
Is Nothing Sacred?

Aristophanes's The Clouds and Moral Taboos

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On my way to an evening class, my eye caught an interesting poster on the hall bulletin board. In its most recent efforts to rehabilitate my retrograde moral sensibility, Fordham University advertised that it would now provide full vegan menus to the community. The poster encouraged the reader to take advantage of this opportunity because it was a way to avoid inflicting pain on innocent animals.

Recovering from my usual reaction to such evangelical proselytizing and virtue posturing, I began to consider the legitimacy of the offer; after all, I do have warm affection for (many) animals. Perhaps there was some other way, apart from or in addition to the vegan program, to avoid injuring my fellow sensitive creatures. I had studied ethics with Robert Nozick, a genius in conjuring up challenging moral scenarios. I also had in the distant past read a provocative essay by Jonathan Swift on a kindred theme, *A Modest Proposal* ([1729] 1960). The alternative path to achieving Fordham's laudable goal became obvious to me: victimless cannibalism.¹ Let me be

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1. A society lacking a sense of subtlety and of humor finds it hard to recognize irony or its literary elaboration, satire. This defect is true for both the political Right (including me) and the political Left. For instance, the Swedish social scientist Magnus Soderlund gave an interview arguing for an incremental approach to the implementation of cannibalism as a way of combating global warming. I wondered, Is this

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clear. I am not suggesting killing human beings for food but rather making good use of already dead human flesh. As a convinced believer in the Lockean notion of the self's ownership of body and property, I think it's obvious that the self that once owned a now dead body is no longer around to claim such ownership. It appears to be abandoned property, unless by way of the provisions of a will the deceased has bound those inheriting his or her other property to a given disposition of his or her corpse. Robbing graves, of course, usually entails theft (that is, if somebody can be said to own the corpse: maybe the undertaker who mixed his labor with the abandoned resource now owns it) or at least invasion of property. But if no such provisions of will are in place, if no invasion of property is involved, and because the deceased, it seems, can suffer no abridgments of his or her rights, no violation of the nonaggression principle can be alleged. Are we dealing with abandoned property?² But the repulsive nature of the plot of, say, the movie *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer, 1973) depends on a condemnation of cannibalism not tied, I think, to utilitarian, or rights, considerations. Again, we are contemplating not the cannibalism practiced by Hannibal Lecter, merely the consumption of human flesh. Is what repulses most of us regarding Lecter not only how he gets his meal but also the nature of the food itself? Is this repulsion only the result of stale habit, of unquestioned prejudices regarding cannibalism?³ Or is this taboo grounded upon something more substantial? Can the taboos regarding consuming human flesh or those involving, say, pedophilia or incest be established by

for real? The giveaway was when the interviewer asked Soderlund if he himself would consume human flesh. Of course he would, the professor replied; otherwise, he would gain a reputation for being conservative. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was recently confronted at a rally by a woman citing Soderlund's argument but going a bit further. The woman argued that because it was only six years to Doom's Day, as her T-shirt stated, it was time to eat babies. The interesting thing about this episode was the reaction of the New York representative and her followers. They were speechless. Ocasio-Cortez had already committed herself to a policy of no offspring, a course of action that she has referred to many times. Perhaps, then, baby consumption was the next plank to add to the progressive agenda. Why not? Tucker Carlson, on his television broadcast, was apparently no more able than Ocasio-Cortez to recognize whether the proponent of baby eating was being ironic.

2. In my youth, I used to ponder the moral legitimacy of the archaeological excavations of the Egyptian royal tombs. Were they abandoned property, open to appropriation by the first dig? Nobody, to my knowledge, approved the grave robbery of those sites, but was that simply because grave robbers did not receive permission from the political authorities? Did those authorities own the sites? By what right? The archaeologists acquired not only treasure but human remains. Despite the undoubtedly dubious way the pharaohs had acquired their wealth, they had spent their entire lives planning for their eternal rest. Did they not deserve it? If the advancement of science bestows moral authority to disturb the dead, then why does not medical science have such authority? Absent donors, why not appropriate otherwise unowned cadavers, including deceased infants, for healthy organs? When the French revolutionaries exhumed and destroyed the bodies of the kings buried in the basilica of St. Denis, and when the Republicans did something similar during the Spanish Civil War, they shared a contempt for human remains. My question, then, is whether there are moral obligations of a noncontractual nature, and if so, regarding the cannibalism issue I have alluded to, do some of them entail treatment of the dead by the living? And do all such obligations have a religious grounding?

