other living creatures, mortal and divine. And by having Eros hatch from an egg its association with birds is made all the stronger. The importance of Eros as a generating principle is analogous to Empedocles’ Φιλότης which (along with Νείκος) is responsible for the combination and separation of all things. Aristophanes is of course not presuming to give an earnest description of the beginning of the race of birds. What then is funny about this passage? The humor relies on the audience recognizing the similarity between this story and that of other writers. In the prior scene he cues them to be expecting some intellectual-speak by having Euepides make use of an uncommon form of the name Zeus. “Now let the great Zeus (Ζάν) thunder!” Where did such a form come from? And what would the audience have thought of? We may have a clue in Porphyry’s *Life of Pythagoras*. He preserves a supposed epigram written by Pythagoras from when he visited the Idaean cave in Crete. “Here died and is buried Ζάν whom they call Zeus.”

In yet another play, *Thesmophoriazusae*, we see how sophistic arguments about language and cosmological speculation can be joined. The play opens with Euripides’ Kinsman complaining. He wants to know where he is being led. Euripides responds

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83 Tarrant 1923, 113.
84 βροντάτω νῦν ὁ μέγας Ζάν. (570).
dismissively “There’s no need to hear what you will soon see for yourself.” This is hardly an informative answer to the question, and the Kinsman asks what he means by this. Is he saying that it’s neither fitting to hear nor see? Euripides explains that you can’t hear what you see; “for the nature of both these things [seeing and hearing] is distinct.”

When again the Kinsman again doesn’t know what is meant by this, Euripides adopts the jargon of the \textit{phusikoi}:

\begin{quote}
Here’s how these things were distinguished:
when Aether separated the elements
and gave birth to the living creatures moving in it,
for those needing to see it first contrived
the eye imitating the disk of the sun,
and then for hearing it dug out a funnel – the ears.
\end{quote}

The poor old man just wants to know where they’re going and instead he gets a lesson in natural philosophy from a pompous professor. The content of this passage, however, can be traced to one specific author. David Sansone has demonstrated that several aspects of this passage are derived from Empedocles. The idea that Aether was the first element to be separated off, that the eye is akin to the sun’s disk, and that the ear is like a funnel are all, he claims, found in the extant fragments of Empedocles. And we can be sure that we’re not supposed to take Euripides in this passage seriously because the Kinsman sarcastically responds “And because of this funnel I can neither see nor hear. By Zeus...

\begin{footnotes}
86 \textit{χωρίς γάρ αὐτοῖν ἐκατέρου ἵστριν ἲ φύσις.} (11).
87 \textit{οὕτω ταύτα διεκρήθη τότε.}
\textit{αἰθήρ γάρ ὅτε τὰ πρώτα διεχωρίζετο}
\textit{kai ζω´ ἐν αὐτῷ ἐνυπόσκυνον κινούμενα,}
\textit{ὥ μὲν βλέπειν χρῆ πρῶτ´ ἐμπανάμεσατο}
\textit{όφθαλμον ἄντιμμον ἢλίου τροχῷ,}
\textit{ακοὶ δὲ χοάνην ὃτα διετετρήσατο.} (13-18).
88 Sansone 1966, 342-344.
\end{footnotes}
I’m happy to learn this! How great it is to have wise associations!” Even if the character were overwhelmed and impressed by such notions, the audience is made to see that they haven’t done him any good.

While Aristophanes surely wants to depict intellectuals – both their ideas and the way they speak – as nonsensical and laughable, in each case we examined the humor depends on recognizing something about what is being parodied. In the preceding example, Euripides’ learned exposition on the difference between hearing and seeing, for all its presumed accuracy and authority, has not only failed to address but actively obfuscated the Kinsman’s question: where are they going? Perhaps this is a not so subtle hint that all cosmological speculation ignores and/or fails to address human concerns. There is something pedagogical in this act of enabling the audience to see and learn something. And since he accomplishes this through his parodic representations, it is fair to say that parody is an important part of Aristophanic pedagogy.

V Education in Frogs

In Frogs Aristophanes brings the tragedians Aeschylus and Euripides on stage. By means of parodic representation he exaggerates, mocks, and criticizes certain recognizable qualities of both poets. He has the two characters do his work for him as the second half of the play is an extended _agon_ between the dramatists where each imitates and parodies the other’s work. The tragedians render each other laughable and, without having formally taken part in the confrontation, comedy is left standing. The _agon_ staged,

89 Νη τὸν Δι’ ἡδομαί γε τοιτὶ προσμαθών.
Οἰόν γὲ ποῦ ὅτι σοφαί ξυνουσίαι. (19-20).

47
however, does not merely pit two rival ‘styles’, aesthetic principles, or dramatic preferences against one another; the argument between Aeschylus and Euripides is about the civic and educational role of drama. As different as these two figures are made to seem, Aristophanes represents both as having a conception of poetry, language, communication, and pedagogy which rests on materialist principles. In this section I will examine these different levels of parody, show just whose mechanical view of learning Aristophanes is exposing, and conclude by demonstrating how his treatment of these issues served as a precursor to Plato’s philosophical project.

In *Frogs* the god Dionysus travels to Hades because he is consumed with a desire for the deceased tragedian Euripides. The first half of the play depicts all the trouble he and his slave, Xanthas, have in getting there. Once they arrive, a slave explains that there is a current dispute between the deceased tragedians Aeschylus and Euripides over who deserves the chair of honor for their art (761-5). Hades has chosen Dionysus to adjudicate and judge a contest between them – and who better than the god of drama? Dionysus had originally expressed an explicit interest in Euripides – that’s why he went down in the first place – but now he and the audience are confronted with the question: who is really the better poet?

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90 τοιούτου στοίνυν με δαρδάπτει πόθος
Εὐριπίδου. (66-7)
Aristophanes’ Parodies of Aeschylus and Euripides

In their discussion of prologues, Euripides accuses Aeschylus of being “unclear in his statement of events.” He cites a verse and complains that it is redundant to have a character say ἥκω γὰρ ἐς γῆν τήνδε καὶ κατέρχομαι – “I have come to this land and I return” because ἥκω ‘I have come’ and κατέρχομαι ‘I return’ mean the same thing (1128). Euripides finds Aeschylus’ penchant for characters who remain silent on stage for half the play maddening. When he does have these characters speak, they either repeat themselves in slow plodding statements or utter bombastic large words no one can understand.

While Euripides charges Aeschylus with being obscure, unnecessarily verbose, and redundant, Aeschylus in turn claims that all of Euripides’ prologues are the same. In every one it starts with someone describing the protagonist. Their whole back-story is laid out straightforwardly in clause after clause with such metrical simplicity and predictability that at the end just about any verb and direct object can be inserted. He demonstrates by having Euripides recite a few of his prologues, but Aeschylus interrupts each one to insert the words ληκύθων ἀπώλεσεν.92

“Aegyptus, so the most common tale has it, with fifty children in a long-oared boat, landing at Argos…” – “lost his little oil flask.”

“Dionysus, who outfitted with thyrsus wands and the skins of deer, amidst the pines on Mt. Parnassus, dancing…” – “lost his little oil flask.”

91 ἁσαφὴς γάρ ἐν τῇ φράσει τῶν πραγμάτων (1122).
92 Dover explains the latent sexual connotation to the substitution ‘he lost his little oil lamp.’ Dover 1968, 203-4.
“Abandoning the town of Sidon, Cadmus, Agenor's son...” – “lost his little oil flask.” (lines 1205-27).

Euripides cannot stand the idea that his lyrics are predictable. It is Aeschylus who is repetitious, using bombastic archaic words. Euripides recites a number of Aeschylus’ lines where the exclamation ἱή is used. Then he sings a parody of an Aeschylean ode:

돗ς Ἀχαϊὼν δίθρονον κράτος, Ἑλλάδος ἥβας,
tοφλαττοθρατ τοφλαττοθρατ,
Σφίγγα δυσαμερών πρύτανιν κύνα, πέμπει,
tοφλαττοθρατ τοφλαττοθρατ,
σὺν δορὶ καὶ χερὶ πράκτορι θούριος ὄρνις,
tοφλαττοθρατ τοφλαττοθρατ,
κυρείν παρασχὼν ἰταμαίς κυσὶν ἀεροφόιτοις,
tοφλαττοθρατ τοφλαττοθρατ,
τὸ συγκλινές τ᾽ ἐπ᾽ Αἴαντι,
tοφλαττοθρατ τοφλαττοθρατ.

How the twin-throned power of the Achaeans, the prime of Greece,
tophlattothrat tophlattothrat
Sends the sphinx, that wretched dog, the overseer
tophlattothrat tophlattothrat
Raging bird with spear and punishing hand
tophlattothrat tophlattothrat
Granting to the eager air-roaming dogs to meet
tophlattothrat tophlattothrat
The united force against Ajax
tophlattothrat tophlattothrat (1285-1295)

It would appear as though Euripides took some of Aeschylus’ favorite themes – epic (Achaeans, spear), mythological (Sphinx, Ajax), animals (bird and dog) – and jumbled them together. These phrases hardly make any sense stitched together; or rather, the point seems to be that they make about as much sense as any authentic Aeschylean ode. The punctuating tophlattothrat however is emphatically meaningless. After Euripides finishes

93 We do see this and similar exclamations in our extant plays. cf. ἱὴ ἱὴ Suppliants 114; ἱὴ ἱὴ, ἵῳ ἵῳ Persians 1004; ἵῳ ἵῃ διὼς Αγαμέμνων 1485.
his parody, Dionysus asks if this is some sort of Persian that Aeschylus picked up at Marathon. The older playwright, not to be outdone, responds with his own parody of Euripidean verse which features a dolphin leaping and spider weeeaving (εἰειειειλίσσετε). With so few tragedies extant it is hard to tell how many of these parodies are actually taken from specific lines in specific dramas; but compare the following lines from Euripides’ Electra with Aeschylus’ parody:

![Greek text]

where the flute-loving dolphins were leaping by the blue-beaked prows weaving… (Electra 435-7)

where the flute-loving dolphins were leaping by the blue-beaked prows for oracles and stades. (Frogs 1317-9)

Notice how Aeschlyus’ εἰειειειλίσσετε in Frogs 1314 is adapted from Euripides’ εἰλισσόμενος in this passage. This is likely as much a parody of the music and sound of Euripides’ lyrics as their content. The audience can laugh insofar as they recognize something true about each of the poet’s charges against the other. But Aristophanes’ goal in bringing these two poets on stage is not just to make fun of how they wrote. He also lays bare their implicit assumptions about the nature of poetry and its effects on the audience. It is these aesthetic theories which Aristophanes wants to bring to the audiences’ attention and what makes his parody pedagogical.

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94 1314.
95 On Aeschylus’ parody and Euripides’ tragedies see Dover 1993, 213-6.
A Common Theory of Language

During the course of the *agon* the value of poetry is repeatedly described and assessed in material, physical terms. Part of what Euripides objects to about Aeschylus is that his words are so large and heavy. He declares:

\[
\text{ἀλλ’ ὡς παρέλαβον τὴν τέχνην παρὰ σοῦ τὸ πρῶτον εὐθὺς οἰδούσαν ύπὸ κομπιασμάτων καὶ ὁμάτων ἐπαχθῶν, ἰσχυνάνα μὲν πρῶτιστον αὐτὴν καὶ τὸ βάρος ἀφελόν ἐπιλλίοις καὶ περιπάτοις καὶ τευτλίωις λευκοῖς, χυλὸν διδόντα στωμυλμάτων ἀπὸ βιβλίων ἀπηθῶν}
\]

But when I received the art from you, at first it was swollen from boasts and heavy phrases, at once I slimmed it down and took off weight with little poetecisms and walk-abouts and white beets, prescribing the juice of chatter strained from books. (*Frogs* 939-43)

Euripides sees himself as a doctor or trainer who has whipped the overweight poetry of Aeschylus’ generation into shape. The younger poet’s plays have evidently benefited from brisk exercise, laxatives, and book-learning. Aeschylus in turn justifies his large and somber words by saying that when you are talking about a weighty situation one’s words should be similarly weighty: “You fiend, there is a necessity for great thoughts and ideas to also produce words of equal measure.”96 This humorous treatment of words as material things is a theme throughout the *agon*. Dionysus tells Aeschylus “You first of the Greeks built towers of solemn phrases.”97 The chorus describes Aeschylus’ phrases as ‘bolt-

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96 ἀλλ’ ὡς κακόδαιμον ἀνάγκη μεγάλων γνωμῶν καὶ διανοιών ἡματά τοῖς ὁμάτων τίκτειν.
κάλλως εἰκός τοῖς ἡμιθέους τοῖς ὁμάτων μείζωσι χρήσθαι. (1058-60).
97 ἀλλ’ ὡ πρῶτος τῶν Ἑλλήνων πυργώσας ὄματα σεμνὰ (1004).
fastened’ (ῥήματα γομφοπαγητῆ). Aristophanes takes this idea of the literal weight of words to its absurd conclusion when the contest climaxes in weighing the two poets’ verses on a pair of scales. However even before the agon, Aeacus and Xanthus anticipate the gimmick:

Αε: καὶ γὰρ ταλάντῳ μουσικῇ σταθμήσεται—
Ξα: τί δὲ; μειαγωγήσουσι τὴν τραγῳδίαν;
Αε: καὶ κανόνας ἐξοίσουσι καὶ πῆχεὶς ἐπών καὶ πλαίσια ἐξυμπτυκτα—
Ξα: πλινθεύσουσι γάρ;
Αε: καὶ διαμέτρους καὶ σφήνας. ὁ γὰρ Εὐριπίδης κατ᾽ ἔπος βασανίειν φησὶ τὰς τραγῳδίας.

Ae: Poetry will be measured in scales—
Xa: What? They’re going to weigh tragedy?
Ae: And they will brings out rulers and yardsticks of words and artificial frames…
Xa: – Because they plan on making bricks?
Ae: … and angles and wedges. For Euripides says that it’s based on words that their tragedies will be put to the test. (797-802).

Xanthas can only imagine that all these instruments and tools are going to be used to physically build something. The audience too, we hope, would not find this a suitable way to judge a poetry contest but, in the fiction of a comedy, this is exactly what happens. In fact, the audience may only be led to the realization that words and poetry should not be thought of or judged as material objects once they are confronted with the absurd vision of their being treated as such.

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98 824.
99 We know that in Aeschylus’ Phrygians a scale was brought on stage in which Hector’’s slain body was weighed against gold. But in the tragedy, it either represented just how valuable even a corpse is to a father or, perhaps symbolically, how burial rites are of worth much more than gold. In Aristophanes’ comedy the idea of weighing lines of poetry is taken literally and becomes absurd.
100 The chorus too later notes that the idea is novel and clever but a strange monstrosity. (1370-7).
After their criticism of each other’s poetry, when Aeschylus suggests that they get to the weighing, Dionysus endorses the idea but with some hesitation “Well, then come here, if I really have to treat the art of these poets like that of selling cheese.” Each playwright speaks lines from one of his plays and these pronouncements are then weighed against one another. It is taken for granted that, just as in the case of a material commercial object like silver or cheese, the heavier verse is the more valuable. In each round Aeschylus’ verse is shown to be heavier and thus better. His ‘Stream of Spercheius’ weighs more than Euripides’ ‘Argive ship’. His ‘Chariot on chariot, corpse’ is heavier than Euripides’ ‘He seized in his hand the iron-heavy club’. In these specific instances we can see how Aeschylus’ verses – or the things they refer to – could seem physically heavier and more substantive. But in one such round Euripides offers “There is no other shrine for Persuasion except speech.” and Aeschylus responds and wins the bout with “Of the gods only Death doesn’t take bribes.” Persuasion and death are abstract concepts. Being non-physical they can’t be said to have any weight. Nevertheless, death is something serious with vividly physical implications. Euripides objects that his verse was well said. And we might concede that persuasion too has serious affects, especially in the democratic assemblies and legislative bodies of fifth century Athens. But Dionysus, the judge of the contest, says, “Persuasion is insubstantial and has no thought.” The caricatures of Aeschylus and Euripides it would seem both

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101 1368-9.
102 1383-4.
103 1402-3.
104 οὐκ ἔστι Πειθοῦς ἱερὸν ἄλλο πλὴν λόγος. (1393).
105 μόνος θεῶν γὰρ Θάνατος οὐ δώρων ἔχει. (1394).
106 πειθὸ δὲ κούφὸν ἔστι καὶ νοῦν οὐκ ἔχον. (1396).
assess the value of words in material terms – as if they thought of these words and concepts as material things with substantive weight. Aristophanes draws our attention to this through the exaggerated humor of it. This is not only the absurd fantasy of comedy, a laughable conceit calculated for laughs. There were intellectuals out there who did speak of words, poetry, and persuasion in physical terms. Aristophanes here is not making fun of the historical Aeschylus and Euripides but rather using them to represent other people’s materialist conceptions of logos and value. Far removed from the context of the play’s performance, we can see what is funny but it may not be clear who is really being laughed at and exposed. The best preserved statement of this view of language is Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*. In the next section I will review Gorgias’ view of language and demonstrate its affinities with the assumptions of Aristophanes’ comical tragedians.

**Gorgias**

Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen* is a curious text. It is, he tells us at the end, both Helen’s praise and his fun/play.¹⁰⁷ Gorgias claims that Helen is undeserving of the censure cast upon her for leaving her husband Menelaus. We certainly can’t blame her if she was physically forced and taken by Paris. But he argues that even if she was persuaded to go ‘willingly’ she is still innocent because being persuaded by words amounts to another sort of force. The majority of the *Encomium* is about persuasion, words, desire, and compulsion: Gorgias’ specialty.

¹⁰⁷ ἐβουλήθην γράψαι τὸν λόγον Ἑλένης μὲν ἐγκώμιον, ἐμὸν δὲ παίγνιον. (21).
Gorgias explains that a certain power of incantation charmed, persuaded, and moved Helen by (inter)mingling with the beliefs of her soul.\(^{108}\) It is unclear what this \(συγγινομένη\) entails. But other statements describe it as a physical process taking place between persuasion (or words) and the soul (or mind):

Persuasion which is present in speech molds (\(ἐτυπώσατο\)) the soul in whatever way it wants.\(^{109}\)

Discourse is a great power, which by/through the smallest and most secret body accomplishes the most divine works; for it can stop fear and assuage pain and produce joy and make mercy abound.\(^{110}\)

Words, either composed of microscopic physical things themselves or working through them (\(σμικροτάτωι σώματι\)), mingle with the mind’s contents and stamp impressions upon the soul. Gorgias compares speech to the effect of drugs on the body: “The power of discourse and the prescription of medicines abide by the same principle, the one with respect to the disposition of the soul and the other with respect to the nature of bodies.”\(^{111}\)

Does this ‘same principle’ (\(logos\)) amount to an analogy or an identification? Even if speech and medicine work the same way and have the same \(logos\), the one works on the soul; the other on the body. Does speech really have corporeal foundations for Gorgias? There is not a consensus on the matter. Andrew Ford finds that the evidence points

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\(^{108}\) συγγινομένη γὰρ τῇ δόξῃ τῆς ψυχῆς ἡ δύναμις τῆς ἐπωιδῆς ἐθέλει καὶ ἐπεισε καὶ μετέστησεν αὐτὴν. (Helen 10).

\(^{109}\) ἡ πειθώ προσιοῦσα τῶν λόγων καὶ τὴν ψυχήν ἐτυπώσατο ὅπως ἐβούλετο. (Helen 13).

\(^{110}\) λόγος δυνάστης μέγας ἐστίν, ὃς σμικροτάτωι σώματι καὶ αφανεστάτωι θειότατα ἐφε γάρ ἀποτελεῖ δύνασται γάρ καὶ φόβον παύσαι καὶ λύσιν ἀφελείν καὶ χαρὰν ἐνεργάσασθαι καὶ ἔλεον ἐπαυξῆσαι. (Helen 8).

\(^{111}\) τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ λόγον ἔχει ἢ τε τοῦ λόγου δύναμις πρὸς τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς τάξιν ἢ τε τῶν φαρμάκων τάξεις πρὸς τὴν τῶν σωμάτων φύσιν. (Helen 14).
toward Gorgias’ materialism. But Segal and Porter do not think that mind and language can be reduced to physical units.

Gorgias also uses the analogy of sight to explain the persuasive powers of speech:

“Thus the sight engraves in the mind images of the things seen. Many of the frightening ones remain; and in the same way those that stick around are just like things which were said.” Words can cause various emotions and leave impressions on the mind just as much as sight can. Ford, again, argues that this is because vision and discourse, sight and words, are both constituted of corporeal things.

… words were analyzable into their constituent syllables and single sounds (letters), and ultimately into the atoms whose shape, arrangement, and positioning created qualitative differences among them. It is logically compatible with the atomistic account of sight that spoken words should be, like any perceptible object, nothing more than conglomerates of atoms perceived by the ear. As composite physical objects, words were arrays of invisible sound atoms that move through the air, create sonic impressions in the ear, and affect the psyche in turn.

Another repeated theme throughout the speech is the issue of force. Because Gorgias is trying to argue that Helen is not responsible for abandoning Menelaus, he characterizes speech as working its effects by necessity. “For discourse, the persuader compelled the

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112 “[The Helen] shares the atomist view of speech as an invisible but material substance, capable of directly shaping the psyches of those it encounters. … Gorgias expanded on and made popular an idea of persuasion as a process explicable in physicalist terms that laid the foundation for idealizations of verbal art as language worked into organic form.” Ford 2002, 174-5.

113 “Gorgias probably did not think in terms of such a consistent materialism as Democritus. His psyche, nevertheless, is in contact with physical phenomena and operates in ways analogous to theirs.” Segal 1962, 106. “It is preferable to view Gorgias as an opportunist who deploys materialist-sounding arguments when it advances his cause, while his final objective is not to adopt this or that strategy but to comment on the nature and especially the pitfalls of human persuasion and conviction.” Porter 2010, 209.

114 οὕτως εἰκόνας τὸν ὄρκομεν παραγμένον ἢ ὡς ενέγραψεν ἐν τῷ φρονήματι. καὶ τὰ μὲν δεματοῦντα πολλὰ μὲν παραλείπεται, ὡμοι δ’ ἐστὶ τὰ παραλειπόμενα οἰάπτερ <τά> Λεγόμενα. (Helen 17).

115 Ford 2002, 166.

116 “Thus logos is an almost independent external power which forces the hearer to do its will. Logos works through ananke and is itself an active force impinging upon the psyche from without; and thus peitho and ananke are strongly associated.” Segal 1962, 121.
soul which it persuaded both to believe the things said and to consent to the things done.” \(^{117}\) This is something of a paradox. Helen may have gone willingly but her consent was forced to by persuasive speech.

Gorgias and his materialist theories found purchase in 5th century Athens among the educated elite. After this survey of his *Encomium of Helen*, however, it should be clear that his metaphysical views would have consequences for any pedagogical or ethical theories. Aristaophanes puts the absurdity of a materialist perspective of language center-stage but yokes this a materialist view of education. All of these issues are connected. If a person is trained in virtue or made better via an education that consists the right reception of the right words, a materialist perception of language is going to have some startling implications. Aristophanes and Plato are both preoccupied with the insufficiency and absurdity of this pedagogical theory.

**VI Mimesis, Materiality, and Education**

In the *Frogs* each playwright argues that the virtue of his poetry lies in his skill at representation. But whereas Euripides claims to imitate the *world*, Aeschylus is concerned with providing models for the *audience* to imitate. What value-system will the Athenians endorse? Once again we are tempted by the false dichotomy: to imagine the choice is between the political/moral virtues of Aeschylus and the aesthetic/amoral virtues of Euripides. Dionysus, in the end, chooses Aeschylus. But we need not think

\(^{117}\) λόγος γὰρ ψυχὴν ὁ πείσας, ἤν ἐπεισεν, ἤνάγκασε καὶ πιθέσθαι τοῖς λεγομένοις καὶ συνανέσαι τοῖς ποιουμένοις. (Helen 12).
conclude that Dionysus’ preferences mirror the author’s own. Aristophanes might not hold the theory of poetics and *mimesis* that he represents Aeschylus as ascribing to.

One must understand, however, that while each tragedian endorses a theory of *mimesis* which underwrites and motivates their dramas, both agree that their job is to educate the city. Aeschylus declares:

\[
\ldots \text{τοίς μὲν γὰρ παιδαφίοισιν}
\]
\[
\text{ἐστι διδάσκαλος ὅστις φράζει, τοίσιν δ’ ἦβοσι ποιηταί.}
\]

…. Little children

have a teacher who advises them; adults have poets. (1054-55)

Another exchange reveals that Euripides has a similar opinion:

\[
\text{Αἰς: ἀπόκριναι μοι, τίνος οὖν εὐνεκα χρή θαυμάζειν ἄνδρα ποιητήν;
}
\]
\[
\text{Εὐρ: δεξιότητος καὶ νουθεσίας, ὡς βελτίους τε ποιοῦμεν}
\]
\[
\text{τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν.}
\]

\[
\text{Aes: Answer me, why should one admire a poet?}
\]
\[
\text{Eur: For cleverness and giving good advice, since we improve the}
\]
\[
\text{people in cities. (1008-10)}
\]

Both poets are represented as not only believing that their job is to educate the city, but that they alone actually accomplish this. They have a different idea of what sort of poetry makes citizens better in part because they have a different idea of what a good citizen is.

Even though Aeschylus, in the end, is chosen as the winner, he has a rather shallow view of how poets teach.

One of Aeschylus’ major criticisms of Euripides is that he portrays wicked characters, apparently believing that the audience will imitate what they see on stage (as if they have no choice in the matter). Not only does Aeschylus say such things should be hidden from view but he also proudly declares that *his* plays offer people models of
appropriate imitation.\textsuperscript{118} When Euripides asks him what he’s done to teach people to become more noble (γενναίους), Aeschylus responds that he composed dramas filled with Mars; that everyone who saw his Seven Against Thebes was eager to fight (δάιος); that with his Persians he taught them to desire incessantly defeating opponents (ἐπιθυμεῖν ἐξεδίδαξα νικᾶν ἀεὶ τοὺς ἀντιπάλους).\textsuperscript{119} As I suggested above, what is really at the root of each character’s pedagogy is a theory of \textit{mimesis}. Aeschylus, as presented in \textit{Frogs}, seems to think that the audience will soak up the actions and attitudes they see on stage.

Euripides argues that his plays which feature women and slaves, far from immoral, embody democratic principles (δημοκρατικῶν γὰρ αὐτ’ ἑδρων, 952) and ‘domestic affairs with which his audience was familiar and would understand.’\textsuperscript{120} And it is through his intelligent and crafty characters that he teaches people how “to think, to see, to understand, to dodge, to love, to connive, to suspect the worst, to wrap one’s mind around everything.”\textsuperscript{121}

George Walsh has argued that this materialist, mechanical view of language is borrowed from Gorgias.\textsuperscript{122} Like the sophist, Aeschylus seems to think that the sight of the action and words of the speeches on stage will stamp their natural characteristics onto the passive souls of his audience. It is this theory of \textit{mimesis} which underlies the educational

\textsuperscript{118} This very claim is something of a joke because the audience surely knows of Aeschylus’ Clytemnestra.
\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Frogs} 1019-27.
\textsuperscript{120} οὐκεία πράγματ’ εἰσάγων, οίς χρώμεθ’, οίς ξύνεσμεν. (959)
\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Frogs} 957
theory of ‘Aeschylus’ which I believe Aristophanes is out to expose and question. If there is something unsatisfying about Aeschylus’ view of poetry and education, then can we be satisfied with Dionysus’ choice to bring him back from Hades at the end? Bruce Heiden has identified what is missing in this false choice: comedy. Not only can comedy address contemporary Athens in a way that tragedy can’t, but it represents an alternative understanding of *mimesis*. Heiden explains, “The Aristophanic mode of teaching does not depend upon either the poet’s imitation of noble types or upon the audience’s imitation of models that the poet provides.”

Can we take Aristophanes seriously as an educator? Any hesitancy we have stems from the mistaken belief that comedy can’t be serious. It might be natural to assume that the *spoudaios* is opposed to *geloios*. Yet, this comic poet has his chorus in *Frogs* ask Demeter to grant that they may ‘say many funny things and many serious things.’

> καὶ πολλὰ μὲν γελοία μ’ εἰ-πεῖν, πολλὰ δὲ σπουδαία (389-90)

They might just as easily yearn to speak ‘many funny but serious things.’ The two are not mutually exclusive and may be one. Michael Silk has suggested that Aristophanes’ brand of *geloios* is opposed not to *spodaios* but rather *phaulos*. Aristophanes’ plays can be humorous and yet still ‘serious’ because they are not ‘trivial’.

That Aristophanes claims to educate his audience is uncontroversial. The *Acharnians*, an early production of his career, features an extended defense of the

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123 Heiden 1991, 100.  
124 Silk 2000, 312.  
125 *Acharnians* was produced in 425.
playwright who had apparently been accused of slandering the city.  

The choral leader in the *parabasis* claims that in writing comedies he is the source of much good for them and is brave enough to tell the Athenians what is just.  

He even describes a scene where Aristophanes’ fame reaches the king of Persia. The monarch allegedly asks whom this poet speaks ill against and claims “For those men will become great and decisively victorious in war, with him as their adviser.”  

And, again, at the end of the *Acharnians’ parabasis* we find Aristophanes “teaching what is best.”  

Athenian dramatists were aware of their role as the city’s teachers. The sophists were the preeminent intellectuals and educators and Aristophanes stages their materialist views of language and education in his *Frogs*. There he displays the shortcomings of the tragedians when they adopt and are judged by the standards set by these theories.  

Aeschylus claims to make citizens virtuous through *mimesis*, by imitating virtuous characters and bringing them on stage but this does not guarantee an ethically ennobled audience. Euripides’ own *mimesis* may depict humanity, as it is, but his cleverness and witticisms are also not enough.  

