Political philosopher Leo Strauss’s extensive engagements with Aristophanes’s comedies represent a remarkable perspective in debates concerning the political and wider meaning of Aristophanes’s plays. Yet they have attracted nearly no critical response. This paper argues that for Strauss, Aristophanes was a very serious, philosophically-minded author who wrote esoterically, using the comic form to convey his conception of man, and his answer to the Socratic question of the best form of life. Part I addresses Strauss’s central reading of the Clouds, which positions this play as Aristophanes’s powerful, exoteric criticism of any purely theoretical philosophy that feels no need to explain or accommodate its pursuit to political life. Part II looks at Strauss’s remarkable reading of the Platonic Aristophanes’s central speech in the Symposium, which suggests that Aristophanes was a secret friend and admirer of philosophy conceived in the Platonic manner, as an erotic search for the truth of nature, beneath Aristophanes’s religiously pious and culturally conservative veneer. Indeed, Part III of the paper shows that Strauss’s readings of the Birds, Peace and Wasps indicate that Strauss believed that Aristophanes was such an esoteric friend to the philosophy he had lampooned in the Clouds.

And does not the same hold also of the ridiculous? There are jests which you would be ashamed to make yourself, and yet on the comic stage, or indeed in private, when you hear them, you are greatly amused by them, and are not at all disgusted at their unseemliness...
— Plato, Republic

Socrates’ speeches, if heard, are ridiculous, let us say comical. But if one looks inside they prove to contain the most wonderful images of virtue. He no longer says most wonderful images of the gods, as he said at the beginning. Socrates’ speeches are like comedies. You remember in the beginning, when he came in, Alkibiades was surprised that Socrates did not sit with Aristophanes, where he belonged.
— Leo Strauss, Reading Plato’s Symposium
Introducing Leo Strauss’s Aristophanes

Concerning the ancient question of the political meaning of the Aristophanic comedies, the modern reception has been divided. In both Anglophone and continental thought, opinion has generally divided into two poles, with some notable exceptions.¹ Either Aristophanes’s comedies have no real political meaning—“politics was the material of comedy, but comedy did not in turn aspire to be a political force”²—or Aristophanes’s comedy is presented as directly political, bespeaking an archetypally conservative, anti-democratic position.³ Political philosopher Leo Strauss’s extensive engagements

¹ Importantly, there are some dissenting voices. Gilbert Murray, Robert Neil, and Maurice Croiset have claimed that Aristophanes was either a pacifist (Murray) or “a moderate democrat, disliking the extreme oligarch as much as the demagogue: a good, comfortable, essentially British position.” See Arnold W. Gomme, “Aristophanes and Politics,” The Classical Review 52, no. 3 (1938): 97–108, here 98. Yet, overwhelmingly, Grote’s gruff assessment of the Old Comic as declaring a poetic war “against philosophy, literature, and eloquence—in the name of those good old times of ignorance,” or at least of the Athens of Kimon, Miltiades, Aristides, and Marathon is the commanding position amongst those who assign Aristophanes’s comedy any political force. On this point, see Philip Walsh, “A study in reception: the British debates over Aristophanes’s politics and influence,” Classical Receptions Journal 1, no. 1 (2009): 55–72, here 62–63.

² Malcolm Heath, Political Comedy in Aristophanes (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1987), 42.

³ Defenders of variants of the first position point, with the Schlegel brothers, to the comic form of Aristophanes’s dramas and their religious setting: “in the festivals dedicated to Bacchus and the other frolicsome deities, every sort of freedom...were not only things permitted, they were strictly in character, and formed, in truth, the consecrated ceremonial of the season. The fancy, above all things...was on these occasions permitted to attempt the most audacious heights, and revel in the wildest world of dreams—loosened for a moment from all those fetters of law, custom, and propriety, which at other times, and in other species of writing, must ever regulate its exertion even in the hands of poets” (Friedrich Schlegel, Letters on the History of Literature, cited in Walsh, “A Study in Reception,” 61 n13). From such a perspective, Aristophanes’s comedies are too “polymorphously perverse” to be taken seriously as direct political comment. See, for instance, Charles Platter, Aristophanes and the Carnival of Genres (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). His apparent political attacks across the plays are too inconsistent. See Gomme, “Aristophanes and Politics.” His characters are clearly parodies of types, rather than specific politicians. See Stephen Halliwell, “Aristophanic Satire,” The Yearbook of English Studies, Satire Special Number: Essays in Memory of Robert C. Elliott 1914–1981, vol. 14 (1984): 6–20. Comic language like that of the Old Comedies sets out to be playful and excessive, rather than demonstrative or didactic. See Simon Goldhill, The Poet’s Voice:
with Aristophanes’s comedies represent a remarkably novel perspective in these debates concerning the political and wider meaning of Aristophanes’s plays. In other readings, Aristophanes’s targeting of Socrates and philosophy forms one feature in a wider consideration of the old comedians’ varied works and concerns. By contrast, Strauss brings to the critical debates concerning Aristophanes and his politics his own particular conception of “Platonic political philosophy.” Famously, this conception of political philosophy addresses the relationship between philosophy as a rational, questioning pursuit of ahistorical truths concerning nature and human being, and what Strauss called “the city”: meaning political life, which is always the life of particular historical societies, drawing on traditional, often unquestioned and religiously-sanctioned traditions. The fate of Socrates at the beginning of political philosophy, for Strauss—pre-eminently including his lampooning by Aristophanes in the Clouds—dramatized the deep tension between philosophy’s “zetetic” calling into question of inherited opinion, and the kinds of traditional forms of life which Strauss saw as necessary for abiding social order. It also cautioned philosophers from Plato onwards concerning their need to present the philosophical bios in a “politic” manner, if philosophical reflection was to survive and flourish. What Nietzsche called “the problem of Socrates”\(^4\) in this way underlies Strauss’s controversial claim that the often oblique, literary presentation of philosophy in figures from Plato to Nietzsche involves their “exoteric” presentation of “esoteric” positions potentially troubling to prevailing public opinion.

Given this conception of philosophy and politics, we can see straight away why Aristophanes was one of only two ancient figures to whose oeuvre Strauss devoted a book-length study (Socrates and Aristophanes).

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Aristophanes), alongside Xenophon. The first two of Strauss’s “Five Lectures” on “The Problem of Socrates” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* are likewise largely devoted to the Old Comedian. There are at least three reasons for Aristophanes’s centrality to Strauss, however much Strauss’s Aristophanes remains one of the *dramatis personae* in his *oeuvre* that has attracted least attention.5 First, Aristophanes’s famous satirizing of Socrates in his comedy *Clouds* represents, alongside Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle, one of only four direct, ancient sources we have concerning the father of political philosophy. (SA, 3) Second, in the trial of Socrates as recounted in Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*, Aristophanes as the author of said *Clouds* is all but named by the aging philosophical hero as Socrates’s oldest, most damaging accuser. (SCP, 2) Thirdly, Aristophanes’s attack on Socrates in the *Clouds* represents for Strauss a first, decisively important salvo in what Plato’s Socrates in the *Republic* announces as the “ancient quarrel between philosophy and the poets” concerning wisdom and the education of citizens.7 For Strauss, the Aristophanic charges against Socrates and thus against philosophy *per se*, are to be taken very seriously from the perspective of the political fate and meaning of philosophy. For “[t]he point of view at which Aristophanes looks at contemporary life is that of justice, old-

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5 One reason for this may be that Strauss did not make any reference to modern authors on Aristophanes, excepting Hegel (see below). On the other hand, several of Strauss’s students, or defenders of his broad approach, have written on Aristophanes himself, or on Strauss’s Aristophanes, under his influence. See Alan Bloom, “Response to Hall,” *Political Theory*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1977): 315–30. See also Mary Nichols, *Socrates and the Political Community: Ancient Debate* (New York: SUNY, 1987), 1–28. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as SPC. Of interest is also Catherine Zuckert’s excellent account of Strauss’s reading of Aristophanes focussing on the *Assembly of Women*, for its influence on Plato’s *Republic*, and the *Clouds*. See Catherine Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 132–56. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PP. Mary Nichols’s “Socrates’ Contest with the Poets in Plato’s *Symposium*,” *Political Theory*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2004): 186–206, addresses the Platonic Aristophanes’s speech, influenced very much by Strauss’s hermeneutics and concerns. Alan Bloom also looks at Plato’s depiction of the Platonic Aristophanes in “The Ladder of Love” in Plato’s *Symposium*, (tr.) S. Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 55–78; as does Seth Benardete’s “On Plato’s *Symposium*,” in the same volume, 179–99. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text respectively as LL and OPS.


fashioned justice," Strauss states. As the ambiguity in the description "contemporary life" here suggests, Strauss’s suggestion seems indeed to be that there is something timelessly valid about Aristophanes’s “reactionary” indignation at the celebrated pursuer of the theoretical life, as we will see. (FL, 103)

