
PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

Spheres and civilization: Plato's Aristophanes and Sigmund Freud's politics of the psyche

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* draws heavily from the human origins myth of Plato's Aristophanes to expound his own political theory. More specifically, the politically relevant psychical conflicts that lie at the center of *Civilization and Its Discontents*—the desire to return to an earlier state of psychic existence, the erotic drive, and the death drive—find their original articulation and political application from Plato's Aristophanes as presented in the dialogue, *Symposium*. The exploration of connections between Freud's work and Plato's (1) shows how attuned ancient sources are to modern concerns; (2) increases our understanding of Freud's theories by providing a more substantial context for considering his work; and (3) offers the possibility of alternative answers to modern questions.

KEYWORDS: Plato; Freud; Aristophanes; myth; eros; politics; psyche

In 'Joseph de Maistre's Civilization and Its Discontents', Graeme Garrard takes exception to Paul Roazen's claim that Sigmund Freud is the first political thinker to recognize the importance of the conflict between the psychic development of the individual and the development of civilization (Garrard, 1996). Garrard argues that Freud was not the first proponent of such a theory and explains the striking similarity of the opinions of Joseph de Maistre to those of Freud. Garrard's contribution is quite excellent, but the first proponent of this theory of psychical conflict belongs to Plato's Aristophanes in the dialogue, *Symposium*. The present essay shows that Plato's Aristophanes is the originator of the theory in question and that Freud draws directly from it in *Civilization and Its Discontents* to work out his own political thought.

Not only does Freud rely on Plato's Aristophanes in *Civilization* more than is typically supposed, but Freud also shows himself to be a qualified Socratic ally in his politics of the psyche. More specifically, the politically relevant psychical conflicts that lay at the center of *Civilization and Its Discontents*: the desire to return to an earlier psychic state, the erotic drive, and the death drive, find their original articulation and political application in Plato's Aristophanes. Despite the fact that Freud continually cites the speech of Aristophanes in his work, Freud's own belief that psychological relief is found by bringing to conscious understanding that which was previously unconscious finds deep affinity with the Socratic quest for self-knowledge. Freud, however, neglects to appeal to Socrates' speech since Socratic self-knowledge in *Symposium* relies on pursuit of a transcendent principle—the Beautiful, or the Good—the existence of which Freud denies. Thus, a consideration of Freud alongside Plato both properly contextualizes Freud's own theory while offering alternative resolutions to the existing tensions Freud recognizes between individual and society.

Freud's treatment of *Symposium* has not gone unnoticed in contemporary scholarship. However, the scholarship does not recognize the full extent to which Freud relies on Plato's Aristophanes, especially when it comes to the relationship between the psyche and society as presented in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Malcolm Bowie argues that Freud's use of *Symposium* in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is purely instrumental: 'It is called upon to initiate, and confer respectability upon, a characteristic Freudian departure into theoretical reverie' (Bowie, 1987, p. 80). Tamise Van Pelt is interested in how both Freud and Lacan impose binaries onto Aristophanes' myth such that their readings impede Freud's revolutionary 'de-centering of the subject' (Van Pelt, 2000, p. 1). Stella Sandford offers the most pertinent and the most interesting treatment of the relationship between *Symposium* and Freud (Sanford, 2010). Among other textual connections, Sandford notices Freud's oblique reference to Plato's Aristophanes in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Sandford, 2010, pp. 56–59). However, Sandford's concern is not with the political significance of Freud's appropriation of *Symposium*. She is concerned rather with the degree to which Freud imposes a 'modern natural-biological concept of sex' onto a more nuanced Platonic view (Sandford,

2010, p. 5). Sandford's research is not irrelevant to the present study, but it is not centered on the political dimension of Freud's work that the present piece seeks to address.

Even contemporary scholarship that focuses on Freud's political significance does not address the importance of Plato's Aristophanes for Freud's political views. Roazen's book *Freud: Political and Social Thought* mentions Plato a few times, but never explains the importance of Plato's *Symposium* to Freud's thinking (Roazen, 1968). In a more recent treatment, Roazen identifies the central psychological conflicts in *Civilization* and shows how they are responses to Wilhelm Reich, but he again fails to mention *Symposium* (Roazen, 2003). Mladen Dolar even uses the Platonic term, 'erōs', to describe the Freudian conflicts presented in *Civilization*, but his work does not mention Aristophanes (Dolar, 2009). This essay seeks to fulfill this lacuna in the literature by (1) introducing Plato's Aristophanes by means of a brief exposition of his speech in *Symposium*; (2) detailing Freud's use of Plato's Aristophanes in his work; and (3) showing how *Civilization and Its Discontents* both follows the movement of Aristophanes' speech and comes to a quasi-Socratic conclusion with regards to the politics of the psyche.