Aristophanes’ own brand of *mimesis* is radically different. He makes use of representation but he does not presume to physically imprint the actors on the audience, nor does he try to represent the world on stage with strict
verisimilitude. Aristophanes humorously represents people and ideas in order to show the truth to the audience in a way they hadn’t seen it before.

**VII Conclusion: Aristophanic Mimesis and Recognition**

I would like to conclude by returning to the *Clouds* and Aristophanes’ use of *mimesis* as a pedagogical strategy. We saw above that he is concerned with educating the audience. How does he presume to do this? The *Clouds* is especially ripe for answering this question because the play stages an education and vision of wisdom. Old man Strepsiades fails to become educated – though he does learn to mimic the shallow and false wisdom of the sophists. His son Pheidippides is given a choice between learning and following the Weaker Argument or the Stronger Argument. That he opts for the Weaker is perhaps not so much a comment upon the nefarious rhetorical powers of the sophists as it is on the values and of the audience. It is after all their education which is at stake, not a fictional character’s. There are hints of this throughout the play. At the beginning of the *agon*, the Stronger Argument asks the weaker how he intends to overturn justice.

δήτων: γνώμας καινὰς ἔξευρισκων.
κρείττων: ταύτα γὰρ ἁνθεὶ διὰ τοῦτοι
tοὺς ἀνοητοὺς.
δήτων: οὐκ, ἀλλὰ σοφοὺς.

Weaker: [I’ll overturn justice] by discovering new ideas.
Stronger: These things flourish because of these mindless idiots here.
Weaker: On the contrary, they are wise.

The deictic marker indicates that here the Stronger Argument points to the audience. It’s *their* fault that these new ideas are becoming fashionable. Later on Strepsiades pays the
price for enrolling his son in the _phrontistērion_ because Pheidippides not only beats his father but proceeds to justify it, according to the laws of both convention and nature (1399-1432). When Strepsiades complains to the Clouds that they are the cause of his misery, they tell him who is really to blame:

Στρ: ταυτὶ δὲ ὑμᾶς ὑπερὶ Νεθέλαι πέπονθ᾽ ἐγώ, ὑμῖν ἀναθεὶς ἀπαντὰ τὰμὰ πράγματα.
Χορ: αὐτὸς μὲν οὖν σαυτῷ σὺ τούτων αἰτιός, στρέψας σεαυτὸν ἐς πονηρὰ πράγματα.
... ἡμεῖς ποιοῦμεν ταῦθ᾽ ἐκάστοθ᾽ ὅταν τινὰ γνώμεν πονηρῶν ὄντ᾽ ἐραστὴν πραγμάτων, ἐὰς ἀν αὐτὸν ἐμβάλωμεν ἐς κακὸν, ὅπως ἀν εἰδῆ τοὺς θεοὺς δεδοικέναι.

Str: Through you, Clouds, I suffer these things
Since I put all my affairs in your hands.
Chor: You yourself are the cause of your own misfortune,
Since you turned yourself to shameful pursuits.
... We treat in this way whomever
We perceive to be a lover of shameful practices,
Until we let him fall into misfortune,
In order that he might learn to fear the gods. (1452-61)

Depending on how strongly we take ἐμβάλωμεν the modern reader might find it hard to blame Strepsiades if the Clouds let him stumble. Their point, however, is clear. It does Strepsiades no good to lament the wickedness of his son or his teachers when it was his own wickedness and contempt for the law that caused him to seek out the sophists in the first place.

The recurring pattern here is one of self-responsibility and self-recognition. My insistence that Aristophanes teaches the audience by allowing them to recognize
something *through* the humor of warped and exaggerated parody is supported by the chorus of *Clouds*.

Σωκ. γίγνονται πάνθ᾽ ὃ τι βούλονται: κατ᾽ ἐν μὲν ἰδασι κομῆτην ἀγγίζειν τινα τῶν λασίων τούτων, ὀιόντες τὸν Ξενοφάντου, σκωπτοῦσαι τὴν μανίαν αὐτῶν κενταύρως ἠκαίρους ἀυτάς.
Στρ. τί γὰρ ἐν ἀρπαγα τῶν δημοσίων κατίδωσι Σίμωνα, τί δρῶσιν; Σωκ. ἀποφαίνουσαι τὴν φύσιν αὐτῶν λύκοι ἐξαίφνης ἐγένοντο.

Soc. They become everything, whatever they want: if they see one of those shaggy, wild, long-haired fellows, like the son of Xenophontes, mocking his savagery they liken themselves to centaurs.
Str. And what if they see Simon that plunderer of public property, what do they do?
Soc. Revealing his nature they suddenly became like wolves. (348-352)

This joke started as a way of explaining why the chorus of Clouds looks like a group of human beings clothed in stretched out wool (343). The answer is that they are shape-shifters and can look like anything. As they imitate various individuals, the audience is encouraged to laugh, presumably because there *is* something centaur-like about this shaggy-looking son of Xenophontes, even if doesn’t literally look like a centaur. This is more than just a gag. The Clouds claim that through their act of representation they reveal a person’s nature. And this I argue is analogous to Aristophanes’ own comedic practice. His parody, through exaggerated and humorous representation, shows the audience something true, not only about Simon, Protagoras, or Strepsiades, but themselves. With a bit of nudging from the playwright, perhaps the audience of *Clouds* was able to see that the play was not so much a critical lambast of Socrates as it was of their own misunderstanding and misuse of sophistic education.
This dissertation on Plato has begun with a chapter on Aristophanes with good reason. Aristophanes’ penchant for turning the audience’s critical attention back onto themselves is also Platonic. It is parody which allows both Aristophanes and Plato to accomplish this self-reflection and recognition. The presence of parody in Plato is easily acknowledged, but little has been said about its significance for his philosophical project. Plato learned from Aristophanes that parody can be an effective pedagogical tool. It is a way of engaging the audience, of confronting them with a person or idea’s absurdity, hidden assumptions, and/or undesirable consequences. Just as the chorus of Clouds reveals the true nature of things through their ridiculous representations, so too do Aristophanes and Plato focus their audience’s attention through the use of parody, affording them an opportunity for genuine recognition and insight.
CHAPTER 2: AGATHON

I Introduction

In my introduction I showed that parody is a significant mode of Platonic pedagogy which merits careful study. In the last chapter I argued that our understanding of the use and function of parody in Plato’s dialogues is enhanced by a recognition of its use and function in Aristophanes’ comedies. The following chapters are a series of case studies in which I analyze particular instances of parody in order to demonstrate the interpretive value of this approach. I will argue that the Republic’s untraditional and shocking system of music education, far from Plato’s own, is actually a critical and parodic representation of Damon’s musical theories; then that Socrates’ etymological demonstration in the Cratylus, far from representing Plato’s view of language, is a parody of contemporary, materialist theories. I begin in this chapter with the representation of Agathon in the Symposium. Plato provides his readers not only a picture of the historical Agathon, but, through parody, he highlights for the reader Agathon’s affinities with the sophist Gorgias. The influence of Gorgias’ thought on the tragedian, I argue, goes beyond a penchant for rhetorical speech. Agathon is not the subject of Platonic parody because of his style or sophistic arguments. What Plato shows his reader is that Agathon speaks of desire as a kind of material force. He has inherited this view from Gorgias and it is this that Plato wants to expose.
II Agathon’s Encomium of Eros

In Plato’s Symposium a number of people have gathered at Agathon’s house for a second day of celebrating his tragedy’s first place victory. A few are still hung-over from excessive partying the night before and Eryximachus suggests that instead of getting drunk they entertain themselves by taking turns delivering speeches. He has a specific topic in mind. His eromenos, Phaedrus, had recently complained that while skilled speakers have composed encomia for every deity and even mundane things like salt, the god Eros remains unpraised (177a-d). This provides the bulk of the Symposium with its structure as we have the speeches of various characters reported to us – Phaedrus Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Agathon, Socrates, and Alcibiades who unexpectedly crashes the party and unknowingly contributes to the assignment in his own way, not by praising Eros, but Socrates.

Agathon with whom we are concerned in this chapter begins his encomium by distinguishing his method from those who spoke before him. They had, he claims, praised only the benefits which Eros brings to human beings and not the god himself.

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131 This is not entirely unusual as it was common for symposiasts to sing songs, and individually recite poems, speeches, riddles, and jokes. cf. especially Bremmer 1990, 135-48.
133 Phaedrus had argued that people are virtuous because of Eros; Pausanias that this is only true of the noble kind of ‘Ouanion’ Eros; Eryxiamchus that Eros is a state of health and harmony of the body and indeed any system; Aristophanes had reoriented the discussion by claiming that if they are going to understand love they have to first understand human nature. Sheffield (2006: 27-32) argues that each speech contributes to a philosophical understanding of Eros in ascending order. Contrast Rowe (1998: 8) "But we should be wary of supposing that there is, or is meant to be, any sense of a gradually developing picture of eros… It is in any case hard to construct a joint account that might emerge from the sequence from Phaedrus to Agathon. All five are essentially individual contributions, with each attempting to go one better than the one before in an apparently haphazard way.”
however, will make clear just what sort of thing Eros is (ὁποῖος δὲ τις αὐτὸς ὄν, 194e) and then what good things follow from him. What is praiseworthy about the god Desire according to Agathon? He claims that Eros is most blessed because he is the most beautiful and best of the gods.\textsuperscript{134} He is beautiful because he is young and flees old age.\textsuperscript{135} Insofar as the young are more beautiful and more desirable than the old, this is a compelling proof. But the reader is shown that, at least for Alcibiades, there is something desirable about Socrates even though he is old. One might say he is beautiful despite being ugly. Alcibiades speaks of Socrates’ beauty as something \textit{inside} him. Agathon seems to understand that desire has something to do with the soul, but he only describes it in physically beautiful terms. In fact, it is not until Socrates describes Eros as a desire which \textit{desires} that we see the oddity of Agathon’s description of Eros as a Desire which is \textit{desirable}.

In keeping with Agathon’s conception of youthful beauty, Eros is also delicate and fluid of form.\textsuperscript{136} In order to be desirable Eros must be what others want and thus be able to change and adapt to what others want. Helen of Troy is an instantiation of this principle – certainly desirable and certainly fluid and adaptable. In the \textit{Odyssey} Menelaus recounts how, trying to coax the Achaean soldiers hiding within the horse to reveal themselves, she imitated the voices of their wives and called out to them.\textsuperscript{137} Socrates

\textsuperscript{134} ἐὐδαιμονέστατον... κάλλιστον... ἀριστον... (195a).
\textsuperscript{135} Agathon thus announces his disagreement with Phaedrus who had said Eros was worthy of veneration because he is the \textit{oldest} of the gods (178b).
\textsuperscript{136} ἀπαλός, ὑγρὸς τὸ εἰδως (196a).
\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Odyssey} 4.240-89. Geradine Bedell in her review of Bettany Hughes’ book \textit{Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore} says, “Raped virgin, child bride, adulterous lover, deserting mother, triumphant mistress, satisfied matron, victim, goddess-queen – whatever women can be, Helen of Troy had a go at it. She defies biography, because she is too many things to too many people.”
while perhaps not particularly soft or delicate also has the uncanny ability to be many things to many people. Plato presents him as a gadfly, torpedo fish, Silenus, and midwife, to name just a few. Agathon, however, has a different explanation for Eros’ soft and water-like nature: without it Eros “wouldn’t be able to fold himself up in every way, entering and exiting throughout the whole soul so secretly.” Here we see a clue that Agathon’s focus on the physical qualities of Eros are motivated by a view of the physical mechanics of desire. This is an important and underappreciated aspect of the entire speech.

In the second half of his encomium, Agathon demonstrates the virtue of Eros by employing delightfully playful and sophistic arguments (196b-197b). Eros is just because he neither uses force nor is ever forced: all willingly consent to desire’s orders. Eros is moderate because no pleasure is stronger than desire; and if Eros has mastered all pleasures he must be moderate. Eros is courageous because desire overwhelms even Ares, the most bold of the gods. Each of these virtues is dispensed with rather quickly, but Agathon takes his time to argue for Eros’ wisdom. People only ever achieve artistic and technical mastery in that which they love – Apollo in music and medicine, Athena in weaving, Hephaestus in metalwork, and Zeus in governing. If all these gods were led by desire in discovering their art and guided by it in the exercise of these skilled activities, then Eros is, in a sense, their teacher. Agathon concludes that Eros must therefore be wise

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138 Apology 30e; Meno 80a; Symposium 215a-b; Theaetetus 148e-151d. Xenophon in his Symposium has Socrates claim to be a pimp (3.10).
139 οὐ γὰρ ἂν οἶος τῇ ἴν πάντη περιπτύσσεσθαι οὔθε διὰ πάσης ψυχῆς καὶ εἰσιῶν τὸ πρῶτον λανθάνειν καὶ ἔμμων, εἰ σκληρός ἦν. (196a).
because “You can’t give someone what you don’t have or teach someone what you don’t
yourself know.”\textsuperscript{140}

Is desire wise? – and for the reasons Agathon gives? Agathon’s proof of Eros’
wisdom may be tongue-in-cheek, but it harbors assumptions which must be seriously
considered. Plato gives the reader reasons to suspect the merits of this argument. For is
not Socrates’ own wisdom such that he teaches others what he himself doesn’t know? In
the \textit{Theaetetus} Socrates tells his interlocutor that he is barren, incapable of producing
ideas of his own. Instead, as a midwife, he helps others bring their own ideas to term and
tests the health of their offspring (148e-151d). At the end of the \textit{Laches}, after Socrates
announces that he still doesn’t know what courage is, Lysimachus nevertheless wants
Socrates to educate his children (200a-201c). At the end of the \textit{Charmides}, after Socrates
announces that he still doesn’t know what \textit{sophrosune} is, Critias nevertheless wants
Socrates to be a mentor to his young nephew (165b-176b). At the end of the \textit{Lysis}, after
Socrates announces that he still doesn’t know what friendship is, he and his two young
interlocutors agree that they are friends nonetheless (223b). Others recognize that
Socrates has some sort of wisdom or insight even though he hasn’t articulated it and
shared it with them, as it were. In each of these dialogues he teaches us something about
these virtues, even though, narratively, he doesn’t seem to know what they are. This is in
direct contradiction with the view of wisdom that Agathon shares here, in which you
cannot teach what you don’t know: \textsuperscript{140} ἅ γὰρ τις ἦ μὴ ἐχει ἦ μὴ οἶδεν, οὔτ᾽ ἂν ἐτέρῳ
δοίη οὔτ᾽ ἂν ἄλλον διδάξειεν.

\textsuperscript{140} ἅ γὰρ τις ἦ μὴ ἐχει ἦ μὴ οἶδεν, οὔτ᾽ ἂν ἐτέρῳ δοίη οὔτ᾽ ἂν ἄλλον διδάξειεν. (196e).
Further evidence for the significance of Agathon’s argument about Eros’ wisdom is that it is actually an echo of a previous scene. Recall that Socrates shows up to the party late because he got lost in thought on his way and stopped in order to think something through. When he does arrive, Agathon beckons him over, hoping for a piece of his wisdom, adding: “For it is clear that you’ve found it and now have it, or else you would not have left off.”

It is, however, not clear that Socrates has obtained an answer to whatever question he was considering, nor even what this ‘it’ (αὐτό) is which Agathon assumes he possesses. Regardless, Agathon here shows the same view of wisdom he describes in his speech – If Socrates is wise, he can share this knowledge; he has something to give. We should not be surprised that various parts of the dialogue illuminate one another as well as the whole. This would be in keeping with the so-called principle of logo-graphic necessity introduced in the *Phaedrus*. Agathon ends his argument for Eros’ virtue by stating that it is the cause of beauty and excellence in others. Here he agrees with Phaedrus and Pausanias but adds that this is only so because Eros itself is beautiful and excellent.

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141 ἀλλοι αὐτοῖς ἰδοὺς εἰς χεῖς: οὐ γὰρ ἂν προαπέστης. (175d).
142 “Every discourse must be organized, like a living being, with a body of its own, as it were, so as not to be headless or footless, but to have a middle and members, composed in fitting relation to each other and to the whole.” (264c)
143 οὗτως ἐμοὶ ὅσκει, ὦ Φαίδρε, Ἔρως πρώτος αὐτός ἦν κάλλιστος καὶ ἀριστός μετὰ τούτο τοῖς ἄλλοις ἄλλοιν τοιούτων αἰτίων εἶναι. (197c)
III Recognizing the ‘Platonic’ Aspects of Agathon’s Speech

Agathon’s speech is too often quickly dismissed as entirely specious and devoid of wisdom or philosophical substance. Socrates does, after all, immediately subject Agathon to an *elenchus* and offers a different view of Eros. It is however significant that Socrates claims he used to think the same things as Agathon before he met Diotima (201e). Instead of ridiculing Agathon’s view and alienating him, Agathon becomes for Plato a sort of proto-Socrates. He is perhaps farther along the path to wisdom and a true understanding of Eros than, say, Pausanias or Eryximachus.

I do not intend to list a set of assertions in Agathon’s speech which we are meant to accept as true. There are, nevertheless, several familiar ‘Platonic’ themes which warrant our consideration. Recall at the beginning of his speech he wants not to praise the beneficial effects Eros brings but desire itself. This move away from the consequences and particulars to the thing in question, the thing itself, is a move Socrates makes often and one which he would ostensibly approve of. In fact, he does. Socrates commends Agathon for beginning with the nature of Eros itself. Diotima will similarly move from the countless examples of particular beautiful things to Beauty itself.

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144 Scott and Welton 2008, 81. “Agathon’s speech is almost entirely vacuous, from the point of view of philosophy. Like Agathon himself, the speech is longer on appearance than substance.” Seth Benardete (2000, 175) says that Agathon delivers “the silliest speech,” while, paradoxically, there is something tragic about the comic playwright’s. Catherine Zuckert (2009, 298) concludes that for Agathon our deepest desire is “for fleeting manifestations of beauty.”

145 In the *Laches*, for instance, he is not satisfied to hear that courage is doing one’s duty in battle, or charging the enemy without fear, but wants to understand courage *itself*. So, too in *Meno* with virtue; in *Euthyphro* with the holy; and in *Charmides* with moderation.

146 καὶ μήν, ὦ φίλε Ἀγάθων, καλῶς μοι ἔδοξες καθηγήσασθαι τοῦ λόγου, λέγων ὅτι πρῶτον μὲν δέοι αὐτὸν ἐπιδείξαι ὁποιός τις ἐστὶν ὃ Ἕρως, ὠστερὸν δὲ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ. ταύτῃ τὴν ἀρχὴν πάνυ ἀγαματ. (199c).
Agathon’s proofs for the justice, moderation, courage, and wisdom of Eros may not be logically compelling, but there is, again, an echo of an idea we find in other dialogues: the unity of the virtues.\textsuperscript{147} One could be ambivalent about Eros, as Pausanias is, believing that it can be good or bad, inspiring virtue or vice. But Agathon believes or would prefer to believe that Eros is excellent in every way, in possession of all the virtues. Socrates’ Eros is not perfect. It is like Aristophanes’ picture of human nature: yearning, and seeking wholeness. But Socrates is in agreement with Agathon that there is something noble and ennobling about Eros.

Phaedrus had argued that men act virtuously for the sake of Eros. Pausanias and Eryximachus had been quick to stress that there are good desires and bad desires which need to be regulated and controlled. Aristophanes’ began his speech by saying that if they want to understand desire, they have to understand human nature. Agathon is the only one who apparently believes that Eros \textit{itself} is a good and beautiful thing. There is something backward about the other speeches. For them good deeds and a virtuous character arise from immoderate desire or in spite of it. For Agathon all excellent things flow from the excellence of Eros. In fact, one might suggest that his Eros is very much like what we’ve come to think of as a ‘Platonic Form’. His wise Eros is responsible for the wisdom of various arts just as Socrates claims in the \textit{Phaedo} the Beautiful is responsible for the beauty we see in particulars.\textsuperscript{148} The difference is that while Plato’s forms are intellectual and immaterial, Agathon’s Eros is described in physical terms.

\textsuperscript{147} \textit{Protagoras} 329c-330b.
\textsuperscript{148} \textit{Phaedo} 100d.
IV Agathon’s Style: A Gorgianic Matter

Now I want to consider the parodic aspects of Agathon’s speech. This comes in two parts: first, Socrates’ gesture toward Gorgias as revealing the rhetorical nature of Agathon’s speech; and in the next section, Socrates gesture as indicating the source of Agathon’s conception of Eros. It is his deployment of parody which enables this recognition on the part of the reader. What is it that he wants us to see? To be sure, he does not create an exaggerated representation of Agathon in order that we might more recognize the historical figure – ‘That sure is Agathon all right’ – but rather in order that the reader may recognize something in particular about Agathon. It is the nature of parody to highlight and humorously magnify specific traits. But we must not misunderstand the function of parody here. Plato does not bring something to the reader’s attention in order to subject it to humor; he subjects something to humor in order to bring it to the reader’s attention. What is it Plato wants us to see about Agathon? Socrates points the way in his response to Agathon’s speech; in a word: Gorgias. But what about Gorgias? Socrates mentions two things: (1) how pleasant it was to listen to; and (2) the traces of Gorgias’ rhetorical influence. In fact, these two go hand in hand. The latter explains the former and is the source of Agathon’s charming persuasiveness.

After describing the beautiful and excellent qualities of Eros, Agathon ends his speech with a rhetorical flourish:

[Eros] includes mildness and excludes wildness. He is generous of goodwill and ungenerous of ill-will… craved by those denied him, treasured by those enjoying him; father of luxury, elegance, delicacy, grace, desire, longing; full of care for good people,
carless of bad people; in trouble, in terror, in longing, in discourse, he is the best helmsman, marine, comrade, rescuer.”

Afterwards, everyone cheers and applauds Agathon’s display of talent. Everyone was charged with delivering an encomium of Eros and Agathon has certainly accomplished this. Socrates, however, responds differently, saying “The greater part of the speech was not so very astounding; but when we drew towards the close, the beauty of the words and phrases could not but take one’s breath away.”

What is it about the ending which is so remarkable? Kenneth Dover finds the peroration (197d1-e5) saturated with poetry:

“nearly all the thirty-one members (or ‘cola’) into which the passage can be articulated by attention to the phrasing indicated by the sense are recognizable… as metrical units familiar in Greek lyric poetry.”

He lists the ionic trimeter, cretic dimeter, trochaic tetrameter, anacreontic dimeter, and iambodochmiac. The main issue, however, is not that Agathon’s speech is poetic. The point of Plato’s parody is to show us why Agathon speaks as he speaks and why he thinks as he thinks. The presence lurking behind his poetry is the sophist Gorgias. This is what Plato wants us to see and what he has Socrates explicitly reveal:

For his speech so reminded me of Gorgias that I was exactly in the plight described by Homer: I feared that Agathon in his final phrases would confront me with the eloquent

149 197d-e, Gill translation (1999).
150 198b.
151 Dover 1980, 124.
152 Alexander Nehemas (1999, 308) believes that while Agathon’s speech is a parody of Gorgias’ style, we are to understand this not as a parody on Plato’s part but on Agathon’s. “Here, the young speaker, quite drunk already in his own honor, is unmistakably playing for laughs. He indulges in an unrestrained parody of Gorgianic style and sophistic argument, enlivened with salacious double entendres, and punctuated with digs at the age and ugliness of his couch partner, Socrates.” My position is that while many of Agathon’s arguments are tongue-in-cheek and perhaps he knows reminiscent of Gorgias, his underlying materialism is the affinity with Gorgias which Plato is trying to bring to our attention.
Gorgias' head, and by opposing his speech to mine would turn me thus dumbfounded into stone.  

The structure and sound of the conclusion (antithesis, homoioteleuton) certainly reminds one of Gorgias, though Dover notes that Gorgias’ influence is manifest throughout the speech. It refers to its own features, describes the rules for the genre, enumerates and ticks off points in order, and systematically adduces τεκμήρια for each assertion. In fact, the tragic playwright’s first words sound more suitable for a forensic orator than a poet: “I want to speak first of how I should speak, and then to speak.” Dover also observes that Agathon’s closing words – the claim that his encomium is meant at least partly in jest – recall the end of Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen* where he calls it a plaything of his. Plato was not alone in noting (or asserting) the connection between these two figures. Philostratus in his *Lives of the Sophists* says, “Agathon too, the tragic poet, whom comedy regards as fine and eloquent often Gorgianizes (γοργιάζει) in his iambic verse.”

Why does Plato insist on drawing these Gorgianic features to our attention? What is the point? Perhaps he wants to emphasize that Agathon’s art of tragedy and Gorgias’ art of rhetoric are not all that different. Poets and orators both must cater to the desires of

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153 Socrates here makes his own play on words likening the mind-numbing rhetoric of Gorgias to the body-numbing gaze of the Gorgon: καὶ γὰρ μὲ Γοργίου ὁ λόγος ἀνεμίμνησκεν, ὡστε ἀπεχώρας τὸ τοῦ Ὄμηρου ἐπηεύνθη: ἐφοβούμην μή μοι τελευτῶν ὁ Ἀγάθων Γοργίου κεφαλὴν δεινὸν λέγειν ἐν τῷ λόγῳ ἐπὶ τὸν ἐμὸν λόγον πέμψας αὐτὸν μὲ λίθον τῇ ἀφωνίᾳ ποιήσειν. (198c).
155 194e.
156 τὰ μὲν παιδιᾶς, τὰ δὲ σπουδῆς μετρίας... μετέχων (197e).
157 ἐμὸν δὲ παίγνιον (B11.21).
158 Philostratus *Lives* 1.493.
others in order to be successful; and in democratic Athens this meant seeking the approval of the masses. After Aristophanes speech, Socrates expresses his misgivings that he’ll be able to contribute any worthwhile praise to Eros after so many great speakers. Agathon, since he has to speak next, accuses Socrates of trying to make him nervous. Socrates however remarks that just the day before Agathon was fearless in front of a vast multitude when he stood in the theater to present his tragedy; so he has no reason to be nervous in front of this small group (194b-c). Agathon retorts that he is more afraid of saying or doing something shameful in front of a small group of intelligent men than a large group of unintelligent ones. Socrates notes that these few intelligent men were in fact among the crowd at the performance and, right when we expect the next question – “Shouldn’t you then also fear doing or saying something shameful in front of the masses?” – he is interrupted by Phaedrus who doesn’t want the assignment to be sidetracked by Socrates’ interrogation. The implication, the answer to the unasked question, is that Agathon will say whatever he thinks is most pleasing to the crowd, even if it is shameful or false.\(^\text{159}\) Similarly, in the \textit{Republic} Socrates describes the sophist who addresses the assembly as being beholden to their desires, as a trainer to a beast (493a-d).\(^\text{160}\) The orator might think that he is manipulating the crowd, but he can only gain their favor and do so by telling them what they want to hear.\(^\text{161}\) The conflation of tragedy and

\(^{159}\) Benardete and Bloom (2001, 114): “The argument would seem to force Agathon to respond that he would not be ashamed [to do something shameful before the many]. But he cannot quite admit publicly that the central activity of his life is shameless, a hypocritical effort to please the incompetent.”

\(^{160}\) cf. Plato’s \textit{Gorgias} (502a-e).

\(^{161}\) This view is anticipated by Aristophanes in the \textit{Knights}. When the chorus criticizes Demos for loving to be flattered and thus easily deceived by orators the Demos claims that he – the crowd – is really in charge: “I intentionally play the fool. For I love getting drunk all day and want a thief as an overseer… Pay attention and see if I’m cleverly running circles around those who think they’re smart enough to cheat me,
oratory as persuasive speech is not an unfair, far-fetched argument on the part of Plato. In fact, even Gorgias in the *Helen* claims that poetry is just metered speech and the purpose of both is to persuade.¹⁶²

Scholars have largely stopped here. They observe that Agathon’s speech is rhetorical and conclude that Socrates’ reference to Gorgias must be a condemnation of the truth-indifferent, persuasion-oriented nature of Agathon’s speech or more specifically the genre of encomium.¹⁶³ Andrea Nightingale’s *Genres in Dialogue* in particular has claims that Plato’s main goal is to assert the superiority of philosophy as a ‘genre’ which he does by both denigrating and co-opting rival discourses. In her view it would seem that the *Symposium* while ostensibly about desire, wisdom, and the soul is really about philosophy as a mode of discourse.¹⁶⁴ “Plato’s critique of the many manifestations of encomiastic discourse evinces two aims. First, to show how the rhetoric of praise that pervades classical Athens can damage individuals, and, indeed, the city as a whole. And second, to demonstrate the antithesis between praise discourse and the language of the philosopher.” I for one think that Plato is not just engaging with Agathon’s manner of speaking but the ideas and assumptions underlying his beliefs and actions. Plato has brought these to our attention by presenting Agathon’s speech as a parody of Gorgias’ views on Eros.

¹⁶⁴Nightingale 1995, 131.
V Agathon’s Eros: Gorgianic Materialism

Agathon inherited from Gorgias not only a manner of speaking, but also his materialist conception of desire. It is this ontology, even more than his rhetorical style, which Plato wants the reader to recognize and confront as a serious worldview.

Agathon’s materialism is foreshadowed even before the speeches begin. When Socrates finally wanders in from his musing, having missed dinner, Agathon greets him warmly and beckons him to his side, “… so that by touching you, I might enjoy that wisdom which came to you on the porch.” Socrates likens Agathon’s underlying assumption to the phenomenon of water flowing along a thread of wool from a more full container to an emptier one (175d); and then informs him that this is not how wisdom works, as if the one who has it can just physically transfer it to someone else. How does Agathon think physical proximity or contact with Socrates is going to help him acquire Socrates’ wisdom? – through osmosis?

