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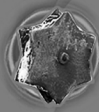
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# *Poetry as Philosophical Self-Criticism*

David Roochnik

## Abstract

*Philosophy for Plato requires self-examination. As Socrates says in the Apology, “the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being.” But how can a philosopher examine this very belief? It seems impossible. After all, a philosopher seriously challenging the conviction that philosophical examination is good would do so by means of philosophical examination. As such, he would beg the question. This paper argues that in the Phaedo Plato addresses this problem. It analyzes Socrates’ dream, which enjoins him to “make music and work at it.” For years Socrates thought that this meant that he should practice philosophy, which he took to be the highest form of “music.” Now, on his deathbed, he reconsiders. Perhaps it meant that he should compose “poetry,” the quintessentially non-philosophical form of human discourse. And so, hours before he dies, he puts the fables of Aesop into verse and composes a hymn to Apollo. The thesis of this paper is that, in a stroke of brilliant but nearly paradoxical consistency, Plato shows his readers that genuine philosophical self-examination requires poetry.*

## I Socratic Self-Criticism in the *Phaedo*

In the dialogue that bears his name, *Phaedo* reports that Socrates had been writing poetry on his deathbed. More specifically, while awaiting execution in prison he had been “putting the fables of Aesop into verse and composing a hymn to Apollo” (60d1-2)<sup>1</sup>.

Socrates’ friend Cebes, who was there at the time, was surprised. After all, prior to his imprisonment Socrates’ assessment of the poets had been harsh. “The poets,” he told the jurors in the *Apology*, “those who composed tragedies and dithyrambs and all the rest,” were utterly unable to explain “what [their poems] meant” (*legoien*: 22a9-b4). In fact, even a randomly selected member of the audience could do a better job than they of discussing their works. For this reason he inferred that poets do not “compose (*poioien*) what they compose by wisdom (*sophia*), but by some natural gift, and by being inspired like the prophets and the diviners” (22b9-c2).

They “say many beautiful things, but they don’t know what they’re talking about” (22c3). Since philosophy is committed precisely to the project of

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1 The Greek Text of the *Phaedo* is that of J. Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). Translations are my own. Burnet mentions that the “prose collection” now known as Aesop’s fables “is of Byzantine date; but many of the fables were well known from popular verses and Archilochus” (p. 60).

knowing what one is talking about, the difference between it and poetry seems fundamental. As Socrates famously puts it in the Republic, there is an “old quarrel between poetry and philosophy” (607b).

Cebes was so puzzled by Socrates’ newfound enthusiasm that he asked him, “whatever were you thinking that led you to compose poetry (*epoiêsas*) after you came here [to prison], you who had never composed any poetry before?” (60d3-4). He responded:

I was examining what certain dreams meant (*ti legoi*) and, in the hope of purifying myself, trying to determine whether they were often ordering me to make this sort of music (*mousikê*). They were like this. Earlier in my life the same dream often came to me. Sometimes it appeared in one way, sometimes in another, but it always said the same thing: ‘Socrates,’ it said, ‘make (*poiêi*) music and work at it.’

Now, at that time I assumed that in exhorting me to make music the dream, like those who exhort runners, was encouraging me to continue the very activity I had been engaged in; in other words, I took philosophy, which is what I had been doing, to be the greatest music. But now, since the verdict came in and the festival of the god has stayed my execution<sup>2</sup>, it seemed necessary for me, in case my frequent dream had

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<sup>2</sup> The execution of Socrates was delayed until the holiday celebrating Theseus’ killing of the Minotaur came to a close with the return of the sacred ship from Delos.

been ordering me to make ordinary music, not to disobey it, but actually to make it. For it seemed safer not to depart before purifying myself by composing (*poiêsanta*) such poems and obeying the dream (60e1-61b1).

Socrates' remarkable reversal on poetry is the result of his self-examination or even self-criticism. What if, he wonders, he had consistently misunderstood the meaning of the injunction to "make music?" (The Greek *mousikê* has a far wider extension than the English "music," for it embraces all the arts inspired by the Muses.) What if the dream had actually been exhorting him to make "stories (*muthous*) rather than arguments" (*logous*: 61b4); that is, to engage in "music" in the conventional sense of poetic activity rather than philosophy?