Leo Strauss’s own political position has been widely interpreted as highly conservative, although the fact that Strauss himself seemingly wrote esoterically make debates on his legacy notoriously irresolvable, and often acrimonious. One certain thing is that Strauss agrees with Grote, Milford, et al. that, on first sight, Aristophanes was just such a radical, cultural and political conservative as Strauss has been widely accused of being. In Strauss’s telling synopsis of the way Aristophanes presents Socrates in the Clouds:

The first impression which anyone may receive of Socrates from the Clouds was expressed by Nietzsche in terms like these. Socrates belongs to the outstanding seducers of the people who was responsible for the loss of the old Marathonian virtue of body and soul, and for the dubious enlightenment which is accompanied by the decay of virtue of body and soul. Socrates is in fact the first and foremost a sophist, the mirror and embodiment of all sophistic tendencies.... Socrates is not only extremely evil but extremely foolish as well—and hence utterly ridiculous. (FL, 103)

Yet, here as so often elsewhere in Strauss’s oeuvre, we want to argue that we do well to not place an unshakable faith in first impressions. Strauss’s conception of political philosophy saw him pay notoriously precise attention to the rhetorical and literary form of the texts he studied. Strauss was thus far too attentive a reader of Aristophanes not to reflect on the types of concerns which animated the Schlegels and others in their caution about reading the Old Comedy too literally, or as involving directly political comment. For Strauss, comedy is a species of indirect communication, wherein what is literally presented is often only obliquely or playfully related to what is intended. And here is the rub that allows us to situate Strauss in one way as between both predominant modern strands of reading Aristophanes.

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9 Critics even disagree as to whether Strauss wrote esoterically, with the most important statement of the case for the negative being Catherine and Michael Zuckert, The Truth about Leo Strauss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
nes's politics. Strauss's framing claim in his interpretation of Aristophanes is that the apparently desultory, ridiculous surfaces of Aristophanic comedies conceal the most serious inner contents. Aristophanic comedy is a species of esoteric writing: "the most effective disguise of wisdom." (SA, 64) In tragedies, Strauss suggests that the low, political, even everyday affairs of men are "sublimated," or presented in a noble or high form. Comedy, by contrast, may present what is of the most noble or philosophical importance while apparently only engaging in bawdy, base, or "beast-like" entertainments. (Hegel in FL, 107) Beneath the ribaldry, Strauss maintains, the Aristophanic Old Comedy "owes its depth and its worth to the presence within it of the solemn and the serious": indeed, he contends, a profound reflection on the relationship between philosophy, poetry, and political life. (FL, 107) Here, then, we approach the most idiosyncratic claims Leo Strauss makes concerning Aristophanes. Their examination will occupy us in the body of this paper.

First, Strauss’s reading of Aristophanes and comedy situates it, beneath the surface, as the highest, and even the most philosophical, of the literary arts. In "The Problem of Socrates," Strauss makes much of Aristophanes’s presentation of the comic muse in Peace as an ill-smelling dung beetle which nevertheless is able, when "induced to leave the ground," to soar higher than Zeus’s eagles. (FL, 107) Comedy rises higher than any other art, Strauss enthuses. Thus it shares much more than we might first imagine with the Platonic or Xenophontic dialogues:

It transcends every other art; it transcends in particular tragedy. Since it transcends tragedy, it presupposes tragedy. The fact that it presupposes and transcends tragedy finds its expression in the parodies of tragedies which are so characteristic of the Aristophanic comedy. Comedy rises higher than tragedy. Only the com-

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10 “The tragic poet establishes the beautiful delusion, the salutary delusion, which the comic poet destroys.... Both tragedy and comedy are equally necessary. If tragic poetry enchants, comic poetry disenchant.... There is a fragment of Heraclitus of which one cannot help thinking in this connection. There is one thing and only one thing which is wise, which wishes and also does not wish to be called Zeus, i.e., to be seen in human form. It wishes to be seen, to be called Zeus—tragedy; it does not wish to be called Zeus—comedy.” Leo Strauss, Reading Plato’s Symposium (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 169–70. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as RPS.

11 Only dying, real suffering, and what is otherwise truly fear-inspiring need be excluded from the comic stage, on grounds of the comics’ need to maintain the medium’s levity, Strauss observes. In contrast, the unreal figures and fancies of fantasy can multiply. See FL, 9, 108 and PP, 136.
edy can present wise men as wise men; men like Euripides and Socrates, men who as such transcend tragedy. (FL, 108; cf. SA, 64)

Second, we will argue here that Strauss’s final political and philosophical assessment of Aristophanes himself turns on its head the reading of him as simply another “Old Oligarch” who used comic license to vent his reactionary spleen against philosophers, sophists, democrats and demagogues. If attention is paid to Aristophanes’s entire oeuvre, and in particular to the endings of his comedies, Strauss argues instead that Aristophanes should rightly be seen as much more a friend to Socrates and philosophy in particular (and even to Euripides), than the Clouds so hilariously suggests. What the comedic license Schlegel and many others have emphasized allows, Strauss suggests, is “the publication of the essentially private, of the improper utterance of things which everyone privately enjoys because they are by nature enjoyable.” (FL, 111) Most readers will think here of the matters of sexuality, bodily pleasures, the raising of children, wine and epicure—all the topics which were Aristophanic or Euripidean long before they became Freudian. (FL, 122) Yet for Strauss, philosophy was both a characteristically private pursuit, and one which he agreed with Plato and Aristotle was also amongst the most truly and lastingly enjoyable, at least for those few men taken by its muse. Just so, for Strauss, we will show, a complete reading of the Aristophanic comedies shows them to be informed by a philosophic “knowledge of nature,” if not committed finally to praising some form of private bios as the highest form of life in figures like the

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12 A reviewer of this article has rightly pointed out that the issue of whether Strauss conceived philosophy as essentially private, like many others, is not completely clear-cut. So a qualification is needed. Strauss notes at various points that the philosopher must, like Socrates, enter into the agora in order to try to win students, which suggests a complexity here, or even an oscillation between a “zetetic” view of the philosopher as seeking knowledge by raising questions, including in discussion with others, and a more Aristotelian or pre-Socratic view of philosophy as solitary contemplation of the eternal truth(s). Strauss stresses in The City and Man that “above all, Plato presents no Socratic conversation with the men of the demos...it is above all through the selection of conversations, apart from the titles, that we hear Plato himself as distinguished from his characters.” Leo Strauss, The City and Man, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 57. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CM. Furthermore, in writing on Xenophon, Strauss takes care to note how in the Memorabilia/Conversations of Socrates, Book IV, Chapter 6, Socrates is depicted as studying the texts of wise men, “pre-Socratic” physikoi, even after his advertised second sailing or turn to political philosophy, away from natural philosophy. (FL, 104) See also PP, 310 n.30 and notes 20, 33 and 37 below.
Aristophanic Dikaiopolis in the *Acharnians* and the natural philosopher Meton in *The Birds.* This is far from a simple reactionary conservatism; it is a political conservatism whose flipside is the praise of intellectual or theoretical liberty, at least for a happy few.

Both of these claims challenge the idea of a simple opposition between poetry and philosophy in Strauss. The second claim, which sees Aristophanes quietly advocating for a philosophical way of life, stands in tension with the more orthodox understandings of Strauss’s Aristophanes as perhaps a friend to philosophy and to Socrates, but no philosopher himself. To make this claim, in contrast to other readings of Strauss on these subjects, we will turn to Strauss’s important reading of the Platonic *Symposium* wherein, as we know, Aristophanes is given the central, arguably most profound speech, and Plato depicts him as a friend to Socrates. (SA, 5) Our novel interpretive move here, relative to other commentators on Strauss’s reading of Aristophanes, is to suggest that his interpretation of the speech and role of Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium* provides a decisive key to unlocking Strauss’s reading of the esoteric, near-philosophical, original Aristophanes. Yet before we examine this speech in Part II, and then return to Strauss’s radical reading of Aristophanes’s other comedies in Part III in its light, we need first to examine Strauss’s exoteric Aristophanes, the comedic critic of philosophy in the *Clouds.*

I. Heads in the Clouds, the Exoteric Aristophanes as Poetic Critic of Philosophy

It is significant that, in contrast with nearly all other studies of Aristophanes, Leo Strauss’s *Socrates and Aristophanes* begins with a single, very lengthy chapter on the *Clouds,* which also constitutes by itself one Part of Strauss’s book. (SA, 9–54) The *Clouds,* and the relationship between poetry, the city, and philosophy which is its subject, forms the key reference point for the entire study. It also occupies nearly the entire second lecture on “The Problem of Socrates” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism.* As Strauss puts it well, the *Clouds* vindicates the perspective of Grote, Mitford, Starkie and Ste Croix, that Aristophanes was “the great reactionary, who opposes with all means at his disposal all the new-fangled things, be it the democracy, the Euripidean tragedy, or the pursuits of Socrates.” (FL, 103) If Aristophanes is concerned with philosophy at all, the *Clouds* show that he is as its incisive critic, anything but its admirer or fellow traveller. For this Aristophanes, Strauss concurs, “philosophy is a problem, philosophy does not have a political or
civic existence,” if it does not undermine the very basis for all such existence. It is this exoteric side of Strauss’s reading of Aristophanes that has attracted most attention. (FL, 119; cf. PP, 133–34, 137; SPC, 2–3, 25–28)

What then are the terms of the explicit Aristophanic critique of philosophy in the Clouds, as they emerge in Strauss’s commentaries? As we know, Aristophanes’s great comedy features one Strepsiadis, a rustic farmer who has fallen into debt on account of his son, Pheidippides’s, immoderate love of horses. In order to rid himself of these debts, Strepsiadis conceives of the bright idea to go to the phrontisterion or think tank of one “Socrates,” about whom Strepsiadis has somehow heard. This Socrates reputedly studies the things in the heavens and beneath the earth, and can teach men for money how to win every law suit, no matter the strength of their cases.