How seriously should we take the view of wisdom which Agathon here implicitly, perhaps unconsciously, endorses? It may, after all, be only a pretext for getting Socrates to sit by him, a flirtatious invitation. Regardless, Plato has Agathon offer an answer to a familiar Platonic question – Can virtue be taught? and if so, how? The tragedian playfully suggests that he can become wise just by sitting next to Socrates. Thus Plato leads us to a serious philosophical question about the nature of wisdom only by first having us confront an absurd, unserious answer. Plato may have even learned this

165 ἵνα καὶ τοῦ σοφοῦ ἀπτόμενός σου ἀπολαύσω, ὦ σοι προσέστη ἐν τοῖς προθύροις. (175c).
166 Meno (70a); Protagoras (319a-329b, 361a-c).
maneuver from Gorgias. Aristotle tells us “Gorgias said that it is fitting to overcome the seriousness of opponents with humor; and the humor of opponents with seriousness.”\footnote{167 δείκτης Γοργίας τὴν μὲν σπουδὴν διαφθείρειν τῶν ἐναντίων γέλωτι τὸν δὲ γέλωτα σπουδῆν, (Rhetoric 1419b).}

It should be noted that Agathon here displays a version of the same error Alcibiades makes later in the Symposium: because Socrates is wise, he has wisdom (αὐτὸν καὶ ἔχεις, 175d); both Agathon and Alcibiades think he can hand it over to them, like any other possession. Both furthermore believe that some of his wisdom will rub off on them if they rub up against him. But Alcibiades at least seems to understand that Socrates’ wisdom is inside, something under the surface, which he tries to coax him into revealing (216d-217a; 218c-d).\footnote{168 This is, unfortunately, yet another incomplete view as Alcibiades’ fixation on Socrates prevents him from looking inside himself.} I intend to show that while Agathon ostensibly believes wisdom, virtue, and desire to be matters of the soul, the soul itself is on his view only a kind of physical object.

Above we saw how Agathon’s descriptions of Eros focused on physical characteristics (its beauty, young age, tenderness, and fluidity). For the first three speakers Eros is a mythical inspiration for virtuous deeds, a woefully constrained social convention, or a principle of harmony. Aristophanes for all the nobility of the sentiment behind his speech, brings a new crude emphasis on the body; and Agathon, for all his emphasis on the perfect beauty of Eros, maintains this physical orientation. For him Eros is soft and sensitive, like the goddess described in Homer who walks lightly along the heads of men. He however does Homer one better: Eros doesn’t walk on skulls which are
hard, but on that which is softest—the characters and souls of gods and humans.\textsuperscript{169} The attentive reader, however, should find this comparison unsettling. The goddess in Homer, whom Agathon leaves unnamed, is \textit{Atē}, Delusion.\textsuperscript{170} The details of the scene in the \textit{Iliad} make more clear the nature of Agathon’s error.

After Patroclus is killed and Achilles returns to fight with the Greeks, Agamemnon wants to publicly reconcile with the warrior he offended. In a speech before the troops he admits that he wronged Achilles by taking his prize, but adds that it was not his fault. Zeus, Fate, and Erinys and the goddess Delusion had cast a wretched blindness over his thinking. Far from a deep insight into Archaic Greek psychology or theology, I read this as, quite plainly, a cowardly attempt on Agamemnon’s part to find the cause of his actions in forces outside of himself. He thus absolves himself on any wrongdoing as he assures everyone that he couldn’t have resisted these divine forces.\textsuperscript{171} That hardly seems an appropriate way to genuinely reconcile with someone one has offended.

Agathon’s point is that Eros is delicate like Delusion. But Plato wants the reader to see just how much Agathon thinks of Eros in the same way Agamemnon thinks of Delusion, as an irresistible external force which invades the mind. In fact, Eros may on this view be a \textit{kind} of delusion. Agathon on the surface tries to disassociate his Eros from

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{169} ὠ γὰρ ἐπὶ γῆς βάινει οὐδ’ ἐπὶ κρανίων, ὅ ἐστιν οὐ πάνυ μαλακά, ἀλλ’ ἐν τοῖς μαλακωτάτοις τῶν ὄντων καὶ βάινει καὶ οἰκεί. ἐν γὰρ ἦθεσι καὶ ψυχαῖς θεῶν καὶ ἀνθρώπων τὴν οἰκησιν ἱδονται. (195e).
\item \textsuperscript{170} \textit{Iliad} 19.92-93.
\item \textsuperscript{171} ... ἐγὼ δ’ οὐκ αἰτίος εἰμι, ἀλλὰ Ζεὺς καὶ Μοίρα καὶ ἡγοροῖτις Ἑρινός, οἱ τε μοι εἰν ἄγορῇ φοιεῖν ἐμβαλον ἄγιον ἄτην, ἡματί τῷ ὅτ’ Ἀχιλῆς γέρας αὐτός ἀπηρύων. ἀλλὰ τι κεν ὃξειμι; θεὸς διὰ πάντα τελευτᾷ. (19.86-90).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
necessity and force. He claims, for instance, that all the violent things which Hesiod and Parmenides claim the gods did to each other, were motivated by Necessity, not Love.\textsuperscript{172} And now the gods no longer struggle with one another because love reigns. Recall also his proof that Eros is just on the grounds that he does not use force; all consent to Love’s orders willingly.\textsuperscript{173} Agathon \textit{knows} that Love cannot have any part of necessity, but I believe his materialist ontology betrays him. Eros, on Agathon’s view, comes in from the outside and tramples on the soul. We find this same view in Gorgias who is much more explicit about the connection between Eros and the irresistible workings of matter. Before we turn to Gorgias, however, I want first to look at how Agathon is portrayed in Aristophanes.

\textbf{VI Agathon in Aristophanes: Corroborating Evidence}

As a character in Aristophanes’ \textit{Thesmophoriazusae} Agathon’s ambiguous gender status is the subject of an entire scene. In the play, the women of Athens are upset with Euripides for his negative portrayals of them. He thus is looking for someone willing to disguise himself as a woman in order to infiltrate their meeting and put in a good word for him. He believes Agathon will be the best person for this job because he will fit right in with all the ladies. Euripides’ kinsman expresses confusion over Agathon’s appearance because he’s wearing a dress but doesn’t appear to have breasts; he has both a hair-net and an oil flask used by wrestlers. These contradictions come together in the kinsman’s

\textsuperscript{172} 195c.
\textsuperscript{173} 196b-c.
referring to Agathon as ὁ γύννις this ‘man-woman’ or ‘Mr. Miss.’ (137).  

Nevertheless, Agathon inspires Eros in the kinsman who is attracted to him, perhaps because Aristophanes’ Agathon is ὑγρὸς τὸ εἴδος like Agathon’s Eros.  

To the kinsman’s incredulous questions Agathon offers this explanation for his appearance:

ἐγὼ δὲ τὴν ἐσθήθο’ ἀμα γνώμη φορῶ.  
Χρῆ γὰρ ποιτίν ἄνδρα πρὸς τὰ δράματα  
ἀ δεὶ ποιεῖν, πρὸς ταύτα τοῦς τρόπους ἐχεῖν.  
Αὐτίκα γυναικεῖ’ ἦν ποίη τις δράματα,  
μετουσίαν δεὶ τῶν τρόπων τὸ σῶμ’ ἐχεῖν.  
...

Ἀνδρεία δ’ ἦν ποίη τις, ἐν τῷ σώματι  
ἐνεσθ’ ὑπάρχον τοῦθ’ Α δ’ οὐ κεκτήμεθα,  
μίμησις ᾗς ταῦτα συνθηρεύεται.

I am wearing the clothing that suits my thought.  
For a poet, though a man, must in his dramas  
 adopt those natures which he needs to portray.  
And so if he graces the stage with a woman,  
It’s necessary that his own body adopt a share of a woman’s ways.  
...

If he is making a man,  
He already has the essence in his body.  
But what we don’t possess  
 Imitation then strives for.  

174 Anne Duncan thinks that this mockery is rooted in anxieties not about Agathon in particular but actors and drama in general. “He is a figure for the actor, or more precisely, he serves as a screen onto which the playwright projects the anxieties about actors and acting already common in the fifth century. These anxieties include the fear that the actor has no essential self, the fear that the actor has an essentially effeminate self, and the fear that the actor causes the selves of the audience to change to match his own.” 2006, 33.  

175 Thesmophoriazusae 148-56. With regards to mimesis Richard Hawley says “The episode with Agathon dramatizes the popular belief that the poet must liken himself as much as possible to the character which he aims to imitate…” (1998: 92). It might be hard to tell how ‘popular’ this belief really was, but I think the humor of the passage is a result of taking seriously, though to an extreme, the views of intellectual theorists like Gorigas and perhaps Agathon himself.
For all his femininity, Agathon, still a man, may not have a feminine nature; he is trying to act out and imitate one in order that he may better write female characters. Agathon continues and makes his point even more explicit. The poems of Ibycus, Anacreon, Alcaeus, and Phrynicus were beautiful, he claims, because these poets themselves were beautiful. He does not mean by this that they had noble characters, but apparently that they were physically attractive, since he also declares that it’s in poor taste (ἄμουσόν) for a poet to be hairy. Here in Aristophanes we see the same fixation on the body which Agathon evinces in Plato. In the Symposium he thinks he might gain some of Socrates’ wisdom if he comes in contact with him; in the Thesmophoriazusae he thinks he will gain a feminine nature if he puts on women’s clothing. After then associating the quality of an artist’s poem with their physical appearance, Agathon says “It is necessary to make things resembling one’s nature” – Ὅμοια γὰρ ποεῖν ἀνάγκη τῇ φύσει (167).

However effeminate the historical Agathon was and whether he held the theory of poetry parodied here, this passage is far from mere mockery and a humorous justification for cross-dressing. Aristophanes goes out of his way to show the theoretical assumptions behind Agathon’s actions: that a poet will produce what he is by nature; and thus that in order to write female characters, Agathon must change his nature, even if superficially.\textsuperscript{176} In other words he believes that his physical nature affects the ideas he has, and that if he changes his physical appearance, this will change his ideas.

\textsuperscript{176} Duncan finds Agathon’s views simply inconsistent. “Agathon’s two theories of poetic composition in the Thesmophoriazousai are (1) the performance of one’s true nature and (2) the impersonation of what one is not, the appropriation of what one lacks.” (2006, 56).
We can make sense of what we find strange and humorous about Aristophanes’ and Plato’s representation of Agathon’s views once we recognize the common thread: both authors use Agathon to represent a kind of materialism fashionable among intellectuals at the time. Now I will turn to Gorgias and demonstrate that his statements about speech and desire are similarly materialistic.

VII Gorgias’ Materialism
The Encomium of Helen

Decades before Plato wrote the Symposium, Gorgias had published an encomium which featured claims about Eros and its charming, persuasive, material effect on the soul. It is thus not controversial to claim that his influence on (Plato’s) Agathon involves more than rhetorical tropes.

In his Encomium of Helen Gorgias argues that she is undeserving of the censure cast upon her for leaving Menelaus. It is clear that we can’t blame her if she was physically forced and taken by Paris. But he argues that being persuaded by words amounts to another sort of force and even in this case she is innocent. How exactly do words persuade with such brute force?

Gorgias explains that a certain power of incantation charmed, persuaded, and moved her by (inter)mingling with the beliefs of her soul. Other passages make clear that this is a sort of physical process:

177 η πειθω προσιοῦσα ταὶ λόγῳ καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἐτυπώσατο ὡπως ἐβούλετο.

177 συγγινομένη γὰρ τῇ δόξῃ τῆς ψυχῆς ἡ δύναμις τῆς ἐπωδῆς ἔθελε καὶ ἐπεισε καὶ μετέστησεν αὐτήν. (Helen 10).
Persuasion which is present in speech molds the soul in whatever way it wants.\textsuperscript{178}

λόγος δυνάστης μέγας ἐστίν, ὡς συμφορτάτωι σώματι καὶ ἀφανεστάτωι θειότατα ἔργα ἀποτελεῖ· δύναται γὰρ καὶ φόβον παύσαι καὶ λύπην ἀφελεῖν καὶ χαρὰν ἐνεργάσασθαι καὶ ἐλεον ἐπανέσθαι.

Discourse is a great power, which by the smallest and most secret body accomplishes the most divine works; for it can stop fear and assuage pain and produce joy and make mercy abound.\textsuperscript{179}

Words, either composed of microscopic physical things themselves or working through them, literally mingle with the mind’s contents and stamp impressions upon the soul. Gorgias compares speech to the effect of drugs on the body: “The power of discourse with respect to the disposition of the soul and the prescription of medicines with respect to the nature of bodies abide by the same principle.”\textsuperscript{180} But does this analogy amount to an identification? Even if speech and medicine work the same way and have the same logos, the one works on the soul; the other on the body. Does speech really have corporeal foundations for Gorgias? I have already discussed in the Aristophanes chapter (p. 56) that different scholars take different nuanced views. For my purposes, I do not need to prove that Gorgias is a materialist in the vein of Democritus, nor prove that he earnestly held the positions he adopts in the Encomium of Helen. The point is that something like a materialist conception of logos and eros is found there and had found some purchase in contemporary Greek culture.

Gorgias also uses the analogy of sight to explain the persuasive powers of speech:

“Thus the sight engraves in the mind images of the things seen. Many of the frightening

\textsuperscript{178} Helen 13.
\textsuperscript{179} Helen 8.
\textsuperscript{180} τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ λόγον ἐχει ἢ τε τοῦ λόγου δύναμις πρὸς τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς τάξιν ἢ τε τῶν φαρμάκων τάξιν πρὸς τὴν τῶν σωμάτων φύσιν. (Helen 14).
ones remain; and in the same way those that stick around are just like things which were said.” Words can cause various emotions and leave impressions on the mind just as much as sight can. Ford, again, argues that this is because vision and discourse, sight and words, are both constituted of corporeal things.

Another repeated theme throughout the speech is the issue of force. Because Gorgias is trying to argue that Helen is not responsible for her emigration, he characterizes speech as working its effects by necessity. “For discourse, the persuader compelled the soul which it persuaded both to believe the things said and to consent to the things done.” This is something of a paradox. Helen may have gone willingly but she was forced to by persuasive speech. This dynamic gives the lie to Agathon’s repeated insistence that Eros has no part in force. Recall that the evidence for Eros’ justice is that all obey love’s commands willingly. But in Gorgias Helen is only innocent if her willingness was itself forced.

It is probably safe to assume that no detail in Plato is incidental. At the beginning of the party, Agathon orders his slaves to serve the meal as they see fit, with no one to

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181 οὕτως εἰκόνας τῶν ὀργιεμένων πραγμάτων ἢ ὄψις ἐνέγραφεν ἐν τῷ φρονήματι, καὶ τὰ μὲν δειματοῦντα πολλὰ μὲν παραλείπεται, ὡμοία δ’ ἐστι τὰ παραλειπόμενα οἰάπερ <τὰ> λεγόμενα. (Helen 17)
182 “… words were analyzable into their constituent syllables and single sounds (letters), and ultimately into the atoms whose shape, arrangement, and positioning created qualitative differences among them. It is logically compatible with the atomistic account of sight that spoken words should be, like any perceptible object, nothing more than conglomerates of atoms perceived by the ear. As composite physical objects, words were arrays of invisible sound atoms that move through the air, create sonic impressions in the ear, and affect the psyche in turn. Ford 2002, 166.
183 Λόγος γὰρ ψυχήν ὁ πείσας, ἢν ἐπεισεν, ἤναγκασε καὶ πιθέσθαι τοῖς λεγομένοις καὶ συναινέσαι τοῖς ποιημένοις. (Helen 12).
direct them (175b). He is undoubtedly proud of the liberal manner in which he treats his slaves. Agathon is no tyrant. And yet, like those subject to the charming power of persuasion, they comply willingly. They are just as servile when he magnanimously invites them to imagine themselves as free. If Agathon’s practice and Gorgias’ notions in the *Encomium* aren’t enough, Plato makes the point explicit in the *Philebus*: “I myself, Socrates, have often heard Gorgias say that the art of persuasion is far superior to all other arts – for it renders every other art its slave, willingly so and not through force.”

And let us not lose sight of desire. For Gorgias desire, compulsion, and matter are all mutually implicated:

If it was desire which accomplished these things, [Helen] will without difficulty be acquitted from the blame for the alleged transgression which occurred. For the things we see do not have whatever nature we want, but rather that which each happens to have. *Through sight, the soul is molded in its character.*

One of the fragments we have from Agathon’s poetry also associates desire and sight.

“For loving arises in people from gazing with admiration.”

There are two places in the *Encomium* while talking about desire when Gorgias underscores corporeal consequences.

[Helen] produced the greatest number of desires in the greatest number of men. For one body many bodies of men came together.

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185 ἦκουν μὲν ἐγώε, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἐκάστοτε Γοργίου πολλάκις ὡς ἢ τοῦ πείθειν πολὺ διαφέροι πασῶν τεχνῶν — πάντα γὰρ ύπ’ αὐτῇ δούλα δι’ ἐκόμνων ἀλλ’ οὐ διὰ βίας ποιοῖτο. (*Philebus* 58a-b).
186 εἰ γὰρ ἠδὲ ἦν ὁ ταῦτα πάντα πράξας, οὐ χαλεπῶς διαφεύγεται τὴν τῆς λεγομένης γεγονέναι ἀμαρτίας αἰτίαν. ἀ γὰρ ὁρῶμεν, ἔχει φύσιν ὑπ’ ἢ ἡμεῖς θέλομεν, ἀλλ’ ἦν ἐκαστὸν ἐτυχε· διὰ δὲ τῆς ὁφύες τῇ πυκνῇ καὶ τοῖς τρόποις τυποῦται. (*Helen* 15).
187 εκ τοῦ γὰρ ἐσοφάν γίγνετ’ ανθρώπως εράν. fr. 29.
188 πλείστας δὲ πλείστοις ἐπιθυμίας ἔρωτος ἐνειργάσατο, ἐνὶ δὲ σώματι πολλά σώματα συνήγαγεν ἀνθρώπον ἐπὶ μεγάλοις μέγα φρονούντων. (*Helen* 4).
Many things produce in people a longing and desire for many things and bodies.\(^{189}\) Gorgias betrays a preoccupation with the physical aspects of desire. It, like speech, is a compelling force. And speech itself, as we saw above, accomplishes things through the smallest invisible body (\(σμικροτάτωι \ σώµατι \ καὶ \ ἀφανεςτάτωι\ldots \ ἀποτελεῖ, Helen 8). 

**The Meno**

Plato briefly addresses Gorgias’ materialism in the *Meno* and there also through parody. The dialogue begins with Meno asking whether virtue can be taught and, if so, how. Socrates professes that he has no idea since he doesn’t even know what virtue is. But in the midst of his first response he mentions Gorgias who has apparently taken on Meno as a student during his stay at Thessaly.\(^{190}\) As their search for the meaning of virtue continues and Meno is only able to list many kinds of virtue but not that which makes them all virtues in the first place, Socrates helps by giving an illustration. If he were to ask ‘What is shape?’, ‘roundness’ is not a sufficient answer because roundness is *a* shape but not shape. If he were to ask ‘What is color?’, ‘white’ is not a sufficient answer because white is *a* color but not color. Meno is still hesitant to answer, so Socrates provides a definition of color – one Meno does not approve of. Socrates then provides another for ‘shape’ and asks Meno to in turn provide his own for ‘color’. The following series of exchanges deserves careful study. When Meno again refuses Socrates asks:

\(^{189}\) \(πολλά \ δὲ \ πολλοίς \ πολλῶν \ ἐφωτα \ καὶ \ πόθον \ ἐνεργάζεται \ πραγμάτων \ καὶ \ σωμάτων. (Helen 18)\)

\(^{190}\) 70b.
Then would you like me to answer you in the manner of Gorgias, which you would find easiest to follow?
– I should like that of course.
Do not both of you say there are certain effluences of existent things, as Empedocles says?
– Certainly
And passages into which and through which the effluences pass?
– To be sure.
…
So now “conceive my meaning” as Pindar says: color is an effluence of figures, sensible and commensurate with sight.¹⁹¹
– Your answer, Socrates, seems to me to be excellently put.
Yes, for I expect you find its terms familiar; and at the same time I fancy you observe that it enables you to tell what sound and smell are, and numerous other things of the kind.
– Certainly.
It is an answer in the high poetic style, Meno, and so more agreeable to you than that about the figure.
– Yes it is.
But yet, son of Alexidemus, I am inclined to think the other was the better of the two; and I believe you also would prefer it, if you were not compelled, as you were saying yesterday, to go away before the mysteries, and could stay a while and be initiated.¹⁹²

After Socrates impresses Meno by imitating Gorgias’ style, he then asserts that his original answer was better. What is the point of invoking and parodying Gorgias’ style only to reject it? Is it just to poke fun at his overly technical manner of speaking? Meno it turns out is under the spell of Gorgias’ pretty-sounding words. They are scientific, borrowing from Empedocles, but also poetic or bombastic (τραγική). This is not an entirely unfair characterization of Gorgias’ position, as we saw in the Helen that sight like words works through the body. And here in the Meno color is a flowing of shapes or ‘effluence of figures’.

¹⁹¹ ἔστιν γὰρ χρώα ἀπορροῆ σχημάτων ὦψει σύμμετρος καὶ αἰσθητός
¹⁹² 76c-e.
VIII Conclusion

In this chapter I hope to have sufficiently demonstrated that Agathon’s speech harbors a set of assumptions about desire and the soul which are based on a kind of materialism, the same sort we find in Gorgias’ Encomium of Helen. Plato parodies these views through the tragedian and has Socrates reveal the true target when he says he feared the head of Gorgias would appear and paralyze him. Nightingale offers a typical interpretation of the passage “Agathon’s speech, in short, was a stylistic tour de force designed to take the listeners’ breath away – to preempt all discourse by striking people dumb.”¹⁹³ Socrates worries that not only will he be struck dumb but even turned to stone. There is here yet another hint of the underlying problem of Agathon’s speech: an ontology which would turn people to nothing other than physical things, a collection of stones. Agathon speaks of Eros as a perfectly beautiful and virtuous god; but Plato leaves enough clues for the reader to recognize that for Agathon, as for Gorgias, desire and the soul are subject to material processes. Plato wants to show his readers the consequences of this impoverished metaphysical view. By thinking that one’s emotions, thoughts, character, and nature are the product of external physical forces, we run the risk of denying the possibility of moral responsibility, as Agamemnon in Homer and Gorgias in his encomium for Helen. Furthermore, by believing desire is a physical thing or processes, we forget the importance of immaterial beauty. Agathon’s speech is a stopping point on the way towards Socrates’ ladder of Beauty. Socrates’ vision is something one

¹⁹³ Nightingale 1995, 112.
must be initiated into, willingly, a perspective one must choose to adopt. His concepts of
beauty and desire are free from compulsion precisely because they are free from or reach
beyond the material workings of nature.
CHAPTER 3: DAMON

I Introduction

As we have seen in the last chapter, Agathon in the *Symposium* borrows much more from Gorgias than his rhetorical style. Agathon inherits his views of *eros* and language from Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen* and Plato represents his positions parodically in order to highlight a particular feature of these views: the materiality of *eros*. The sophist and his student, Agathon, both speak of Desire (and Persuasion) as an irresistible force precisely because it is envisioned as a kind of physical thing that enters and affects a person from the outside.

In this chapter, I turn to the *Republic* and another case-study of Plato’s use of parody as a pedagogical tool. There are many startling proposals in this text, among them a eugenics program where the state arranges couples in rigged lotteries, the abolishment of the family unit so women and children are held in common, the prohibition of certain forms of literature and music, and perhaps most bizarre and ridiculous of all: philosophers are running the show. Instead of trying to ferret out and catalogue every instance of parodic representation in the *Republic* or arguing that the text itself, in its

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194 The reader who wants to take Plato’s suggestion literally – that the world will see no end of trouble until philosophers are rulers (473c-d) – must also take into account that philosophers and politics are elsewhere (when Socrates speaks) usually presented as incompatible: “A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time” *Apology* 32a; “In a city of good men, if it came into being, the citizens would fight in order *not to rule*, just as they do now in order to rule” *Republic* 347d. “The members of this small group have tasted how sweet and blessed a possession philosophy is, and at the same time, they’ve also seen the madness of the majority and realized, in a word, that hardly anyone acts sanely in public affairs and that there is no ally with whom they might go to the aid of justice and survive, that instead they’d perish before they could profit either their city or their friends…” *Republic* 496c-d.
entirety, functions as a parody,195 I will focus primarily on one issue – that of the guardians’ education. This topic is thematically linked to the parody analyzed in the last chapter. I will show that the assumptions underlying Kallipolis’ system of education in the *Republic* have a remarkable affinity with those underlying Agathon’s conception of Desire in the *Symposium*. In the tragedian’s speech, Eros is a subtle but physical force, an external stimulation, which impresses itself on the souls and minds of men. In Kallipolis, people become virtuous (on the inside) by being exposed to representations of virtue (on the outside). This, however, is not a position endorsed throughout the *Republic*, nor need we assume that it is Plato’s view. In fact, Plato’s presentation of this view is a parody of other people’s views.

Once they turn to music education (398c), we are given a clue as to who holds such a view. It is my contention that the reforms for musical education in the *Republic* are not based on theories we can ascribe to Plato, but on theories he makes sure we know belong to someone else: Damon of Oe. That the assumptions and principles underlying the guardians’ music education are Damon’s is clear from 1) the text of the *Republic* itself, 2) the extant fragments of this figure, and 3) the biographical tradition. The *Republic* shows us what taking Damon’s views seriously means for a system of education and a political community: the results are disturbing. Damon here stands as the representative of a certain view of music and, more broadly, a certain view of education.

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195 Plato was certainly not the first author to write about justice and what a just form of government looks like. Antisthenes, another student of Socrates’, wrote a *Περὶ νόμου ἢ περὶ πολιτείας* (Dio. Laer. 6.15) which does not survive. One wonders how it would compare to Plato’s *Πολιτεία*. It is hard to imagine that Plato could have written his own dialogue without such previous and contemporary texts, authors, and ideas in mind. Thus we may never know just how much of the *Republic* is a parodic send-up of or response to other texts.
Broadly speaking, he along with (Plato’s representation of) Agathon and Gorgias, represents a certain ideology. Their conception of human nature and virtue stems from a set of materialistic assumptions which Plato brings to the foreground through his parodies.

One might object that I will be hard-pressed to prove that Plato disagrees with Damon if, in the text, Socrates clearly appeals to and defers to Damon’s views. We should, however, be suspicious whenever Socrates appeals to an authority instead of subjecting authoritative statements to *elenchus*. I intend to show that far from deferring to Damon, Plato brings this theorist’s views center-stage in order that we may clearly see them in action, as it were. Plato wants the reader to consider not the validity of Damon’s position on the character of this or that meter, but rather what a system of education based on his theories would look like. Damon’s theory purports to be about music but it is dependent on a theory about the nature of the human soul. Plato wants to expose the political and moral implications of embracing this metaphysical worldview. He does this by using humor to focus on and highlight its materiality and the implausibility of its evaluative claims. It is for this reason that Plato’s representation of Damon’s views is a kind of parody.

In this chapter I will focus on Damon’s theories about music as a case-study in order to demonstrate the presence and purpose of parody as a pedagogical device. First,

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196 In the *Apology*, for example, even while claiming to trust in the Delphic oracle’s authority, he still sees his life’s mission as an attempt to disprove it.
197 This is an echo of Socrates’ request in the *Timaeus* to see Kallipolis’ constitution ‘in action’ 19b-c. The *Republic* functions as a place where we see theories of education and virtue ‘in action’ rendering us more capable of assessing them and spotting their flaws.
198 This theory has striking similarities with the other case-studies in this dissertation: Gorgias and Cratylus.
however, I follow the argument of the text as we see it develop. The materialist ideology which Damon embraces is present from the foundations of Kallipolis. By spotting and tracking this fixation on physicality from the beginning, we will more easily recognize how it shapes the guardians’ system of education and the view of the human soul which Damon embraces. At the end of the chapter, I will discuss a contrasting view of the soul found elsewhere in the Republic, one distinctly immaterial, non-deterministic, and internally self-directed.

II The City’s Material Foundations

After Glaucon and Adeimantus provide the common arguments they hear against justice and challenge Socrates to give a better defense of it (357a-367e), the philosopher suggests that in order to get a better look at the virtue, they need to examine a larger copy of it. Thus, instead of justice in a man, they determine to first consider what justice is in a city. Instead of getting distracted by all that comprises a contemporary city which they are already familiar with, they construct a new theoretical city from scratch. Here already we see a grossly exaggerated materialist perspective. One would rightly question the legitimacy of this analogy or maneuver in Socrates’ argument – Is it even correct to say that a man is ‘just’ in the same way that a city is ‘just’ or is this a kind of homonymy? Instead of reflexively faulting Plato, one might imagine that Plato perceived the faults of this argument and, nonetheless, intentionally included it. The question then is – Why did he have Socrates make the argument if he knew it was a bad one? One possible answer is that he wanted to show the reader what exactly is bad about this argument or perspective. The bizarre notion of Justice ‘writ-large’ is brought about by the assumption that justice
is a physical thing in the first place, something that we can see with our eyes. This, strictly speaking, isn’t quite true if Justice is a principal, concept, idea, or Platonic form. We can’t see Justice in the city any more easily that we can see Justice in a man because Justice isn’t something that can be seen. It certainly isn’t bigger or larger in a city any more than it is heavier there. We may instinctively reproach Plato for the invalidity of his argument and roll our eyes when his interlocutors miss this. But that is, I believe, part of the point. We, the readers, are shown that Justice is not a physical thing like marks on a piece of paper only when Plato depicts the absurdities of his interlocutors assuming that it is.

This same error haunts the first instantiation of the city. It is determined that no one is self-sufficient; we are in need of too much we cannot provide on our own. That is why people form cities: to more efficiently fulfill these needs. What are these needs? – food, shelter, clothing, an unsurprising list. Glaucon intervenes and points out that this is a city of pigs, unfit for men. He thinks any city worth the name is going to be filled with the luxuries of food, entertainment, and material comfort. As happens so often with characters in the Republic, Glaucon is right to object but not exactly for the reasons he gives. Some scholars think that Kallipolis is doomed from the start because its genesis is rooted in desire, whereas Socrates’ city of Need is the true, pure philosophical city. This is wrong. The humans in Socrates’ city have their material needs fulfilled but Glaucon is right: they might as well be no more than pigs. A fulfilled human life requires more than

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199 Γίγνεται τοινυν, ἵν δ’ ἐγώ, πόλις, ως ἑγώμαι, ἐπείδῃ τυγχάνει ἡμῶν ἕκαστος οὐκ αὐτάρκης, ἀλλὰ πολλῶν <ὦν> ἐνδεής· ἢ τιν’ οἰεί ἄρχην ἄλλην πόλιν οἰκίζειν 369b.