Self-examination is, of course, a hallmark of Socratic philosophy. As he says with such force in the *Apology*

The greatest good for a human being is this: to make speeches (*tous logous poieisthai*) every day about virtue and the other topics about which you hear me conversing, and **examining myself** and other people. Indeed, an unexamined life is not worth living for a human being (38a1-5).

Socrates practices what he preaches. In asking, what is courage (*Laches*), moderation (*Charmides*), piety (*Euthyphro*), knowledge (*Theaetetus*), beauty (*Hippias*



*Major*), or friendship (*Lysis*), he discusses virtue and perhaps even challenges his own preconceptions of it. By themselves, however, these inquiries are not an adequate form of self-examination.

In order for philosophers genuinely to challenge themselves – to take seriously the possibility that they are wrong – they must question the value of philosophical activity itself.

For an unreflective or dogmatic commitment to philosophy should be as subject to Socratic critique as, say, an unreflective commitment to Athenian democracy. This sort of philosophical self-criticism is, however, intrinsically problematic.

To explain: a Socratic philosopher affirms the imperative “one should live an examined life.” This means that he should resist dogmatism by challenging and demanding rational justification of his own (and others’) beliefs. Call this the “philosopher’s conviction” (PC). But PC is itself a belief, and so consistency requires that it too be examined. But how can one examine it without abiding by it? For demanding and then attempting a rational justification of the PC would be an instance of philosophical activity.

Thus to challenge the PC in this fashion is actually to accept it. In other words, if Socrates were to ask, “is the PC true?” and then rationally examine possible answers to this question – by, say, testing their logical consistency – he would beg

the question. The remarks above (if cogent) imply that philosophical self-criticism is a problematic enterprise. For this reason the philosopher committed to the PC faces a peculiar risk: avoiding self-examination; that is, becoming dogmatic about the goodness of philosophy itself.

Plato vividly illustrates this risk in the prologue of the *Symposium*. The bulk of the dialogue is narrated by Apollodorus, a man who for three years has been spending all his time with Socrates and, as he says, “making it my concern to know what he says and does every day.”

He is not only obsessively devoted to Socrates, he is thoroughly convinced that prior to his own initiation into (what he takes to be) philosophy he was “utterly miserable” (172e). So too, he thinks, is everyone else who is not a philosopher. It is clear that his companion (Glaucón) has heard this fervent refrain from Apollodorus many times, and that he is quite tired of it.

What he wants is not a diatribe but an account of what transpired during the famous dinner party hosted by Agathon and attended by, among other luminaries, Socrates, Aristophanes and Alcibiades. Apollodorus was not there himself. He did, however, hear the story from one of the attendees, Aristodemus, a man rather similar to Apollodorus.

For he was a “lover” (*erastês*: 173b2) of Socrates who went so far as to go “barefoot” (173b2) in

mimetic homage to his famously shoeless master. Apparently Aristodemus memorized the speeches that were given at the party.

In Apollodorus and Aristodemus, two strikingly unimpressive human beings whose only distinction is their mindless devotion to Socrates, we see the danger of unreflective affirmation of philosophy. These are men who might parrot the phrase, “the unexamined life is not worth living,” but neither examine what it means nor wonder whether it is true.

It is precisely from this danger that Socrates hopes to safeguard himself by composing poetry while awaiting execution. Unlike his acolytes, he seriously entertains the possibility that the PC might be false. To do so without begging the question, however, requires him to engage in a discursive activity that is non-philosophical. In poetry.

## II Poetic Logos

The word “poet” of course refers to Homer, the tragedians and the comic playwrights. But for the purpose of this paper (and indeed for Plato himself) it has a much broader sense and is meant to refer to any thinker for whom *logos* – here taken to mean human discourse in all its many variations – is essentially **productive**; that is, literally *poiêtikê*

(which is derived from *poiein*, “to make”).

An example is the sophist Gorgias. *Logos*, he says in his *Encomium of Helen*, is a “powerful master capable of “ending fear, alleviating pain, bringing gladness, and expanding pity” (§8)<sup>3</sup>.

It **produces** emotional affects in listeners<sup>4</sup>. For this reason, it is like “magic” (§10). Just as a magician can (seem to) cause objects to move without making contact with them, so too can a speaker move an audience with the “small and invisible bodies” (§8) that are words.