3. Is victimless cannibalism an illustration of what J. S. Mill describes as "individuality" or "eccentricity" ([1859] 1978, 81)? Mill mentions as a consequence of the hegemony of culture the Muslims' abhorrence of pork, the Hindus' disgust for beef, and the poor Parsees', at one time under sharia and at another time under Hindu governance, proscription of both meats. Is the proscription against eating human flesh, we may ask Mill, one further instance of the dominance of irrational prejudice? Mill marks, in my mind, an important stage in the articulation of left classical liberalism.

reference to rights or to utility, or are such prohibitions dependent on a sense of the sacred or religion? After all, at present the law prosecutes cannibalistic acts as involving the “desecration” of a human body. There can be no such thing as desecration absent a notion of the sacred.

Perhaps Aristophanes (446–386 B.C.) and *The Clouds* can help us focus on what is at stake and why it is at stake.

Aristophanes and the Platonic Apology

There is a Platonic dialog that portrays Socrates in unique public conversation with the city of Athens: the *Apology*. The setting of this dialog is the day in 399 B.C. when the Athenian philosopher had the opportunity to reply before a jury of five hundred of his peers to the formal accusations leveled against him by Meletos (in behalf of the poets), Anytos (for the artisans and politicians), and Lycan (representing the orators) (Plato 1972, *Apology*, 23e2–24a1). Meletos, crafter of the accusation, alleges that Socrates is guilty “of corrupting the young and of not acknowledging the gods the city acknowledges, but rather new divinities” (24b8–10). Pressed by Socrates, Meletos accuses him not of religious heresy but of atheism. Socrates argues that this formal charge and the Athenians’ current suspicions about him were prepared for by what we might now term a media campaign, initiated by earlier accusers, who portrayed Socrates as a “wise guy,” who investigates all things in the heavens and under the earth and who “makes the weaker argument the stronger” (18b7–10). Socrates later renders this accusation as a formal indictment: “Socrates does unjust things. He is preoccupied with investigating cosmic matters and those below the earth. He makes the weaker argument the stronger” (19b4–19c1). What makes this accusation a matter of public concern is its conclusion: “He teaches these things to others.” What is believed privately is of no concern to Athens, but teaching is a public act. Socrates forces upon the interpretation of what teaching is the notion that it involves pay. That is, both the earlier charge and Meletos’s charge portray Socrates as a “wise guy,” maybe a sophist (18b7). These early critics seem to imply, as does Meletos, that Socrates corrupts the young. The accusation of his investigation of things above and below seems also to hint that Socrates might be impious, a hint that serves as a precursor to the atheism accusation. Like many managers of public opinion to this day, the early accusers remain nameless, “[u]nless one of them,” as Socrates reveals, “is a comic poet”: Aristophanes (19b4–cJ). We can find that depiction of Aristophanes in his own play *The Clouds*.

The Clouds: Strepsiades and Student Debt

The Clouds commences with the sleep-deprived Strepsiades reflecting upon the cause of his insomnia: the debts he has accrued as the result of financing his son Pheidippides’s horse-racing mania. Strepsiades has heard that in the next-door Thinkery, Socrates

teaches his students how to “make the weaker argument the stronger,” how to equip people like Strepsiades with the rhetorical skills for winning court cases, no matter whether as a contestant he is truly guilty or not (Aristophanes 1998, ll. 95–200).⁴ He wants to argue himself out of his debts. He is corrupt. He is not the only one. Later in the play the debate between the Strong Speech and the Weak Speech leads to the conclusion that the Athenian polis itself is corrupt (ll. 1094–102). *The Clouds* portrays Athens as an excessively litigious community. Both as a citizen and, more notably, as a parent, Strepsiades embodies a particularly Athenian form of corruption. Because he is aware that, given his limited intellectual gifts, he may not master the morally dubious rhetorical techniques, he plans to enroll his son in the Thinkery in his place. He thus illustrates what the Socrates of the *Apology* believes to be impossible: someone who deliberately corrupts an individual intimately close to him (Plato 1972, 25c–26a). Thus, Aristophanes does not accuse Socrates of being the primary cause of the corruption of the young, if Pheidippides represents the children of Athens and Strepsiades the parents. Whatever Aristophanes finds blameworthy in Socrates differs from Meletos’s formal accusation in at least this respect: Socrates is not the sole or even chief corruptor of Athenian youth, though his presence either testifies to this corruption or may abet it. The parents are instead primarily to blame.