200 For an analysis of the huopolis as the best, healthy city where the distinction between humans and animals are blurred see Dolgert 2014.
sustenance and physical security. There is no desire in the city and, by definition, no desire for wisdom (no *philo-sophia*) either.\(^{201}\)

I interpret the transition of the first city (of Need) to the second (Kallipolis) just as I interpret Socrates’ previous analogy of looking at Justice in a larger font by turning to a larger instance of it in the city. The purpose of the crude argument is that it provides the reader an opportunity to see what is crude about such arguments: the materialist perspective. Instead of idealizing the ascetic and ‘natural’ life of Socrates’ first city, we should realize, along with Glaucon, that such a city is missing something. He just misunderstands what it is missing (hint: it’s not fish-sauce).\(^{202}\) When Socrates proceeds to elaborate on what we need to then add – hairdressers, chefs, swineherds, and nannies – we might wonder whether the citizens of the first city will be truly fulfilled by the presence of these professions and their products.

The added benefits these people provide are nice, to be sure, but the superficiality of the list forces us to ask the question: if it’s *not* hairdressers and fish-sauce that make a city suitable for men, what *is*? *That* is the question Plato is prompting us to answer. He himself draws attention to what is problematic about this list. Socrates says “Surely then our city must be made bigger. For that healthy city is no longer sufficient, but now we must fill it up with a kind of bulk and mass – things which are no longer in the city

\(^{201}\) Stauss similarly observes “The heathy city may be just in a sense but it surely lacks virtue or excellence: such justice as it possesses is not virtue” Strauss 1964, 95. This is precisely because its justice is borne from need and not desire.

\(^{202}\) One of the first things Glaucon mentions is that unlike pigs who eat acorns men in a city should recline, eat of tables, and enjoy fish-sauce (ὀψα) like they do now, 372d-e.
because of necessity.” The idea that the city can be fixed by filling it with more stuff (ὄγκου ἐμπληστέα καὶ πλήθους) is the problem, the mistaken outlook that Plato is exposing. The way to justice, wisdom, and virtue lies not there.

It should be noted that Socrates also includes various artists in his list of what should be added to the city. He significantly labels these people as imitators, all those concerned with shapes and colors. Already this first mention of artists, actors, and musicians harbors many of the issues that will be problematic later on in the text. Glaucon eagerly agrees that these are part of a proper city. But it is not clear why – because of how they can imitate shapes, sounds, and colors? Is that what artists do and why we value them? The best artists enable us to commune with things of immaterial value, through their material medium. The upcoming discussion of education will focus solely on the material dimension of artists and their craft, excising completely any element of the immaterial.

Now that their luxurious city has expanded its desires, they will go to war and need warrior citizens, a class devoted exclusively to this profession. Socrates explains that these guardians are to be like dogs who are gentle to those they know (their fellow citizens) and hostile to those they don’t recognize (foreign enemies). He thus deems these dogs philosophical because they love knowledge and determine friends and enemies by means of knowledge and ignorance. This is usually taken as a joke that expresses

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203 Οὐκοῦν μείζονά τε αὖ τὴν πόλιν δεῖ ποιεῖν ἐκείνη γὰρ ἡ ὑγιεινὴ οὐκέτι ἰκανή, ἀλλ' ἤδη ὅγκου ἐμπληστέα καὶ πλήθους, ἃ οὐκέτι τοῦ ἀναγκαῖον ἑνεκά ἐστιν ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν, 373b.
204 ... οἶον οἱ τε θηρευταὶ πάντες οἱ τε μιμηταί, πολλοὶ μὲν οἱ περὶ τὰ σχῆματα τε καὶ χρώματα, πολλοὶ δὲ οἱ περὶ μουσικήν, ποιηταὶ τε καὶ τούτων υπηρέται, ἢψαυτοὶ, ὑποκριταί, χορευταί, ἐργολάβοι, 373b.
something serious – comparing the guardians to dogs is funny, but, as Socrates
supposedly shows, entirely appropriate.

I, however, find this a rather backhanded compliment. At its core, it is
dehumanizing and insulting that the guardians are to be thought of as or even compared
to dogs. Are dogs (and their guardian counterparts) truly philosophical? Socrates, our
principle model of the philosopher, despite his pursuit of truth is certainly not *hostile*
toward ignorance. What he doesn’t know stimulates his curiosity, not his animosity. This
comparison of human beings to animals in the *Republic* is reminiscent of a similarly
ambiguous suggestion made by Socrates in the *Apology*. There he is at pains to convince
the jury that he is not to be counted amongst sophists like Gorgias, Prodicus, and Hippias.
He relates to the jury the following conversation he has with the wealthy sophist-crazy
Callias.

“Callias, if your two sons had happened to be two colts or two calves, we should be able
to get and hire for them an overseer who would make them excellent in the kind of
excellence proper to them; and he would be a horse-trainer or a husbandman; but now,
since they are two human beings, whom have you in mind to get as an overseer? Who has
knowledge of that kind of excellence, that of a man and a citizen? For I think you have
looked into the matter, because you have children. Is there anyone,” I said, “or not?”
“Certainly,” he said.
“Who,” I asked “and where from, and what is his price for his teaching?”
“It’s Evenus, Socrates. He’s from Paros and the price is five minae.”
And I called Evenus blessed, if he really had this art and taught it at such a reasonable
rate. I myself should be vain and put on airs, if I understood these things; but I do not
understand them, men of Athens. (20a-c).

What is the point of this anecdote? Perhaps we are to take Socrates’ first suggestion as
earnest – that just as horse-trainers train horses, there must be a small number of
knowledgeable human-trainers out there. What he hints in the second half is that Callias
has wasted his money on Evenus who, we are to assume, *lacks* the proper knowledge to
train Callias’ sons. Most readers assume that it is, of course, *Socrates* who has such knowledge, despite his assurances to the contrary. *He* is the human-trainer *par excellence*. I contend however that this illustration is supposed to show the reader something quite different: the folly of thinking that there even could be such a thing as a human-trainer who works according to the same principles as a horse-trainer. What allows the sophists to swindle wealthy Athenians is the very assumption that human beings can be trained just like colts, calves, or dogs, as if humans exhibit or realize their excellence in the same way that animals do theirs. By feigning to adopt this position and showing the obvious problems that arise from it, Socrates reveals to us that the problem is with a faulty assumption. Why can no human-trainer demonstrate a scientific *techne* and produce a reliable product like animal-trainers? And for those who still think that Plato wants to present Socrates as the ideal human-trainer, what do they make of Critias or Alcibiades. Plato certainly doesn’t try to hide these blunders. They should note that even Plato is quick to reveal that Socrates himself has no reliable ‘product’ or *techne*. By having Socrates bring this perhaps unspoken assumption to the foreground (the analogy between trainers training animals and teachers teaching humans), Plato does the opposite of endorsing such a view. Instead, Socrates shows us what is *absurd* and *wrong* with such a view.

It is with this *Apology* passage in mind that I read the *Republic’s* comparison of guardians to dogs. Whatever playful and sophistical reasoning Socrates uses to make dogs seem philosophical, we should balk at the idea of wanting any of our citizens to be dog-like. On a superficial level there are qualities like loyalty which dogs and ideal guardians share. But Socrates unexpectedly and strangely insists that this is a kind of
wisdom. But a wise man’s wisdom is decidedly different than a dog’s. A dog’s virtues (good/desirable behavior) are brought about through habituation; training is a matter of imposing external rewards and punishments and has little to do with (true) knowledge. A philosopher’s virtues and wisdom is, for Plato, something internal. Our actions and habits are conditioned by the condition of our soul, not the other way around.

III Mythopoetic Education in Kallipolis

The conversation now turns to what sort of education these guardians are to have. Socrates explains that education traditionally entails gymnastics for the body and mousikē for the soul. This appears to be a natural division of two distinct kinds of teaching, both in the way one learns and what aspect of the recipient is being improved (body vs soul). As the argument develops, however, I want to suggest that this distinction becomes muddled. It turns out that mousikē – what I call mythopoetic and musical education – is in Kallpolis just another kind of gymnastics; the soul is treated as if it were another component of the physical body. This is part of the recurring theme in the Republic I addressed in the last section. If any reader was skeptical about my attempt to separate Socrates’ apparent fixation on physicality from Plato’s position on the matter, here at least we can agree that the more the soul is made a material thing, the less Platonic the argument becomes.

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205 This could be read as a jab at Antisthenes, a student of Socrates. Although the ‘school’ of ancient Cynicism is most associated with Diogenes of Sinope, the label ‘κύων’ is traced back to Antisthenes, Diogenes Laertius Lives VI.6. If he and Plato both were laying claim to Socrates’ legacy and offering contrasting visions of wisdom, Plato may be showing us that Antisthenes’ wisdom is that of a dog’s, fit for only a kind of habituated soldier.
So far, I have not tried to pin this materialist view on any specific figure, but now that they are talking about education, the field narrows. When discussing stories, imitation, and the soul Socrates appears to espouse ideas belonging to the sophist Gorgias. In the next section, I will show how, far from agreeing with and adapting the theorist Damon’s ideas as his own, Plato has Socrates parody them in order to show the reader what they really entail. In the case of both Gorgias and Damon their views are revealed as resting on a materialist conception of language, sound, the mind, education, and virtue.

As they begin to lay the foundations for their system of education, the distinction between body and soul is agreed to and passed over as self-evident. Since children are told stories from a very young age, that is where their education truly begins and where Socrates and his interlocutors decide to start their analysis. The explanation (377b-377c) here has some surprising details we should attend to carefully. I therefore provide the entirety of the passage in Greek:

Οὐκοῦν οἰσθ’ ὅτι ἀρχὴ παντὸς ἔργου μέγιστον, ἄλλως τε δὴ καὶ νέω καὶ ἀπαλῷ ὀταίρουν; μάλιστα γὰρ δὴ τότε πλάττεται, καὶ ἐνδύεται τύποις ὅν ἄν τις βουλήται ἐνσημαννασθαι ἐκάστῳ. Κομιδὴ μὲν οὖν.

Ἀρ’ οὖν ὑσίος ὡστιοὺς παρήσομεν τοὺς ἐπιτυχόντας ὑπὸ τῶν ἐπιτυχόντων μύθους πλασθέντας ἀκούειν τοὺς παῖδας καὶ λαμβάνειν ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ ἑναντίας δόξας ἐκείνας ὅς ἐπειδὰν τελεῳθόσιν, ἔχειν οἴησόμεθα δεῖν αὐτούς; Οὐδ’ ὀπωσιό̣νον παρήσομεν.

Πρῶτον δὴ ἡμῖν, ὡς οἰκεῖν, ἐπιστατητέουν τοὺς μυθοποιοῖς, καὶ ὅν μὲν ἄν καλὸν [μῦθον] ποίησομεν, ἐγκριτέον, ὅποιον ὃ ἄν μή, ἀποκριτέον. τοὺς δ’ ἐγκριθέντας πείσομεν τὰς τροφοὺς τε καὶ μητέρας λέγειν τοῖς παισίν, καὶ πλάττειν τὰς ψυχὰς αὐτῶν τοῖς μῦθοις πολὺ μᾶλλον ἢ τὰ σώματα ταῖς χερσὶν ὁν ἄλλ’ λέγουσι τοὺς πολλοὺς ἐκβλητέον.
“You are aware that it is the beginning of any undertaking which is the most important part—especially for anything young and tender? That is the time when each individual thing can be most easily moulded, and receive whatever mark you want to impress upon it.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Shall we be perfectly content, then, to let our children listen to any old stories, made up by any old storytellers? Shall we let them open their minds to beliefs which are the opposite, for the most part, of those we think they should hold when they grow up?”

“No. We shall certainly not allow that.”

“For a start, then, it seems, we must supervise our storytellers. When they tell a good story, we must decide in favour of it; and when they tell a bad one, we must decide against it. We shall persuade nurses and mothers to tell children the approved stories, and tell them that shaping children’s minds with stories is far more important than trying to shape their bodies with their hands. We must reject most of the stories they tell at the moment.”

It is not unusual to speak of ‘molding’ children. Even today we say that kids are ‘impressionable.’ But this short excerpt features five instances of this metaphor family. The repetition and vividness of this kind of language renders it more than just a casual or natural metaphor. In fact, the thoughtful reader may see, once such language is highlighted and exaggerated, just how unnatural a conception of education this is. He starts by saying that we should be concerned with the young because that is the age at which they are most easily fashioned or molded (μάλιστα γὰρ δή τότε πλάττεται). Furthermore they adopt or are instilled with whatever form or shape a person wants to stamp upon them (καὶ ἐνδύεται τύπος ὅν ἄν τις βούληται ἐνσημήνασθαι ἐκάστω). The young are, after all, described as ‘tender’ or ‘soft’ (ἀπαλῶ). Like so much else since the founding of the city in the Republic this passage betrays a starkly materialistic set of metaphysical and epistemological assumptions about education and human nature. What does it mean to educate a child? It means that you are shaping and

\[206 \text{Translation Griffith 2000.}\]
molding them into whatever you want, whatever society or its leadership has decided is appropriate. The work and the model are external to the child. Outside forces affect it and determine its nature, which is just the ‘impression’ it adopts. This might make sense when speaking of an infant – how else could an infant be educated? But we will see that this paradigm is retained throughout books 2 and 3. Not only as babies, but even as children they hear stories and take opinions into their minds (…ἀκούειν τοὺς παιδας καὶ λαμβάνειν ἐν ταῖς ψυχαῖς… δόξας…). He ends the section by reinforcing the idea. Mothers and nurses are to shape children’s minds with their stories even more than they shape children’s bodies with their hands (…πλάττειν τὰς ψυχὰς αὐτῶν τοῖς μύθοις πολὺ μᾶλλον ἢ τὰ σώματα ταῖς χερσίν). This rests on the assumption that the mind can be shaped in the way that matter can be shaped.

However reasonable it is to talk about infants in this way, these sections provide the foundation for the guardians’ mythopoetic education. Given what Socrates says about stories, drama, and music in books 2 and 3 we are given no reason to think that anyone can become educated and ‘shaped’ – whether into someone virtuous or vicious – by any other means than receiving the right sense-impressions from the outside. It is not until Books VI and VII with the allegories of the Sun, Line, and Cave that we are told education and wisdom are not a matter of setting the right sights and sounds before one’s senses, but rather about things unseen and immaterial. True education (518b-c) works from the inside out rather than the outside in. Why does Plato advance these two conflicting views of education? I believe that the city which Socrates constructs in Books

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207 See the conclusion of this chapter for discussion of this passage.
2 and 3 and its assumptions about education are not properly ‘his’. Viewing Kallipolis as Plato’s ‘ideal’ city is a mistake. He takes up his interlocutor’s expectations, their views, and sets about answering questions of justice and education on their terms. This might be hard to demonstrate – How can we distinguish between the views of Glaucon & Adeimantus and the views of Plato? – but in the following section on music education, Plato gives us a specific historical person whose ideas and assumptions are independently attested: Damon. In the rest of this chapter I will show how Socrates continues in a particularly and peculiarly materializing vein; but now we know not only that such views are Damon’s, not Plato’s, but also why he has Socrates espouse such views: they function as a parody of Damon’s ideas about music, education, and virtue. The purpose of this parodic representation is to show the reader to what unacceptable conclusions, or worse, to what unacceptable policies such views lead.

IV Music Education in Kallipolis

Throughout most of the discussion of the guardians’ education, Socrates and Adeimantus focus on what kinds of stories should be told and how (376c-398b). After this, the discussion turns to music education (398c-402a). Socrates wants to know what manner of songs and melodies should be employed, if they want to raise virtuous citizen-guardians?²⁰⁸ He begins as usual with a question, a question Glaucon cannot answer:

“And couldn’t anyone presumably work out what we must say about the character these [songs and melodies] must have, if, that is, we intend to agree with what we said before?”

²⁰⁸ τὸ περὶ ὁδῆς τρόπου καὶ μελῶν λοιπόν… 398c.
Glaucon laughed, “I’m afraid, Socrates, it looks then like I’m not ‘anyone’.”

The sons of Ariston are not interchangeable yes-men. They each have their own characters and aptitudes. Adeimantus – and perhaps the uncritical reader – was persuaded that false and immoral stories ought to be banned. But when Socrates suggests that they treat music in the same way and asks for appropriate songs, Glaucon does not offer immediate, unthinking agreement. He is at a loss and, importantly, admits it. He, like us, is wondering: how can you tell which songs are moral and true versus which ones are immoral and false?

Because he does not understand how to apply their principles of story-censorship to music, Socrates treats them to a review of some basic music theory. A song, we learn, is composed of lyrics, a rhythm, and a harmonia. Socrates suggests and Glaucon agrees that different musical modes are suited for and employed on different occasions. Even today we are familiar with how the genre of music in films helps set and reinforce the expected and desired mood of the audience. We know we are in the climactic battle of an epic, a hair-raising horror movie, or a light-hearted romantic comedy at least in part because of the style of the music. Which Greek harmoniai correspond to which moods and mental states? Socrates explains that the Mixolydian and the Syntolydian are suitable for mourning dirges, the Ionian and Lydian for luxurious and debauched parties (398d-e).

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209 ἂρ᾽ ῥήν οὐ πᾶς ἢδη ἥν εὖροι ἄ ἡ μὲν λεκτέον περὶ αὐτῶν οἰα δὲ εἶναι, εἴπερ μέλλομεν τοῖς προειρημένοις συμφωνήσειν; καὶ ὁ Γλαύκων ἐπιγελάσας, ἐγὼ τοῖνυν, ἐφη, ὃ Σώκρατες, κινδυνεύω ἐκτὸς τῶν πάντων εἶναι, 398c.

210 See Strauss City and Man 1964, 90-1, 95, 100; Blondell 2002, 219 ff.

211 Acknowledgement of one’s own ignorance is an important part of Socratic wisdom.

212 ἁρμονία is translated variously as: harmony, attunement, tuning, or mode. For discussion of Greek harmonies see West 1992, 177-189; Hagel 2010 who prefers the designation tonos.
Since this sort of behavior – excessive emotional lamentation and indulging in base desires – is deemed unmanly, they conclude that the modes of music associated with them should be banned from their city (398e).

Glaucon’s confusion has been dispelled. It now seems obvious that a virtuous person should not be exposed to these harmoniae. The matter, however, is not settled. They have so far only given a criterion for expelling certain musical modes. Now, in explaining which modes they should keep, Socrates employs the concept of mimesis.

I’m not well acquainted with the modes, I said, but leave me the mode which can most fittingly imitate (μιμήσατο) the voice and accents of a brave man in time of war or in any violent exertion… and also another one for the man engaged in some peaceful, unforced, freely chosen activity.213

Plato underscores the importance of mimesis to Socrates’ point by having him use the word twice in close succession. Just after the above quote, he concludes: “Those two modes – the forceful and the voluntary – which best imitate (μιμήσονται) the speech of men in good fortune and in bad, the temperate and the brave, leave me those.”214

After the recent discussion and criticism of mimesis (394e-398b), it is odd that Socrates would employ this concept in an apparently positive way. This is what Socrates had said regarding the guardians’ education and the role of mimesis:

If they do imitate anything, then from their earliest childhood they should choose appropriate models to imitate – people who are brave, self-disciplined, god-fearing, free, that sort of thing. They should neither do, nor be good at imitating, what is illiberal, nor any other kind of shameful behavior, in case enjoyment of the imitation gives rise to enjoyment of the reality. Or haven’t you observed that imitations, if they are practiced

213 Όψις οἶδα, ἔφην ἐγώ, ἀλλὰ κατάλειπε ἐκείνην τὴν ἄρμονίαν, ἢ ἐν τε πολεμικῇ πράξει ὄντος ἀνδρείου καὶ ἐν πάσῃ βιαίῳ ἐργασίᾳ πρεπόντως ἀν μιμήσατο φθόγγους τε καὶ προσῳδίας… καὶ ἄλλην αὐτ ἐν εἰρηνικῇ τε καὶ μή βιαίῳ ἀλλ’ ἐν ἐκουσίᾳ πράξει ὄντος (399a-b).
214 ταύτας δύο ἄρμονίας, βίαιον, ἐκουσίον, δυστυχούντων, εὐτυχούντων, σωφρόνων, ἀνδρείων αἰτίνες φθόγγους μιμήσονται κάλλιστα, ταύτας λείπε. (399c)
continually from youth onwards, become established as habits and nature, in body and sounds and in thought? (395c-d)

Imitation is presented as a danger and, indeed, by Book X *mimesis* is specifically characterized as two steps away from reality, inherently defective and false. But in Book III, a young person becomes virtuous *precisely by means of imitation* – he just has to make sure he is imitating the right and not the wrong models. Good men are those who imitate a story’s good characters. What was left unsaid in this discussion of stories is just how one can tell which characters *are* good. We might at first think such a thing is obvious. Plato gives a list of things a virtuous man is not and thus will never imitate: a woman abusing her husband, or ill, or in labor, striving against the gods, boasting, mourning and wailing, slaves, free men doing slavish things, cursing, drunkenness, a common smith or trireme-rower, the sounds of animals, the sounds of nature, or madmen. These are all unbecoming of a gentleman and ought not to be even imitated. This list makes it seem as though what ought and ought not to be imitated is obvious. We ought to imitate the brave man and not the coward. And, surely, all know the difference between a brave man and a coward, a just and an unjust man.

Anyone familiar with the Platonic dialogues, however, quickly discovers that he can hardly be certain he knows for sure what the virtues are. Platonic philosophy provides us with a model of how to move beyond our inherited assumptions and to inquire into the very nature and meaning of courage and justice. In other words, Socrates is here telling us to straightforwardly imitate the virtuous and not even dare to imitate the vicious lest we should become vicious ourselves, but the function of Socrates in Platonic dialogues is to unsettle our notions of virtue and vice. Certainly at the end of the *Laches*
the reader is in a state of *aporia* concerning the definition of courage. The interlocutors thought they knew what acting courageously meant but were unable to give a satisfying definition and account of the virtue.

Plato’s texts are not the only literature to foster a kind of uncertainty and critical reassessment of received ideas. Greek drama can have the same effect. Many tragedies are designed to make the audience question whether any given character is admirable or reprehensible. It turns out that distinguishing virtue and vice isn’t as obvious as *Republic* II and III would have us believe. Characters like Orestes, Antigone, and Medea are protagonists who the audience can’t help but both admire and recoil from. Each of these characters has virtues worth aspiring to and well-articulated reasons for their actions, but it seems unlikely that the guardians in Kallipolis would be encouraged to imitate any of them: a matricide, a death-obsessed criminal, and an infanticidal witch.

Adeimantus should have been more skeptical with Socrates’ explanation of the role of *mimesis* in the section on stories. Men are only to imitate (or be exposed to imitations of) virtue. But it was taken for granted how we can tell which stories, actions, and characters are virtuous. This mistake on Adeimantus’ part is made manifest in the section on music. As explained above, Glaucon admits that he cannot readily tell which modes are virtuous and which are not. Socrates defines them in terms of the virtuous men whom they imitate. We are again brought back to the more fundamental questions of virtue, the good man, and the good. Plato makes these the foundation of his education. He is trying to take a discourse about education and imitation already present in the culture and reveal the problems inherent in its assumptions, the questions it doesn’t ask and cannot answer on its own terms. Damon, in contrast, makes the foundation of his musical
education the good or excellent measure. For him, the compass and due-north for ethical and educational questions is music. The virtuous person is defined in terms of musical phenomenon.

After having asked for modes which appropriately imitate the man virtuous in war and the man virtuous in peace, they realize there are two which they haven’t yet banned: the Dorian and the Phrygian. Glaucon assumes that providence has left them with exactly the two which Socrates requires.\footnote{Lord (1978, 37) has noted that there is something odd about Glaucon’s readiness to accept the Phrygian mode. Usually it is associated with ‘freedom’ in the sense of wild, eastern ecstasies more than the calm temperance Socrates describes. Plato either has a strikingly different understanding of this mode than his contemporaries or he is deliberately misleading his readers, but to what end? I suggest that this surprising mischaracterization of the Phrygian mode prompts the reader to question the veracity of the claims being made.} Having thusly restricted the modes, several instruments are rendered superfluous. They decide that the city will have a use for only the lyre and cithara and maybe the panpipe for herdsmen (399c-d).\footnote{Warren Anderson comments “Plato’s belief that the aulos has the greatest compass of any instrument is what makes him ban it from Kallipolis, the imagined city-state of his Republic,” Anderson 1966, 64. Socrates notes at 399e that the aulos is the instrument of Marsyas and they should follow the Muses in preferring Apollo. Socrates’ argument and this dichotomy are troubled by the fact that in the Symposium Alcibiades likens Socrates to the satyr Marsyas, 215c. Socrates does not have an instrument like the satyr; he needs none but his voice to charm others with his songs. Like, Marsyas, however he was also killed for his impiety.}

At this point Socrates exclaims “By the dog!” and declares that without realizing it they’ve purged the city which earlier they agreed was extravagant.\footnote{\textit{Καὶ νὴ τὸν κύνα. ... λελήθαμέν γε διακαθαίροντες πάλιν ἢν ἄρτι τρυφάν ἐφαμεν πόλιν, 399e.}} It was Socrates’ concessions to Glaucon’s desires for fine living which gave them Luxurious City, Kallipolis, and the guardian class whose proper education they are now concerned with.

We do not have to believe that Plato is earnestly advocating these reforms. This rigid educational system comes not from Socrates but from his \textit{interlocutors’} assumptions.
They have to ban Homer and Hesiod not because Plato thinks they are immoral, but because his interlocutors think (or are all too easily convinced) that a person will inevitably imitate what he watches. They have to ban the Lydian and Ionian modes not because Plato thinks they are immoral, but because his interlocutors think (or are all too easily convinced) that a person will inevitably imitate what he hears. Perhaps after their extreme censorship they have managed to regulate imitation and guarantee virtue. In my view, however, Socrates’ unconventional and startling exclamation – “By the dog!” – is an alert to the reader that something unconventional and startling has happened. We are prompted to wonder whether Socrates’ oath is sincere or ironic – does he really believe they’ve cleansed the city? This in turn makes us wonder whether banning these musical modes and instruments would do a city any good. Of these two questions, the latter is more important. The sincerity of a fictional character’s oath is ultimately inaccessible to us. And even if, at the time, it was not as utterly strange as it seems to us now, the oath, nevertheless, provokes the thoughtful reader to pause and take stock of his claims.

My contention is that this passage and the entire discussion of music is more ambiguous than it might seem on the surface. Right at the moment when Socrates (and Plato) appears to give his seal of approval to the bizarre system of education they have drawn up, the sentiment is undercut by an unconventional oath which should make the reader think twice about how earnest Socrates is being.

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218 pace Hoerber 1963. He argues, based on Gorgias 482b, that the Athenian association of the Egyptian Anubis with their own Hermes – both of whom are associated with the underworld and the former especially with judgment and honesty – renders Socrates’ oath (at least specifically in the Gorgias) a sincere appeal to a principle of honesty. cf. Patzer 2003.
V Damon in the Republic

Socrates carries their assumptions about stories and modes to the case of rhythms and meters which they turn to next. He defines the task:

“Come then, let us purify the rest of it. Following upon modes, we must say something about rhythms, not pursuing complex ones, nor a great variety of meters, but look for which rhythms are those of an orderly and courageous life; and after looking at them compel the meter to conform to that man’s speech, not the speech to the meter and song. Which these rhythms are is for you say, as you did the musical modes.”

“By Zeus, I’m not able to say.” (400a).

The reader has been primed to recognize the pattern: just as some modes are associated with virtue and others with vice, so too are different meters associated with different moral dispositions. If the citizens are to receive a good education, the vicious meters should be banned just like the Lydian and Ionian modes were. But, again, Plato alerts us to the problematic nature of this claim by having Glaucon admit his confusion for a second time (Ἀλλὰ μὰ Δί’, ἔφη, οὐκ ἔχω λέγειν). Meters are apparently not as easy to couple with behavior as are the modes. There is, however, someone who has thoroughly examined meters and determined their moral effects. Here is Socrates’ first mention of Damon in Republic, right after Glaucon’s profession of aporia:

άλλα ταῦτα μὲν, ἢν δ’ ἐγὼ, καὶ μετὰ Δάμωνος βουλευσόμεθα, τίνες τε ἀνελευθερίας καὶ ἐβρεῖς ἢ μανίας καὶ ἄλλης κακίας πρέπουσαι βάσεις, καὶ τίνας τοῖς ἐναντίοις λειτουργοῖς ὀίμαι δὲ μὲ ἀκηρεύειν οὐ σαφῶς ἐνόπλιον τέ τινα ὀνομάζοντος αὐτόν σύνθετον καὶ δάκτυλον καὶ ἦρων γε, οὐκ οἶδα ὅπως διακοσμοῦντος καὶ ἵσον ἄνω καὶ κάτω τιθέντος, εἰς βραχὺ τε καὶ μακρὸν γιγνόμενον, καὶ, ἃς ἐγὼ οἶμαι, ἵσμον καὶ τιν’ ἄλλον τροχαῖον ἀνόμαζε, μήκῃ δὲ καὶ βραχύτητας προσοπέπτει. καὶ τούτων τοιῶν οἶμαι τὰς ἀγωγὰς τοῦ ποδὸς αὐτῶν οὐχ ἦπτον ψεύδειν τε καὶ ἐπαινεῖν ἢ τοὺς ὑσθμοὺς αὐτοὺς—ἡτοι συναμφότερον τι: οὐ γάρ ἔχω λέγειν —ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν, ἀστερὸς εἶπον, εἰς Δάμωνα ἀναβεβλήθωσα: διελέσθαι γὰρ οὐ σιμικροῦ λόγου. ἢ σὺ οἷς μὰ Δί’, οὐκ ἐγὼ γε. (400b-c)
“Well, on these matters also we shall take counsel with Damon, as to which beats are appropriate to ungentlemanly behavior and hubris or mania and other evils, and what rhythms we must leave for their opposites. I think I have heard him obscurely naming a meter ‘in armor’ [a composite], and one called ‘finger’ and a ‘heroic’ which he somehow arranged and made equal up and down, passing into a short and a long, and, as I think, he named something an ‘iamb’ and something else a ‘trochee’, and he added longs and shorts. And in some of these he criticized or praised the tempo of the foot no less than the rhythms themselves, or else some combination of the two; I can’t say. But, as I mentioned, in these matters we should defer to Damon, for it would take us a long time to make a judgment. Or do you think we should try?”