His speeches are like “incantations” (§10). By them alone he can bring his listeners to tears, rage or joy by projecting articulate sounds that “intermingle with the *doxa* of the soul” (§10).

In fact, for Gorgias the essential power of *logos* is precisely to shape, mold or produce *doxa*; that is, to persuade. (Although *doxa* can be accurately translated as “opinion” or “belief” its meaning can extend to “appearance” or “the way things seem”).

It is in this sense that *logos* for Gorgias is “poetic.” He explains by means of a rather surprising example.

That persuasion, when added to *logos*, can make an impression on the soul in whatever way it wishes, it is necessary first to study the

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3 The Greek text is Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*, edited by D.M. MacDowell (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1982). Unless otherwise noted, translations will be my own.

4 There is no need here to discuss the difference between written and oral speeches. The latter are clearly what Gorgias is thinking about.

speeches of the astronomers, who substituting *doxa* for *doxa*, taking away one but producing (*energasmēnoi*) another, make (*epoiēsān*) what is incredible and unclear seem [plausible] to the eyes of *doxa* (§13).

On this view, the putative “theories” of the astronomers are, in fact, not theories at all. For they do not afford an unimpeded “view” of the reality they purport to articulate. (The Greek *theôrein* means “to look at” or “behold”). Instead, they are linguistic constructs produced by their authors that are more or less persuasive. So too are all other speeches.

*Logos* constructs the lens through which human beings “see” the world. Such a lens, however, does not offer an unimpeded view of things as they are in themselves. Instead, it only opens a window to another view that itself has been manufactured by *logos*. Gorgias elaborates in his work *On Non-being*:

If beings are visible and audible and in general perceptible, if they are taken to be external, then of these the visible ones will be grasped by vision and the audible ones by hearing, and not the other way around. How, then, can these things be communicated to one’s fellows? For that by which we communicate is *logos*, and *logos* is not beings that are.

Therefore, we do not communicate beings to our fellows but *logos*, which is other than beings that are. Just as the visible could not become audible, and vice versa, so too since being

is external, it cannot become our *logos*. And because it [beings that are] are not *logos*, they could not be disclosed to another (§83-85)<sup>5</sup>.

More simply, a *logos* provides no access to a *logos*-independent reality. Instead, it only produces *doxai*, which themselves are appearances of a reality that is already linguistically saturated. In short, a *logos* refers only to other *logoi*.

On such a view, Socrates' injunction that the unexamined life is not worth living (the PC), like the various astronomical "theories," has no greater hold on the truth than any other. Instead, it does no more than attempt to persuade others to follow it. The best that can be said of the PC, therefore, is that it has seduced generations of young philosophers.

Back to the *Phaedo*. In a stroke of brilliant but nearly paradoxical consistency, Plato has Socrates challenge the PC, which *qua* self-critical philosopher he is obligated to do. He seriously considers the possibility that he had regularly misinterpreted his recurring dream's injunction "to make music." Instead of exhorting him to continue philosophizing perhaps, he wonders, it meant that he should compose poetry. And so he tries his hand at composing poems. For such is the only way he can genuinely challenge

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<sup>5</sup> The Greek text is Gorgias' *On Non-Being* is from *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, edited by Diel and Kranz (Berlin: 1964). Translations are my own, but I did consult the translation by G. Kennedy that can be found in *The Older Sophists*, edited by R. Sprague (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972).

the PC without begging the question.

Having Socrates try his hand at composing poems in the *Phaedo* (and elsewhere)<sup>6</sup> is only one way that Plato acknowledges that the philosopher must examine himself by challenging the PC. A second is the fact that he regularly includes characters in his dialogues who affirm the poetic conception of *logos*.

Furthermore, and strikingly, he makes it clear that they are not refuted by Socrates. Such characters can be called “surds”. (The Latin *surdus* means “deaf, mute, stupid,” and is the equivalent of the Greek *alogon*, “without *logos*”). These are men who explicitly oppose *logos* understood as rational discourse that has epistemic access to a *logos*-independent reality reference to which can objectively justify or verify *doxai*. To explain, consider the following example.