With some trepidation, Strepsiades knocks for entry into the Thinkery. The student/receptionist says to Strepsiades that things of uttermost secrecy are going on within, so only the initiated are granted admission. Yet once Strepsides declares his intention to become a student, all caution seems to go to the wind. Despite the alleged secrecy, noninitiates, including Strepsiades, appear to have some general sense of the goings on in the Socratic academy. Nobody stipulates an admission fee or tuition. Thus, the Socrates of *The Clouds* is not a complete sophist: he does not demand payment for his wise teachings. Amazed by Socrates’s knowledge of biological trivia, Strepsiades gets his first exposure to the curriculum of the Socratic Thinkery: on one hand lessons involving language and rhetoric (ll. 647–95), on the other lessons about cosmology and theology (ll. 364–408). There is, I believe, a connection between these seemingly disconnected subjects. The lessons about “making the weaker argument the stronger” suppose that the practitioner is free from qualms of conscience when he bamboozles, for instance, a jury. If he is to assuage his sense of apprehension, he must be convinced that either no gods exist or that such gods as there may be are not actively concerned with justice. Otherwise, the fear of divine retribution for perjury might kick in. If the practitioner of Socratic rhetoric is proficient in that craft, then no fear of human retribution for perjury will restrict his arguments.

4. Subsequent citations to the edition of *The Clouds* (Aristophanes 1998) I used give line numbers only. My reading of *The Clouds* is substantially indebted to the commentary of Leo Strauss (1966).

What *Are* the Clouds?

For Strepsiades, the god associated with weather is Zeus. Strepsiades, likewise in accordance with tradition, as Socrates assumes, also associates Zeus with justice. Ordinary Athenians swear by Zeus. Not so Socrates (l. 246). Socrates asserts that the only personal gods that he acknowledges are his novel divinities, the Clouds. He invokes the Clouds along with Air and Ether (ll. 264–65). Later in the play, he says that he venerates Chaos, the Clouds, and the tongue (l. 423). Socrates argues that no meteorological phenomena (rain, thunder, lightning) occur in the absence of clouds. When one cause suffices, why bring in Zeus as the source of weather? As for Zeus as the executor of justice, more trees are struck down by his thunderbolt than are criminals. But what causes the Clouds themselves to move? Is it a personal god like Zeus? Not at all: the Clouds are moved by the cosmic vortex, the grounding of all motion (l. 380). Socrates subordinates his sole personal divinities to an impersonal supreme principle. The unmoved mover is not a personal god. Socrates leaves the Clouds out in his final oath: “By Breath, by Chaos, and by Air” (l. 628). The experiments going on in his Thinkery and his argument regarding the causes of weather illustrate that Aristophanes indeed views Socrates as busying himself with examining what is above and what is below the earth and with committing theological heresy, but not with practicing atheism.

What sort of deities are the Clouds, and why does the play bear this title? Athena, for instance, is the goddess of wisdom, Ares the god of war. What, then, is the essence of the divinity of the Clouds? For Socrates, the Clouds may be goddesses connected with weather, but their role as such is reducible to the way Socrates uses them to deny the existence of Zeus. Socrates never prays to the Clouds, for instance, for sunshiny days. Aristophanes, who we shall see also has a relationship to the Clouds, ignores their meteorological functions. Both Socrates and Aristophanes are practitioners of arts involving language: for Socrates, a certain rhetoric; for Aristophanes, comic drama or poetry. For an art to claim to be knowledge (not opinion), it must be connected with the study of and grounded in nature, not simply in convention. Physics, for instance, is based on a natural phenomenon, bodies in motion, and biology is also based on a natural phenomenon, bodies having life. When Socrates instructs Strepsiades about proper speech, he attempts to purify words of mere historical, accidental usage (ll. 681–82). In a perhaps politically incorrect way, he insists that there are only two sexes and that Greek linguistic use needs to create for every word a natural male and female version—something that nonscientific, pre-Socratic colloquial Greek lacks. The Clouds appear to be such a natural base for the arts of rhetoric and poetry. Both arts necessitate plasticity in the achievement of imitation. That is what the Clouds exemplify. When a Cloud passes over a rapacious lawyer, it takes on the form of a wolf. When it passes over a coward, it takes on the appearance of a deer (ll. 347–55). When one passes over Socrates, perhaps it takes on the details of the play titled *The Clouds*. Given Aristophanes's consummate command of the art of imitation, when a Cloud passes over him, it remains amorously plastic: it remains a Cloud. The Clouds take on such

appearances because they are caricatures of what they imitate. A caricature is not a photograph. In the usual practice of caricaturing, the caricaturist exaggerates some physical attribute of the person he portrays. The Clouds, in the imitative forms they take, exaggerate the central personality trait of the character imitated. The imitation, again, portrays the truth of what it imitates through deliberate and skillful abstraction and exaggeration. Thus, Aristophanes's play is not an attempt to present a biographical sketch of a day in the life of the historical Socrates but instead to portray what Socrates is really about, what he means. Clearly, the Clouds do not volitionally take on such appearances. Rather, their observers use the Clouds as a means of exercising imagination. The Clouds appear, by exercise of human imagination, to be "like a wolf" or "like a deer." The Clouds are like metaphors and similes. Metaphors and similes are instruments of poetic presentation. Imagination also plays a role in effective rhetoric in that it uses devices such as similes and metaphors.