PLATO'S SYMPOSIUM AND ARISTOPHANES' SPEECH

We can date the symposium that is recounted in Plato's dialogue to 416 BCE. Agathon, a tragedian, is celebrating the victory of one of his plays at the Lenaia, an Athenian festival featuring dramatic competition. Several of the Athenian elite attend Agathon's party, including Aristophanes, the great comic poet, and Socrates. The attendees agree to make speeches in honor of the god, Erōs.

In all, the dialogue presents us with seven speeches in praise of love. These speeches run the gamut of attempting to describe, define, control, re-direct, and praise erōs. Perhaps the most famous speech of the seven, at least as famous as the speech of Socrates, is the one given by the comic poet, Aristophanes. Aristophanes, who speaks fourth, departs from the previous encomiasts by arguing that in order to understand erōs, it is necessary to first understand human nature. His speech then gives a myth of human origins that serves as the starting point for his exposition of erōs.

Aristophanes claims that if people truly understood the power of the god, Erōs, they would build their greatest altars to him and offer him their best sacrifices (Plato, ca. 385–370 B.C.E./1991, 189c; please note that all further references from this source cite the Stephanus number). Erōs is a physician whose ability to cure is the greatest happiness of human beings (189c–d). This claim is extraordinarily important for understanding Aristophanes' thinking, but in order to name erōs a 'cure', he must first explain what it is in human beings that requires such a cure. The language of 'cure' already opens possibilities for Freud's appropriation as we will soon see!

Aristophanes states that human nature was not always the way it is now (189d). First, there were three kinds of human beings, not just male and female, but also a combination of the two, the androgynous (189d–e). Aristophanes goes on to describe what humans were like in their original state: the shape of each human being was completely round, with back and sides in a circle, each had four arms and four legs, and two faces on a rounded neck. Each had two sets of sexual organs (190a). Aristophanes continues:

It also traveled upright just as now, in whatever direction it wished; and whenever they took off in a swift run, they brought their legs around straight and somersaulted as tumblers do, and then, with eight limbs to support them, they rolled in a swift circle. (190a)

These aboriginal humans, Aristophanes explains, were terrible in strength and might and 'they had high thoughts and conspired against the gods' (190b). Aristophanes recounts that this attempt of the humans on heaven both failed and left the gods at a bit of a loss about what to do. On the one hand, if the gods were to wipe out the entire human race, then they would no longer have the devotion and sacrifices of humankind. On the other hand, they could not just let the deed go unpunished.

Luckily, for the gods, Zeus had a brilliant idea. Zeus surmises that if he were to cut down the strength of human beings by splitting them in two with his thunderbolts so that they have to walk on two legs instead of four, they would cease their rebellious behavior while continuing to exist (190c–d). Zeus warns that should the humans misbehave again, he will split them in half again so that they have to hop around on one leg (190d). This latter detail constitutes one of the few truly comic aspects of Aristophanes' ultimately tragic speech.

Zeus does as he says and uses his thunderbolts to cut the original humans into two. Additionally, he has Apollo turn their heads towards the wounds inflicted by the thunderbolts, sew them up, and smooth them over. However, Apollo leaves some of the marks behind. That way, every time human beings look at their stomachs and bellybuttons—where Apollo sewed up the wounds—they are reminded of their rebellion against the gods and subsequent punishment: 'But he [Apollo] left a few wrinkles around the belly and the navel, as a reminder of the ancient suffering' (191a). On first glance, it appears that Zeus has indeed managed to put humans in their place while also preserving the sacrifices that they offer to the gods. However, there is a problem with Zeus's plan. The natural form of human beings had been cut in two and each of the halves longed for the half that was now separate. So, these incomplete humans go around looking for their other half and then throw their arms around the other and attempt to join themselves back together into their original state. Aristophanes says that they started to die from hunger and laziness because all their time was taken up trying to get back to their original state (191a–b).