### III The Comic Poet

This section will examine a surd par excellence: Aristophanes in the *Symposium*. His speech articulates a thoroughly non-philosophical conception of human nature, one that is not only

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6 Of course Socrates' turn to *muthos* in the *Phaedo* is hardly unprecedented. One need only remember his telling of the “myth of Er” in the *Republic*, or even the finale of the *Phaedo* itself, in which he tells a great story about the underworld.

comedic and but also deeply “conservative.”

The latter word is used here in a basic, rather than a narrowly political, sense.

Conservatives are inclined to conserve what they have. They are wary of change and especially of “big ideas” (*ta phronêmata megala*, as Aristophanes puts it at 190b6) that promise to make life much better than it really is<sup>7</sup>. In other words, they are skeptical about the possibility of progress. A classic example of a “big idea” relevant to the *Symposium* was the invasion of Sicily undertaken by the Athenians in 416 bce, a few months before the dramatic date of the dialogue itself. Another “big idea,” the one central to this paper, to which a conservative would be opposed is the PC.

Someone like Socrates claims transformative powers for philosophy. On his view, self-examination and rational reflection can turn lives around and put its practitioners on the path towards the Good. As such, Socrates embodies the highest level of intellectual ambition, and thus becomes a target of conservative criticism and, as we shall see, comic deflation<sup>8</sup>.

Aristophanes’ speech is full of sight gags, visual images he conjures in words. That these images are of the human body in various postures and

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7 The Greek text is J. Burnet’s edition of the *Symposium* (Oxford, 1965). Translations will be my own.

8 My concern here is only with the Aristophanes who speaks in Plato’s dialogue. Whether his speech approximates the views expressed in the plays written by the actual historical figure is a question far beyond the scope of this short paper.



configurations is already suggestive. When exposed, our bodies tend to be funny. They are also, at least for the comic poet (and surely not for the philosopher of the *Phaedo*), definitive of what it means to be human. Consider the following summary of his story.

In the beginning humans were spherical double-beings, with two faces upon one curved neck, eight limbs, and two sets of genitals. There were three genders: males who were descended from the sun, females who came from the earth, and androgynes, descended from the moon. Equipped as they were, these primal humans could move fast, apparently in a cartwheeling motion. (See 189d6-190b5).

The primal humans were “terribly (*deina*: 190b5) strong” and, as mentioned above, filled with “big ideas” (190b6). As a result, they dared to attack the gods. We can imagine them aggressively cartwheeling up Mount Olympus. As was inevitable, the assault of the spherical beings failed. At that point, Zeus was confronted with a dilemma.

If he wiped out the human race, which is a punishment they may well have deserved, he would be deprived of the “honors and sacrifices” (190c4-5) he was accustomed to receiving from them. More specifically, he would be deprived of the smoke he craves that comes from human beings sacrificing animals to him. On the other hand, humans had to be cut down to size. Zeus was “stumped” (*êporoun*: 190c3).

The image is of a self-interested god in *aporia*,

one who cares more about receiving his dose of smoke than he does about justice, is funny. But Zeus retrieves his wits and then devises an ingenious plan. He would cut the spherical beings in half, simultaneously making them both weaker but also doubling their capacity to send sacrifices his way. (See 190c7-d3). He sliced them in two, and then ordered Apollo to turn their faces around so that they could “gaze upon” (190e4) the section that had been cut. Apollo drew together the folds of skin at the stomach into the belly-button. The inner torso then looked like a wineskin drawn together by a string. Zeus’s hope was that by contemplating their belly-buttons, “the memorial of their ancient suffering” (191a5), humans would be deterred from further acts of arrogant mischief.

With the halving of the spherical beings, Aristophanes’ account of human history enters its second stage (191a5-b5). Having been severed from their original state of “wholeness” (189e5) human beings longed for their other half.

Because they “desired to fuse together” (191a8), when one half found the other the two would intertwine and not let go. As a result of this desperate embrace, which was so consuming that all other matters, even one as basic as eating, were neglected, humans began to die from hunger.

The image conjured here of emaciated corpses permanently coupled is hardly amusing. Fortunately,

the next point Aristophanes makes does provide comic relief. If one of the two partners should happen to die, he says, the one left behind would simply look for a replacement (191b3). The partners in the passionate love-death embrace turn out to be almost entirely indiscriminating. As long as the replacement half is of the proper gender, it is acceptable.