When Strepsiadis arrives at the think tank, we are treated to a hilarious presentation of this Socrates’s ridiculous pretentions. Socrates himself first appears above the earth, suspended in a basket, so—we are told—he might mix his thoughts with the ether. As Strauss comments, thus positioned, Socrates is as one “walking on air, and looking over the sun, or looking down on it.” (FL, 120) Socrates addresses Strepsiadis as if he were a god: “Why do you call me, ephemeral one?” (Clouds line 223; SA, 15) His students for their part practice forms of very elevated natural research. When Strepsiadis announces his desire to become a pupil, the august mysteries are revealed to him straight away. (SA 14; PP, 134) By creating tiny wax slippers, Socrates’s enthusiastic charges are discovering how many lengths of its own feet a flea can leap. Socrates’s students bear the marks of their teacher’s complete neglect of practical matters, in search of such elevated theoretical mysteries. (SPC, 10–11) Despite what Strepsiadis has heard, neither Socrates nor his pupils show any regard for anything so worldly as even taking money for sharing their wisdom. (FL, 120–21; 134–35)

Aristophanes’s Socrates, Strauss notes, seems to teach two things: natural science, like a “pre-Socratic” philosopher (PP, 135), and rhetoric. Bringing these fields together symbolically are his new gods, who are natural beings, the Clouds—and who form Aristophanes’s chorus in the comedy. Above the Clouds, we learn, is a first cosmic principle, the ether and vortex. (SA, 19) The clouds, as their shifting forms suggest, teach the art of being able to speak persu-

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13 FL, 120–21: “Socrates is no money maker, but a needy fellow who makes his companions needy as well and yet is insensitive to his and his companions’ neediness....”
sively, and appear differently to different audiences. (SA, 17–18) They can imitate all things, and bestow knowledge of how to speak well to all men. In any case, just as it was enough for Strepsiades to state his desire to learn for Socrates’s students to begin their physical demonstrations (FL, 120; SA, 134), so too Aristophanes’s Socrates does not hesitate to imprudently reveal immediately to his neophyte the shocking implications of his new philosophy: “Zeus does not exist.” (Clouds line 367; cf. SA, 22, 45) Lightning is not Zeus’s way of punishing the wicked, as the naïve believe. It is a naturally occurring phenomenon that strikes equally the good, the bad, and morally indifferent.14 Perfectly natural, indeed comically base, explanations can likewise be given for thunder, which the uneducated associate with Zeus’s justice. For these reasons:

[Socrates] demands of Strepsiades that he no longer recognise the gods worshipped by the city, and Strepsiades, mind you, complies with this request without any hesitation. The strange thing is that Socrates blurts out these things before he has tested Strepsiades regarding his worthiness to hear of them and his ability to understand them. (FL, 121; cf. SA, 22)

Strepsiades as it turns out is too dull to understand. He fails even to learn grammar and the cloud-like arts of speaking. Instead, he compels his son Pheidippides to study with Socrates in his place. Strepsiades is eager in particular that his son should learn the “Unjust Argument [Logos]” which he hopes will demolish his creditors and free him of his need to honour the debts. In what follows, Pheidippides is made to witness the famous exchange between the personified “Unjust” and “Just Arguments.” (SA, 29–31) The Just Logos represents ancestral civic virtue: respect for elders, the deferral of sexual and other forms of enjoyment, the importance of hard work and a good education. The Unjust Speech sets out to deny ancient temperance by showing that justice is “not with the gods.” (Clouds, lines 903–905) Zeus himself is said in the ancient poets to have done castrating violence to his own father Cronos, and gone unpunished. Again, the father of the gods represented by Homer or Hesiod is anything but a model of sexual moderation or marital fidelity. In short, in Strauss’s words:

14 Strauss suggests that it is poetically significant that the Clouds conceal the ether above them, which is indifferent to good and evil: so too rhetoric, including the art of writing, “is essentially both revealing and concealing,” if not amoral. (FL, 121)
...since the gods are not human beings and therefore cannot be bound by the laws to which they subject men—Hera is both Zeus’ wife and sister—a great difficulty remains. Men must do what the gods tell them to do, but not what the gods themselves do. (FL, 123)

Confronted by this telling argument\textsuperscript{15}, the Just Logos collapses. (SPC, 19–22) Pheidippides for his part shows himself an able pupil of the Unjust Logos, and adept at the art of clever speaking. Filled with joy at his son’s transformation, Strepsiades confronts his creditors with Pheidippides at his side, ridiculing them, his old oaths, and the gods themselves. However, the father does not bank on all that the son has learnt from the Unjust Logos. A dispute follows between the two, significantly concerning the relative merits of Aeschylus—whom Strepsiades favors—and the new-fangled tragedian, Euripides, admired by the rhetorically trained son. In the exchange that follows, Pheidippides first beats Strepsiades, then proceeds to justify his actions using the sublime precedents for immorality he has learnt from the Unjust Logos. The breaking point comes when Pheidippides proposes to show how beating his mother too can be justified by the Socratic, Unjust rhetoric. At this point, which Strauss pointedly links to the question of incest (SA, 40, 43), Strepsiades re-avows his lapsed piety towards the Olympian gods, and sets about burning down Socrates’s phrontisterion. (SA, 46)\textsuperscript{16}

The outcome of the Clouds leaves us in little doubt as to what its author’s evaluation of Socratic philosophy can have been. In Natural Right and History, Strauss claims that the prephilosophic view is characterized by the pervasive tendency of peoples to identify the good with what is old.\textsuperscript{17} It is just such a view that the Aristophanes of the Clouds represents, Strauss agrees with Grote et al: “justice as Aristophanes understands it consists in preserving or restoring the ancestral or the old...the perspective of the simple, brave, rural, and pious victors of Marathon, of those who prefer Aeschylus to Euripides.” (FL, 109–110) The Socrates of the Clouds takes his place alongside a series of much-lampooned Aristophanic anti-heros—Kleon, Euripides, the law courts of Athens, the effeminate tragedian Agathon—each representing one contemporary vice and source of

\textsuperscript{15} See Plato, Euthyphro, 5e–6c.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 22–25.

\textsuperscript{17} Strauss, Natural Right and History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 81–90. Cf. SA, 40.
Athens’s decline: the war with Sparta, the plague, the unhappiness of her women, and her imminent, catastrophic defeat. (*Ibid.*)

Two things need to be underlined here concerning Strauss’s reading of the *Clouds*, which will assume importance in his wider evaluation of the meaning of Aristophanic comedy. The first is that Strauss is at pains to suggest that we should at least “wonder whether there was not perhaps a little bit of fire where there was so much smoke” concerning Aristophanes’s presentation of Socrates, parody notwithstanding. (*FL, 104*) Plato’s *Apology* has Socrates denying that he was a *physikos* or natural scientist as alleged by his accusers and the *Clouds*. Yet in the *Phaedo*, Strauss notes, Plato has Socrates recall that as a younger man at least (“he does not give any dates”), Socrates had indeed been “concerned with natural philosophy in an amazing way.” (*FL, 104*) Equally, Xenophon in the *Oeconomicus* and in his *Symposium* suggests that Socrates was still “no longer young” when he had the reputation for “measuring the air”—viz. practicing natural philosophy—as Aristophanes parodied in the *Clouds*. Strauss’s Socrates quietly continued his study of the *physikoi* throughout his entire career, despite the more public “second sailing,” as Zuckert also (literally) notes. (*FL, 104*; *PP, 330 n.30*) We will see later why this is very important, given Strauss’s conception of Aristophanes as something of a hidden *physikos*, like Eryximachus in the *Symposium*, into whose place Plato deftly puts him.