So, Zeus has to devise another plan. The new plan is to move the genitals of these fractured humans around to their new front-sides. That way, the attempt of the humans to weave together results in intercourse. While intercourse does not constitute a return to original

nature, it is a closer approximation than their current efforts to reunite (191c–d). For heterosexual couples, this arrangement allows them to beget and propagate the race. For same-sex couples, there is sexual release. Aristophanes relates, 'So Eros for each other is inborn in people from as long ago as that, and he unites their ancient nature, undertaking to make one from two, and to heal human nature' (191c–d). *Erōs* cures the wound of human nature because it reunites us, approximately, to our original nature. There is still more to Aristophanes' teaching on *erōs*.

'Each of us then', Aristophanes says, 'is a token of a human being, sliced like a flatfish, two from one; each then ever seeks his matching token' (191d). When a lover meets his or her particular half, 'they are then marvelously struck by friendship and kinship and Eros, and scarcely willing to be separated from each other even for a little time' (192b–c). Aristophanes gives us one of the most compelling definitions of love in all of literature: 'Eros then is a name for the desire and pursuit of wholeness' (192e–193a).

Finally, Aristophanes reminds his listeners that it is due to an injustice that humans have been split into two (193a). He gives further admonition, 'So there is fear that if we should not be well ordered towards the gods, we shall be split in two again...' (193a). Additionally, 'This is why all men should urge each other in all things to worship the gods, so we may escape this and meet with that, because Eros is our guide and general' (193a7–b2). It is by befriending the gods, rather than opposing them, that we are able to find our other half and have the opportunity to find some of the happiness that was our original nature (193b).

Here, Aristophanes has introduced a political dimension to his *encomium*. The hermeneutic of *erōs* is not complete in Aristophanes' speech without a statement of how humans should act in society, especially with reference to the gods. Aristophanes calls *erōs* 'leader' (*hegemōn*) and 'general' (*stratēgos*), signaling their importance for guiding both individuals and society. Theological claims about human behavior with respect to the gods can never be separated from political concerns in a Platonic dialogue. Socrates was put to death because of the political effects of his alleged teaching of youths to disbelieve in the gods of the city. The primary message of Aristophanes' speech seen in this context is: obey the gods and find your happiness in human relationships which can approximate original nature. The message is reinforced by threat of future punishment.

Plato's Aristophanes offers us a principle for political organization centered around fear of the gods and fear of being severed yet again. We can surmise that Aristophanes believes both that a healthy piety and respect for traditional arrangements is politically necessary. If we were to look at the historical Aristophanes, we would find that his criticisms of Socrates, found in his own *Clouds* and recounted by Plato in *Apology*, cohere remarkably with Plato's presentation of Aristophanes in *Symposium*. In *Clouds*, Aristophanes accuses Socrates of corrupting the youth and undermining the gods of the city. This is not insignificant because it

suggests that the historical Aristophanes sees a tension between the practice of philosophy and the maintenance of the *polis*.

Given the fraught relationship between the historical Aristophanes and Socrates, it is only reasonable to juxtapose in *Symposium* Aristophanes' myth with Socrates' speech in favor of the practice of philosophy to show the difference in approach between these two figures. While a comparison of the speeches of Aristophanes and Socrates would constitute material for an entirely new article, it is important to show here that there is something about Socrates' philosophical pedagogy that Aristophanes thinks is a threat to political stability. If Plato's *Symposium* is in any way a response to the charges of Aristophanes against Socrates—and this seems exceedingly likely given the appearance of Alcibiades, one of the 'corrupted youth' at the end of the dialogue—then the dialogue should be seen at least in part as a defense of Socratic dialectic.

We should not conclude, however, that although Plato's Aristophanes takes a decided political position that he does not recognize the psychological tensions at play. Aristophanes does not call explicit attention to the tensions, but they are there for the careful reader to discover.