Zeus “took pity” (191b5) on these creatures who were dying of starvation due to their “lack of work” (191b1), and so devised another plan to keep them alive. It is unlikely, of course, that his intervention was motivated solely by compassion. Zeus has already shown himself to be addicted to the honors and sacrifices he receives from humans, and so once again self-interest surely entered his deliberations.

His plan was this: he transferred the genitals from the back of the body to the front. Doing so allowed humans to have sexual intercourse “inside each other” (191c3). Before the transfer, humans procreated like grasshoppers, by depositing egg and sperm on the earth.

The key benefit gained by the genital transfer is the pleasurable satisfaction that resulted from sexual intercourse. Even when the partners are male homosexuals who do not procreate, they are still able to receive “some fulfillment at least” (191c6) from the sexual intercourse made possible for them by having frontal genitalia.

This passage (191b6-c7) is puzzling. Recall that

Zeus's dilemma was caused by the fact that humans were locked in embraces so tight that they did nothing else and as a result were dying of hunger. How did the invention of sexual intercourse ameliorate this dire problem? The answer is that once human coupling became sexual, it became temporary; "a few minutes of friction" and it is over<sup>9</sup>. After that, human beings "could get back to work" (191c7).

This point is crucial, and so will be elaborated shortly. For now Aristophanes' own words can be used to summarize this section: "Eros is the name of the desire and pursuit of wholeness" (192a10-11). It is the urge people feel to complete themselves by finding their other half, and its mode of expression is sexual.

To be clear: for Aristophanes the most fundamental mode of human striving is sexual and bodily. Again, his speech expresses a thoroughly anti-philosophical conception of human nature. Furthermore, the logic of his story entails that human experience is essentially characterized by self-deception. To explain, let us review the three stages of Aristophanes's account of human history.

The first was the age of the spherical beings. In light of subsequent developments, three features of this primordial wholeness should be noted.

First, it was not sexual. Recall that at this stage, the genitalia were located on the outside and

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<sup>9</sup> The wonderful phrase "few minutes of friction" comes from Ian McEwan's novel, *Amsterdam*.

procreation was done on the earth.

Second, asexual union was totally impersonal. Note that the two faces, which were “alike in every way” (190a1), were pointed in opposite directions (190a2). Third, primordial wholeness was not satisfying, and in this sense wasn’t real wholeness at all. After all, despite being perfectly fused with their other halves, the spherical creatures were filled with “big ideas” and their grand ambition was to attack Olympus.

Zeus cut them in two. In this second stage of the history, humans longed for their other halves. And when they found each other they coupled. Again, this reacquired wholeness, like the primordial version, was asexual. In fact, it was altogether curious.

Once reunited the partners entered a condition of stasis and oblivion, and so did no work at all. But the union here was not sexually ecstatic. Instead, it was some sort of desperate clinging which is made even stranger by the fact that the other half was so easily replaceable.

Zeus corrected this fatal condition, and moved us to the third (contemporary) stage of human history. He transferred the genitalia to the front and thereby invented sexual intercourse. Recall that he did so because such intercourse was satisfying but brief.

This point is key. From Zeus’s perspective the purpose of sex is to allow humans to “get back to work” (191c7). Humans must work not only in order to produce food so that they won’t die of starvation,

but also because they are required to generate a surplus so that they can can sacrifices and build great temples to the gods. (See 189c5-7.) Zeus is not an altruist. He gave us sexual intercourse, and a brief spasm of pleasure, so that we could thank him with smoke.

If this is the true purpose of sex, then erotic life – in fact, human life in general – is riven by fundamental self-deception. Eros may seem to be “the desire and pursuit of wholeness” (192e10), but it has no chance of fulfillment. After all, both of the earlier versions of wholeness – that of the spherical beings and the intertwined anorexics – were asexual (and the former was not really satisfying anyway, since the spherical beings attacked the gods).

Sex may seem like “the restorer of our ancient nature that attempts to make one from two and to cure human nature” (191d1-3), and in moments of passion it may seem to come “close” (193c7), but it is not the real thing. For the fulfillment it provides is distinctly qualified. As Aristophanes puts it, the best it can is provide “some fulfillment at least (*plêsmonê goun*)”.