The second point is related to this claim, already remarkable enough, that for Strauss there is real justice in the Aristophanic charges against Socrates. It concerns Aristophanes’s assessment of Socrates and the open pursuit of natural philosophy in contemporary

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20 In the context of his exegesis of the *Clouds* in the second lecture of “The Problem of Socrates,” Strauss feels compelled to offer “a word about Socrates’ think tank or school.” (*FL, 120*) That *logos* draws our attention to two passages in Xenophon’s *Conversations of Socrates* (Book I, Chapter 6 and Book IV, Chapter 6) In these passages, Xenophon describes Socrates in a way which directly contradicts the public image Plato’s Socrates promotes in the *Apology*, and which is generally accepted as Socrates’ distinct second sailing: that in his maturity, Socrates was constantly philosophizing in the Athenian agora, having shunned natural philosophy as impossible and politically unwise. The passages depict Socrates as from time to time withdrawing with students to study together the books of wise, “pre-Socratic” men of old. According to Strauss’s Xenophon, even in the famously pious *Memorabilia* (or *Conversations of Socrates*), Socrates “never ceased considering with [his students] what each of the beings are.” (*FL, 104*) See also notes 12, 33 and 37 in this paper.
Athens. With typical acuity, Strauss draws our attention to the subtle way Aristophanes’s Clouds themselves change in their attitude towards Socrates and Strepsiades as the Clouds continue, in ways which suggest Aristophanes’s own, larger perspective. While their divinity within the phrontisterion might tempt us naturally to associate the Clouds with the Unjust Logos, Strauss notes that they in fact applaud only the defeated Just argument in the debate between the two causes. When Strepsiades mocks his creditors and blasphemes, the Clouds express grave doubts concerning his future. (SA, 37) When, finally, Strepsiades goes to burn down Socrates’s think-tank because of Pheidippides’s impiety towards father and mother, the Clouds do nothing to oppose this, and save their darling. Strauss has this to say concerning this peculiarity of Aristophanes’s Clouds:

After Socrates has introduced the new divinities into the city, they [the Clouds] desert him when they see how unpopular he is bound to become. They change their position as soon as they see how the Strepsiades case, the test case, is developing. Their conduct proves their divinity. They are wiser than Socrates. The Clouds are wise because they act with prudent regard to both Socrates’ virtue and his vice. His virtue consists in his daring, his intrepidity, his nonconformity…. His vice is his lack of practical wisdom or prudence. (FL, 124)

This matter of the Aristophanic Socrates’s lack of prudence or political wisdom is indeed for Strauss the heart of Aristophanes’s paradigmatic critique of philosophy in the Clouds, and Aristophanes’s effective claim therein for the superiority of the poets over philosophy. (SA, 49; cf. LL, 308; PP, 134–37; SPC, 25–28) As we commented in passing above, Strauss is repeatedly struck by the “amazing lack of phronesis, of practical wisdom or of prudence” Aristophanes’s Socrates shows in his very openly treating with Strepsiades and his son. (FL, 121) Socrates’s pursuit of theoretical wisdom and the study of nature for Aristophanes purchases the higher pleasures of learning at the price of inducing a lack of self-knowledge which is also a lack of political nous, since even the man who pursues the bios theoretikos remains always a political being. The Clouds for Strauss then, far from being a flippant comedy, proffers a timelessly devastating attack on the purely theoretical study “of nature as a whole” (FL, 126) when it is not accompanied by political philosophy’s concern with the specific, all-too-human nature of political life. For the lack of prudential self-knowledge has for Strauss a second corollary: the inability of the purely theoretical philosopher in the mode of the Aristophanic Socrates to persuade the non-philosophical population
of the need or worth of their pursuits. So Strauss writes in “The Problem of Socrates,” explaining the power of Aristophanes’s critique of philosophy in the *Clouds* to an understanding of the origins of political philosophy:

The concern of philosophy leads beyond the city in spite, or because, of the fact that philosophy is concerned with rhetoric. Philosophy is unable to persuade the nonphilosophers, or the common people, and hence philosophy is not a political power. Philosophy in contradiction to poetry cannot charm the multitude. Because philosophy transcends the human and the ephemeral, it is radically unpolitical, and therefore it is amusic and anerotic. It cannot teach the just things, whether poetry can. Philosophy is then in need of being supplemented by a pursuit which is political because it is musical and erotic, if philosophy is to become just. Philosophy lacks self-knowledge. Poetry is self-knowledge. (FL, 126)

It is for these reasons that Strauss maintains that Aristophanes’s *Clouds* represents the “most important statement of the case for poetry” in the ancient quarrel with philosophy Socrates names in *Republic X*. (FL, 125; cf. SA, 23, 29, 53) It is a statement, Strauss contends, that Plato and Xenophon—if not Socrates already—took extremely seriously in the shaping and literary presentations of their pursuit of the *bios theoretikos*. (See PP, 137–55) It would be difficult to overestimate the importance for Leo Strauss’s mature understanding of political philosophy—and that of his students—of this Aristophanic challenge made on behalf of “the city,” albeit out of the mouth of a comic poet. Our concern here, however, is specifically with Strauss’s reading of Aristophanes. So we must now pursue how, according to Strauss, Aristophanes’s *Clouds* is only the exoteric, salutary face of the comedic poets’ more nuanced, and controversial, sympathy with the philosophers.

II. The Cut and the Cosmos: The Platonic Aristophanes of the *Symposium*

As we have said, one key exegetical claim we want to make here is that understanding Leo Strauss’s reading of Aristophanes’s Platonic presentation in Plato’s *Symposium* provides a kind of royal road to understanding Strauss’s complete, and remarkably favorable, picture of Aristophanes’s comedies. As far as we can see, this interpretive move is one which has not been made by his students, or those
influenced by his work.\textsuperscript{21} We get a clue concerning this august assessment when, in the context of examining Alkibiades’s closing speech concerning Socrates in \textit{Reading Plato’s Symposium}, Strauss makes a brief digression. The digression reflects on the different ages, ethical characters, and erotic statuses of the seven speakers in Plato’s \textit{Symposium}. Strauss notes how everyone else present, excepting Aristophanes—namely, Phaedrus, Pausanius, Eryximachus, Agathon, Alkibiades, and even Socrates—is either a declared lover or the beloved of someone else present. Evidently thinking of a tale Friedrich Nietzsche recounts concerning Plato in \textit{Beyond Good and Evil} (§28), Strauss proposes to boldly resolve the anomaly of why Aristophanes alone should be unloved. Aristophanes, “and this is only a suggestion,” is \textit{beloved by Plato himself}, says Strauss: “There is an old story, that when Plato died he had Aristophanes’ comedies under his pillow.” (RPS, 254) But why would Plato love Aristophanes, particularly after the \textit{Clouds}? Our claim is that Strauss’s reading of the Platonic Aristophanes’s central speech in the \textit{Symposium} provides our best resources for his answer to this question, which in many ways challenges what the \textit{Clouds} would have us expect. Certainly, as Strauss’s \textit{Reading Plato’s Symposium} amply bears out, Plato gives to his Aristophanes the speech in the \textit{Symposium} that, along-

\textsuperscript{21} Bloom, in his “Response to Hall,” looks at length at the connection between Plato’s \textit{Republic} and the \textit{Assembly of Women}, noting in an opening note his direct debt to Strauss. But Bloom does not consider the \textit{Symposium} in this context. Zuckert’s excellent account of Strauss’s reading of Aristophanes in \textit{Postmodern Platos} likewise focusses on the \textit{Assembly of Women} and the \textit{Clouds}, without reference to Strauss’s \textit{Symposium}, although Aristophanes’s \textit{Birds} and \textit{Archanians} are briefly broached (PP, 135–37, and below). Mary Nichols’s “Socrates’ Contest” addresses Aristophanes’s speech in a Strauss-influenced manner, emphasizing its contrast with Eryximachus’s, particularly concerning the absence of any references to arts like medicine in Aristophanes, which had been central to the doctor’s presentation. Nichols contends that, ultimately, Aristophanes’s speech “leaves no room for philosophy; longing or desire has nothing to do with wisdom” (Nichols, “Socrates’ Contest,” 189–90). We disagree, or contend that Strauss certainly disagrees, as will become clear. Bloom in “The Ladder of Love” sees a proximity between the Platonic Aristophanes’s and Socrates’s sense of the opposition of \textit{physis} and \textit{nomos}, on \textit{eros} as expressing in both along for wholeness, on Socrates’s sympathy for the cosmic deities (versus the Olympians) (LL, 106); and finally suggests it is \textit{Socrates} who is more radical on this score (LL, 107, 109), Benardete in “On Plato’s \textit{Symposium}” likewise follows Strauss in highlighting the opposition of cosmic and Olympian deities in Aristophanes’s speech, as reflecting a distinction between individual human beings, shaped by political life, and a cosmic dimension to human desiring (OPS, 186–88). Yet, all these readings underestimate the extent of the \textit{kinship} Strauss sees between Socrates and Aristophanes, in ways we shall see.
side Socrates’s, is the most powerful and memorable of the dialogue’s seven speeches on eros. In it, of course, the Platonic Aristophanes positions each of us as looking for “our other half” when we love, as colloquial English still has it. But what in particular does Strauss read the famous Aristophanic speech as indicating concerning the larger teachings of the Old Comic poet, which might challenge the image of him as arch-anti-philosopher and reactionary, so amply borne out by Strauss’s reading of the Clouds?