Aristophanes portrays Socrates as a devotee of *The Clouds*. Socrates's reward for such worship does not seem tied, as it is for other Cloud worshippers, to material success. Aristophanes portrays his own relationship to these new divinities in a startling way. The Clouds function as a chorus in the play. The head of the chorus is, of course, a Cloud. The head Cloud discusses plays he has composed and hopes that the audience will reward the current play with a prize. The head Cloud, then, is Aristophanes (ll. 517–23). Socrates worships the Clouds. Aristophanes is a Cloud. Aristophanes's self-portrait seems at first blush much more hubristic than even the arrogant Socrates portrayed in the play. Yet Aristophanes's plea for these novel divinities is that they be added to the existing pantheon. Aristophanes may be involved in theological innovation, but he does not preclude honoring the other traditional gods. Socrates, in contrast, denies the existence of any of the traditional deities. Aristophanes is solicitous of the approval of his audience. He loves to be loved. What Aristophanes finds most peculiar in Socrates is Socrates's rejection of fame, of popular appeal. Aristophanes and Socrates have something in common: their acknowledgment of new gods. This common interest might be the basis of friendship between them. If Socrates may be a potential friend, Aristophanes through the play may be offering him some warning. Unlike the Platonic Socrates, who has a divine voice that warns him away from harmful actions (Plato 1972, *Apology*, 40a1–40b5), the Socrates of the play lacks both divine correction and ordinary common sense. Aristophanes has no need for a divine voice. His desire for fame, for popularity, effectively keeps him out of political trouble.

Strepsiades Fails Socratic Questioning: What Is to Be Done?

Socrates's attempt to instruct Strepsiades in natural language fails. Strepsiades nevertheless gets additional lessons, the exact content of which the play's audience is not informed of. At the end of his instruction, Socrates poses several problem scenarios for Strepsiades to resolve, using what he has learned from Socrates. In the first two instances, each resolution involves a use of trickery employing a demythologized

understanding of celestial bodies. The Athenians, of course, looked upon the sun, the moon, and the planets as divinities. Each resolution in the first two examples reveals the nature of the otherwise occult Socratic teachings. To get out of a lawsuit involving debts, Strepsiades plans to employ a sorceress to bring down the moon from the heavens (ll. 749–52). No moon means no lunar calendar, and its absence vitiates the payment of debts. Strepsiades compares the moon to a mirror: it is not a god but a source of reflected solar light, we surmise. Using a magnifying lens, Strepsiades melts the wax summons of the following scenario: the sun also is not divine but a lifeless source of heat (ll. 768–72). So far Strepsiades reveals that the esoteric teaching in the Thinkery involves cosmological concerns. Socrates's third query to Strepsiades involves quite a different matter. Suppose, Socrates asks Strepsiades, you are in a legal dispute and lack any witnesses to corroborate your defense: How do you get off the hook? Strepsiades states that he would then hang himself: you cannot sue a corpse. Socrates expels Strepsiades from the Thinkery for this response (ll. 780–83).

What critical error has Strepsiades committed that leads to his expulsion? The Socrates of *The Clouds* shares with his philosophical predecessors a commitment to unpacking the implications implied in the discovery of “nature.” Natural phenomena are, in the first place, distinguishable from things occurring by chance or by force. However, the most politically useful antithesis to nature is *nomos*, convention. All man-made objects are not natural, of course, but among them are agreements human beings make among themselves (including, for some philosophers, the concept of justice): conventions. The Socrates of *The Clouds* views whatever is conventional as inferior to what exists by nature. Not recognizing the natural status of time preference, the classical philosophers viewed interest (and money in general) as an instance of convention: the value of money seemingly being set by such agreements. In confronting one of his creditors, Strepsiades refers comically to the conventional status of money by comparing the interest on debts to the earth's water supply. There is always the same amount of water on the planet (in different forms), but the amount of additional money owed to a creditor appears to Strepsiades as unnatural: it predicates something as coming from nothing (ll. 1288–295). The value of one's life to one's self is, though, something natural. To commit suicide because of monetary debt means subordinating nature (in this case, self-preservation) to mere conventional considerations. This is not to say that certain natural occurrences, such as extreme pain, may not legitimate suicide. To kill one's self to avoid a debtor's status, though, manifests gross stupidity. It displays the irrationality of that person who prefers to undergo an avoidable supreme natural evil to avoid a conventional non-life-threatening inconvenience.⁵