(The particle *goun* is perfect here because it not only “conveys a qualified assent”<sup>10</sup>, but also sounds a bit funny). Our “few minutes of friction” are nice, but we take them far too seriously if we think they can “cure” us by restoring genuine wholeness.

They are a sop and incapable of actually returning

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10 J. Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), p. 452.

us to our primal (asexual) state. They are but a means by which Zeus has us get back to work. In short, sexual intercourse is not as splendid as it seems to be. Aristophanes makes this clear in the following passage that describes two people who have found partners.

They cannot say what it is they want from each other. For surely no one would think it is sexual intercourse, and that for the sake of this each of us enjoys and pursues sexual intercourse with such seriousness. Instead, it is clear that the soul of each desires something else which it is unable to articulate. It can only intuit what it really wants, and speak in riddles about it (192c3-d2).

We want something from our lovers, but cannot say what it is. We think sex will make us happy, will restore us to the wholeness we intuit is missing from our lives. But this it cannot do. As a result, our lives are essentially characterized by self-deception and most relationships, especially marriage, are either failures or funny. Indeed, that we take our few minutes of friction so seriously is what makes much of life funny, and (and on this view) renders comedy a truthful expression of the human condition.

Not only is the seriousness with which humans pursue their sexual interests doomed to be disappointing, so too are all other “big ideas” that promise to make life whole. Politically ambitious schemes to enhance the city and philosophical claims

that the unexamined life is not worth living are, given the logic of Aristophanes' tale, certain to fail. For we are essentially our bodies.

All big ideas, then, represent temptations that should be resisted. The job of the comic poet is to mock and expose them as pretentious nonsense. Should a Socrates stand before an audience earnestly spouting promises of transcendent goodness, the comic should pull his pants down.

At the end of the speech Aristophanes recommends the following to his listeners:

I am speaking about all men and women, that in this way our race might become happy, if we consummate our Eros and each of us were to find his beloved, thereby returning to our primordial nature. If this is best, then it is necessary in the present day that what is nearest to this be best. And this is to find a beloved who is most akin to us in mind. And in praising the god who is responsible for this, we would justly praise Eros, who in the present most benefits us by leading us to what belongs to us and supplies us with great hopes for the future. For if we supply piety to the gods, he will establish us in our primordial nature and by curing us, make us blessed and happy (193c2-d5).

Aristophanes' final words are replete with discrepancies and their joyous veneer conceals the reality implied by the logic of his own speech. It is, in other words, thoroughly comic. He makes it sound



as if sexual union is great. But we have established that, at best, it is not bad. There is an unbridgeable gap between primordial wholeness, which was asexual and impersonal, and sexual intercourse.

Aristophanes says as much with his injunction that “it is necessary in the present day that what is nearest to this [primordial wholeness] be best.” The happiness Eros promises is counterfeit. Our “great hopes for the future” are delusory traps.

In short, the message of this speech is conservative: avoid big ideas, do not hope for much, enter into a sexual relationship that can satisfy your needs at a basic level by offering a bit of qualified fulfillment, but when the deed is done get back to business. The ideal life seems to be one spent in a family, hard at work (probably on a farm), paying due reverence to the traditional gods by sending them smoke. Translated into contemporary imagery, one should work hard, stay married, and go to church on Sundays. This is about as good as it will get.

This is a grim picture. But it is the picture at the heart of comedy. Comedy makes fun of all serious pursuits, including itself. Consider, for example, the bit of banter with Eryximachus that precedes Aristophanes’ actual speech.

The poet has been hiccuping throughout the good doctor’s rather serious treatment of Eros. After Eryximachus accuses him of mocking him, Aristophanes says, “well said, Eryximachus! So let

what was said by me be unsaid” (189b3-4).

This sentence can function as a motto for comedy. What was said can be unsaid because it was not said seriously. And this is true not just of comedy. No saying, no *logos*, neither the arguments offered by Alcibiades on behalf of invading Sicily nor Socrates’ fabulous description of the salutary benefits of philosophy in the *Apology*, should be etched in serious stone. For all can be unsaid, re-written, mocked. Nothing escapes comic deflation.

We ought, therefore, to conserve what we have because we simply cannot realistically hope for much that is better. We must do the best with what we have, even though what we have is manifestly not enough.