As we would expect from the popular image of Aristophanes, the comic poet’s speech in the Symposium begins and ends with piety. Men have not yet properly understood their indebtedness to the god Eros, for if they had, they would offer him the greatest of all their sacrifices, Aristophanes intones. (FL, 116) However, Strauss, here as elsewhere, adeptly brings out how the whole truth of Aristophanes’s speech subtly contests this first impression.

First, Strauss notes how the Aristophanic story positions the Olympian gods, and their father Zeus, as first of all punitive, or even cruel, in their relations to human beings. (FL, 106) This is a sentiment more conducive to Promethean rebellion than to fearful reverence. (RPS, 126) The Olympian gods are associated by Strauss with the advent of nomos and thereby of political life. (RPS, 127; LL, 106–107) This advent of nomos, as Strauss conceives things, above all concerns what Sigmund Freud described in Civilisation and its Discontents as the single greatest libidinal burden civilized human beings must bear: the prohibition on incest. (RPS, 133, 144)22 This same advent of nomos is depicted by the Platonic Aristophanes as a kind of violent, physical splitting visited on the first men by Zeus. Strauss does not hesitate to call it “a kind of castration,” since “it is not uninteresting that ‘to cut’ also means to castrate.” (RPS, 129, 131; cf. LL, 107)23 Zeus’s castration of our primordial cosmic ancestors,

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22 Strauss, On Plato’s Symposium, 144: “The most massive limitation on man’s sex life by law is the prohibition of incest.” See Sigmund Freud, Civilisation and Its Discontents, (tr.) J. Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 51: “The tendency on the part of civilisation to restrict sexual life is no less clear than its other tendency to expand the cultural unit. Its first totemic phase already brings with it the prohibition against an incestuous choice of object, and this is perhaps the most drastic mutilation which man’s erotic life has in all time experienced.”

23 Notably, Strauss sees the cut in question in Aristophanes’s speech—as well as being a negative, privative act—as producing the seemingly “unnatural” features of human desire at the heart of the Jacques Lacan's Neo-Freudian psychoanalytic account of desire as caused by law. In particular, Strauss, like Freud and Lacan, points to the absence of any natural mating season, not to mention the possibilities of homosexuality and the perversions, as demarcating human sexuality.
moreover, was not motivated by divine philanthropy, Strauss observes. Zeus’s decision to keep human beings alive in our reduced or castrated forms was instead justified because of the gods’ dependence upon our devotions and sacrifices, at the same time as it allowed the thunder-bearing God to forcibly put humans back in our proper, subordinate places. (RPS, 125–26; LL, 106–107)

Secondly, Strauss reflects on the way human beings are depicted in the Aristophanic myth as in the beginning spherical, near-cosmic beings, whose rebellious wish was what he terms a “vertical” one: to ascend to and to challenge the Olympian gods. It was only after Zeus’s law-bringing castration of our forebears that human eros became “horizontal,” and more earth bound. (cf. LL, 106–107; OPS, 187) Each of us, caught up in the search for our lost, other half, is in this way happily diverted from conceiving again our ancestral, “vertical” desire to become as Gods ourselves. (RPS, 140; LL, 109–110)

For this reason, Strauss claims that underneath the Platonic Aristophanes’s story of seemingly perfect piety and propriety, this mythos teaches a different, deeply impious message concerning eros. This is the teaching “that by virtue of eros the first men, and perhaps still the best part of the male sex, will approach a condition in which they become a serious danger to the gods,” in need of holy suppression or castration. (FL, 117) The reason is that, beneath or above the comedy of sexual desire, eros as conceived by Plato’s Aristophanes first of all involves “a desire for the ancient nature, for the state in which man had the loftiest thoughts, in which he thought of conquering heaven, or rather Olympus.” (FL, 137; cf. LL, 111; OP, 187)

Indeed, Strauss is at his ingenious best in Reading Plato’s Symposium when he reflects on how, of all the dialogues, only the Epinomis has a title comparable to the Symposium. For Strauss, this is a textual feature that should prompt us to seek out an intimate connection between the two texts. (RPS, 128) Yet, the Epinomis, a kind of appendix to the Laws, prescribes the proper education of the guardians of the nocturnal council. It is an education not in eros, but in cosmology, mathematics, and the worship of the cosmic, pre-Olympian gods: viz. the heavens and the spherical bodies of sun, moon, and earth, if not the clouds or ether. (RPS, 130, 126)

(RPS, 133–34, 144) He writes, “it is man’s essence to be constituted by both...limitless sexual desire and law.” (RPS, 134; see also, 145)

24 On the cosmic gods in the guardians’ higher education, see Plato, Epinomis, 976–77b; 984d–85b.
What might this have to do with the Symposium then? For Strauss, ingeniously, the Platonic Aristophanes and his speech provide the core of an answer. What Plato has indicated by aligning the titles of the Symposium and Epinomis is that, beneath his exoteric Olympian piety, Aristophanes’s central speech truly aims at the “radically impious,” the esoteric doctrine that human beings are descendants of the cosmic gods. That is, the deepest motivation of at least the best of men will be to recapture their lost, sphere-like unity in “the loftiest thoughts,” and hence to become uncastrated wholes, beyond the restrictions placed upon them by the nomoi of cities and their civic, or moral, gods: “eros is in no way connected with the Olympian gods.... As desire for restitution of the cosmic, globular shape, eros belongs to the cosmic gods.” (RPS, 131; see also LL, 106−107; OPS, 187−88) It can no longer escape us, that is, that under Strauss’s pen, the Platonic Aristophanes of the Symposium comes to seem like an uncanny double of the philosopher as student of “the science of the beings,” insofar as the latter too is desirous of a contemplative unity with the extrapolitical, cosmic whole.25 In fact, Strauss is explicit about this:

What is the consequence of the fact the eros cannot be satisfied [according to Aristophanes’s speech]?.... The consequence of Aristophanes seems to suggest piety .... [However] piety could fulfil what eros promises if the objects of piety, namely the gods, were themselves wholes. But the Olympian gods, being the models of human beings, are not wholes in that sense. The true wholes are sun, moon, and earth. Piety would then consist, in the highest possible case, not in restoring the original unity but in looking at the cosmic gods, sun, moon, and earth. The fulfilment of eros would be contemplation. (RPS, 140)

Strauss’s Reading Plato’s Symposium thus leads us towards the striking image of an Aristophanes who is almost a natural philosopher, and a thinker whose conception of eros points directly to Plato’s larger conception of eros as ascending finally towards philosophy: if not the cosmic whole represented by the pre-Olympian deities, then the oceanic beauty of Socrates’s speech. These questions then present themselves: so does Strauss then think that this Platonic Aristophanes is anything more than a Platonic misrepresentation of

the comic poet? Is Plato in his turn not having a laugh at the comic poet’s expense, or even exacting a kind of refined revenge upon him for the Clouds, by presenting Aristophanes—not Socrates—as the truly impious one, in love “pre-Socratically” with the suprapolitical, hybristic prospect of knowing or approaching the things in the heavens?

In fact, what we want now to show is how, according to Strauss, Plato’s presentation of Aristophanes in the Symposium as esoterically impious and a friend to philosophy, or, at least, to a contemplative, wordless species of philosophy (OPS, 187)26, is both true to his Plato’s intentions, and reflects the profound insight Plato had into Aristophanes’s true motivations in the comedies.

III. Strauss’s Esoteric Aristophanes as Hidden Physikos

Plato’s Socrates complains in the Republic that the concealment of a dramatic author behind the action and characters he produces makes his own intentions unavailable to us. Yet, as Strauss replies in his lectures on “The Problem of Socrates,” “the dramatic poet can express what he is driving at by the outcome of his play[s].” (FL, 108) With this in mind, Strauss directs us to look beyond the Clouds, at the outcomes of all the different extant Aristophanic comedies if we are to approach the wider intention behind Aristophanes’s works. To be sure, Aristophanes aims at the restoration of good sense and order, despite the widespread, “modern” corruptions of the Athens of the Peloponnesian war. Nevertheless, “[i]n the Knights, the Wasps, the Peace, the Birds, the Thesmophoriazusae, and the Assembly of Women, the restoration of soundness in politics is effected by radically novel means, i.e. by means which are incompatible with the end, the ancestral polity and its spirit.” (FL, 112; cf. SA, 104) Indeed, the nature of Aristophanic “restoration” turns out in Strauss’s estimation to be much more “politically problematic” than we might first suppose. Importantly for our reading here, it is also much closer to what Plato’s representation of Aristophanes in the Symposium would lead us to expect.