5. In this context, consider the death of Socrates. Plato (421–347 B.C.) never calls his death a suicide, yet the *Apology* suggests that Socrates was acting in a way that intentionally would infuriate the Athenian jury. Socrates envisions the possibility, after his death, of a discussion with those who died an unjust death, one of them being the hero Ajax. Ajax, however, committed suicide. Xenophon (431–354 B.C.) claims that

Strepsiades's plans for a future career as a barrister thus seem to be at a close. Not so, though, his plans to successfully cheat his creditors. He will enroll Pheidippides in the Socratic Thinkery in his place. Pheidippides naturally resists. He is not at all impressed by his father's demonstration of Socratic wisdom regarding natural language and theology, and he is repulsed by the pale male specimens matriculating in the Thinkery, so much at loggerheads with his passion for athletic competition. Pheidippides will decide whether to matriculate with Socrates after accepting Socrates's invitation to judge a debate between the Just Speech (symbolic of the Athens of the heroes of Marathon) and the Unjust Speech (an advocate of vulgar hedonism). Neither of the debaters advocates for Socrates's way of life. Socrates displays neither traditional piety nor the love of bodily pleasure. Then, again, contrary to the charge made by the older accusers in the *Apology*, Socrates does not teach the unjust speech or advocate it, but nor do either of the combatants representing Aristophanes's perspective. The old Athens has vanished. That Athens disparaged the pursuit of bodily pleasure (ll. 986–98). Aristophanes, however, is by no means a puritan. The traditional stories about the gods portray them as morally deficient. Nature, for the Unjust Speech, is the compulsive pursuit of pleasure and drives mortals toward injustice, which compulsion even the gods cannot master (ll. 1080–81). Self-defense, then, requires verbal trickery to avoid legal sanctions, the consequence of the unbridled pursuit of forbidden delights. The Just Speech concedes to his opponent that none of the pillars of a traditional morality is present in contemporary Athens (the lawyers, the politicians, the tragic poets, the Athenian demos: all are corrupt) (ll. 1089–198). Conservatism will not be of help because there is little worth preserving. Even the stories about the gods and the heroes teach inappropriate lessons. This situation may benefit Socrates, but he is not its cause. Such influence as he exercises demonstrates a society's moral sickness. Aristophanes, given his sometimes courageous civic-mindedness, abandons mere traditionalism and initiates the desirability of reform (ll. 549–53). After all, like Socrates, he acknowledges novel divinities, including those presiding over the imitative arts, such as comic poetry. Such poetry can lambast vacuous nihilistic intellectualism while conveying criticism of Athenian corruption through the pleasures of laughter.

Socrates presents his new graduate Pheidippides to his father and gives Strepsiades a taste of the son's recently acquired forensic skills. When his creditors come knocking, Strepsiades does not want to waste his son's skill on them but decides to handle them using the rudiments of Socratic wisdom that he himself has gleaned from his instruction in the Thinkery. One of the creditors shows his ignorance of the principles of scientific (natural gender-based) speech and of Socrates's new theology (ll. 1241–243). The other

Socrates's insolence before the jury was evidence of intended suicide: he was attempting to escape the physical and mental evils of old age (Reeves 2002, "Socrates: Defense to the Jury"). For Xenophon, then, Socrates's suicide conforms to nature insofar as he shortened his life to avoid a natural evil. For Plato, I believe, a more noble end justifies his apparent suicide: Socrates sacrificed his life so that philosophy would safely survive his personal demise.

fails to see the analogy between the volume of earth's water and monetary interest (ll. 1285–296). The creditors demonstrate to Strepsiades their natural inferior status: they are stupid. Strepsiades treats them with contempt, exercising, as he infers, the natural right of the wise over the ignorant. The wiser you are, the more nature gives you license over the stupid. There exists a natural hierarchy, then, with Socrates at its apex and ignoramuses like the creditors at its base. As we shall see, however, Pheidippides occupies a position higher than his father in the natural hierarchy based on wisdom.