Aristophanes is a “surd” and Plato draws attention to the fact that he is not refuted. At the end of Socrates’ speech, “Aristophanes was trying to make himself heard” (212c), but the roar that accompanied Alcibiades’ entrance drowned his words out. And at the end of the dinner party, when Socrates was trying to convince Aristophanes that the same author should be able to write both tragedy and comedy, Aristophanes simply fell asleep “in the middle of the discussion” (223d). A perfect response from a “surd”<sup>11</sup>.

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11 Note that in the dialogue named after him, Philebus, another surd, also falls asleep.

## IV Aristotle By Contrast

This section will attempt to clarify Plato's position on poetry, understood as a necessary supplement to philosophical self-examination, by presenting a strong contrast to it: the Aristotelian conception of *logos* in which poetry plays no role whatsoever. Only one passage will be briefly discussed here.

In *Metaphysics* Γ 3-4 Aristotle argues against an "opponent" (*amphisbêtôn*: 1006a13) who is a "surd," someone who (like Gorgias) denies that rational *logos* can disclose the truth about a stable, non-linguistic reality<sup>12</sup>. Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle is confident that he can definitively refute, or at least silence, him.

In Γ 3, Aristotle argues that the philosopher who studies "being qua being" (1003a21) must also study "what in mathematics are called the axioms" (1005a20). In fact, all demonstrative sciences, not just mathematical ones, use (depend upon) axioms (or first principles [*archai*]) in their proofs; see *Posterior Analytics* I.2.71b23).

Since all sciences study genera, and since all beings belong to genera, axioms "belong to all beings" (1005a22). It is "fitting, therefore, for the one who is especially knowledgeable about each genus" – for the philosopher studying being qua being – "to be able to articulate the most secure

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<sup>12</sup> The Greek text is the edition by W.D. Ross (Oxford: 1970). Translations are my own.

(*bebaiotatas*) of the first principles” (1005b9-10). And this is the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC): “it is impossible for the same thing both to belong and not to belong to the same thing at the same time” (1005b19-20). The PNC is not only the most basic principle of demonstrative science, but of rational *logos* more generally. Aristotle’s opponent denies, or rather attempts to deny, its truth.

Aristotle’s first move is to show that the truth of the PNC cannot itself be demonstrated. A demonstration must begin somewhere; that is, it requires first principles (axioms, common notions, definitions). If the truth of all such principles had to be demonstrated, none could be first since the process would “go on to infinity”. As a result, no demonstration could actually begin, and “there would be no demonstration at all” (1006a9).

Since the PNC is the first of all such principles, any attempt to demonstrate its truth would presuppose rather than argue for its truth; that is, it would beg the question. Therefore, Aristotle concludes, this cannot be done.

In what seems to be an abrupt reversal, he next asserts that in fact it is possible to “demonstrate” the PNC. Fortunately, he adds a qualification: the truth of the PNC can be demonstrated, but only “by refutation” (*elenchtikôs*: 1006a12). In this sort of argument the “opponent” – in this case, the one who denies the truth of the PNC – is asked to speak first.

Aristotle acknowledges that his options in arguing against him are limited. First, he cannot demand that his opponent prove the truth of his own position (that is, the falsity of the PNC). Since all proofs require assumption of the PNC, that would clearly “beg the question” (1006a17).

For the same reason he cannot require that the opponent state that something either is or is not, for that would imply abiding by the PNC.

But he can make a minimal, non-questioning begging demand: the opponent must simply participate in the conversation. He must “say something” (*ti legêi*: 1006a13).

In turn, this means that he must “say something significant (*sêmainein*) both to himself and to another. For this is necessary if he is to say (*legoi*) anything” (1006a21-22). Should the opponent refuse to do this he could not participate in the argument. As such, he would become indistinguishable from a “plant” (1006a15).

Now the trap has been set. If the opponent says something, anything, significant – that is, intelligible both to himself and to his argument partner – then he will have said something “definite” (*ôrismenon*: 1006a25). And Aristotle thinks that this, by itself, constitutes an affirmation of the PNC. He explains.

If ‘human being’ signifies (*sêmainei*) one thing, let this be ‘two-footed animal.’ By ‘signifying one thing’ I mean the following. If this [being a two-footed animal] is a human being, then if

something is a human being, this is what it will  
be for it to be a human being (1006a30-34).