To see this, let us begin by considering, with Strauss, Aristophanes’s Acharnians. In this comedy, Strauss claims, the hero Dikaiopolis (“just city”) is almost explicitly identified with Aristophanes himself. (SA, 63, 69, 76, 78; PP, 135) Yet Dikaiopolis commits high treason, seeking out the Spartans in order to make a private peace treaty with

them. (SA, 61) When he is brought to trial, Dikaiopolis appears clothed in cloaks borrowed by Euripides and a master of the best, Euripidean rhetoric, if not exactly the Unjust speech taught by the rhetorically shifting Clouds. (SA, 67) Dikaiopolis delivers a ringing indictment of Pericles as the cause of Athenians’ great sufferings, manages to divide the men of the jury and thereby prevents his prosecution. (SA, 65) As a result, he is allowed to return to his private life, and the pleasures of his rural estate. (FL, 111–12; SA, 77) Strauss comments that the whole comedy hardly seems a ringing endorsement of the untarnished civic values of the men of Marathon: it is closer to the wise Odysseus’s seemingly laudable choice for the private life at the end of Plato’s Republic.27

Then there are Strauss’s assessments of the Wasps. This comedy, like the Clouds, takes the relations between a son and his father as a preeminent theme. However, the father, Philokleon, is less the bearer of justice and unimpeachable authority than what in psychoanalytic parlance is described as a “superegoic” figure: someone in whom the punishment of transgressive enjoyments has given over to a malicious enjoyment in exacting the Law. Philokleon wants to spend all his time at the courts, righteously condemning all and sundry. In order to be stopped, he must be forcibly restrained, and lied to, by his son Bdelykleon. (SA, 123) But the father’s motivation, as Strauss emphasizes, is fear of the gods and the sense that the gods too enjoy the condemnation of human beings—by sitting always on the juries, he believes is following the Delphic oracle. (SA, 119) Here again Strauss sees Aristophanes as both presenting, and tacitly critiquing, the poetic notion of the “jealousy of the gods” against which Aristotle pits philosophic contemplation in the Metaphysics.28 When Philokleon’s son deceives him into acquitting a defendant, he is afraid of having committed a sin against the gods. What makes him savage, Strauss stresses, is his fear of the savagery of the gods. To make men more humane, one must free them from the gods, Strauss sees this Old Comedy as suggesting. As Plato’s Aristophanes puts it in the Symposium (189c–d), Eros is the most philanthropic god. Yet the other side to this thought is the impious implication that the other

27 See Republic, 620c. Or consider again the plot and outcome of the Peace: as Strauss glosses it, “by rebellion against Zeus and the other gods, Trygaeus [the hero] becomes the saviour. The just and pleasant life of ease and quiet cannot be brought about except by dethroning the gods.” (FL, 113) Again, the political or cultural conservatism of such a proposition seems contestable.

Olympian gods are not distinguished by the love of men: another key point in Strauss’s reading of the Aristophanes of the Symposium as we saw. (FL, 113)

Thirdly, let us consider Aristophanes’s Birds, which in different ways is of pivotal importance in Strauss’s assessment of Aristophanes’s comedy. The comedy stages the wish of two Athenians, sick of their native city’s endless litigations and assemblies, to live in a quiet, simpler, and happier polis. One of them hits upon the idea of persuading the birds of the world to build a city in the clouds (“Cloud-cuckoo-land”), between the gods and men. Our hero Peisthetaerus will rule over the new city, wherein the all-seeing birds and their wholly pleasant ways will be worshipped. The city is marked by the remarkable absence of prohibitions on nearly all things men think “base by convention.” Significantly, Strauss notes, not only is desertion permissible and slavery abolished, but sons are allowed to beat their fathers—as in Socrates’s cloud-worshipping phrontisterion. Peisthetaerus himself is a pederast. Yet, again, the end of the play does not see the entire, ignoble cloud-borne utopia brought down, like Socrates’s phrontisterion in the Clouds. Rather, the gods are starved out by the birds, and the play ends with Peisthetaerus establishing a tyranny in the clouds, taking the significantly named Basileia (kingship) to bed. (SA, 188–89; PP, 136)

How, then, does Strauss assess the meaning of all of these seemingly deeply impious Aristophanic plots and their resolutions? Thinking of the Acharnians, Strauss presents a first revision or qualification of the first impression of Aristophanes as champion of the Just and ancestral Olympian gods, versus the Unjust speech of the Clouds and the philosophers. The decisive opposition operating in Aristophanes’s works, Strauss suggests, is something closer to that between the family or private life, over against the city or public life—not the Clouds’ opposition of the old civic values versus all things new or modern.29 Yet having stated this intriguing hypothesis concerning Aristophanes’s comedies, Strauss quickly qualifies or overturns it. First of all, Strauss notes, the family, although earlier than the city, cannot for all that survive without the advent of wider law—beginning from the prohibition of incest we met in the Symposium.

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29 Aristophanes’s comedies, Strauss indeed claims, can be read as a kind of anachronistic commentary on Aristotle’s notion that “man is by nature a pairing animal rather than a political one, for the family is earlier and more necessary than the city, and the begetting and bearing of children ...” (Nic. Eth. 1162a17–19 cited in FL, 112). Again the proximity with Freud is clear; see Freud, Civilisation and Its Discontents, Chapter IV.
sium—so it cannot be the household alone that Aristophanes means to pit against political life.\(^30\) Second, Strauss pays close attention to the way the plots and characters in Aristophanes’s comedies, notably *Wasps* and *Birds*, seem to *vindicate* sons doing violence to their fathers, do not particularly balk at adultery, and even at times seem to accept pederasty—all activities generally opposed to the promotion of the family. It is by no means clear that even the prohibition of incest is sacrosanct in the utopia set up in the *Assembly of Women*, Strauss notes, any more than it would be in the city of speech of Plato’s *Republic*\(^31\): “[i]n brief, Aristophanes does not stop at the sacredness or naturalness of the family.” (FL, 115)

To uncover what the operative Aristophanic standard is, against which the Old Comedian aimed to show up the limits and eccentricities of political life, Strauss reflects on the very means Aristophanes uses to make us laugh: “these include gossip or slander, obscenity, parody, and blasphemy.” (FL, 107) Comedies represent a culturally demarcated place wherein—as if by magic—the usual proprieties of speech and action are suspended. An Aristophanic character is so hilarious, Strauss puts it, since “he gives his enjoyment a frank, a wholly unrestrained expression. He calls a spade a spade. If he does this as a character on stage, he says in public what cannot be said in private with propriety” (FL, 111) And this is the key Straussian thought, in terms of getting to the bottom—or rather to the pinnacle—of his Aristophanes’s esoteric position. Aristophanes’s standard for criticizing the Athenian-Greek world of his day is less the family versus the city than what Strauss calls the “essentially private” against what would be held or decided in common in *poleis*. (RPS, 149) Again, the parallel between this Aristophanic standard and the conception of justice of the Platonic *Republic*\(^32\) is surely in Strauss’s mind:

The victory of the just, or the movement from the ridiculousness of contemporary political folly to ancient soundness is a move-

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\(^30\) In particular, “the prohibition of incest compels the family to transcend itself and, as it were, to expand into the city. The prohibition against incest is a quasi-natural bridge between the family and the city.” (FL, 123) It is at the final moment when Pheidippides claims to be able to justify violence against his own mother—if not directly incest itself—that, Strauss notes, Strepsiades snaps at the culmination of the *Clouds*. (FL, 122)

\(^31\) For Strauss, the *Assembly of Women* shows, like the *Republic*, the absurdities which follow from trying to model the city on the family. (FL, 111).

ment towards the ridiculous of a different kind. The just man is a man who minds his own business, the opposite of the busybody, the man who loves the retired, quiet, private life. (FL, 111)

And so at last we reach the meaning of the kind of general definition of the comic phenomenon in Strauss, which we introduced initially above. Comedy involves "the ridiculousness of the publicization of the essentially private, of the improper utterance of things everyone privately enjoys because they are by nature enjoyable." (FL, 111) To speak of the "essentially private" in Aristophanes, for Strauss, is then to inescapably speak both of what gives pleasure and what is in accordance with nature. The pleasure in question comes because the things thus comically "outed" "are ridiculous and hence pleasing to the extent to which propriety is sensed as a burden, as something imposed, as something owing its dignity to imposition, to convention, to nomos." (FL, 115) Here then we sense the full force of Strauss's claim in his commentary on the Aristophanes of the Symposium that the comedian's vision of eros as shaped "in the negative relation to nomos"; "from the point of view of rebellion against civilisation." (RPS, 134, 133) Again, this point Plato placed in the mouth of Aristophanes in the Symposium applies for Strauss to the comic original. The deepest presupposition of the Aristophanic comic universe is, for Strauss, the old opposition of nomos and physis, law and nature, desire and its prohibition. Strauss is "tempted" to describe the comedies as celebrating the victory of physis or eros over nomos. Nevertheless, we should resist this temptation, or at least properly conceive it. "Above all," Strauss clarifies:

Aristophanes has no doubt as to the fact that nature, human nature, is in need of nomos. Aristophanes does not reject nomos, but he attempts to bring to light its problematic and precarious status, its status in between the needs of the body and the needs of the mind; for if one does not understand the precarious status of nomos, one is bound to have unreasonable expectations of nomos. (FL, 115; cf. OPS 110–11)

At the decisive point of developing this general perspective on Aristophanes, Strauss illuminatingly contrasts his emerging perspective with Hegel's, in the latter's writings on aesthetics. For Hegel, the comedies bring everything high, including the gods, down from their august heavens through the dissolvent activity of self-consciousness, "the power of the negative." For the Platonist Strauss, by contrast, what underlies Aristophanes's mischievous genius is not the dissolvent power of self-consciousness, but "knowledge of nature and
therefore...consciousness of the sublime pleasures accompanying knowledge of nature." (FL, 115) In this reading, as Strauss says openly and directly, “the basis of Aristophanean comedy is knowledge of nature, and that means, for the ancients, philosophy.” (FL, 118; my emphasis) At the end of our exegetical journey, that is, we return exactly to the “loftiest thoughts” of the Platonic Aristophanes’s first, cosmic revels in the Symposium, if not the Farabian “science of the beings” dear to Strauss himself. Beneath the conflict between physis and nomos, which Strauss sees as the key Aristophanic opposition, Strauss espies the old conflict of philosophy as the natural, erotic and hedonic pursuit of a few for knowledge of the whole, and the divisive demands of law, morality, and political life.

33 In this light, we can see why Strauss accords great importance to the central appearance in the Birds of the character Meton, who is an astronomer, and thus a student of nature, like Plato’s nocturnal councillors in the Epinomis, whose importance we noted in Part II: “Meton comes closer to Socrates (and his pupils) than any other Aristophanean characters.” (SA, 175). The founder of the “city according to nature” is exceedingly pleased with this Meton who “measures the air,” although even the tyrant cannot protect Meton against “the enmity of the citizen body” which also killed Socrates. (FL, 115, 118) For Strauss, Aristophanes evidently appreciated the “sublime pleasures” of pursuing philosophy that move men like Meton (whose very name suggests Metis, hence wisdom, and the first pre-Olympian wife of Zeus), as well as Socrates and Plato. Yet, as per Part I, at the same time Aristophanes remained prudently aware of the political or existential dangers pursuing these sublime pleasures entailed. Hence, as a reviewer of this article has stressed, his Peishtetarios knows to publically beat Meton, before sending him on his way: “however much he might love and admire Meton, he is the founder of a city; and the city has no use for subtleties, at least not for subtleties of the kind Meton has to offer.” (SA, 175) Aristophanes does not entertain what Strauss calls the “male” dream of Plato; that philosophers might rule. See SA, 181–82; CM, 114; PP, 317 n.82 and Bloom, “Response to Hall,” 326.

34 See Strauss, “Farabi’s Plato,” 365. Strauss’s article on Farabi is recognized as vital in Strauss’s Kehre which, like Socrates’s, is generally presented by students as being towards political philosophy and away from natural philosophy. Yet, in it, Strauss comments that “His [Farabi’s] Plato is so far from narrowing down philosophy to the study of political things that he defines philosophy as the theoretical art which supplies ‘the science of the essence of each of all beings.’ That is to say: he identifies philosophy with the ‘art of demonstration.’ Accordingly, his Plato actually excludes the study of political and moral subjects from the domain of philosophy proper.” (364; my emphasis) As per notes 12, 20 and 37 in this paper, we would suggest that the author of Natural Right and History’s position on natural philosophy, and its role in engendering happiness for a few, is ambiguous and open to hermeneutic debate.
Concluding Remarks: From the Philosophy of Comedy to the Comedy of Philosophy

Some qualifications notwithstanding, the surprising exegetical conclusion that Aristophanes was for Leo Strauss not simply the greatest critic of philosophy, but himself a kind of hidden philosopher—and in this way a most worthy beloved for Plato—hence stands up. Strauss’s explanation of the highly-suspicious literary swap that enables Aristophanes in Plato’s Symposium to take the decisive central place, replacing the doctor Erixymachus on account of Aristophanes’s untimely, comical hiccups, can stand as emblematic here. (RPS, 120–22) For Strauss, the meaning of this Platonic play comes from recalling that Erixymachus, the doctor, is a student of nature, influenced by the great pre-Socratic physikos Empedocles. Just so, Strauss claims, Plato wanted careful readers to see again that Aristophanes was truly one of the tribe of philosophers or students of nature—if not a Socratic political philosopher:

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35 Strauss will also, we note, stress that in Plato’s Aristophanes, the mind or nous is abstracted from, as he holds on to the claim that the dimension of vertical eros decisive for Plato is absent in the comic poet. (RPS, 140–41; FL, 125) This thought is not clearly explicated in Reading Plato’s Symposium. Nichols in “Socrates’ Contest” gives a good reading of this idea, emphasizing the primacy of touch over speech in Aristophanes’s conception of eros 190. Yet, for Nichols, this supports a more general claim that “Aristophanes’ speech leaves no room for philosophy; longing or desire has nothing to do with wisdom”—a claim that Strauss’s reading of the same speech, and of Aristophanes per se, disputes.

36 A reviewer has suggested that we are identifying Aristophanes with Socrates in the mind or texts of Strauss: but this is not the claim: only that the evidence cited suggests they are a good deal closer than Strauss’s reading of the Clouds, and that comedy itself, first suggests.

37 We need to be careful here not to obviate the distinction between Socratic political philosophy and pre-Socratic natural philosophy in claiming that Strauss’s Aristophanes is a hidden “philosopher.” A reviewer, underlining this vital contrast, has cited Strauss’s key claim in Socrates and Aristophanes concerning Meton the natural philosopher (see note 33 above), and contrasting his kind of philosophy with Socrates’s: “If Aristophanes had been compelled to choose between Socrates’s doctrine and the birds’ doctrine, he would have chosen the birds’ doctrine, a doctrine that, with the help of Parmenides and Empedocles, could easily have been stated in philosophic terms. This entitles us perhaps to say that Aristophanes is not opposed to philosophy simply, but only to a philosophy that, disregarding Eros, has no link with poetry....” (SA, 173; my emphasis) Note that the passage, in the italicized clauses, suggests that Aristophanes at once accepts the pre-Socratic philosophers and wants philosophy to be concerned with poetry. This is a very provocative remark, since (a) it aligns Aristophanes’s preference for the birds’ doctrine with the pre-Socratics and
As we have seen, [Aristophanes] changes places with Erixymachus, and that means he is in a way exchangeable with him. Erixymachus is a physician and a physicist; Aristophanes will also prove to be a physiologist in the Greek sense of the word—as student of nature—but in such a way as to lead up to a natural hierarchy. (RPS, 120; cf. FL, 116)

This is a remarkable reading of Aristophanes, and one which turns on its head the interpretation of Aristophanes as, simply speaking, a cultural conservative. At least concerning an elite few, Strauss’s reading would rather suggest that Aristophanes’s cultural position was that of a radical, like to that of his friend or admirer Plato, champion of the new philosophy—while publically defending the ancestral ways against the democracy. (SA, 104–105) The task of Aristophanes’s comedic critique of philosophy in Clouds could hence only be to warn the Socratics of the need for political prudence: “a warning informed by a mixture of admiration and envy of Socrates.” (SA, 5; cf. FL, 105) When the Birds or Peace is pitted alongside the Clouds, Aristophanes’s assessment of philosophy and the philosophical way of life emerges as significantly more nuanced, we have seen Strauss arguing. The interpretations of Aristophanes we met at the essay’s opening which see his work as non- or a-political are in one way closer to Strauss’s Platonic reading of Aristophanes. This is true at least insofar as the private pursuit of philosophy Strauss sees Aristophanes as esoterically promoting will involve the search for knowledge concerning the suprapolitical, natural world. What these readings miss, from Strauss’s perspective, is the way Aristophanes’s brilliant comedic stylings allowed him to subtly present this private pursuit of philosophia itself to a few enlightened addressees as a most worthy human concern—again, all while exoterically supporting the old and ancestral. (SA, 104–109)

suggests that the pre-Socratic philosophers must have been “poetic” in the way Aristophanes required—in contrast to the Clouds which opposes Aristophanes’s poetically presented practical wisdom with the theoretical lunacy of the physikoi; (b) it thereby positions Aristophanes as by preference a physikos and a master of the poetic and political art who rejects philosophy without poetry; just as Socrates’s “second sailing” in response to Aristophanes’s poetic and political critique sees Socrates reshaped as politically wise, and sensitive of the need to moderate his theoretical eros, or its expression, before the “city.” The difference between the Straussian Aristophanes, who misreads Socratic political philosophy (a philosophy rendered politically prudent, and awake to the need for dissimilating rhetoric), and philosophy simpliciter in his presentation, is thus again much less great than a simple opposition suggests.
We cannot complete this assessment of Strauss's Platonic Aristophanes and its importance to his work, without indicating its *envers* or reverse side: the sense that Strauss not only reads Aristophanes through a Platonic lens, as we have been examining, but that he also reads Plato and Platonic political philosophy in the light cast back upon these by Aristophanic comedy.38 This is the side of the argument that previous Straussian readings have emphasized, especially Bloom's, Nichols' and Zuckert's. We close this essay with some remarks on the decisive centrality of Aristophanes to Strauss's most famous essay on Plato and the *Republic*, in *The City and Man*.