The Turning Point

When we return to the scene after Strepsiades cheats the creditors, we discover that Strepsiades and Pheidippides's brief honeymoon period is at an end. Strepsiades is calling for help: Pheidippides is beating him (ll. 1321–324) because Strepsiades prefers stodgy old Aeschylus to his son's favored poet Euripides. As an example of Euripides's poetic genius, Pheidippides quotes a passage concerning incest between a brother and a sister (1368–370). Strepsiades is disgusted, and his disgust leads to what his son views as an appropriate punishment for his father's lack of literary refinement. Pheidippides is willing to give a justification for his violence, and Strepsiades, so addicted to Socratic inquiry has he become, is receptive to hearing that argument (ll. 1336–341). Novel reasoning replaces traditional familial practice. Pheidippides gives his father the option of hearing either the "Superior" argument (which appears to involve reference to nature) or the "Inferior" argument for father beating (l. 1337). Pheidippides gets his father to admit that he beat his son during his childhood for his son's own good: he was wiser than the child. Currently, however, Pheidippides is wiser than his dad, whose elderly status constitutes a second childhood (1414–418). Such wisdom gives the son the natural right to punish the father for his own good, to correct his ignorance. The prohibition on father beating is simply the outcome of an agreement among citizens, a matter of convention, not nature. What is natural does not change. Yet what was formerly agreed to can in the future be altered or abolished (ll. 1421–429). Pheidippides then directly points to nature. Observe the barnyard: the younger roosters attack their progenitors. Strepsiades objects: What if Pheidippides's son chooses to beat Pheidippides? "And what if I have no son?" Pheidippides retorts (l. 1437). That is not unlikely, considering that the Thinkery does not increase its stock by biological reproduction but rather by recruiting from existing families. Misery deserves company, Pheidippides thinks, so, to console his father, he announces that he will beat his mother as well (l. 1442).

Strepsiades is outraged by this proposal. He seeks vengeance against Socrates, who he believes has disrupted his relationship with that person he most loves, Pheidippides. He turns his anger now to the Clouds. These goddesses appear to him and reveal that their intention in getting Strepsiades involved with the Thinkery was to morally improve him by driving the old man to desperation and by showing him the evil of his unjust plans for cheating his creditors (ll. 1458–461). Another traditional

member of the pantheon, Hermes, now helps Strepsiades in his quest for justice. When Strepsiades contemplates taking Socrates to court, Hermes reminds him that Socrates can easily weasel himself out of any legal hassle. Hermes's suggestion is for Strepsiades to set the Thinkery ablaze (ll. 1483–485). The only way to defeat Socrates is to prevent him from speaking. The smoke from the blaze effects that result. Mocking Socrates by quoting him as if he is looking down upon the divine Sun, Strepsiades concludes the comedy by warning Socrates “never to offend the gods above” (l. 1509).

What precipitated Strepsiades's abrupt and violent turn against Socrates? Recall that when arguing the legitimacy of father beating, Pheidippides points to the behavior of animals in the barnyard. Younger roosters, we remember, attack their fathers. Pheidippides does not say but experience has it that they also assault their mothers. If so, Pheidippides has a license, based on the natural right of the wiser, to punish both his mother and his father. Call to mind, again, what event initiated Pheidippides's beating of his father: it was Pheidippides's attempt to prove the superiority of Euripides over Aeschylus by way of citing a passage from the former poet that involved incest between a brother and his sister. *Given* that context, Strepsiades's thought moves in an alarming direction from the justification of mother beating: the barnyard birds not only assault their parents but also mate with them and with their siblings. According to Socratic thinking, therefore, Oedipus's sin, involuntary though it be, is justified by nature, even when fully volitional.

How should we summarize Aristophanes's assessment of Socrates on the basis of his play? In particular, *does* the way he presents his character Socrates conform to the accusation made by the “older accusers,” as set forth in the *Apology*? Does Aristophanes, in addition, agree with the indictment of Socrates presented by Meletos and the “newer accusers”? The old accusation began by depicting Socrates as a wise guy, investigating all things in the heavens and under the earth. *The Clouds* surely affirms such a characterization. In referring to the physical cosmology of Anaxagoras, the Socrates of the *Apology* seems to confirm that he did such investigating. The older accusers also accused Socrates of “making the weaker argument the stronger.” The Socrates of the *Apology* does exactly that numerous times at his defense. For instance, although Meletos accuses Socrates of religious innovation, Socrates gets Meletos to charge him with atheism instead, something that Socrates can more easily refute. *The Clouds*, however, does not show Socrates as directly teaching the art of making the weaker argument the stronger, as we have seen. Nor does the play accuse him of atheism. Religious heresy, yes, but for Aristophanes heresy is a delicate issue because he, too, introduces strange gods (the Clouds, of course). His innovation is more ecumenically inclusive than Socrates's in that Aristophanes does not limit the number of personal gods to the Clouds, as Socrates does. Aristophanes, for instance, includes Hermes in the play, a representative of the acknowledged gods of the pantheon. In including the traditional gods “of the city” in his theology, Aristophanes acknowledges gods who care for human beings and who are active in earthly affairs. Socrates's Clouds may affect the weather, but Socrates clearly

does not pray to them for temperate seasons or for any other favor. They are completely inactive when it comes to human issues, including matters of justice. Socrates in the *Apology* expands the old accusation to include the charge of teaching such things to others. According to the *Apology*, Meletos connects the accusation of corrupting the young to Socrates's atheism. For Aristophanes, as we observed, the corruption is already under way in Athens before Socrates even opens the Thinkery, and such corruption is not a consequence of Socratic atheism. That is not to say that theology plays no role in Athens's corruption: the poetic accounts of the gods and heroes provide bad templates for moral imitation. Perhaps Aristophanes's craft can subtly correct the older poetic accounts. But unlike Socrates's radical program in the *Republic*, the old stories will not be censored out of existence but supplemented by more morally supportive poetic works, I believe.