Aristotle next explains that a word like “human being” need not signify one and only thing. “Human being,” for example, can signify the species understood as “two-footed animal” but as the “political animal”.

What is necessary is not that the word have one and only one meaning, but that there be a “definite number” (1006b4) of such meanings. He defends this claim indirectly: if the significations of a word (its meanings) were indefinite, human beings would be incapable of “conversing with one another” (*dialegesthai pros allêlous*: 1006b8).

Since we do converse with one another, it follows that the meaning(s) of the words we use be limited, determinate, definite. If you and I are talking, and one of us uses the word “human being,” the other must peg this word to one of its possible significations in order for the conversation to go forward.

To illustrate by means of a more prosaic example: if the meaning of the word “salt” were indefinite, then when you asked me to “pass the salt” I might pass you the pepper instead. I would not know what you were talking about. But I do know what you are talking about, and so I do pass you the salt. Therefore, “salt” must have a determinate meaning. As Aristotle puts it, “not to signify one [limited, determinate] thing is to signify nothing” (1006b7).

All of this, he thinks, entails an affirmation of the PNC. For if the truth of the PNC were denied, if the opponent were right, it would be possible for X to be both a human being and not a human being. And then the word “X” would signify an unlimited number of things.

But this has been show to destroy the possibility of conversation. Since conversation is in fact possible, the “X” must signify something determinate. Therefore, X cannot be both a human being and not a human being. The truth of the PNC has, in Aristotle’s mind, been secured.

To sum up: if the opponent, the person denying the truth of the PNC, only agrees to the most minimal and neutral demand – that he say something intelligible to other people (and to himself) – then he will have refuted himself, for he will have said that X is P and is not not-P. He thus will have affirmed the PNC even in his attempt to destroy it.

Or as Aristotle says of his opponent, “in destroying *logos* he submits to *logos*” (1006a26). The PNC, therefore, is inescapable. It is the most “firm,” “stable” or “secure” of all principles, and it is what grounds *logos* in its most ordinary sense of everyday conversation. The above merely scratches the surface of a long, complicated and controversial argument. Fortunately, the intended point here is minimal. Aristotle is an entirely different kind of thinker than Plato.

Unlike Socrates in the *Phaedo*, who seems haunted by the possibility that the music his dream has enjoined him to make is not philosophy but poetry, and unlike Plato who regularly includes non-philosopher (“surds”) such as Aristophanes in his dialogues, Aristotle simply and confidently goes about his business of explaining the way things are.

By his lights, the efficacy of *logos* as rational, non-poetic discourse is secured simply by the fact of ordinary conversation.

## V Conclusion

It is possible that Aristotle’s confidence is ill deserved. Despite his best effort to avoid doing so, perhaps his argument against his version of the “surd,” namely his opponent in *Metaphysics* Γ 3-4, does beg the question.

Perhaps the very conception of significant discourse (*logos*) he insists upon is already laden with prejudicial assumptions.

Is it true that “not to signify one thing is to signify nothing,” and that the person refusing to participate in the conversation (whose rules Aristotle himself stipulates in advance) is no more than a “plant?”



Or might some sort of indeterminate signification yet be communicative? Might, for example, Aristophanes' story in which human beings, driven by sexual desire, strive for a wholeness that is neither sexual nor whole, do a better job of communicating the fractured reality of erotic life than a logically consistent account of sexuality? Might the images he conjures be more expressive of the truth of the human condition than any theoretical treatise?

The thesis of this paper is that Plato considered this to be possible. For Plato was much like the Socrates he depicts in the prologue of the *Phaedo*: haunted by dreams that told him his life had been predicated upon a fundamental misunderstanding.

Perhaps real "music" was not the philosophical *logos* he loved, but the poetic *muthos* he denigrated during his waking hours. His inclusion of a crew of surds – Aristophanes, Callicles, Cleitophon, Philebus, Critias, Protagoras – was his way of acknowledging, even brooding upon, his own fallibility; that is, the limits of rational discourse.

Aristotle suffers no such worries. It is arguable that he should. After all, a philosopher is required to examine his most fundamental beliefs, including the conviction that philosophy itself is the best of all possible human lives. Doing so, however, requires the philosopher to entertain the impossible; namely, that poetic rather than philosophical *logos* is the appropriate means to express the truth.