“God, no; I don’t think so.”

It is hard for Glaucon to say which meters are appropriate and which are not. Lucky for him, Socrates knows an expert in such things. What can be gleaned from Damon’s theory of music, as Plato presents it?

(1) He employed technical distinctions between various meters by giving them names.220

(ἐνόπλιον... καὶ δάκτυλον καὶ ἀργόν... ἱαμβόν καὶ τίν’ ἄλλον τροχαῖον)

(2) He associated different rhythms with different mental/moral states, positive and negative. (ἀνελευθερίας καὶ ὑβρεως ἡ μανίας καὶ ἄλλης κακίας... καὶ τίνας τοῖς ἐναντίοις)

(3) He condemned and approved certain meters and perhaps even particular beats. (καὶ τούτων τισίν οἴμαι τὰς ἀγωγὰς τοῦ ποδὸς αὐτὸν ὦχ ἤττου ψέγειν τε καὶ ἐπαινεῖν ἡ τούς ὑθμοὺς αὐτοὺς—ἡτοι συναμφότερον τι)

Damon is cited as an authority on meters. He can settle for them the question of which rhythms should be allowed in their city. However there are several reasons I think we should hesitate before concluding that Plato approved of and accepted Damon’s theories.

First, in the passage under consideration, Plato has Socrates distance himself from Damon’s ideas by repeatedly emphasizing his unfamiliarity with them: ‘οἴμαι δὲ μὲ ἀκηκοέναι οὐ σαράς,’ ὅσι οἶδα ὅπως διακοσμοῦντος,’ ἄς ἐγὼ οἴμαι,’ ήτοι


220 In this respect he is like Prodicus, another prominent 5th century intellectual who made much of fine distinctions in the definitions of words. Damon and Prodicus are in fact associated with one another by Socrates at Laches 197d.
This may simply reflect Plato’s own aversion to technical terminology. But, even in this harmless explanation, an inconsistency is revealed. Can Plato admire and approve of Damon’s rigid terminological scruples while strictly avoiding such things himself? In this passage he is clearly showcasing the categorical nature of Damon’s ideas. Why does he have Socrates feign ignorance or unfamiliarity with them? Warren Anderson says of the peculiarity:

… his apparent hesitation in dealing with details of the Damonian theory of rhythmic ethos – a hesitation which cannot be due to genuine ignorance – must represent Plato either pretending simply as a joke not to know what in fact he knows very well, or for some reason anxious to avoid the appearance of having a specialized knowledge of musical theory, and willing even to indulge in gentle parody.”

Anderson tries to demonstrate that Plato’s musical theories were, though inspired by Damon, different enough that he felt he needed to distance himself from the music theorist. On my view, Anderson did not take his conclusions far enough. He concedes that Plato is “willing even to indulge in gentle parody” but does not consider that this parody may be far more subversive than gentle. Plato does not give us a slightly exaggerated caricature of Damon’s theories in order to distinguish his own ideas from the sophist’s. It is rather that Plato wants to expose the foundations of Damon’s theory of education as laughable. Keep in mind that the context of this digression on music is an attempt to design a system of education which will instill virtue in the citizens of

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221 cf. Phaedo (100d) where doesn’t much seem to care what people call the relationship between particulars and forms. “I maintain this position simply and plainly and perhaps naively that nothing else makes something beautiful except its presence or communion or whatever you want to call it with the Beautiful.” – τούτο δὲ ἀπλῶς καὶ ἀτέχνως καὶ ἵσως εὐθύθως ἔχω παρ᾽ ἐμαυτῷ, ὅτι σὺκ ἄλλο τι ποιεῖ αὐτὸ καλὸν ἡ ἐκείνου τοῦ καλοῦ εἶτε παρουσία εἶτε κοινωνία εἶτε ὅτι δὴ καὶ ὅπως ἐπροσγενομένη.

222 Anderson 1955, 91.
Kallipolis. Taking into consideration the Platonic corpus as a whole, Plato thinks that living virtuously has more to do with knowing one’s self and cultivating the soul through earnest dialogue than with listening to the right kinds of music. Readers of the Republic find Plato’s prohibitions of certain modes, instruments, and meters repulsive. But it turns out that the assumptions motivating these measures are Damon’s and not, as far as we can tell, Plato’s own.

The second reason to doubt that Plato endorses these musical theories is Glaucon’s response to Socrates’ question at the end. As I explained above, Plato primes the reader to find this characterization of Damon’s hyper-technicality either humorously pedantic or confusing or both. Socrates concludes “In these matters we should defer to Damon, for it would take us a long time to make a judgment. Or do you think we should try?” to which Glaucon responds “By Zeus, no I don’t.” (μὰ Δί᾽, οὐκ ἐγώγε). It is easy to rush through this passage because the reader, sympathizing with Glaucon, is all too happy that we are spared a detailed investigation into the nuances of metrical analysis. And besides, aren’t we supposed to be talking about justice? Let’s leave the technical understanding of meters and their ethical effects to the technician, Damon, and get on with the discussion.

But, it is precisely at this point that a critical reader might want to question these Damonian principles – when the opportunity is raised but the interlocutors let it pass by. Which meters or rhythms exactly are conducive to ethical behavior? And how is it that bad meters corrupt their auditors? Plato has Socrates offer Glaucon (and the reader) an opportunity to question this reliance on Damon, but notes that it might require some work
and patience: “… it would take us a long time to make a judgment. Do you think we should try?” Glaucon doesn’t take him up on it; but perhaps the thoughtful reader should. We need not foist onto Plato his interlocutors’ mistake in conceding to Damon the strange notion that some meters are morally enriching and others conducive to vice.

There is yet a third reason this passage shouldn’t be taken as complimentary to Damon as it seems on the surface. Experts of ethics and virtue are always frauds in Plato. If Protagoras, Gorgias, and Thrasy machus are shown to not understand the nature of virtue, despite their reputed expertise, what reason do we have to think that Damon understands virtue, even if he is a master music teacher? The topic of expertise is a theme that runs throughout the dialogues, parallel with the notion of technē and the question of knowledge. According to Terence Irwin and Christopher Bobonich what makes a person wise for Plato is his knowledge of the truth – which is to say his knowledge of the Forms.\footnote{Irwin 1995; Bobonich 2002, 34-39, 86.} This runs contrary to what Plato has Socrates say about his own wisdom – that he is wise because he knows just how much he doesn’t know. As I discussed in the Introduction, one way of accounting for this inconsistency is the idea that Plato more closely follows his teacher in ‘early’ dialogues. ‘Later’ and, supposedly, more ‘mature’ Platonic thought develops the epistemology we see in the Republic and Theaetetus. I follow Charles Griswold who argues that this theory of ‘developmentalism’ in the dialogues “rests on a series of assumptions that are highly suspect.”\footnote{Griswold 1999, 366.} Since we really cannot know the order in which the dialogues were written – only that there are different
narrative styles and characters amongst them – any argument about the early ‘Socratic’
doctrines and the later ‘Platonic’ doctrines is tenuous at best.

Rod Jenks has argued that “because the kallipolis necessarily degenerates,
because of the way in which it degenerates, and finally, because the Philosopher Ruler
disappears with her supportive context, the Philosopher Ruler would not be of any use
whatsoever as a moral expert.”225 Throughout the dialogues Socrates is skeptical of any
sort of moral expert. The sophists stand out in particular but the problem isn’t just that
they got it wrong; the idea that they have and teach knowledge which could constitute a
politiķē technē is exposed as unlikely. David Roochnik has shown that far from moral
expertise being a positive principle in Plato’s dialogues, the introduction of virtue and
knowledge as a sort of technē is precisely what, in several aporetic dialogues, steers the
conversation to a dead-end.226 For these reasons, Damon’s expertise in music-theory-as-
ethics is not any reason for us to think Plato was sympathetic to his views.

Once we take all this into account, it becomes harder to believe that Plato
subscribed to Damon’s theories and that his parody is gentle play. The function of the
parody here, as in Aristophanes, is to show us something true, by highlighting and
exaggerating a distinguishing feature of the object under consideration. Plato presents a
parody of Damon’s views in order to show the reader what is wrong with them. Many

225 Jenks 2008, 43.
226 Here he explains how this understanding of technē relates to the dialogue form: “On my reading, the
literary form Plato chooses is essentially related to the philosophical content he wishes to express. The
dialogue is not merely a pedagogical device, nor is it meant to conceal a positive, nondialogical teaching. It
is not provisional in the sense that Plato hopes someday to be able to replace it with a treatise or a technē.
Instead, it is essential to the Platonic teaching. Moral knowledge is nontechnical. It is not reducible to a set
of true propositions. It must embrace word and deed. And only the dialogue form can adequately explain
readers have rejected the policies of Kallipolis. But they thought they were rejecting Plato, when they may have in actuality been rejecting those contemporaries of his whose views he held up to scrutiny.

Despite all these warning signs that we should be skeptical, Socrates and his interlocutors continue their discussion. They move on to physical education and how it should be balanced with music education (410d); the distinction is made between the true guardians and auxiliaries; the noble lie is introduced (114c); and at what is almost the end of their description of Kallipolis and its laws, Damon is again invoked by name.

τούτου ἀνθεκτέον τοῖς ἐπιμεληταῖς τῆς πόλεως, ὡς ἂν αὐτοὺς μὴ λάθη διαφθαρὲν ἀλλὰ παρὰ πάντα αὐτὸ φυλάττωσι, τὸ μὴ νεστερίζειν περὶ γυμναστικῆν τε καὶ μουσικῆν παρὰ τὴν τάξιν, ἀλλ' ὡς οἶδον τε μάλιστα φυλάττειν. ....

εἴδος γάρ καίνον μουσικῆς μεταβάλλειν εὐλαβητέον ὡς ἐν ὅλῳ κινδυνεύοντα οὖραμον γὰρ κινοῦνται μουσικῆς τρόποι ἀνευ πολιτικῶν νόμων τῶν μεγίστων, ὡς φησί τε Δάμων καὶ ἐγὼ πείθομαι. (424b-c).

The oversees of our city must keep a firm grip on our system of education, protecting it above all else, and not allowing it to be destroyed accidentally. They must reject radical innovation in physical or musical education, preserving them as far as they can unchanged...

They must guard against changing to some new form of music, since it would endanger the whole system of education. For never are the styles of music changed without a change in the most important laws/customs of the city. That’s what Damon says and I’m persuaded.

It is easy to take this as Plato’s prescription for a virtuous city: massive censorship and an aversion to novelty in music. What we can be sure of is that, Plato first associates this view with Damon and only then has Socrates voice his approval. He is ‘persuaded’ (ἐγώ πείθομαι). But are we? The claim is that change in music must be rejected if one wants
to preserve the state because changes in music bring changes to society’s laws or customs (πολιτικῶν νόμων τῶν μεγίστων). This is just another iteration of the problem we examined earlier about mimesis. Socrates, following Damon’s line of thinking, has made a city with the right kind of (music) education. And now if they make any changes in music, the theory they have accepted tells them that society will also be changed – for the worse. This is like the discussion of the gods in book II when Socrates argues that they must be unchanging: because the gods are perfect, any change would be a change for the worse. He thus rejects stories about the gods changing shape. There are two main problems with this view as it concerns education. First, it is backwards, assuming that a society’s character is determined by the character and quality of their gods. Is it not rather the other way around that the character and nature of a society’s gods is determined by the people in it? Their conception of the divine is a reflection of their own values, their conception of the good and beautiful. The second problem with this Damon-inspired way of thinking is the idea that a society has some character apart from the individuals in it. The only way for changes in music to change the customs or ways of a society is for it to change the souls of its members. But this all rests on the assumption that a soul is something malleable and shaped by external forces. The greatest testament for the contrasting view – that the human soul is a wellspring of creativity and profundity, shaping and sanctifying the outside world – is the Platonic corpus itself. I argue that we

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227 In Plato’s *Euthyphro* and Aristophanes’ *Clouds* characters justify their own questionable actions by referring to the portrayal of the gods in Hesiod. But Xenophanes had already written that different nations conceive of their gods as looking like their own people. The interlocutors in the *Republic* are filled with an anxiety about what kinds of gods they depict so that their people will be virtuous. But, maybe they should follow Xenophanes in a more abstract vein: seek virtue and to be virtuous; then they’ll know what kind of divinities they need (if they still need them, after that).
should attribute this deterministic, material theory of music and education to Damon. So far, I have focused just on Plato’s text of the Republic. Now I will look at other references to Damon and his theories.

VI Damon Outside the Republic

Damon is not just a name, a fiction, or a blank canvas Plato can paint as he likes. He was a well-known Athenian intellectual in the 5th century. In this section I examine the figure Damon in order to explain why Plato has Socrates appeal to him at this particular point in the dialogue. One way to interpret the Republic is that Plato is describing what a city would look like when held to the rigorous standards of his own rational philosophy. On this view, the educational system and state-censorship, however shocking, is just where Plato was led by his philosophical commitments. Thus Socrates invokes Damon and defers to his conclusions about moralizing music because Damon is an expert and his views compliment Plato’s own. On my view Socrates’ interlocutors are led to a shocking educational system because of the philosophical commitments of people like Damon, positions we need not think Plato held. What we see in the Republic is Plato having Socrates work through some of the consequences of such positions. Damon, I will now show, had a view of music and, more importantly, a view of human nature and ethics which are inconsistent with what we think of as ‘Socratic’ or ‘Platonic’.

I have already discussed Damon’s views as represented in the Republic. If, as I argue, Plato didn’t agree with Damon’s views about music, might he not have unfairly

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228 Isocrates, for instance, says that Damon was reputed to be the wisest of the citizens in his time (τοῦ κατ’ ἐκείνον τόν χρόνον φρονιμωτάτου δόξαντος) Antidosis 15.235.
characterized them? Yet, we cannot charge Plato with doing Damon an injustice in this way because we have independent testimony which corroborates the descriptions found in the Republic.

From Athenaeus we learn that Damon’s school believes:

Song and dance necessarily arise when the soul is in some way moved; free and noble songs make a similar kind of soul, while the opposite kind make the opposite kind of soul.\(^{229}\)

This is similar to the statement of Damon’s views in the Republic but different enough that Athenaeus does not seem to have extrapolated the idea from Plato’s text. In the Republic it is not clear how rhythms and a person’s moral character are related. Plato speaks of beats (βάσεις) being appropriate for or suited to (πρέπουσαι) shameful behavior and other rhythms (ῥυθμούς) for their opposite kinds of behavior (τοῖς ἐναντίοις). The quote from Athenaeus is more explicit. The soul is somehow moved (κινουμένης πως); and certain kinds of songs and dances make (ποιοῦσι) souls of the same kind.

Philodemus attributes to Damon the following position:

In singing and playing the lyre a boy ought properly to reveal not only courage and moderation but justice.\(^{230}\)

One can imagine that a student needs both courage and moderation or self-possession in order to play an instrument beautifully and nobly. But, Damon, perhaps surprisingly, adds

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\(^{229}\) οὐ κακῶς δ’ ἔλεγον οἱ περὶ Δάμωνα τὸν Ἀθηναίον ὅτι καὶ τὰς ἡμείας καὶ τὰς ὁρχήσεις ἀνάγκη γίνεσθαι κινουμένης πας τῆς ψυχῆς, καὶ αἱ μὲν ἐλευθέριοι καὶ καλαὶ ποιοῦσι τωμάτις, αἱ δ’ ἐναντίαι τὰς ἐναντίας. Athenaeus Deipnosophistai 628c.

\(^{230}\) λέγειν γὰρ αὐτῶν, προσήκειν ἄφθωντα καὶ καθαρίζοντα τὸν πανθεόν μη μόνον ἄνδρες<αν ἐμφαίνεσθαι καὶ σωκρατύνην, ἄλλα καὶ δικαιοσύνην. Philodemus of Gadara Mus. 3.77.13-17.
justice which is a more political virtue. What does singing have to do with being just? We do find later in the *Republic* that the virtues have two aspects – both as social relations in the city and psychic relations in the individual. Later a specific virtue, *sophrosunē*, is described as a kind of concord or harmony.\(^{231}\) And in the *Phaedo* Simmias suggests that the soul itself is considered a kind of harmony.\(^{232}\) Often in Plato, virtue is understood in relation to the soul; ethics is a matter of one’s character. Pythagoreans, like Simmias above, had proposed that the soul is a kind of harmony. So, it is not strange to think that the soul and virtue and harmony are somehow similar. But the significance of Damon’s contribution is that the virtuous soul is not only like harmony or a kind of harmony, but for him music and rhythm affect and shape the soul, rendering it harmonious if the music was harmonious or ungraceful if the music was ungraceful.

These other sources do tell us a bit about Damon’s theories, but what about the man? It turns out that Damon was much more than a music teacher or theorist. While not a career politician or demagogue, he was implicated in the politics of his day. In a dialogue titled ‘*Politeia*’, this is certainly relevant to our understanding the baggage which invoking Damon’s name brings. In this section I consider the implications of Damon’s biography on the meaning of his presence in Plato’s text.

Much has been made of Pericles’ association with sophists and thinkers.\(^{233}\) And while the focus has been on largely on Anaxagoras, we find in *Alcibiades* I: “It is said,

\(^{231}\) συμφωνίας τινι καὶ ἁρμονίας προσέοικεν, Republic 430e.
\(^{232}\) 85e-86d
\(^{233}\) For a good discussion see Podlecki’s *Perikles and His Circle*, 1998.
Socrates, that [Pericles] has not become wise all on his own, but by spending time with many wise men, both Pythocleides and Anaxagoras. And even at his present age he still associates with Damon for this same reason.” Are we to think that Pericles was taking music lessons from Damon? What wisdom could Damon offer to a man like Pericles? Regardless, the passage comes off as a light insult to the statesman. His wisdom isn’t his own, but others’. Damon is not mentioned in any of the extent plays by Aristophanes, but Plutarch cites the comedic playwright Plato who says that Damon was Pericles’ Cheiron. Here again Damon is cast as more than a music teacher. He is to be numbered along with Pericles’ other philosophical teachers and advisors, Zeno and Anaxagoras.

Robert Wallace has argued that Damon plays a peripheral role in the infamous trial of the profanation of the mysteries. The insulting parody allegedly took place at the house of Charmides. Alcibiades, Axiochus, and Adeimantus stood among the accused. We see Damon associated with a few of these men when in the pseudo-Platonic Axiochus he arrives with Kleinias (the son of Axiochus) and Charmides. Also intriguing is the fact that Damon’s former wife, Agariste, provided the testimony against those on trial.

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234 Λέγεται γέ τοι, ὦ Σώκρατες, οὐκ ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτομάτου σοφὸς γεγονέναι, ἀλλὰ πολλοῖς καὶ σοφοῖς συγγεγονέναι, καὶ Πυθοκλείδη καὶ Ἀναξαγόρας καὶ νῦν ἐτί τηλικοῦτος ὃν Δάμωνι σύνεστιν αὐτοῦ τοῦτος ἔνεκα. (118c)
235 οὐ μὴν ἔλαβεν ὁ Δάμων τῇ λύρᾳ παρακαλύμματι χρώμενος, ἀλλ’ ἡς μεγαλοπράγμων καὶ φιλοτύραννος ἐξωστρακίσθη καὶ παρέσχε τοῖς κωμικοῖς διατριβήν. ὁ γοῦν Πλάτων καὶ πυνθανόμενον αὐτοῦ τίνα πεποίηκεν ὅτι
237 Andocides in de mysteriis (1.11-18).
Damon’s political role is even more explicit in the pseudo-Aristotelian Athenaios politeia.

“Since Pericles’ wealth fell short for this expense, he took the advice of Damonides of Oea (he it seems was the author of many things for Pericles, and it was for this reason that later they banished him), when he was weak in his personal things, to give to the many their own things, he instituted a payment for the courts.”

In another article Wallace insists that the name Damonides is a mistake and that this is really our Damon. But, even if it had been his father, it would be remarkable how intertwined this family is with Pericles and his politics. In the same article Wallace argues that Perikles often used others to sponsor his legislation to protect himself. That way if the Demos came to dislike the policy, they might very well have ostracized the proposer of the bill instead of Pericles himself. We have four ostraka with Damon’s name on them, so there’s good reason to think this actually happened. Wallace dates the ostracism to c. 441.

With all of this information, Plutarch’s further characterization of Damon is less far-fetched and is likely to have some basis in fact. In Life of Aristides 1, he says that Damon was banished because he was ‘too intelligent’. In Life of Nicias 6 he says that the Demos was always suspicious of those who were clever, and therefore they ostracized Damon. Finally, in Life of Pericles 4, he calls Damon “a sophist of the highest order, who

238 πρὸς δὴ ταύτην τὴν χορηγίαν ἐπιλειπόμενος ὁ Περικλῆς τῇ οὐσίᾳ, συμβουλεύουσαντος αὐτῷ Δαμωνίδου τοῦ Οἰήθεν (ὃς ἐδόκει τῶν πολλῶν εἰσηγητῆς εἶναι τῷ Περικλεί: διὸ καὶ ὠστράκισαν αὐτὸν ὑστερον), ἐπεὶ τοῖς ἰδίοις ἑττάτο, διδόναι τοῖς πολλοῖς τὰ αὐτῶν, κατεσκεύασε μισθοφορὰν τοῖς δικαστήριοις: (27.4).


240 He does so because the Laches takes place about ten years after 441 and Socrates seems to speak of Damon as if one could find him in Athens.
hid behind the name of music, concealing from the *hoi polloi* his cleverness. He associated with Perikles, that athlete of politics as it were, as a rubber and trainer”, but was ostracized as “a great meddler (μεγάλοπράγμων) and lover of tyranny (φιλοτύραννος).”

What all of this tells us is that Plato’s allusion to Damon is not a simple appeal to an authority on music education. If Damon was a part of Pericles’ intellectual circle and someone who the Demos had exiled, it’s possible that he not only *theorized* about music and ethics, but was advocating to see his theories realized in Athens. A half a century later Plato still found his views important enough to address. The goal of this chapter has been to show that the education of the guardians in Kallipolis does not represent Plato’s ideal pedagogy but is rather a parody of Damon’s views. And yet, this parody is not intended only as a joke or comic sendup. He treats the topic with such seriousness and at such length that his goal is not to dismiss Damon’s ideas out of hand. Rather, Plato sees them for what they are and uses parody to educate his readers. He follows Damon’s assumptions about music, education, and virtue to their logical conclusion and shows the reader what would be required to see them manifest in a city. The result, the severe system of education in Kallipolis, is a city on the sophist’s terms, on terms accepted too easily by Glaucon and Adeimantus. The modern reader who rejects the city for its fascist policies, too quickly faults Plato for such misguided idealism. The *Republic* (or at least the construction of the city) is a kind of thought-experiment, it is true, but the purpose is to subject the thoughts of Damon to a test.
VII Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that Socrates and his interlocutors construct Kallipolis with a materialist ideology. This focus on the physical aspects of the city contaminates the educational system they set up. Their discussion is guided by an assumption that a person’s character is directly affected by what their senses are presented with. This is why the meticulous selection and criticism of stories and music ranges on for so long. The theory invoked to support the endeavor is that of mimesis which, especially before the metaphysical account given in Book X, can be summed up: monkey see, monkey do. The youth are not to witness a warrior weeping or they too will weep; they must not listen to sensuous music or they too will become overly sensual.

Instead of attributing these reforms to Plato as if they were genuine recommendations, I have argued that Plato is representing a contemporary materialism which is not his own. In this dissertation we will meet several representatives of materialist worldview whose ideas he parodies: Gorgias, Cratylus, and in this chapter, Damon. In the Introduction I discussed two views which are alternatives to the theory of learning found in the guardians’ education. Socrates’ description of anamnesis in the Meno and his description of education after the analogy of the Cave Republic VII. It might not do us much good to argue over which particular versions of which view Plato held. The function of the dialogues is to make us aware of the views and assumptions exerting influence on us and to provide us a way of navigating them.

Socrates led Adeimantus and Glaucon on when identifying good stories and music; but when it comes to identifying and defining the Good, he refuses. Instead of
relying on an expert, he uses the analogies to gesture towards it. They will have to work it out for themselves. The movement of philosophy and the practice of Socrates is to lead people away from certainty and toward authentic inquiry, away from practical matters and toward more abstract and general concepts. Consider briefly the *Laches*. The question Lysimachus and Melesias want answered is whether they should send their sons to the weapons expert. When they defer to the expertise/authority of the two generals, the answer is still not clear, since one recommends and the other criticizes martial-arts training. When they turn to Socrates to unravel the issue, he elevates the discussion to excellence in warfare and the nature of the virtue courage. The interlocutors have a practical question before them and even when the discussion turns to courage, they are initially fixated on coming up with specific examples and instances of courage, almost like scenes or pictures of courage they have seen or can imagine. In the *Republic* Socrates asks and addresses a series of practical questions first about justice and then about the just city. But by Book VI he has abstracted the discussion to the Good itself. This maneuver or trajectory is common in Plato’s dialogues. The *Symposium* also proceeds from the more social/physical to the intellectual/immaterial (with Alcibiades’ speech serving as a significant post-script).

And in case we weren’t convinced that true education is a matter of orienting one’s own soul and not a matter of controlling external sensual stimuli, Socrates continues to explicate the consequences of the Cave analogy in Book VII:

So while the other things we call virtues of the soul may perhaps be quite close to the virtues of the body, since it’s true they are not there to start with, but are implanted by custom and habit, the virtue of rational thought is different. It seems that it really is made
of some more divine material, which never loses its power, but becomes useful and beneficial, or useless and harmful, depending on which way it is facing.\textsuperscript{241}

We are familiar with virtues of the body, like strength, being ‘implanted by custom and habit’ (ἐμποιεῖσθαι ἐθεσι καὶ ἀσκῆσεσιν). And it’s possible that virtues of the soul are quite similar (ἐγγύς τι). That is at any rate how they talked about making their guardians just and courageous in Books III and IV: by controlling external stimuli, essentially habituating them to representations of virtue and thus imparting it. But now we find an addition or caveat: the virtue of thinking (ἡ [ἀρετή] δὲ τοῦ φρονήσαι) is unlike the others. Perhaps we cannot impart thought, understanding, or wisdom to others by presenting them with the correct stimuli. The interlocutors may, then, be wondering how one \textit{could} teach such a virtue. Mindfulness is divine, entirely more divine than the other virtues (παντὸς μᾶλλον θειότερον τινός). And, as he states just before this passage about education, mindfulness is something we can only find and bring forth from the inside.

I hope to have shown not only that Plato was no advocate for Damon’s views of music and education, but furthermore \textit{why} he wasn’t. Although only named twice, Damon represents a materialist view of virtue, education, and indeed social engineering which provides the foundation for Kallpolis. Plato has Socrates set out from this starting point for a number of reasons. First, it would seem these assumptions were likely those of

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{241} Αἱ μὲν τοῖνυν ἄλλαι ἄρεται καλούμεναι ψυχῆς κινδυνεύονσιν ἐγγύσ τι εἶναι τῶν τοῦ σῶματος – τῷ ὁντὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἐνοῦσαι πρότερον ὑστερον ἐμποιεῖσθαι ἐθεσι καὶ ἀσκῆσεσιν – ἡ δὲ τοῦ φρονήσαι παντὸς μᾶλλον θειότερον τινός τυγχάνει, ὡς ἔοικεν, οὕτα, ὅ τὴν μὲν δύναμιν οὐδέποτε ἀπόλλυσιν, ὑπὸ δὲ τῆς περιαγωγῆς χρήσιμον τε καὶ ἄφελιμον καὶ ἄχρηστον αὖ καὶ βλαβερὸν γίγνεται. (518d-ε).
\end{footnotesize}
his interlocutors. Socrates chooses to adopt them because this provides some common
ground and an agreed upon point of departure. If he were to disagree with first principals
from the outset, it may become too abstract too quickly. Additionally, when a
disagreement starts with the lines drawn and both sides know that neither will budge from
their stance, it makes the argument and the search for progress a non-starter. If Socrates is
committed to anything, it is that the dialogue must continue. In fact, Socrates
frequently concedes to the positions of an interlocutor, but provisionally so, until it can be
shown to be inconsistent or unacceptable. Let us look at the beginning of the Republic.