Commentators have rightly noted the way Strauss's bold claim that the *Republic*'s central "city in speech" should be read parodically, or even comically, rests on noting the parallels between Socrates's prescriptions there concerning property and the sexes, and those of Aristophanes's *Assembly of Women*.39 Yet Aristophanes also has a

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38 We cannot examine, but only note, here the different levels at which Strauss reads Plato as responding to Aristophanes's critique of philosophy as amusic, and lacking political self-awareness. We have examined Aristophanes's presentation in the *Symposium*, the most direct Platonic response. Second, there is the explicit critique of the poets in the *Republic*, Books III and IV, then the culminating Book X. Plato's Socrates, first in discussion with the more moderate Adeimantus and then with the more "daring" Glaucion (FL, 172), proposes a "ministerial" censorship of all poetry in the best philosophical regime in a way that has attracted much outrage over the ages. Strauss situates the Socratic critique as pointedly "turning the tables" on Aristophanes's critique of the alleged injustice or amorality of philosophy: "[Plato] draws all the conclusions from Aristophanes's indictment of Euripides in the *Frogs* and turns them against Aristophanes. Especially convincing, or amusing, is the critique of comedy as such in the name of the polis, a critique which occupies the centre of their respective discussions. The imitation of men who ridicule one another and use foul language against one another, whether they are sober or drunk, is not to be permitted in the just city...." (FL, 173. Third, the Platonic Socrates proffers what Strauss admits is a "complicated and strange analysis" of the condition of the soul in the audience of comedies in the *Philebus*, 48a8 to 50a10. The condition of the soul involves a mixture of envy at the good fortune at friends, with an ignoble pleasure derived from witnessing their misfortunes. This analysis seems "monstrously inadequate" as a general theory of comedic reception, in Strauss's words, although it certainly speaks to the *Clouds*.

39 To note these parallels, alongside Bloom ("Response to Hall," 326–27) and Zuckert (PP, 317 n.82) or Strauss himself, is not to obviate the differences: since Plato's city in speech remains hierarchical, and has male philosopher-Kings, who seem to be able to achieve a utopia of a kind that Strauss maintains the woman Praxagora in *The Assembly of Women* cannot (Strauss reads the *denouement* of this play, with a young man being forced to sleep with old hags, as evidently "ugly" and undesirable, although its final scene is nevertheless the great communal feast. (SA, 181–82; cf. SPC, 210 n.4)) Strauss suggests that the *Republic* by
less remarked-upon, pivotal presence in the early part of Strauss's programmatic essay, which concerns the decisive subject of the literary character of Plato's dialogues. This pivotal role is highlighted by Strauss's gnomic conclusion to the culminating 13th paragraph of this opening section of his essay concerning Plato's manner of writing. The paragraph ends (with a dash) by saying that the Platonic dialogue, centrally the Republic, “brings to completion what could have been thought to be completed by Aristophanes.—” (CM, 62)

Our argument above concerning what Strauss saw as Aristophanes's philosophical intentions can assist us in making some sense to what Strauss may be indicating here. Yet Strauss’s remarkable implication that the Platonic dialogues themselves, and Plato's politic presentation of philosophy within them, somehow continue or complete Aristophanic comedy is a stronger claim still. Strauss here explains the basis for this controversial claim by recourse to the, equally contentious, hermeneutic postulate that each Platonic dialogue both should and must abstract from something of decisive importance. His curious reflection is that the true object of the Platonic dialogues is the natural whole or cosmos, of concern to philosophy as philosophy. But any one literary work must limit itself to considering one part of this whole. It follows that the whole subject matter of the dialogues as works of philosophy is in a strict sense “impossible” to represent. This however would situate the Platonic dialogues as “slightly more akin” to comedy than tragedy, Strauss now adds: for “the impossible—or a certain kind of the impossible—if treated as possible is in the highest sense ridiculous or...comical. The core of every Aristophanean comedy is something impossible of the kind indicated.” (CM, 62)

From what we saw in Part III, we know that the core impossibility in Strauss’s Aristophanes concerns the abiding conflict between physis and nomos, the essentially private pursuit of happiness in men like Dikaiopolis or of knowledge of the whole in men like Meton and the demands morality, public or political life, place upon us. Yet this impossibility turns out in City and Man to be nothing less than what Strauss’s ensuing, famous analysis of the Republic suggests is also at the heart of what that Platonic dialogue aims to show:

contrast with The Assembly is of “male origin,” (closer then to Aristophanes’s “men-dramas” [SA, 181]), although this again is in tension with Socrates’s own avowal in the text of his “female drama” (Republic, 451c1–3). Stanley Rosen concurs with Strauss that Socrates's “female drama” in the Republic is certainly one in which females are given no voice, and their “emancipation”—such as it is—is granted them by men (Rosen, Plato’s Republic, 186).
This is why the true reason for the coincidence of philosophy and political power is extremely improbable: philosophy and the city tend away from one another in opposite directions. (CM, 125; cf. SA, 108)

The citizens need philosophers to rule for there ever to be justice, the *Republic* teaches. The philosophers meanwhile, in Strauss’s words, “being dominated by the desire, the *eros*, for knowledge as the one thing needful, or knowing that philosophy is the most pleasant and blessed possession...have no leisure for looking down at human affairs, let alone for taking care of them.” (CM, 124–25) Moreover, the citizens do not even recognize their own need for philosophical rule, for “precisely the best of the nonphilosophers, the good citizens, are passionately attached to these opinions [of their particular city] and thus opposed to philosophy (517a) which is the attempt to go beyond opinion towards knowledge.” (CM, 125) The whole situation might seem ripe for tragic lament, if Strauss did not go to pains to indicate that—just as we see Socrates laughing, but never weeping, even in his final hours—the Platonic dialogues are “more akin” to comedy than to tragedy, with their prosaic and often comic surfaces harbouring the most noble concerns. (CM, 61)\(^{40}\)

It might be suggested that Strauss indeed sees in the *Republic* and political philosophy more widely an elevated playing out of one of the classic *motifs* of comedy: that of mutual misunderstanding or unrequited *eros*. Yet recognizing the comic impossibility of any synthesis of philosophy and politics around which this philosophical comedy turns, for Strauss, *just is* one key to understanding that *ratio rerum civilium* that Plato and the other classical philosophers were concerned to show us—in order, thereby, to dissuade us from the

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\(^{40}\) In his commentary on *The Symposium*, Strauss thus comments that Alkibiades’s lovelorn comparison of the effects of Socrates’s speech upon him situates these speeches—if not Socrates himself—as undeniably comedic in kind: “These speeches have an ugly exterior and a beautiful interior. In the first part of Alkibiades’s speech he had compared Socrates chiefly to Marsyas and noted the contrast between Socrates’s external shape—and his quasi-internal flute-playing, i.e. his speeches. But now he will speak of the external of Socrates’s speeches and the internal of Socrates speeches. Socrates’s speeches, if heard, are ridiculous, let us say comical. But if one looks inside they prove to contain the most wonderful images of virtue. He no longer says most wonderful images of the gods, as he said at the beginning. *Socrates’s speeches are like comedies*. You remember in the beginning, when he came in, Alkibiades was surprised that Socrates did not sit with Aristophanes, *where he belonged.*” (RPS, 279; my emphasis) The same observation holds for Plato’s texts, not least the *Symposium* itself.
kinds of hybristic projects in realizing the impossible that really do lead to tragedy, when they are not confined to the comedic stage. (CM, 138) But, alongside Plato and the classical philosophers in showing us both this impossibility and the hidden joys of theoretical life, we have seen here that Leo Strauss would have us also place, high up, a laughing, hiccupping Aristophanes.

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