What bothers Aristophanes regarding Socrates is his moral and political aloofness. He literally has his head in the clouds. His aloofness may betray arrogance, connected with his sense of natural superiority to the nonphilosophers. Aristophanes may, for many reasons, feel superior to the *demos*, but his desire to be liked by his audience supposes that he acknowledges some basis of equality between the poetic genius and the political multitude. What protects Aristophanes from litigious retribution (even though, for *civic* causes, he does take political risks) (ll. 549–53) is something natural: the desire to be praised for his exceptional talents. Thus, he escapes both political and moral censure as well as ridicule: he, unlike Socrates, does not appear as or act like an oddball.

What Arrangements Make for a Flourishing Society: The Lesson of *The Clouds*

From our reading of *The Clouds*, I believe we can learn at least three lessons relevant to the preservation of a good, liberal (in the classical sense) society. First, a culture, moral and religious, is essential to sustain that society's political order and economic arrangement. Second, the family occupies an important position in a polycentric transmission of classical liberal values, and the persistence of the family is endangered by various nonliberal ideologies. And third, the use of humor, instead of force, can be an effective and enjoyable way to deal with those inimical to such a society, its institutions, and the market.

We return now to our original concern: What grounding is there for the conventional prohibition against cannibalism and for other common taboos, such as the prohibitions against incest, necrophilia, pedophilia, and other activities, limited only by human imagination? Are these taboos just age-old prejudices, outlived and restrictive habits? Can an argument be made in behalf of these taboos by referring to utilitarian concerns? Note that I am not considering the near-universal prohibitions against murder or theft—such actions proscribed, for instance, in the second tablet of the Mosaic Ten Commandments. Thomas Hobbes (1957) in the thirteenth through fifteen chapters of *Leviathan* argues for such prohibitions in his formulation of modern natural law. These prohibitions are necessarily binding on full members of any human society,

from pirate bands to the nation-state. Without their enforcement on members of such associations, the organized group may perish. These proscriptions, of course, when argued for in utilitarian terms, lose their categorical quality and their universality, which, I believe, are essential to classical liberal rights ascriptions. They are binding upon the majority of the association, but what of a minority? Some actions are prohibited reasonably only if they occur at least occasionally. The prohibition against tripping the blind in Leviticus 19:14 informs us that this must have been a source of recreation for some in the community, brought to an end only by divine sanction. Perhaps such prohibitions might be based on human nature, including the human capacity for enduring guilt or shame? Then again, learning what to be ashamed of becomes important, and some standard must be referred to regarding this education. A liberal political order, one dedicated to the preservation of the natural rights to life, liberty, and property, seems to require for its preservation a supporting culture. Claims made about the nature and contents of classical liberal rights require a mutual common understanding supplied by culture, the culture of the civil society protected by and in turn nurturing the more narrow political institutions and processes of a liberal community.

The political institutions of classical liberalism, including the rule of law, and the existence of the free market are essential to a good society, a necessary but not a sufficient condition. Although some of the prohibitions required for any society to persist, such as prohibitions on murder, robbery, and theft, can be justified by reference to utility, not all “taboos” required for a good society can be justified by such reference, as I have argued in the light of Aristophanes’s teachings, as I discern them in *The Clouds*. The prohibitions against incest strike at the heart of the survival of the family, whose persistence, for many reasons, is vital to a good society and to the polycentric transmitting of liberal norms (Baumgarth 1986; Peden and Glahe 1986). Aristophanes may have had reservations about the way in which the Thinkery requires drawing potential students away from their families (and potentially away from civic duty). But his main point is that Socratic natural right (of the wise over the stupid) undermines the relationship of father to son. Pheidippides becomes, at least in theory, a rival to his father as a lover of his mother. Maybe the incest taboo is the result of evolutionary/historical laws preventing the family’s isolation from broader society. But why are such evolutionary strategies prescriptive for advanced societies, in particular when the future of the traditional nuclear family itself seems under attack?

I have stipulated that this taboo and others, such as that involving cannibalism, get a proper grounding only when reference is made to the “sacred.” Which “sacred”? That of Aristophanes, involving a polytheistic pantheon? That of the monotheistic faiths? But which one, assuming divisions among them on core issues? A minimalist notion of the “sacred,” a common denominator among the three major monotheistic affirmations? Yet minimalism may drive the maximalists to tears if not to anger.