Thrasymachus provides a model of a hostile interlocutor whose demands and
positions Socrates nonetheless entertains. Thrasymachus wants Socrates to offer a
definition of justice but rules out a string of potential answers: “Come on, why don’t you
give some answers yourself? Tell us what you say justice is. And don’t go telling us that
it’s what’s necessary, or what’s beneficial, or what’s advantageous, or what’s profitable,
or what’s good for you. I won’t take any of that stuff.” (336d). This hardly seems fair,
especially given that Thrasymachus himself will soon define justice as ‘what is
advantageous for the stronger’. But Socrates confronts the idea and undermines it on its
own turns. When he points out that rulers might be mistaken about what truly constitutes
an advantage to them, Thraymachus at first agrees. It turns out, then, that if a law happens
to harm the ruling class, a just man who obeys the law will not meet Thrasymachus’

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242 “If anyone, with his mind fixed on all these objections and others like them, denies the existence of
ideas of things, and does not assume an idea under which each individual thing is classed, he will be quite
at a loss, since he denies that the idea of each thing is always the same, and in this way he will utterly
destroy the power of carrying on discussion [τὴν τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι δύναμιν]. You seem to have been well
aware of this.” Parmenides 135c.
definition since acting justly will not entail the advantage of the stronger. Cleitophon tries
to defend the sophist by suggesting that he really meant was “justice is whatever the
stronger think is good for them.” Polemarchus protests that that isn’t what Thrasymachus
said. But Socrates does not want to quibble about it: “It’s neither here nor there,
Polemarchus. If those are the words Thrasymachus is using now, let’s take it in that
sense.” (340c). Instead of accepting the emendation, Thrasymachus denies that rulers
make mistakes. He claims that rulers, in so far as they are rulers, do not make mistakes
when they are ruling (340d-e). Socrates accepts even this counter-intuitive claim and
confronts it on its own terms. This example is meant to show that it should not be
surprising that Socrates adopts the assumptions of the interlocutors. The materialistic
foundations of the city and Damon’s music theory are further examples of this method.
Instead of denying them outright, he is willing to entertain them and present them in such
a way that their flaws are exposed. In the instance of the humorous exaggerations of the
educational theory of the Republic, Plato does so via parody.

The goal of parody itself provides a further reason for adopting other people’s
views. For if Socrates wanted simply to defeat a rival position he could marshal
arguments against it or, perhaps, not even deign to mention it, consigning it to oblivion.
Plato, however, wants to put a spotlight on different worldviews and ideas, to show them
for what they are, to highlight aspects or consequences of these views which were either
hidden or ignored. Parody provides a means by which this may be accomplished but also
entails adopting and representing views he doesn’t himself accept.

There is one final reason that Socrates is preoccupied with the physical aspects of
the city and a sensory-input obsessed educational system, beyond the fact that he wanted
to confront this opposing position on its own terms and reveal something about it through parody. Perhaps the reason this worldview is so prevalent in the first six books of the *Republic* is because it was an especially prevalent and popular, widely accepted (though perhaps unconsciously assumed) view. If Plato’s contemporaries for the most part believed that the unjust live happier lives because of the material advantages they accrue, that a man’s soul is shaped by what he sees and hears through an impersonal, natural process, and that knowledge is a kind of possession which the wise have and hand over to the ignorant, then the philosopher has quite an uphill battle to fight. In the *Republic* Socrates argues a) for the value of justice and knowledge apart from any material gain and b) that education and the virtues are capacities and qualities of every individual’s immaterial soul, not something which enter into it from outside. Plato leads his readers here by having Socrates first take the opposing view at face value and taking it to its logical conclusion. This is ultimately a kind of parody where his exaggerated adoption and representation of another’s view results in not only a fair amount of humor but also our new appreciation of what such a view really entails.
CHAPTER 4: CRATYLUS

I Introduction: The Problem of the Cratylus

There is an ongoing debate about just how funny the Cratylus is supposed to be. In this chapter I offer an answer to the more productive question of how the Cratylus is supposed to be funny. What is really at stake is how to interpret the dialogue: which stated positions within it have merit and which are shown, through humor, to be untenable. This debate should thus not be interpreted as a disagreement about whether to take the dialogue seriously. Those who, like me, acknowledge the dialogue’s humorous and parodic aspects are not trying to dismiss it as silly and philosophically shallow. We have learned from Aristophanes that a text or even a joke can be both humorous and serious at the same time. The ‘aha moment’ of getting a joke can simultaneously be an ‘aha moment’ of seeing, realizing, and understanding something.

The argument in Plato’s Cratylus is about language and the correctness of names (ὀρθότης τῶν ὄνομάτων). This becomes an exploration into how words mean what they mean and what kind of language we should use in order to speak most truthfully. This seems a sober enough topic. It is, however, my contention that one must see or ‘get’ the joke(s) in the text in order to understand what Plato is doing. My intent in this chapter is not to argue that Plato’s Cratylus is funny (explaining a joke always has the unfortunate consequence of making it less funny). There is already scholarly consensus

243 καὶ πολλὰ μὲν γελοία μὲν ἐ- / πείν, πολλὰ δὲ σπουδαῖα. (Frogs 389-90).
that Plato’s dialogues, in general, contain plenty of humor.\textsuperscript{244} And even those who argue for taking Socrates’ arguments in the \textit{Cratylus} as earnest expressions of Plato’s philosophy of language are willing to concede that parts of the dialogue are playful or tongue in cheek. The important point is not \textit{that} or \textit{how} the dialogue is funny but \textit{why} it is funny. To what end does Plato employ humor here? – to be engaging and entertaining? – to spic up an otherwise dull, technical exposition of his position? – to render it less dogmatic with the addition of numerous qualifications of doubt and self-deprecation – to unfairly characterize and denigrate opposing views? I make the case first, that large swaths of Socrates’ argument in the \textit{Cratylus} are a parodic representation of a certain view of words and second, that he uses the humor of the parody to help his readers see what is wrong with this ‘naturalistic’ and materialist view of words which sees them as made up of physical bits of the reality they denote. In this way Plato’s humor is seriously funny – funny and serious both. Although the reader is meant to laugh at the views Socrates parodies, the philosophical work of the dialogue is not negative but positive in the way in which it enables us to see and understand the assumptions and consequences of various views about language.

Scholarship on the dialogue breaks down into those who see Plato as advancing his own theory of language in the dialogue and those who believe he is offering criticism of a prevailing theory of language. The former are usually less inclined to see the dialogue as humorous or parodic. The latter argue for the dialogue’s critical intent and cite its humor as evidence. The two are thus at something of a stalemate. While not

\textsuperscript{244} For works on humor in Plato see Greene 1920; Strauss 1966; Brock 1990.
escaping the hermeneutic circle, I hope to abstract from these two opposed camps by placing the dialogue in the context of the other cases studied in my project. Certain metaphysical and ethical concerns are emphatically and/but unnecessarily at issue in the dialogue. It is yet another example of how Plato uses parody to confront what is really a kind of materialism as it applies to language.

The perplexing aspects of the dialogue and the tone of its modern reception was set by Schleiermacher who called the central etymological demonstration “trifling and unmeaning play.” In order to proceed from and escape the text’s apparent absurdity and triviality, one must either discount its humor or account for it. David Sedley and Francesco Ademollo have downplayed the humor in favor of viewing the text as a sober examination of the issue at hand and an earnest expression of Plato’s thoughts on the correctness of words. When faced with the far-fetched and explicitly ridiculous derivations Socrates provides, Sedley counters “Whether or not those ancient beliefs further turn out to be true – whether, that is, the etymologies are also philosophically correct – is a separate question. My present contention is just that Socrates regards the etymological decipherments as by and large exegetically sound.” The etymologies Socrates offers are certainly untrue and mostly implausible, but Sedley argues that this kind of manipulation of words was just one of the tools or methods available to a fourth century Greek intellectual. He refers to other instances of the practice elsewhere in Plato and notes that Aristotle cites some of the etymologies approvingly. From his perspective, once we take the etymologies ‘seriously’ (i.e. humorlessly) we can get on to the serious

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245 Schleiermacher 1836, 229.
246 Sedley 2003, 41.
task of grappling with the philosophical theory of language expressed. Ademollo takes a similarly skeptical view of the dialogues purported humor: “… the etymologies are unlikely to be an enormous send-up or anything else of that sort. They are not primarily directed against anyone; and Socrates and Plato regard at least most of them as plausible reconstructions of the original form of the words analyzed.”

Several scholars, however, acknowledge the humor in the etymologies. Nevertheless, they do not allow the humor to detract from the seriousness of Plato’s project. Michael Palmer sees the dialogue as Plato’s attempt to advance his own philosophical theory of language. He concludes:

> Since *ousiai*, and not the namemaker’s preconceptions about reality, provide the only basis for any distinctions that can be called natural… Plato’s view of the correctness of names may properly be called a ‘nature’ theory. Names are correct if and only if they are given in accordance with nature and adequately describe what they name.

Riley (2005) sees the dialogue’s structure and trajectory as analogous to the divisions of the Line from the *Republic* (*eikasia, pistis, dianoia, noesis*). Yet he says “I am also proposing that he follows the form of a *reductio ad absurdum* proof for the entirety of the dialogue.” Joseph (2000) also sees the etymologies as critical: “We may not be able to learn anything about ultimate realities… But at least dialectic provides some hope of learning. Etymology, rhetoric, grammar and the rest of linguistic study do not.”

Baxter argues that we must confront the etymologies, saying there is room for “… work that tries to produce a more unified interpretation, one that does not regard the

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249 Riley 2005, 8.
250 Joseph 2000, 81.
etymologies as a tedious display of Socrates’ verbal dexterity, but tries to explain how they are an essential part of the dialogue.” He concludes that “Plato is attacking the way in which various representatives of Greek culture have misunderstood the relationship between names and things”.

Ewegen emphasizes the comic play of the dialogue, taking this to be representative of the unavoidable play of language in general. He argues that the etymologies present “nothing other than the technological/tragic view of language, yet in such a way as to resist it comically. By offering a comic pastiche of this view, Socrates has been critiquing it and distancing himself from it.” Ewegen’s notion of comedy as ‘disclosive’ is parallel to my argument (in the Aristophanes chapter and throughout this dissertation) that Plato uses comedy (and parody specifically) to reveal something to the reader about the views he is representing – not just how funny or wrong it is, but exaggerating, emphasizing, and highlighting a feature or consequence of the view. In this way parody enables and produces a kind of recognition and insight. Ewegen has hit upon a similar idea. “Comedy is a way of bringing into the open what would otherwise remain hidden. In a word, comedy is a way of showing something, a means of exhibition. Rather than simply stating something (i.e., offering some λόγος), comedy, precisely through its performed ridicule, demonstrates something about that which it ridicules.” In this chapter, I make explicit just what it is that Plato is showing his readers through his parodic representation of the etymological method. Viewing words as objects or things

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251 Baxter 1992, 2.
252 ibid. 162.
254 ibid. 11.
connected to their referents by a physical likeness is a brute, physical view of language that cannot account for the immateriality of meaning and intention. By adopting the etymologists’ assumptions and taking them to their logical conclusion in a humorous way, Plato not only reveals that an unstable, ever-changing Heraclitean flux is the metaphysical basis of such a view, but also the unforeseen dehumanizing ethical consequences of such a view which reduces things of value like the divine, virtue, and indeed any meaning into the work of bits and pieces of sound and material reality.

Summary of the Dialogue

Because I do not provide a linear commentary of the dialogue, I will here briefly indicate the trajectory of the discussion. In the beginning, Socrates stumbles upon a debate between Hermogenes and Cratylus about names. The former favors a linguistic conventionalism whereby words and the things they name are connected only by convention and agreement. The other interlocutor, Cratylus, has adopted the position that the correctness of each thing’s name is determined by nature; that whatever people happen to call something, there is only one correct way to refer to it. Socrates is asked to arbitrate and settle the dispute (383a-384e). Socrates first examines what Hermogenes’ position amounts to and offers a typical Socratic critique of it (385a-391a). It then seems like Socrates is on Cratylus’ side that names mean what they mean by nature. Hermogenes asks Socrates to explain what this could mean (since Cratylus had refused to and merely repeatedly asserted his position). Socrates then undertakes an examination of names that shows, through etymological speculation, how they are true representations of the nature of the thing the name (391a-427d). This is where the humor and parody of the
dialogue is most prominent and most at issue. After providing so much apparent support for Cratylus’ position, Socrates finally lures him into the argument, but then asserts that they must re-examine the issue in case they were mistaken. He begins to question Cratylus and to criticize ‘their’ position. This elenchus ends, of course, in the refutation of Cratylus’ original position (427d-438d). The dialogue ends with a suggestion that one must look beyond names if he is to understand things in themselves (438e-440e).

In making my case about the philosophical function of the parody in the *Cratylus*, I first examine Socrates’ etymological demonstration and show why they are not to be taken as serious examples of Plato’s view of language. Then I show what views they are parodies of. Finally, I argue that the materialist views of language and Heraclitean view of reality at their core is what Plato is subjecting to criticism. But what is problematic about them, what he brings to the forefront in the humor of his parodies, is the threat such a view poses to value-laden, ethical concepts essential to a philosophical and fully human life.

II The Etymologies

The etymologies in the *Cratylus* are not earnest expressions of Plato’s beliefs. He has left us many hints in the text that we should not take everything Socrates says as tenets of a ‘Platonist’ theory of language. I will here look at five reasons we have to doubt the sincerity of Socrates’ etymological demonstration.

1) Socrates’ explicit warning that he is not an expert in the field and may be wrong

2) the non-coincidence that his first extended demonstration of the etymological method serves to undermine (instead of confirm) the validity of his methodology.
3) his recurring suggestion that he may be deceiving his interlocutors

4) a repeated reference to the ‘inspiration’ of these specious etymologies: the Euthyphro of Plato’s eponymous dialogue (hardly a resounding endorsement)

5) his frequent comments about how ridiculous his explanations and derivations are

1. Socrates denies any etymological expertise

Early in the dialogue, after Socrates has finished his first line of arguments against Hermogenes’ conventional view, we might expect that Plato is going to have Socrates give us his own considered, correct view. But he tempers our expectations with the following exchange:

Hermogenes: I don’t know how to oppose you, Socrates. It isn’t easy for me suddenly to change my opinion, though. I think you would be more likely to persuade me if you showed me just what this natural correctness of names you’re talking about consists in.

Socrates: My dear Hermogenes, I don’t have a position on this. You have forgotten what I told you a while ago, namely that I didn’t know about names but that I would investigate them with you.255

Plato wants to be sure the reader doesn’t conclude that Socrates is a kind of knowledgeable expert. He could have presented him as such. Then we might accept and adopt his professed views on language as our own, precisely because he is an expert.

Plato denies this option to us. This statement appears at a crucial point in the dialogue, just as Socrates is about to embark upon his lengthy etymological demonstration as a response to Hermogenes’ request that Socrates ‘show’ him what he means by correctness in names. Instead of claiming the position as his own or letting the reader assume that it is, he turns to poets like Homer and Hesiod, using their texts to show what they seem to

255 Cratylus 391a.
have thought about the correctness of names (391d). We are not told that this is Socrates’ view and cannot assume it is Plato’s.

Even once Socrates turns his attention to Cratylus, he continues to undermine our confidence in his demonstrations. When at 427d Hermogenes demands that Cratylus explain what he means by the natural correctness of names, and Cratylus avoids having to defend his position by saying that he agrees with Socrates’ arguments, the latter responds:

But, Cratylus, I have long been surprised at my own wisdom – and doubtful of it too. That’s why I think it’s necessary to keep re-investigating whatever I say, since self-deception is the worst thing of all… Therefore, I think we have to turn back frequently to what we’ve already said, in order to test it by looking at it ‘backwards and forwards simultaneously’.”

The reader may have been convinced by the etymological demonstrations and therefore that words have a kind of natural correctness. But by having Socrates slam on the breaks and make sure that Cratylus is not content to take what was said as the truth, Plato makes sure the reader is not content to take what was said as the truth. This is not the end of the argument. It is, as Socrates here insists, the beginning of a new phase in the argument, a provocation to self-reflection.

A similar kind of pause in the argument occurs with Hermogenes, after Socrates has made the case for the correctness of names, using examples from the Iliad.

Socrates: It seems right to call the son of the defender ‘Astyanax’ or lord-of-a-city.
Hermogenes: That seems right to me.
Socrates: It does? I don’t understand it yet myself, Hermogenes, but you do?
Hermogenes: I certainly do not. Or, at least, that is what he purports to do. It is unlikely that even Homer and Hesiod would have taken all of Socrates’ etymologies drawn from their texts at face-value. 428d. The reference is to Iliad 3.109. 392e.
This is a peculiar exchange. Socrates has succeeded in securing Hermogenes’ agreement but then quickly undermines his confidence. Not only does he reveal that Hermogenes doesn’t really understand what the argument has shown once he asks him directly, but claims that *he himself* doesn’t understand it. It is as if Socrates lured Hermogenes into the comfort and security of easy agreement, only to abruptly deny him this. The reader, likewise, who may have been nodding along with Socrates’ arguments is invited to reflect on whether he actually understands how this etymologizing works (or whether it really ‘works’ at all). That is, I argue, the point of this hiccup in the interlocutor’s steady agreement. In demonstrating this way of looking at words, Plato is not advocating or validating it. He is imitating and parodying a particular methodology, one we might think seems straightforward or sensible enough, but which we really don’t understand. He portrays it in such a way that we will be able to see what is wrong with it.

2. *Etymological investigation: sound methodology or epic blunder?*

    Socrates has already thrown speed bumps and caution signs in the way of Hermogenes’ unthinking agreement. But Plato foregrounds the discussion of names with a more subtle warning that the entire methodology is fraught with problems.

    Since Socrates has denied being an authority himself, he then looks to Homer in order to investigate the correctness of names. There he finds that some names are more correct than others, specifically those that better represent or signify the essence of the thing named. A few times in the *Iliad* two different names are used to refer to the same thing. If everything has its own single, fixed being and essence, which name is the one that picks it out correctly? The Trojan river burned by Hephaestus is called ‘Xanthos’ by
the gods and ‘Skamandros’ by men. There is a certain bird that gods call ‘chalkis,’ and men call ‘kumindis’. Which name in each pair is correct? At Socrates’ prompting, Hermogenes agrees that it is the gods who must surely call things by their correct names.

In a seemingly analogous case, Hector’s son is called both ‘Skamandrios’ and ‘Astyanax’. This time however it is not the gods who give him one name and mortals another. Socrates explains that the boy is more correctly Astyanax because this is what the men of the city call him. The women of Troy call him ‘Skamandrios.’ And since, Hermogenes agrees, women are less wise than men, they are incorrectly naming the infant. It is further claimed that Astyanax is a proper name because he is the son of Hector, the protector and lord of the city (ἄστυν ἄναξ – 392e).

We can either fault the argument for its distasteful sexism or forgive Plato for the insensitivity of his age and accept the point he is making. Both these responses, however, miss the point. A close reader who knows the Iliad will spot that there is something wrong here. The claim that women call the boy Skamandrios is either a clumsy misinterpretation of the text or a deliberate stretch of the truth. When Homer says that the ‘Trojans’ (Τρῶες) call him Astyanax, Plato seems to interpret this as meaning that only the Trojan men call him this – the noun is after all masculine plural. He then infers that it must be the women (Τρώαδες) who call him by the other name, Scamandrios. This is not only a blatantly misleading and exclusive interpretation of ‘Τρῶες’ but Socrates actually gets his facts wrong about who calls the boy what. It is not the women but Hector who calls his son Skamandrios.

τὸν ὥ’ Ἔκτωρ καλέεσκε Σκαμάνδριον, αὐτὰρ οἱ ἄλλοι
Ἀστυάνακτ᾽ ὁ ἂν γὰρ ἔρυετο Ἰλιον Ἕκτωρ.

Hector often called him Skamandrios, but others called him Astyanax – for Hector alone protected Ilion. (*Iliad* 6.399-403)

Thus the name Astyanax, bestowed on the child because of his father’s service to the state, may be more of a nickname, something granted him by the will of the grateful citizens, a kind of social convention. Yet, in Socrates’ discussion with Hermogenes he concludes it is *this* name which correctly picks out the boy’s essence – the one that turns out to be conventional. These are egregious errors and flaws to the theory of names Socrates is here arguing for – but only to someone familiar with Homer’s texts or who will think through the matter himself and look into Socrates’ claims of evidence in the *Iliad*. Again we are left to wonder whether Plato just made a mistake or intentionally had Socrates present an argument built on false premises.

David Sedley believes Plato made a mistake. Faced with Socrates’ claim that, since the Τρῶες call the boy Astyanax, it therefore must be the Trojan women who call him Skamandrios, Sedley deems this “not an altogether stupid guess.”259 Concerning the selective reading of Homer (and the fact that it is Hector who calls him Skamandrios) Sedley confesses, “Some might see this misreading as a deliberate subversion on the part of Plato or Socrates. I cannot see what the point of the subversion would be, and assume rather that it is a simple error.”260 If it was a deliberate misreading on Plato’s part, the

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259 Sedley 2003, 78.
260 *ibid.*
point would be to undermine the methodologies of the etymological enterprise right from
the beginning.

Sedley cannot see the point because he is committed to the idea that Plato believes
in these etymologies. The question of Astyanax’s proper name is the main problem of the
dialogue writ small. He is not the defender of the city by nature; his father is. It is by
convention that the Trojans call him Astyanax. How, then, can this serve as an example
of the natural correctness of names? Plato is giving the careful reader a clue to show just
how easily these names are manipulated to say whatever one wants – a point which is
later on explicitly conceded.

3. Deceivers and deception

Later on, Socrates is describing various views of the derivation of the name
‘justice’. After the lengthy, technical digression, Hermogenes notes that these are
certainly views he has heard from others.

Hermogenes: I think you really must have heard this from someone, Socrates, rather than
making
it up as you went along.
Socrates: What about the other explanations I’ve mentioned?
Hermogenes: I certainly don’t think you’ve heard those.
Socrates: Listen, then, and perhaps I’ll be able to deceive you into thinking that I haven’t
heard
the remaining ones either.261

This bit of playful banter is a window into how common Socrates’ etymologies are. Socrates’
explanations are so precise and perhaps typical (especially for ‘justice’ and ‘just’) that
Hermogenes suggests Socrates has borrowed them from others. Hermogenes jokes, however, that

261 413d.
the earlier etymologies were apparently too absurd for anyone other than Socrates to have thought up. Socrates’ reply to this jibe is to hint that he has been deceiving Hermogenes and may continue to do so (ἐξαπατήσαμι, 413d7). A closer look at this passage about justice reveals that he learned these deceptive derivations from those who think the universe is in motion. Here he mentions Anaxagoras. Socrates is doubly deceptive. He presents etymologies favored by natural philosophers – philosophers of phusis – in support of his argument, when they are by his own admission unsatisfactory; and by the same token implies that the previous etymologies he has given, which even Hermogenes suspects he has been making up, are similarly unsatisfactory. At 393c Socrates is even more straightforward, telling Hermogenes, “But you had better watch out in case I trick you.”262 The reader to should be on his guard.

The possibility of deception comes back at the end of the dialogue. Socrates says, “But don’t you see, Cratylus, that anyone who investigates things by taking names as his guides and looking into their meanings runs no small risk of being deceived?”263 Instead of stating this position early on and quickly reaching an impasse in the argument, Socrates spent a long while with Hermogenes and Cratylus so that they could be shown the deceptive nature of names. In fact, it is through his own take on the etymological method and fixation on the meaning of words themselves (his parodic representation of this habit in others) which allows him to lift Hermogenes and Cratylus out of their interminable and irresolvable argument about the correctness of names.

262 φύλαττε γάρ με μή πιε παρακρούσωμαι σε.
263 ... ἀδ' ἐννοεῖς ὅτι οὐ συμφρός κίνδυνος ἦστιν ἐξαπατηθήμας; 436b.
4. Euthyphro’s inspiration

Early on in his demonstration, Socrates refers to “this wisdom which has suddenly come upon me – I do not know from where,” and says that it must be tested to see whether or not it holds up (396c-d). Wisdom, like knowledge, is something sophists profess to possess. Plato’s Socrates most memorably in the *Apology* emphasizes his lack of wisdom. It should be surprising then in the *Cratylus* when Socrates claims that he has mysteriously acquired some. The following exchange, however, qualifies it in such a way that we discover it is not *his* wisdom, but rather something else’s. The reference is, more importantly, a hint that this practice of etymology is a false wisdom.

Hermogenes: Indeed, Socrates, you seem to me to be exactly like a prophet who has suddenly been inspired to deliver oracles.
Socrates: Yes, Hermogenes, and I, for my part, mostly blame Euthyphro, of the deme of Prospalta, for its coming upon me. I was with him at dawn, lending an ear to his lengthy discussion. He must have been inspired, because it looks as though he has not only filled my ears with his superhuman wisdom but taken possession of my soul as well.264

Socrates is not only distancing himself from the etymologizing practice but attributing it to Euthyphro. While we cannot be sure that this is the Euthyphro from Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*, many scholars believe it is likely.265 There are several reasons to believe it is the same man.

In the passage directly preceding his initial reference to Euthyphro, Socrates has etymologized Zeus and Ouranos, but says that he can’t remember Hesiod’s genealogy of the prior gods (396a-c). Hesiod plays an important role in Plato’s *Euthyphro* where the

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264 396d-e.
eponymous character justifies the harm he could do to his father in prosecuting him by pointing to how Cronos treats Ouranos and Zeus Cronos in the *Theogony*.

It is true, we do not see Socrates’ interlocutor in the *Euthyphro* make any claims about the meaning of a word based on its constituent parts, but a concern about the precise meaning of words does pervade the dialogue. Not only are they trying to find a definition of *to osios*, but Socrates’ very first line in the dialogue is to correct Euthyphro about the difference between a lawsuit (δίκη) and an indictment (γραφή).  The gesture would be more meaningful, if the historical Euthyphro had a habit of claiming to know the precise meaning of words. This would make their opening exchange something of an inside joke for the readers familiar with the pretentious, expert on meaning. Additionally, we know Euthyphro is a person who takes words quite seriously because he believes the stories about the gods, specifically those in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, to be literally true.  

The *Euthyphro*, as an ‘aporetic’ dialogue, is a discussion more conversational and free of the dense philosophical and linguistic jargon of the *Sophist* and *Philebus*. There is, however, one extended passage in *Euthyphro* that has always struck me as particularly inelegant in the technicalities of its grammatical argument. At 10a Socrates has summarized the problem with Euthyphro’s definition of the holy in the following question: “Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?” His interlocutor does not understand what he means. So Socrates explains by giving further examples of the grammatical distinction using the active and

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266 *Euthyphro* 2a.
267 5e-6c.
passive voice. Instead of advancing his argument theologically, Socrates relies on
Euthyphro’s ability and willingness to follow a grammatical one: there’s a difference
between carrying and a thing being carried; something can only be carried if someone is
carrying it; one does not carry something because it is a carried thing, rather it is a carried
thing because someone carries it; so too (so the analogy runs) the gods do not love
something because it is a loved thing, rather it is beloved by them because they love it.
Socrates uses this line of reasoning to pry apart Euthyphro’s quick equation of the holy
and that which is loved by the gods. For Euthyphro also admits that the holy isn’t so
because the god love it, but rather they love it because it is holy – which at least looks
different than the other examples Socrates used. Although we don’t think of Plato’s
_Euthyprho_ as being about words, this is a passage where words and their meaning are
given an almost unbearable sophistic priority. Socrates, I would argue, is tailoring his
argument to fit Euthyphro’s assumptions and preferred methods which are more
linguistic and linguo-centric than might appear at the surface. This reliance on words,
however, is again brought out when Socrates alludes to Euthyphro in the _Cratlyus._

In the _Cratylus_ Socrates is likened to a prophet with a kind of divine knowledge.
Euthyphro in the _Euthyphro_ claims to be just such a person: he prophesies the future
before the Athenian assembly. When Socrates asks whether he really has knowledge of
the divine law and holiness and unholiness, Euthyphro responds “I would be of no use,
Socrates, and Euthyphro would be in no way different from other men, if I did not have
exact knowledge about all such things” (4e-5a).

These are all arguments for the equation of the two Euthyphros. Given the
positions and treatment of Euthyphro in that dialogue, this gives us little reason to be
confident in Socrates’ Euthyphro-inspired etymologies in the *Cratylus*. The text of this
dialogue itself, however, is enough to discredit the source of Socrates’ inspiration,
whoever it is. Here Socrates describes his plan:

So it seems to me that this is what we ought to do: today, we’ll use this wisdom and
finish our examination of names, but tomorrow, if the rest of you agree, we’ll exorcize it
and purify ourselves, as soon as we’ve found someone – whether priest or wise man –
who is clever at that kind of purification.\(^{268}\)

The entirety of the etymological demonstration is here based on the shaky foundation of
*Euthyphro*’s wisdom. And here Socrates gives us a hint that, on the next day, they can
examine names in some other way, free of Euthyphro’s influence. One wonders how
different that discussion would have looked. The reason we don’t see it is because Plato
needs to enable us to have such a discussion. He first needs to free us from the spell of
etymological speculation and its faux-wisdom by having Socrates humorously represent
it.

As the argument progresses throughout this dialogue, this ‘inspiration’ is
mentioned four more times to make sure the reader doesn’t forget.\(^ {269}\) How seriously
should we take these etymologies when Socrates repeatedly insists they are a result of his
being inspired by a guy like Euthyphro?

Even long after, when the dialogue reaches a turning point and Cratylus becomes
the main interlocutor, one of the first things he says is, “Your oracular utterance –
whether inspired by Euthyphro or by some other Muse who has long inhabited your own
mind without your knowing about it – seem to be pretty much spoken after my own

\(^{268}\) 396e.
\(^{269}\) (399a, 400a, 407d, 410e, 411b).
mind.”  Although the results of Socrates’ elaborate demonstration are obviously false, one useful effect they had was to lure Cratylus into the open. Where he had previously been unwilling to explain what he meant (383b-384a, 427d), now he says that he agrees with Socrates’ oracular utterances. Cratylus is finally made to cite Socrates’ Euthyphronic etymologies with approval but Socrates then abruptly subjects these etymologies and the position that words have their meaning by nature to criticism. This gives us little reason to think of Euthphro as a legitimate inspiration.

5. The etymologies are ridiculous

The etymologies Socrates offers for many of the words he analyses are not only obviously wrong but laughable. This might seem an unfair or subjective judgment to make so many centuries removed from the text. What gives us the right to declare the results of Socrates’ investigations ridiculous? – He says so himself.

Socrates: Nevertheless, it [ψυχή] sounds funny (γελοῖον) when it’s named in the true way, with its actual name (φυσέχη). 272

Socrates: Perhaps it will seem absurd (γελοῖα), Hermogenes, to think that things will become clear by being imitated in letters and syllables, but it is absolutely unavoidable. 273

Socrates: Well, my impressions about primary names seem to me to be entirely outrageous (ὑβριστικά) and absurd (γελοῖα). 274

Socrates: I’ve got a whole swarm of wisdom in my mind!
Hermogenes: What sort of wisdom?

270 καὶ ἔμοι οὐ, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἐπιεικός φαίνη κατά νοῦν χρησμωδεῖν, εἰτε παρὰ Εὐθύφρονος ἐπίπτωνς γενόμενος, εἰτε καὶ ἄλλῃ τις Μοῦσα πάλαι σὲ εὔνοσα ἐλελήθη (428c).
272 This was, at the level of the drama of the dialogue, their purpose.
273 400b.
274 425d.
274 426b.
Socrates: It sounds to me completely absurd (γελοῖον), yet it seems to me to have something very plausible about it.\(^{275}\)

Again and again, Socrates draws attention to the absurdity of the etymologies he is coming up with. In what way are they laughable? Consider just the following to examples. Socrates argues that phonēsis (wisdom) comes from phoras noēsis (understanding motion) or perhaps phoras onēsis (delighting in motion).\(^{276}\) He says that hērōs (hero) comes from erōs (desire) or maybe erōtan (questioning).\(^{277}\) These are obviously false derivations, but there is something clever about them, something funny.

What Athenians in the fifth or fourth century would have thought being a hero had anything to do with asking questions? or that wisdom is found in understanding motion or taking pleasure in it? These are patently philosophical ways of viewing heroism and wisdom, or at least they sound philosophical. Socrates is using them as buzzwords to direct the conclusions of his etymological investigation in a certain direction. The effort is so heavy-handed that the reader is made aware both of the hollowness of the derivation at issue and of the intentional choice Plato is making as an author. A prime example is his claim that “Hades derives his name not from what cannot be seen (ἀιδοῦς), but from the fact that he knows (εἰδέναι) everything fine and beautiful and that is why the rule-setter called him ‘Hades’ (Ἁδης).” Again, this derivation is not only mistaken and false, but intentionally so, causing the reader to smile and shake her head. There is something silly and playful about it, in its absurdity.

\(^{275}\) 402a.
\(^{276}\) 411d.
\(^{277}\) 398d.
This theme of absurdity does not go away. Plato uses it to undermine Socrates’ etymological derivations, but the character Socrates later uses it to argue that Cratylus’ position is untenable. Cratylus is forced to take the position that words are correct by nature because the word resembles or imitates its referent. Socrates points out that this leads to some pretty bizarre conclusions. “At any rate, Cratylus, names would have an absurd (γελοῖα) effect on the things they name, if they resembled them in every respect, since all of them would then be duplicated, and no one would be able to say which was the thing and which was the name.”278 What would it mean for a word to naturally reflect the essence of the thing it names? The word ‘woof’ (if it is a word at all) reflects the essence of what it means because it is an onomatopoetic spelling of the sound of a dog’s bark. But the word ‘woof’, while resembling a dog’s bark, isn’t itself a bark, is it? How much less is the word ‘dog’ a dog just because that is what it means?

III The Etymologies as Parody

I hope to have put to rest any doubt that Socrates string of etymologies are earnest expressions of a philosophical belief in the correctness of names. This step was necessary; for it would be hard to argue for the parodic nature of Socrates’ arguments while readers are still primed to mine the dialogue for serious metaphysical and epistemological doctrines.279 This interpretation is motivated by the old assumption that Socrates is a stand-in for Plato, that the author voices his own positions through his character. This simplistic view has long been questioned and shown to be deficient, first

278 432d.
279 Sedley 2003; Ademollo 2011.
and foremost because it does not properly take into account the dialogue form.\textsuperscript{280} If, as I argue, the etymologies are \textit{not} expressions of Plato’s beliefs about words, that leaves us with the question – Whose view \textit{was} Socrates espousing? In the rest of this chapter I will show that his methodology and the etymologies are inspired by and, in many cases, direct borrowings from other fifth century Greek thinkers. Timothy Baxter in his 1992 book \textit{The Cratylus: Plato’s Critique of Naming}, provides an exhaustive list and analysis of likely suspects.\textsuperscript{281} The dialogue is not informed by the ideas of one, single thinker. It is rather fraught and brimming over with a number of pre-Socratic and sophistic theories. I am not here concerned with exhaustively teasing out which Greek intellectual is responsible for which part of the \textit{Cratylus}’ etymologies. I want to explain why Plato is parodying these views and what he enables the reader to see because of Socrates’ elaborate demonstration. It has been argued that in this dialogue Plato presents his own view of language, as either a contrast or combination of Cratylus’ and Hermogenes’ two extreme positions (naturalistic and conventional).\textsuperscript{282} Others recognize that the extensive parody in the etymological section is part of the point of the dialogue: to critique contemporary views of language by humorously representing them. Baxter draws the following conclusion:

\begin{quote}
What is decided is that etymology is an unreliable tool in seeking knowledge about things. This is the major positive result from the etymological inquiry, and it is here that one should seek the unifying feature of the etymologies.\textsuperscript{283}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{280} Strauss 1964; Arieti 1991; Blondell 2002.
\textsuperscript{281} He considers Homer and the philosopher-poets, Pherecydes of Syros, Empedocles, Homeric interpreters, the school of Anaxagoras, the Derveni Commentator, \textit{oι μετεωρολόγοι}, \textit{oι τραγῳδοποίοι}, Protagoras, Prodicus, and Democritus. Baxter 1992, 107-163.
\textsuperscript{282} Silverman 1992.
\textsuperscript{283} Baxter 1992, 97.
\end{footnotes}
Baxter’s ‘positive result’ is still a negative one: etymological speculation does not give us knowledge of things in themselves. But that is not what (or not all) there is to take away from the *Cratylus*. On the surface the dialogue is a discussion about language and words but much more is at stake. I intend to show that Plato’s real concern is the metaphysics lurking behind one’s view of language, and the ethics implicit in one’s metaphysics. For Plato, how someone behaves – what he thinks is good and virtuous – is intertwined with his beliefs about what constitutes reality and how and whether language can meaningfully refer to it. This three-part investigation will structure the rest of this section. I examine three figures who figure prominently in the dialogue – Prodicus, Protagoras, and Heraclitus – and draw out the linguistic, metaphysical, and ethical consequences of their views. It is the last, ethics, with which Plato is most concerned. I will show that when one indulges in a literal, physical view of words and their relationship to reality, one’s understanding of meaning and communication in human relationships is similarly diminished into a reductionistic materialism. Socrates parodies several popular thinkers’ theories in order to demonstrate the mutually reinforcing and negative effects they have on discourse. Instead of presenting a straightforward answer to the issue in the beginning of the dialogue, Plato hijacks the argument between Hermogenes and Cratylus and shows how the underlying assumptions one has about words and the world can have far-reaching implications.
Prodicus

a) Language

Of all the 5th century intellectuals who lectured about and studied the correctness of names, Prodicus of Ceos is the foremost. It should come as no surprise that, when Hermogenes asks for assistance in his debate with Cratylus, Socrates’ first lines in the dialogue refer to Prodicus:

… it certainly isn’t easy to get to know about names. To be sure, if I’d attended Prodicus’ fifty-drachma course, which he himself advertises as an exhaustive treatment of the topic, there’d be nothing to prevent you from learning the precise truth about the correctness of names straightaway. But as I’ve heard only the one-drachma course, I don’t know the truth about it. (384b).

He must have been well known to the Athenians for Plato names the sophist in the Apology alongside Gorgias and Hippias (19e). Xenophon’s Memorabilia records a moral allegory delivered by Prodicus wherein Herakles meets and must decide between the allure of two different women, Virtue and Vice. This last reported testimonia is not about etymology or the words Ἀρετή and Κακία specifically but it does rely on a kind of play of language. The meaning of (the words) virtue and vice is articulated through the descriptions of women who bear these names.

In Plato’s dialogues, Prodicus appears most memorably in the Protagoras where he is made to showcase his signature technique – distinguishing two seemingly synonymous words into different shades of meaning. His speech is meant to encourage the debate between Socrates and Protagoras as well as offer guidelines for the audience.

284 Xenophon, Memorabilia II.1.21-34. The allegory is also mentioned by Philostratus Lives of the Sophists 1.12.496, the scholium on Aristophanes’ Clouds 361a, and alluded to by in Plato’s Symposium 177b.
listening. While his intention and advice seem sound, his specific arguments and methodology come off as somewhat pedantic.

I think you are right, Critias: those who attend this sort of discussion ought to be joint (κοινος μεν), but not equal (ισους δε μη), hearers of both disputants. For there is a difference: we should listen jointly to them both, yet not give equal heed to each, but more to the wiser and less to the less intelligent. I on my part also, Protagoras and Socrates, call upon you to accede to our request, and to dispute (αμφισβητειν μεν), but not wrangle (εοιζειν δε μη), with each other over your arguments: for friends dispute with friends, just from good feeling; whereas wrangling is between those who are at variance and enmity with one another. In this way our meeting will have highest success, since you the speakers will thus earn the greatest measure of good repute (ευδοκιμοιτε), not praise (και ουκ επαινοισθε), from us who hear you. For good repute is present in the hearers' souls without deception, but praise is too often in the words of liars who hide what they really think. Again, we listeners would thus be most comforted (ευφραινομεθα), not pleased (ουχ ηδοιμεσθα); for he is comforted who learns something and gets a share of good sense in his mind alone, whereas he is pleased who eats something or has some other pleasant sensation only in his body. (337a-c)

Plato wants us to know that Prodicus is quite concerned with the correct use of words, perhaps overly concerned. The passage is not without a kind of exaggeration and gentle mockery. Nevertheless both in the Protagoras and Cratylus Prodicus is presented as a reputed expert on words and their meaning. Prodicus, perhaps more than any of Socrates’ conemporaries, stood the best chance to resolve the dispute between Hermogenes and Cratylus. But Plato did not allow him a role in the dialogue and Socrates does not make use of Prodicus’ technique. He brings the man up only to dispense with him, explaining that because he has not taken Prodicus’ advanced course, they will not be able to rely on the sophist’s expertise. Plato could have arranged things differently; but he chose to deliberately exclude Prodicus’ ideas as answers to the question at hand.

285 Later on Prodicus is again invoked and plays another brief role in the dialogue as the arbiter over fine distinctions in words. (340a-341e). see Mayhew 2011: 27.
All the same, given this early invocation, does Prodicus’ presence haunt the rest of the dialogue? Are the ideas that motivate Socrates’ etymological speculation and demonstration ultimately a parody of a Prodicean practice? Although sensitive to nuances of meaning in words, etymology is not the primary or even a common topic in the fragments of Prodicus which ancient authors cite. Of the ninety testimonia and fragments which Robert Mayhew collects in his book on Prodicus, only one repeated report in Galen comes close to evidence of a concern with etymology.\(^{286}\) Whereas every ancient writer associated phlegm (\(\varphi \lambda \dot{e} \gamma \mu \alpha\)) with the cold and moist/wet humor, Galen complains that Prodicus alone thought otherwise, persuaded by a wondrous etymology (\(\pi \rho \omicron \omicron \varsigma \tau \iota \varsigma \theta \alpha \nu \mu \alpha \sigma \tau \iota \varsigma \grave{e} \tau \nu \mu \iota \omicron \omicron \gamma \iota \varsigma \varsigma \ \alpha \nu \alpha \pi \varepsilon \iota \theta \omicron \omicron \omicron \omicron \nu \omicron \varsigma\)).\(^{287}\) Prodicus had argued instead that phlegm is so called because it is derived from \(\pi \epsilon \varphi \lambda \dot{e} \chi \theta \alpha \alpha\) (from the verb \(\varphi \lambda \dot{e} \gamma \omega\)) and thus is hot. The white-colored cold stuff everyone calls phlegm, he calls ‘mucus’ (\(\beta \lambda \dot{e} \nu \nu \alpha\)).\(^{288}\)

While this is enough to show that Prodicus was led to controversial positions because of a strict etymology, there are not enough similar reports to show that Plato expected his readers to think of Prodicus when they encountered the wondrous etymologies in the \textit{Cratylus}. The very name Prodicus will, however, have brought to mind other ideas associated with him.

\(^{286}\) Mayhew 2011.
\(^{287}\) Galen, \textit{On the Differences among Fevers} 2; discussed in Mayhew 162-3.
b) Metaphysics

Prodicus was not only known for his pedantic precision with words. In Aristophanes’ *Clouds* Prodicus is associated with those who investigate the stars and ‘things above’. The chorus says “We would not listen to any of the other meteorological sophists, except Prodicus, on account of his wisdom and intelligence, and to you [Socrates].” In *Birds* Prodicus is alluded to in the preface of the chorus-leader’s avian cosmogony. “You shall know thoroughly what is the nature of birds, what the origin of the gods, of the rivers, of Erebus and Chaos; thanks to us even Prodicus will envy you your knowledge.” (690-2). This parabasis explains the origins of the cosmos in a pseudo-Hesiodic fashion. It explains the birds’ existence as prior to the gods, their association with desire, and their function as omens. The above allusion to Prodicus – that he will be jealous of the truths revealed there – seems to imply that we can’t attribute any of the following comic cosmogony to him. But Robert Mayhew argues that the bird’s speech is actually a parody of Prodicus’ own views, an attempt to humorously one-up them, putting birds center-stage instead of men. It is hard to prove that the speech is a parody of Prodicus’ views without his texts extant, but Mayhew provides two reasons to believe this is the case. First, the allusion to Prodicus is preceded by a repetition of the adverb ὄρθως (lines 690, 692) which is intended to invoke his concern with vocabulary ‘correctness’. The repetition itself may perhaps poke-fun at Prodicus’ own dogged

289 οὐ γὰρ ἄν ἄλλω γ’ ὑπακούσαμεν τῶν νῦν μετεωροσοφιστῶν / πλὴν ἢ Προδίκω, τῷ μὲν σοφίας καὶ γνώμης οὐνεκα, σοι δὲ (360-1).
insistence on the proper use of words.\textsuperscript{291} Secondly, the word ‘season’ (ὥρα) appears six times between lines 696 and 725. This is very likely an allusion to his famous work Όρα.\textsuperscript{292} The birds aren’t only a sign of when to expect each season, but they serve as omens and prophets in general. The language of the choral leader here becomes quite bold. “To you we are Ammon, Delphi, Dodona, and Phoebus Apollo… Are we not, clearly, a prophetic Apollo to you?”\textsuperscript{293} The birds have here replaced and usurped the gods in their traditional roles. If this passage is a kind of parody of Prodicus’ theories, what can we infer about these theories? Although we primarily associate Prodicus with linguistics, he should perhaps be grouped with the intellectual movement in the 5\textsuperscript{th} century which sought to replace the mythological gods with Nature and natural processes. The force and humor of Aristophanes’ \textit{parabasis} makes more sense when taken as a parody of this secular crusade, putting birds at the center of the universe instead of mankind.\textsuperscript{294} Prodicus’ views on the gods are preserved and we can safely say that he was a part of this movement:

\begin{quote}
And Prodicus of Ceos says: ‘Sun and moon and rivers and springs and generally everything that benefits our life the ancients considered gods because of the benefit from them, just as the Egyptians considered the Nile. And because of this bread is considered Demeter, and wine Dionysus, and water Poseidon, and fire Hephaestus, and so on for each of the things that are useful.’\textsuperscript{295}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{291} Recall that the central question in the \textit{Cratylus} concerns ὀρθότητα τῶν ὅνομάτων (383a).
\textsuperscript{292} For this claim see Hubbard 1997: 32-33.
\textsuperscript{293} Aristophanes \textit{Birds} 716, 722.
\textsuperscript{294} see Dunbar 1998, 294-7.
\textsuperscript{295} Sextus Empiricus \textit{Against the Mathematicians} 9.18; DK B5. Further on in the same passage, Prodicus is grouped together with other atheists (ἄθεοι) like Euhemerus, Diagoras of Melos, and Theodorus (9.50-52). cf. Philodemus \textit{On Piety} 2.
Prodicus’ status as a sophist, then, was not confined to being a teacher of rhetoric and linguistic theory. Perhaps we can now better understand the notoriety which earned him a place in the plays of the comic dramatists.

c) Ethics

The infamy such views would certainly give him was moderated by a seemingly conservative moral teaching we saw typified in the story of Virtue in Vice. The latter personified woman tries to seduce Herakles not only by offering him an easy life of pleasure but by playing fast and loose with names. She notes that her friends call her ‘Happiness’ (Εὐδαιμονία, Memorabilia II.1.26). Presumably those who have taken Prodicus’ course and understand names will, with Herakles, not be deceived by her suggestion that vice and happiness mean/are the same thing.

Although Prodicus is frequently cast as something of a quibbler, he doesn’t appear to be a corrupter of the youth. But what about his above view of the gods? Wouldn’t this give his contemporaries and later readers pause? Cicero says of him “What about Prodicus of Ceos, who said that those things which profited human life were numbered among the gods – what, in the end, did he leave of religion (religionem)?”

Plato’s elaborate parody in the etymological demonstration of the Cratylus does not target Prodicus. His early allusion to Prodicus, however, was apt. He is relevant not only because the correctness of names is his specialty but because the metaphysical and ethical view held by Prodicus comes to dominate much of the dialogue. Socrates’

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296 Cicero de natura deorum 1.118.
analysis of the gods’ names robs them of their divinity. That Demeter is the giver of nourishment just like a mother seems harmless enough (διδοῦσα μήτηρ). But Hera is so named either because she is loveable (ἐρατή) or because the rule-setter, being a lofty thinker, called her ‘Hera’ as a disguised name for air (ἀέρα). This reduces the name Hera and, significantly, the goddess herself, to an element of nature, an impersonal thing or process. While this etymology cannot be ascribed to Prodicus, it fits his reductionistic metaphysics (Demeter is bread, Dionysus is wine). Plato is parodying this kind of sophistic view in Cratylus in the same way that Arisophanes did in his Birds. The point is not just to poke fun at people who hold them but to reveal the ethical consequences of adopting such views about language. The work of imagining the gods and understanding virtue and vice becomes an argument about meaning, words, letters, and sounds. To paraphrase Cicero – what happens to a community bound together by religion when one embraces this theory of language?

Protagoras

a) Language

After Prodicus, the second sophist to whom Socrates alludes during the discussion is Protagoras of Abdera. This early reference similarly underscores his importance in the dialogue. The most famous and successful sophist of the century, Protagoras taught rhetoric and the art of argument to young Athenian aristocrats. His presumed relevance

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297 Plato Cratylus 404b.
298 Plato Cratylus 404c.
to the argument in the *Cratylus* can be found in his treatises about linguistics and language. Diogenes Laertius records the title of a treatise Ὀρθοπεδίων in which Protagoras likely gave prescriptions for correct speaking or the correct form of words. It is reported in Aristotle that he disagreed with Homer’s use of μῆνις and πτήλης as feminine nouns, insisting to the contrary that they are masculine. There is no purely linguistic motivation for this position (since, for example, most nouns in –ις are feminine). Therefore we must assume that he subscribed to a kind of naturalism that associates nouns like ‘wrath’ and ‘helmet’ with virile, masculine things. He thus felt justified in opposing the traditional convention that made them grammatically feminine. Before his time there may not have been much systematic thought put into the matter. Aristotle reports that Protagoras was the first to separate nouns into masculine, feminine, and neuter. This view may have inspired much of the word-play in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*. In the play Socrates represents a stereotypical sophist and teaches Strepsiades that the conventional spelling of certain words must be changed to fit within a rigid grammatical system. There is an interesting note in Diogenes Laertius whereby he claims that Protagoras attended to words, dispensing with their intention or meaning – τὴν διάνοιαν ἀφεὶς πρὸς τὸ νόμον διελέχθη. This serves as further evidence that the sophist had a keen interest in words.

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300 The book is referred to in Plato *Phaedrus* 276c. Note that the *Cratylus’* argument concerns ἡ τῶν ἐν ὑμιστὶν ὀρθότης.
301 Aristotle *Sophistici Elenchi* 173b17-174a4.
303 See my earlier discussion, p. 23ff.
304 Diogenes Laertius *VitaePhilosophorum* … IX.52.8.
Does Socrates parody Protagoras in his etymological demonstration in order to refute the sophist’s views of language? It is not likely. For all this interest in language, we have no evidence that Protagoras used etymology as a tool for understanding a word’s meaning. Socrates has other reasons for bringing up Protagoras. He is relevant to the discussion at hand but not for purely linguistic reasons.

b) Metaphysics

Plato’s ultimate concerns in the *Cratylus*, I argue, are the ethical consequences of taking certain views of language. Those linguistic views are often paired with metaphysical assumptions. Protagoras himself, however, does not have a clear metaphysics. He retreated entirely from the Milesian search for the material substrate of things or, as Aristotle would have it, the first-principles of Being. Instead of confronting Being itself (as Parmenides had) Protagoras is primarily concerned with epistemology, language, and rhetoric – what man can claim to know, how he makes claims, and whether they are persuasive or not (whether we assess his claims as correct or incorrect, good or bad). Protagoras is known to have popularized the position (notably in his *Technē Eristikōn* and *Kataballontes*) that there are two sides to every argument.\(^\text{305}\) Even the truth of contrary positions can be asserted. This leaves the truth of metaphysical claims about reality and Truth itself with an ambiguous status. Protagoras does not seem to have affirmed any metaphysical positions, accept that any position can be affirmed. It is *this* position that Plato is trying to warn his readers against. Ugo Zilioli in his book

\(^{305}\text{DK B6a, Diogenes Laertius IX.51.}\)
Protagoras and the Challenge of Relativism has picked up on this: “Plato best betrays his worries about Protagoras’ subtlety just when he signals the danger that a possible widening of the domain of Protagoras’ relativism to key philosophical areas might imply.”\(^{306}\) He argues that Hermogenes’ conventionalism isn’t strictly ‘Protagorean.’\(^{307}\) But Protagoras’ ideas are nevertheless dangerous. Beyond discouraging any kind of metaphysical commitments or leaving one open to accepting a conventionalist theory of meaning, Protagoras and his texts were also regarded as flirting with atheism. His work On the Gods began “Concerning the gods I am unable to know either that they exist or that they do not exist or what their nature is; for there are many things which prevent one from knowing, both the unclarity and the short span of human life.”\(^{308}\) This passage may give us a picture of what a Protagorean metaphysics looks like. If we substitute ‘the things that are’ or ‘What Is’ or ‘Being’ for ‘gods’ in the above passage, we’d have a close approximation: concerning Being or What Is, I am unable to know either that they exist or that they do not exist or what their nature is. Just as the Athenians saw his skepticism and hesitancy to assert the gods’ existence as a threat to traditional views, Plato saw Protagoras’ relativism and refusal to take a stance on metaphysics as a threat to ethics and the pursuit of wisdom.

One important shift in perspective that Protagoras and the sophists accomplished was to change the focus of speculation from nature to man in society. This human-

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\(^{306}\) Zilioli 2007, 56.

\(^{307}\) “Protagoras’ doctrines are philosophically subtle… because they stimulate the formulation of other philosophical positions, like that of Hermogenes’ semantic conventionalism, which are not genuinely Protagorean but which betray a kind of Protagorean genesis.” *ibid.*

\(^{308}\) DK 80B4.
centered perspective is highlighted by Socrates when he appears to adopt Protagoras’ view in the following passage of the *Cratylus*:

> We admit that we know nothing about the gods themselves or about the names they call themselves – although it is clear that they call themselves by true ones… You would want us, then, to begin our investigation by first announcing to the gods that we will not be investigating *them* – since we do not regard ourselves as worthy to conduct such an investigation – but rather human beings, and the beliefs they had in giving the gods their names. After all, there’s no offense in doing that. (*Cratylus* 400d-401a).

Socrates’ conclusion may be tongue-in-cheek. In limiting their investigation to human beings and their beliefs, claiming that we can never know the gods’ true names, Socrates assumes a familiar kind of Protagorean agnosticism that many in Athens might find offensive. In fact the point of this passage could be to show the reader that those who take such positions about the names we call the gods are really taking Protagoras’ position about the gods’ existence and our lack of knowledge on the matter.

It is, however, not Protagoras’ agnosticism that principally bothers Plato. His Socrates moves and lives in a lack and want of knowledge. He operates by leading people to *aporia*, having them acknowledge and confront what they don’t know. The problem with Protagoras is not his skepticism about the gods but the fact that his epistemological relativism too easily leads others to an ontological, and ultimately ethical, relativism.

Plato links Hermogenes’ linguistic conventionalism with Protagoras’ ontological relativism in the following passage:

> Let’s see, Hermogenes, whether the same thing also seems to you to hold of the things that are (*ta onta*). Is the being or essence (*ousia*) of each of them some private thing for each person (*idiāi… hekastōi*), as Protagoras tells us? He says that man is ‘the measure of all things,’ and that things are to me as they appear to me, and are to you as they appear to you. Do you agree, or do you believe that things have some fixed being or essence of their own? (385e-386a)
Instead of confronting Hermogenes’ conventional understanding of language head-on, Plato goes out of his way to liken it to Protagoras’ doctrine which is not about language specifically. But the *Cratylus* leads Hermogenes and Plato’s reader to see that the culprit behind a linguistic relativism is the epistemological and metaphysical relativism of Protagoras. What effect might this position have on one’s character and ethics? I will take this up in the next section after a brief note about the nature of the two sides in this argument.

Relevant to the question of metaphysics and being is the debate between *phusis* (nature) and *nomos* (convention).309 The discussion in Plato’s *Cratylus* is, in a certain respect, just an instance or application of the framework of this debate onto words. Alongside Hermogenes’ stated position, most scholars would set Protagoras on the side of *nomos*.310 The speech Plato gives him in the *Protagoras* supports this view. In the *mythos* which the elder sophist tells we find that by nature – our original nature – men are hostile to one another because they lack the *politikē technē*. Art or skill, to Protagoras, is something that we do not come equipped with. It must be learned or taught. Humans do manage to come together and form cities but only because the gods ‘give’ them a sense of shame and justice (*aidōs* and *dīkē*). This kind of divine gift, something appended to man’s vicious nature, is not so much a transformation of our *phusis* as it as an allegory for traits that arise in human communities, something contingent and conventional and

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309 For a summary of this debate in Ancient Greek philosophy see McKirahan 2010, 405-426.  
310 McKirahan 2010: 418-19. In contrast, Lampert 2010 offers a subversive reading of Protagoras as an outspoken proponent of convention, but an implicit advocate of nature.
yet divine. But this tale hints at a much more inflammatory sophistic perspective: it is the conventional belief in the gods (who in fact don’t really exist) that gives people shame, justice, and the willingness to submit to a conventional morality. Socrates goes out of his way to associate Hermogenes’ position with Protagoras’ relativism. Why?

c) Ethics

Socrates initially invokes the sophist not because of his linguistic theories but because of his most famous dictum. Near the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates is trying to understand the argument he has been summoned to adjudicate. Cratylus believes that a thing’s name is determined by its nature; whereas Hermogenes believes that something can ‘correctly’ be referred to by any name since what we call something is really just a matter of convention. Hermogenes resists the idea that a name can pick out the essence of something. Socrates at this point invites a comparison to Protagoras’ view of things ‘as they are’.

Is the being or essence of each of them something private for each person, as Protagoras tells us? He says that man is “the measure of all things,” and that things are to me as they appear to me, and are to you as they appear to you. Do you agree, or do you believe that things have some fixed being or essence of their own? (385e-386a)

Hermogenes’ response seems so sincere and genuine that this moment gives the lie to the claim that Plato just employs characterless yes-men to agree with Socrates: “There have been times, Socrates, when I have been so puzzled that I’ve been driven to take refuge in Protagoras’ doctrine, even though I really don’t believe it” (386a). Hermogenes’

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311 Socrates: So whatever each person says is the name of something, for him, that is its name? Hermogenes: Yes. (Cratylus 385a)

312 Hermogenes’ begrudging sympathy with the sophist’s position is reminiscent of Glaucon’s resistance to accepting Thrasymachus’ claims about justice in the Republic.
conventionalism would seem to leave him open to Protagoras’ epistemological claim that Socrates quotes above, and yet Hermogenes is hesitant to endorse this position, though he confesses, with a kind of regret, that sometimes he is forced to adopt Protagoras’ doctrine as a justification for the view he has about language and the correctness of words.

In the *Theaetetus* we are shown that Protagoras’ epistemological relativism leads to ethical relativism. If something is for me as it is for me and is for you as it is for you, there can be no praise or blame for true or false claims nor for virtuous or vicious deeds. Ethics may seem out of the purview of the *Cratylus* but in my view the ethically charged etymologies themselves and the drama of the dialogue show its relevance. Once Socrates has befuddled Hermogenes with his demonstration and argued for a natural view of language, he lures Cratylus into the discussion since the hapless Heraclitean thinks that Socrates agrees with him. Protagoras is still relevant here since we find that Cratylus adopts Protagorean positions like the impossibility of falsehood. Socrates, far from encouraging this perspective, turns on Cratylus and reveals what is dehumanizing about such views.

At 428c Cratylus says that he agrees with what Socrates has said. Nevertheless, the latter thinks that they must re-investigate the matter ‘since self-deception is the worst thing of all.’ Keep in mind that on Protagoras’ view, there is no possibility for self-deception. Things just are the way they are to you. Plato warns his reader against accepting whatever he or she happens to believe. You may in fact be deceived and wrong. You may be deceiving yourself. Socrates launches into his interrogation by asking

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313 *Theaetetus* 161c-178d.
whether some painters are better or worse than others. Cratylus agrees, but refuses to admit, when asked, that some rule-setters and name-givers are better or worse than others. Cratylus insists that if a name-giver did not give a name correctly, then what he ‘gave’ wasn’t a name at all. (429b) This is similar to Thrasymachus’ extreme view in *Republic* I where if a ruler makes a law which *isn’t* in his own best interest (presumably because he was either mistaken that it was in his interest or because he was mistaken about what his own best interest is) then that man isn’t in fact a ruler *at all*, ‘strictly speaking’. In both cases a wily sophist who is about to be backed into a corner (what if the name-givers made a mistake in choosing a name? what if the ruler makes a mistake about what is in his best interest?) retreats to a view unsupportable by common sense (that in such cases the name-giver hasn’t really given a name at all and the ruler isn’t really a ruler at all). Such positions are supported by a specious reliance on precise language. Socrates suggests that someone could in fact use a name incorrectly and speak falsely. Cratylus denies this.