I would not desire to return to wars of religion to establish an accepted sense of the “sacred.” But the importance of political decentralization for classical liberals may provide an answer to those fearing religious persecution. A “polyverse” of communities

composed of like-minded believers (or disbelievers), open to trade and exchange with other communities, is something classical liberalism might embrace. Religious discrimination in, say, the housing market does not violate the nonaggression axiom. Such decentralization, of course, might lead to equally acceptable acts of political secession. Candor requires that I admit to believing that some religions (what we now call “sacred traditions”) have a more thoughtful apprehension of the “sacred” than do others. Admitting the importance of the “sacred” becomes an invitation for the theologians to exercise some creativity and liberality.

I venture to affirm that, along with some sense of the “sacred,” some sense of humor is required, if not for the preservation of then maybe for the defense of a liberal society. Here again Aristophanes is helpful. Writing when heroes were no longer dominant, the soil of tragedy, where the culture becomes essentially democratic, Aristophanes makes skillful use of humor to disarm amoral elements destructive of his Athens. Yet laughter becomes a way of alerting the amoral oddball, the misfit, to the dangers of that aloofness (Bergson 1911, 134). It is a less drastic means of curbing the unsociable than legal penalties or moral condemnation.

Hobbes had a good nose for scenting traces of aristocracy, the virtues of which he found unacceptable. For Hobbes, all laughter indicates a sudden eruption of feeling of vainglory, of perceiving yourself superior to someone else (1957, 36). For Hobbes, comedy is an offense against the humble recognition that we all are fundamentally equal respecting our mortality. Although not all humor is personal and prideful, Hobbes has a point. Comedians get maybe the bulk of their laughs by focusing on their audience’s feeling of superiority to the unfortunates who are the brunt of the jokes. Comedy, then, preserved an element of aristocratic pride even in the extreme democracy of Aristophanes’s Athens. It is difficult not to laugh when you get the punchline, even though the laugh may be at some unfortunate’s expense: laughter and stern democratic morality are often at odds. The persistence of the comic is, then, a survival of a positive evaluation of inequality. The sense of the comic, I venture to say, may be rooted in human nature itself. Yet are we not presently in a “postcomic” society? That is, are all acts of displaying a sense of superiority, which leads to the laugh, held by the most advanced elements of progressive morality to be offensive, maybe criminally so? The direction progressivism is taking seems to involve taking Orwell’s *1984* not as a warning but as a handbook. Further, that direction combines *1984* with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. What may well save us all are, hardly to be expected, comedians with courage. And though few they may be, they are out there.

When I discussed the concept of “victimless cannibalism” to a friend, he replied, jokingly, “Why not?” Take the deceased homeless of New York, for instance. Their now unoccupied bodies might as well be put to productive use. What starts as a joke these days may well become public policy. Then it ceases to be funny. Pedophilia might be defended as no more offensive, than, say, my victimless cannibalism. The culture that gave rise to classical liberalism, providing common concepts and language, was arguably a religious culture. Only a religious culture, I am arguing, gives to asserted liberal rights

their nonconditional status as moral imperatives. This is the direction in which Aristophanes is going in his humorous criticism of the moral/cultural neutral status of Socratic philosophy (as Aristophanes judges it) and its destructive implications for the unconditional obligatory status of traditional moral prohibitions. I do not know if I would want to live in even the freest of societies if it substantially lacked that culture. I know that I would not want to die there.⁶

As always, thanks for their love, support, and patience to my wife Natia and my sons William and Peter, for whom some things are sacred.

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6. One of the philosophical schools that has been most inspiring and helpful to me is Stoicism. Yet Aristophanes would find it hard to distinguish the teachings of the early Stoics from that which Socrates portrayed in *The Clouds*. The founder of Stoicism, Zeno of Citium (336–265 B.C.), appears to have advocated not only incest but also cannibalism (Inwood and Gerson 2008, 175, 122). This is not surprising because Zeno was an apprentice of the Cynic philosopher Crates of Thebes (360–280 B.C.). The Cynics believed that the only vice was ignorance and the only virtue wisdom, thus dismissing thereby all the generally held moral virtues as sheer conventions.

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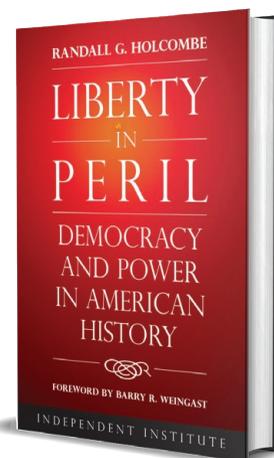
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