*Cratylus*: “But, Socrates, how can anyone say the thing he says and not say something that is? Doesn’t speaking falsely consists in not saying things that are?”

*Socrates*: “Your argument is too subtle for me at my age.”

…

*Cratylus*: “In my view, one can neither speak nor say anything falsely.”

This is a notorious sophistic position, one Protagoras entertained. What one gains by being unable to say something that is not or speak falsely is always being right. When

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314 *Republic* 340d-341a.
315 “In precise language (κατὰ τὸν ἀκριβῆ λόγον), since you like speaking precisely (σὺ ἀκριβολογῇ), no one who exercises a skill ever makes a mistake.” *Republic* (340e).
316 429d-e.
317 cf. *Theaetetus* 188d-189a; *Euthydemus* 283e-284c.
Socrates presents an example of someone clearly saying something that isn’t true or using a name incorrectly, Cratylus is forced to say that in such cases a person isn’t speaking at all or uttering a name, but rather just meaningless noise.

Socrates: Suppose you were in a foreign country and someone meeting you took your hand and said, “Greetings! Hermogenes, son of Smicrion, visitor from Athens,” would he be speaking, saying, announcing, or addressing these words not to you but to Hermogenes – or to no one?
Cratylus: In my view, Socrates, he is not articulating them as he should.
Socrates: Well, that’s a welcome answer. But are the words he articulates true or false, or partly true and partly false? If you tell me that, I’ll be satisfied.
Cratylus: For my part, I’d say he’s just making noise and acting pointlessly, as if he were banging a brass pot.\textsuperscript{318}

Socrates creates a hypothetical situation in which someone addresses Cratylus. But Cratylus insists that, were he to be hailed by another name, his potential interlocutor would be just emitting meaningless noise. One can’t help but imagine that Cratylus would understand what this person intends with the greeting. And yet, he insists that the words are nonsense and unable to be understood. Notice the contrast between Socrates and Cratylus. The former wants to foster dialogue and relationships with individuals. Conversation proceeds from and despite disagreement toward an aporia which is itself an incitement to further discussion. Cratylus’ strange ideas about language are in fact a hindrance to communication and dialogue. They end discussions instead of stimulate them. At the beginning of the dialogue Hermogenes is accusing Cratylus of not fairly or earnestly participating in the debate.

Eagerly, I ask him to tell me what he means. He responds sarcastically and makes nothing clear. He pretends to possess some private knowledge which would force me to agree with him and say the very things about names that he says about himself, were he to express it in plain terms. So, if you can somehow interpret Cratylus’ oracular utterances, I’d gladly listen.”\textsuperscript{319} 

\textsuperscript{318} 429e-430a.
\textsuperscript{319} 383b.
Cratylus was content to make claims about the world, others, language, and meaning. But he would not explain himself or make himself understood. Not only does he refuse to communicate by choice, but, by the end of the dialogue, he even more perversely denies others the ability to communicate. Unless someone speaks ‘correctly’, he is not speaking at all and meaningful interaction is impossible. A testimonium in Aristotle reveals that Cratylus eventually takes this bizarre position to heart. It is reported that Cratylus abandoned speech entirely and only wiggled his figure, pointing at things.\(^{320}\) Cratylus had evidently set the standard for truthful speech so high that not even he could meet it. For all the criticism Plato receives for hypothesizing ideal, eternal, universal Forms to serve as references for moral standards, he did so to facilitate and incite dialogue about these concepts, not to silence discussion.

The philosophical and ethical failings of Cratylus are not Protagorean, but Heraclitean. The ideas of these two pre-Socratics dominate the dialogue. Protagoras’ conventionalism leads Hermogenes down a false path just as the doctrine of the impossibility of falsehood provides only a temporary retreat for Cratylus’ weak argument. Heraclitus’ theory of flux, however, repeatedly shows up in the dialogue. This is the other side of the relativistic coin that Plato puts center stage so he can confront it head-on. It is not Heraclitus’ metaphysics that Plato wants to discredit through philosophical analysis. Instead, the narrative of the dialogue develops in such a way that the reader is presented with a choice between a Heraclitean worldview and a Platonic

\(^{320}\) Metaphysics 1010a.
The former results in an unstable, relativistic conception of the good and no foundation for building meaningful statements or meaningful relationships.

Heraclitus

As Socrates proceeds in his etymological demonstration, a growing number of the words he examines are found to have at their root a reference to instability and motion. Cratylus is described by Aristotle as a radical Heraclitean. Thus the very title of the dialogue may indicate that Plato is not only addressing and examining the correctness of words but the claims of Heraclitus and what this means for meaning.

a) Language

Heraclitus is famous for his style, the obscure manner in which he deployed words: how he constructed his logos of Logos. Given that the Cratylus is a dialogue about language, the several allusions to Heraclitus beg the question: what does the pre-Socratic have to say about words? While no systematic philosophy of language can be construed from the fragments, an awareness of and preoccupation with the ambiguity of words is apparent. This is especially the case when it comes to matters of great significance: the divine, life, and death. Heraclitus wanted to show that language itself could predicate contrary things of the same entity.

God is day night, winter summer, war peace, satiety hunger; and he takes various shapes just as oil which, when it is mingled with spices, is named according to the scent of each of them.321

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321 ὁ θεὸς ἡμέρῃ εὐφρόνη χειμῶν θέρους πόλεμος εἰρήνη κώρου λιμός· [ἀλλοιώτατι δὲ ὀκωσπερ <ἔλαιον> ὀπτοῖεν συμμετὴ θυσίματι ὀνομάζεται καθ’ ἥδονήν ἑκάστου. (B 67). I accept Fränkel’s conjecture of ἔλαιον for πῦρ, following Dilcher 1995.
This seems both a metaphysical statement about the divine and a claim about language. Words either fail to capture the many-faceted and self-contradictory nature of god or the point is that they can only come close to encompassing what he is when we assert and accept such contradictions. In Plato’s dialogue, the interlocutors are trying to determine whether something’s name is determined by convention or by its nature. For Heraclitus it would seem that the relation between words and the world is complicated. The conventions we have are both insufficient and necessary for understanding.

Consider another fragment about names:

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ἕν τὸ σοφὸν; μοῦνον
λέγεσθαι οὐκ ἐθέλει καὶ ἐθέλει Ζηνὸς ὄνομα.
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One is the wise; it is unwilling and willing to be called alone by the name of Zeus.322

The Greeks called the father of gods and men Zeus. And here Heraclitus asserts that this name is appropriate and inappropriate. Zeus is one, singular, but the single name Zeus is somehow both enough and not enough.

In a third fragment, Heraclitus uses a play on words to highlight how they can mean more than one thing:

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tῷ οὖν τὸξω ὄνομα βίος, ἔργον δὲ θάνατος.
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For the bow the name is life, but the work is death.323

In the original unaccented script the reader would see ΒΙΟΣ and therein lies the ambiguity. This could indicate either βίος (bow) or βίως (life). The fragment then either

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322 DK B 32. Plato uses the accusative of this alternative, more poetic form for the name Zeus (Ζηνας) at Cratylus 396a. The name is thought there to allude to life (ζην) and perhaps has the association for Heraclitus as well.

323 DK B48.
rather prosaically notes: ‘The bow (τόξος) also called βίος, brings death’ or with the contradiction brought to the fore, it more strangely and compellingly can be rendered: ‘The bow bears the name ‘life’, but does the work of death.’ Roman Dilcher says of this passage:

A fundamental discrepancy between the words and the corresponding reality comes to the fore. … In this case, at least, language seems to fall short of conveying that which it intends to express and not only to fall short by being inadequate and vague in the face of something surpassing human understanding, but by asserting precisely the contrary.”

It is not the bow that humans fail to understand, but rather death and life. It is these two contraries which are united by the work of the bow; or rather life and death are parts of the same thing. Language normally obscures the relationship, but Heraclitus in this fragment makes it readily visible within the contradiction. Cratylus for all his Heracliteanism does not appear to adopt such positions in Plato’s dialogue. He insists that some words are correct by nature. Everything else isn’t a word at all.

b) *Metaphysics*

Socrates quotes Heraclitus’ two most-famous sayings in *Cratylus* 402a:

“everything gives way and nothing stands fast,” and “you cannot step into the same river twice.”

He does so because he wants to explain that the ancients must have thought as Heraclitus did when they named the gods, like Rhea which indicates a kind of flowing (rhoē). This notion of movement is prefigured in the analysis of the generic word for

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325 Λέγει που Ἡράκλειτος ὅτι “πάντα χωρεῖ καὶ οὐδέν μένει,” καὶ ποταμοῦ ὡς ἄπεικάζων τὰ ὄντα λέγει ὡς “δίς ἐς τόν αὐτὸν ποταμὸν οὐκ ἂν ἐμβαίης.” (402a).
gods (*theoi*). Socrates says they were thought to be the heavenly bodies which run (*thein*) through the sky.

Just before Socrates quotes Heraclitus, he presents the reader with a stark choice between a Heraclitean worldview and a more stable, meaningful one. When, in his etymologies, he reaches the traditional pantheon of gods, Socrates starts with Hestia (*Ἑστία*) as is customary and derives her name from Being (*οὐσία*). It would seem as though Plato is trying to finesse many of these names into his own philosophical framework. However, he here complicates the message. He says that in earlier times ‘*οὐσία*’ was called by some ‘*ἐσσία*’ and by others ‘*ὡσία*’. Plato is not simply fishing for names more similar to Hestia. He couples this speculation with a bold claim:

… anyone who called the being or essence of all things ‘*ἐσσία*’ would naturally sacrifice to Hestia before all the other gods. On the other hand, those who use the name ‘*ὡσία*’ seem to agree pretty much with Heraclitus’ doctrine that the things that are are all flowing and that nothing stands fast – for the cause and originator of them is then the pusher (*ὡθοῦν*), and so it well names ‘*ὡσία*’. But that’s enough for us to say about this, since we know nothing. (401d)

Being is of course a fundamental concept to Plato. In this passage he sets up a clear dichotomy, as if he were offering his readers an option or choice. On the one hand Hestia can be identified as *ἐσσία* (Being) or *ὡσία* (push, thrust). But how do we tell which interpretation is correct? It is of course far from likely that either Hestia or her name were somehow associated with such abstract concepts. That is not what Greeks thought of as they invoked her in prayer. Plato is not earnestly informing his readers about what her name means. Instead, he presents these two divergent perspectives and just continues his argument. The reader will have to watch these two contrasting concepts develop and play out in the rest of the dialogue and make his or her own choice at the end about the
meaning of Hestia and, more importantly, about the fundamental nature of reality by the end of the dialogue.

c) Ethics

Moral concepts are also subsumed into the Heraclitean framework of flux. Wisdom (φρόνησις) is derived from an understanding of motion (φιλοσοφία – 411d). Virtue/excellence (ἀρετή) is an ‘always-flowing’ soul (ἀεὶ ὑπὸν – 415d). Truth (ἀλήθεια) is a divine wandering (ἀλήθεια – 421b). And even the fundamental, metaphysical concept of Being (ὁν) is related to movement (ιόν – 421b). By the end of the extended demonstration, Plato has successfully associated many of Socrates’ etymologies – and ‘the ancient name-givers’ who he attributes them to – with a Heraclitean metaphysics.326 If the reader is surprised by such an unexpected argument coming from Plato, he should be. But, although he superficially makes the case for them, Plato has carefully embedded the downfall of these Heraclitean etymologies within the dialogue. After so much fanciful speculation he cries:

By the dog, I think that’s a pretty good inspiration – what popped into my mind just now! Most of our wise men nowadays get so dizzy going around and around in their search for the nature of things that are, that the things themselves appear to them to be turning around and moving every which way. Well, I think that the people who gave things their names in very ancient times are exactly like these wise men. They don’t blame this on their own internal condition, however, but on the nature of the things themselves, which they think are never stable or steadfast, but flowing and moving, full of every sort of motion and constant coming into being.327

326 The ancient name-maker (νομοθέτης) or rule-setter (ὀνοματουργός) is first postulated at 388e-389a.
327 411 b-c.
Socrates’ mention of his ‘inspiration’ and his rather irreverent oath is a signal that we should treat this passage with caution. He claims that the first name-givers thought the world was in constant-flux, but that this notion of theirs was really due to the frenzied discombobulation of their own mental states. We need not think that Plato is in fact positing this as an explanation for why so many words have an apparent Hericlitean kernel. The reference to his disingenuous, feigned ‘inspiration’ tells the reader that he in fact doesn’t think this or at least that he has no good reason to. Instead it is the ‘wise men nowadays’ who are his real target. Readers might think that Plato is wrong to posit the existence of ancient name-givers and thus ignore the argument of the Cratylus as flawed, but the point is to show us that people who adopt a Heraclitean worldview are really just attributing their own confusion and instability onto the external world. *This* is what is at issue for the fourth-century reader. This is what is at issue for us, not whether ancient name-givers existed or not, but what kind of world we see ourselves living in and what makes us see it the way we do.

Eventually Socrates finally raises the objection which most readers have been sitting on from the beginning of the dialogue: these supposed name-givers may have been mistaken. The current discussion has arrived only at what the name-givers believed about the nature of the things they were naming (436d). In a move which seriously undermines his entire etymological program Socrates reconsiders knowledge ‘ἐπιστήμη’ which had originally been found to signify that a worthwhile soul follows (ἕπεται) the movement of things (412a). Now he claims, “It seems to signify that it stops the movement of our soul towards things (ἐπὶ ἰστήραιν), rather than that it accompanies them in their movement…”
The text’s strange fixation on fixity gives way to a preference for stability and constancy. This new direction is not a clumsy move on Plato’s part which jeopardizes his project. Rather it is the fulfillment of a trajectory he set up from the beginning. He has used the issue of words and their meaning to open up the discussion to what is really at stake – what our assumptions about the fundamental constituents of reality mean for meaning and what consequences these assumptions have for ethics and ethical discourse.

One could have discussed the correctness of words without bringing up Heraclitus at all. But Plato wanted to show that what we think about words is a window onto what we think about the world. The Protagorean and Heraclitean worldviews, for all their differences, are twin threats to a Platonic one which allows for Ideas like the Good.

IV Conclusion

There is not a single figure or text in the *Cratylus* that Plato parodies. The dialogue is fraught with references to too many intellectuals and theories to conclude that there was a single etymologist whom Plato was trying to expose as a fraud. It is clear, however, that he parodies the practice of etymology. In doing so he demonstrates its unreliability. Yet Plato has done more than offer a criticism of etymology as a means to determine meaning. He has invested the dialogue with Heraclitean themes, putting a spotlight on the consequences of taking a Heraclitean worldview to its natural conclusion. Plato does this all in the guise of having Socrates examine and argue for Cratylus’ position that words are correct by nature. Yet his etymological demonstration amounts to

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328 This is the conclusion of Baxter 1992, *contra* Sedley 2003 and Ademollo 2011.
a strange defense of the essentialism of word-meaning, since no reader could fail to see that so many of the etymologies are presented as laughably wrong. Hermogenes and the unwary reader might be convinced by the apparent sincerity of the ingeniously inventive derivations, but Plato has invested them with enough absurdity that in the same stroke he shows us that they are ultimately unconvincing.

Like Aristophanes, Plato employs parody to reveal something to his reader, to inspire a kind of recognition, an ‘aha’ moment. That recognition is where the humor lies – what allows him to ‘get’ the joke. It enables him to see the object parodied for what it is. If the modern scholar, like the rigorously scientific Aristotle, does not see the humor, we’ll have to rely on Socrates’ own admissions that the etymologies are laughable. In concluding this chapter, I will address what the reader is supposed to see or recognize.

There is a cost to thinking that the essence of words is an always-moving flow, an unstable lack of essence. Words with ethical dimensions – words like theoi, Zeus, agathos, alētheia, dikaiosūnē – lose their human significance when their meaning is believed to be derivative of the bare world around them, reflecting flux and instability. The above words are not strictly ‘Platonic’ or philosophical. They are words important for any Athenian, for any human’s journey through life. From the Protagorean and Heraclitean perspective which Socrates flirts with and parodically exaggerates in this dialogue, these words do not elicit any kind of response, attitude or behavior from their utterers. They only signify and are echoes of a frenzied, essence-less world. Socrates starts hinting at a possible alternative, at the end of the dialogue. He, importantly, does

329 cf. Sedley 2003, 39. “If Plato was joking, the joke flopped.”
not bother arguing that words have a meaning grounded in stability and being. Instead he looks beyond the bare sounds and utterances of words and their constituent letters. How words mean what they mean is not what is important.

After luring a reticent Cratylus to at least openly state a position – that he agrees with Socrates’ defense of the correctness of words – Socrates then turns on him and investigates this position of ‘theirs’. Cratylus claims that the purpose and good of words is “To give instruction, Socrates. After all, the simple truth is that anyone who knows a thing’s name also knows the thing” (435d). This is quite an admission. The end of the dialogue is Plato’s argument against this position. Since there is a civil war between words – between understanding their foundational meaning as static or ever-changing – we cannot look to the words themselves to settle the dispute. Since the original name-givers couldn’t have looked to the words to name them, but rather to the things which they themselves named, we too would be better served by looking to things themselves. There follows a kind of ‘Platonism’ 101 similar to the exposition in the Phaedo: since all beautiful things are ever changing, their beauty in flux, the place to look for beauty is Beauty itself which does not change. This raises the reader’s attention away from particular material things subject to time and motion and toward the abstract ideas Plato was concerned with. There is an analogous trajectory here. Socrates blundered into a discussion about how words mean what they mean and slowly led the conversation away from the binary convention vs nature, and toward an ultimately more pressing one: flux

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330 Plato does, however, acknowledge that this is a possible direction one could go in, given the binary interpretation of Hestia at 401b-e and reexamination of epistēmē at 437a. Socrates says there “I think one could find many other names from which one could conclude that the name-giver intended to signify not that things were moving and being swept along, but the opposite, that they were at rest.” (437c).
vs stability; non-being vs being. This is not only an abstract metaphysical concern. Otherwise, he might have served the reader better by getting straight to the point and straightforwardly advancing his arguments for his ‘Platonic’ worldview. Instead Plato takes the long way around. The reader is invited to observe the conversation as it proceeds; she is treated to the amazing and humorous display of Socrates’ etymologies, and encouraged to reflect on the possibility that all speech and meaning is subject to Heraclitean flux. Socrates ultimately suggests that rather than trying to understand something by examining its name, it is better to investigate the thing itself. Hermogenes is frustrated that Cratylus refuses to freely dialogue about how words mean what they mean, but Socrates has pulled the rug out from both of them and changed the terms of the debate. How words mean what they mean is not the issue. The true choice before the interlocutors (and the reader) is whether they are going to operate in a world whose meaning is imagined as a kind of physical thing constructed out of constituent parts all in imitation of an ever-flowing flux or one where beauty, truth, and goodness are not just mere words, more manifestations of ephemerality, but stable somethings to be considered in their own right.

The End of the Cratylus and Cratylus’ End

Socrates ends his argument about looking to things themselves (and not names) by poking fun at Heracliteanism: maybe all of reality is like a leaky pot or has a cold and a runny nose, dripping all over everything. (440c). He notes that Cratylus is young and should investigate into the matter courageously. Cratylus says that things seem to him to be as Heraclitus says they are. As I argued above, Plato has presented the same choice to
the reader: not that of convention vs nature from the beginning, but stability vs flux. The reason Plato has chosen these particular characters to investigate this particular issue is because the reader is in a good position to assess the two views. Not only does Cratylus tell us which side he chooses but Plato’s readers would have known what choosing Heraclitus meant for him (and what it could mean for them). Aristotle preserves for us a quite startling picture of our interlocutor Cratylus.

… observing that all this indeterminate substance is in motion… they supposed that it is impossible to make any true statement about that which is in all ways entirely changeable. It was from this supposition that there blossomed forth the most extreme view of those we have mentioned, that of the professed followers of Heraclitus, and such as Cratylus held, who ended by thinking one need not say anything, and only moved his finger; and who criticized Heraclitus for saying that one cannot step into the same river twice; for he himself held that it cannot be done even once.\(^{331}\)

Cratylus, at the beginning of the text, certain of his own wisdom and correctness, refuses to explain himself to Hermogenes and enter into an earnest dialogue. This reticence of his was apparently a famous trait of his. What Plato reveals only through absurd parodic exaggeration Aristotle states plainly: it is an extreme Heraclitean worldview that prevents meaningful speech since any fixed meaning is ultimately untenable. The historical Cratylus must have concluded that his philosophical commitments lead him to the position that *all* our speech, in referring to what is not, is only the banging of a brass pot. His abandonment of speech and reliance on deictic gestures alone is playfully anticipated by Plato in jest. Here Socrates is making a comparison based on how a mute person communicates.

Socrates: If we wanted to express something light in weight or above us, I think we’d raise our hand toward the sky in imitation of the very nature of the thing. And if we wanted to express something heavy or below us, we’d move our hand toward the earth. And if we wanted to express a horse (or any other animal)

\(^{331}\) Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1010a.
galloping, you know that we’d make our bodies and gestures as much like theirs as possible.
Hermogenes: I think we’d have to.
Socrates: because the only way to express anything by means of our body is to have our body imitate whatever we want to express.\textsuperscript{332}

Cratylus’ philosophical commitments rendered him mute. To him the world is a conglomeration of ever-flowing physical things. Speech could not capture this or any truth, so he pointed at particular, ephemeral moments of being. The dialogue ends with Socrates seeing Cratylus off with a joke. He tells him to “go off into the country (εἰς ἀγρόν), as you were planning to do, and Hermogenes here will see you on your way.”\textsuperscript{333}

The phrase ‘into the country’ could be taken as an indication that Cratylus is set to go off down a rough path in a metaphorical sense. The verb ἀγριόω means to grow or be wild and savage. He has reaffirmed his commitment to Heraclitus’ worldview and his narrow, constricting view of language and is on a pitiable trajectory of foolishness. Additionally, while Cratylus had asserted that Hermogenes wasn’t correctly called Hermogenes – that that wasn’t his name – Plato suggests at the very end that it may be correct, after all.

Hermes was famously the πομπαῖος who escorted the dead to Hades. Socrates here suggests that Hermogenes will escort (προπέμψει) Cratylus away, off-stage, so to speak, to what could be construed as his metaphorical death.

Plato is concerned with meaning and uses Cratylus as a cautionary tale. Not only does he parody and expose the fallacious claims of etymology to reveal a word’s hidden meanings, but he shows that trying to find meaning out of words in constant flux like the

\textsuperscript{332} (422e-423a).
\textsuperscript{333} (440e).
world they are made from is a futile endeavor. Once Cratylus is persuaded of this, he concludes that there is no use in speaking. Plato’s dialogues, in contrast, are an invitation and protreptic to dialogue, to using language, however imprecise it is. But it is not in the words themselves that we will find the truth about the world, the gods, or morality. Plato enables the reader to see the paucity of the Heraclitean worldview by showing the absurd position Cratylus finds himself increasingly committed to (both in and after the dramatic date of the dialogue).

334 Consider Socrates’ analogy that just as people investigate the sun by looking at its reflection in water, so too he investigates the truth of things by means of words. (Phaedo 99d-e).
CONCLUSION

I have succeeded in establishing four main points: first, some views expressed by Socrates are actually other people’s; second, the reader is shown what is problematic about them through their humorous representation; third, Aristophanes is an important predecessor to Plato in this regard; and lastly, one view that Plato is particularly concerned with is materialism. In this Conclusion, I want to make sure I articulate what is positive about Plato’s parodic pedagogy. It will be instructive to look at the Symposium.

Each of the speeches in praise of Eros could be viewed as representing a particular kind of person or set of assumptions. The dialogue follows a trajectory in which these views are shown to be insufficient and the capstone to the five speeches is Socrates’. There he describes his conversation with Diotima and how she initiated him into the rites of love. Her description of Eros eventually gives way to a vision of Beauty. As I discussed in the Introduction, it is tempting to label this a Platonic form with all its attendant metaphysical and epistemological problems. The significance of the view Plato has Diotima share is that it is such a marked contrast with so many of the conceptions of beauty that came before it. Phaedrus and Pausanias were focused on relationships. Eryximachus sees Eros as a kind of physical process present in all of nature. Aristophanes describes the origin of Eros in a humorous but also grossly physical allegory. Agathon, as I argued in chapter two, can only think of love in materialist terms reminiscent of Gorgias’ conception of logos and persuasion. Diotima’s Beauty is so other-worldly and emphatically immaterial because Plato is trying to offer his readers an
alternative view of desire. Socrates’ interlocutors in the dialogue and Plato’s readers might not even be able to imagine what desire could be if not something physical.  

Socrates himself in the *Symposium* stands as an embodiment of this unorthodox principle. He is not young and beautiful like Agathon (or Agathon’s *Eros*) and yet there is something desirable about Socrates. Alcibiades proves this at the end of the *Symposium*. He, however, still thinks that he can acquire the wisdom Socrates has through a physical transaction, by offering him his body. Plato is showing his readers what is insufficient about thinking wisdom, knowledge, *eudaimonia*, *arêtē*, soul, and beauty are material things or that they can be treated as such. What we consider Platonic ‘doctrines’ are ways of leading the reader out of his familiar, habitual assumptions.

Agathon’s description of desire in materialist terms means that it is subject to the impersonal, deterministic laws of nature. The philosophical life, as Plato presents it, is one where individuals have a responsibility to choose how they live and act. Damon’s conception of education and *arêtē* in materialist terms means that becoming virtuous is an impersonal matter of exposing one’s senses to the right stimuli. The philosophers in the heart of the *Republic* are concerned with ever increasingly immaterial things and are able to direct their own souls. Indeed Socrates says that *everyone* has the power to turn their own soul toward the Good. Cratylus’ conception of correctness of speech in materialist terms means that meaning is an impersonal, physical process of the world around us, as if we don’t have a say in such things. Plato’s pedagogy, in parodically representing these

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335 This is certainly Callicles’ position in the *Gorgias*. Socrates’ *elenchus* reveals Callicles to himself (and to the reader). He obviously has intellectual and social goals, but the heart of his desires is about self-interest, pleasure, and power (*Gorgias* 491e-492c).
views and exposing these views to criticism, is not entirely negative. He points to a path beyond them. This is not a matter of adopting or believing certain Platonic ‘doctrines’, but rather adopting a courageous philosophical perspective: when it comes to things we value like justice, beauty, and truth three things are required. 1) these things are ‘real’ in at least the sense that they really matter; 2) it is possible to talk about them; and 3) our conceptions about them have consequences for us and those around us.

I have shown that Aristophanes used parody in much the same way Plato did. He exaggerated aspects of recognizable viewpoints in order to subject them to criticism. I made the case that this was not just for a laugh but was pedagogical, revealing something true to the reader. But just as Plato’s point was not entirely critical or negative, the same can be said of Aristophanes. Aristophanes exposes materialist assumptions to be insufficient in order to suggest that there has to be another way of seeing things or addressing problems. Consider the *Lysistrata*. In this play, the comedic playwright addresses a very real anxiety about war and the loss of life by staging a sex-strike on the part of the combatants’ wives. Even at the end when the men are brought to their knees and forced to concede to peace, Peace herself is imagined as a scantily clad woman whom they slaver over. Led now by desire and not hostility, they peaceably divide up her ‘territory’. One misses the point in pointing out that this isn’t a realistic solution. What Aristophanes stages is the ridiculousness of thinking that our desires, imagined in purely physical or sexual terms, can lead to any meaningful peace. Seeing the men stop fighting because of their sexual desire leads the audience to wonder – Could someone stop fighting because of love? love of family? love of country?
The *Birds* features a similar kind of hyperbolic materialism. Peisthetaerus leaves Athens because he thinks he will find a more just city among the birds. In this play, nature and natural principles are imagined as replacing the laws of men and gods.\(^{336}\)

What makes the city so great? It has no need of priest, poet, oracle-mongers, or geometers. When Prometheus suggests a negotiation strategy, he convinces Peisthetaerus to demand the hand of Sovereignty who is posited as a consort to Zeus. But when all is said and done this city’s merits can still only be imagined in mundane, material terms.

She is a very beautiful girl  
Who looks after Zeus’ thunderbolts  
And everything else all at once, good counsel,  
Good laws, a sound mind, the dockyard,  
Abusive speech, the collectors at sacrifices, and the half-drachma. (1537-1541).

The humor of this list is designed to make the audience wonder: is this going to really get Peisthetaerus what he wants? Is that what a good government consists of? Plato has Socrates more directly ask – what is *sophrosunē*? Just as in the *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes inspires in the audience a recognition that it is not any amount of food or sacrifices or money or walls – physical things – that makes a city good or great.

Plato, I believe, saw this positive quality in Aristophanes’ humor. In the *Symposium*, he gives Aristophanes a proper comic speech, one completely absurd and, it should be noted, one that explains desire in physical terms: the story of sundered humans seeking to literally unite with their other half. But, Plato, in his dialogue, has allowed Aristophanes to do what he did in his plays: the comic playwright uses the absurd materiality to point the way toward a more abstract truth. Desire *is* the pursuit of

\(^{336}\) “But if they acknowledge that *you* are God, *you* are Life, *you* are Earth, *you* are Kronos, *you* are Poseidon – ah, then what blessing will be showered upon them.” (586-7).
wholeness. This rings true. The audience learns and realizes this in his silly story and is then prompted to wonder how it is true if Aristophanes’ story of man’s original nature cannot be taken as literally true. In this way, Aristophanes and Plato share not only a pedagogical tactic or methodology, but a philosophical vision.
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