Aristophanes proposes that *erōs* is the cure for the wound of human nature. In his view, human woundedness is due to a mode of existence that is different from that of our original nature. This new mode of existence is due to a just punishment inflicted on us by the gods. *Erōs* is curative because it moves us in such a way as to give us a close approximation of our original nature, in which state we are happy and content. The problem with Aristophanes' interpretation of his own myth is that it cannot account for the original humans' assault on the heavens. Aristophanes tells us of the original humans, 'they had high thoughts and conspired against the gods' (190b). However, if they were happy and contented in their original nature, what moved them to have such 'high thoughts?' Of what would such thoughts consist for a being who is already happy?

It would seem that what Aristophanes describes as wholeness is not a wholeness at all, but just a state without *erōs*. *Erōs* may aid human beings in bringing them back to their original nature, but it would seem—on Aristophanes' own account!—that there is another drive at work within those original humans who seek to displace the gods: an aggressive or violent drive. The sexual satisfaction that *erōs* offers human beings approximates original nature and so offers some succor for human beings, but it cannot fully account for the violent drive that moves the original humans to rebel against the gods. Aristophanes' myth gives a hermeneutic for understanding *erōs*, but rather than using the same myth—or another myth—to comprehend the violent desire of original humans, Aristophanes uses it as a warning and mode of imparting fear on his hearers.

'Of what would such thoughts consist for a being who is already happy?' It appears that Aristophanes believes that this question is one that should not be asked—at least publicly—for the sake of the political order. Aristophanes calls to our attention a tension between

human desires (both erotic and violent) and politics and seems to abandon the tension in favor of political order. Not only does Aristophanes abandon consideration of this tension, but his myth, through its threat of punishment, serves as a deterrent to renewed critical inquiry. Jonathan Lear writes, 'This absorption in the purely human realm serves as a distraction from any tendency to strive for the transcendent. "'Eros' is the name for our pursuit of wholeness, for our desire to be complete"' (129e)' (Lear, 1998/1999, p. 152). We can conclude that central to Aristophanes' account is the conflict between the development of the individual and that of society—the exact conflict central to the account in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Whereas Aristophanes indicates that the effects of human drives need to be moderated, Freud is not so sure.

SIGMUND FREUD AS READER OF PLATO'S SYMPOSIUM

Aristophanes' methodology, his understanding of the internal forces of human nature, and his conclusions regarding the tensions between human desire and political society all anticipate Sigmund Freud's political reflections. Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, fleshes out Aristophanes' suggestions and, I argue, expounds a political philosophy that takes to heart the implications of Aristophanes' myth. I am not arguing that Freud's is a model of what a fully developed Aristophanean political philosophy looks like—I imagine there are numerous possibilities, and, as I argue, while Freud draws mainly from Aristophanes, he ultimately shows himself to be a kind of Socratic ally. Here, I am mainly interested to show that Freud presents us with a useful interpretation and fleshing out of the principles in Aristophanes' speech.

Before comparing Aristophanes' thought to that of Freud, I first want to show clearly that Freud had internalized *Symposium* as an interlocutor. A look at Strachey's index (Freud, 1954) shows that Freud cites Plato 14 times in his corpus. The full list of citations is in the *Standard Edition (SE)* IV: 67; V: 620; VII: 134, 136 n; VIII: 79 n. 1; X: 240 n. 2; XVIII: 57–8, 58 n. 1, 91; XIX, 218; XX: 24; XXI: 210; XXII: 209, and XXIII: 149 n. 1. Most of these citations refer to *Symposium*. Of these, Aristophanes' is the speech most cited from the dialogue. (Note that all further citations from this source are in this article referred to as *SE*.)

The most important of these citations are from 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905), 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego' (1921), 'The Resistances to Psycho-Analysis' (1924/1925), and 'Why War?' (1932/1933) (as cited in Freud, 1954). Freud's use of *Symposium* in these works spanning 28 years show his constant return to the dialogue. In the preface to the fourth edition of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud writes, 'Anyone who looks down with contempt upon psycho-analysis from a superior vantage-point should remember how closely the enlarged sexuality of psycho-analysis coincides with the Eros of the divine Plato' (*SE* VII, p. 134). He then states in the actual work, 'The popular view of the sexual instinct is beautifully reflected in the poetic

fable which tells how the original human beings were cut up into two halves—man and woman—and how these are always striving again to unite in love' (SE VII, p. 136). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud explains that human sexuality traces 'the origin of an instinct to a need to restore an earlier state of things' (SE XVIII, p. 57). He goes on to reference Aristophanes explicitly, 'What I have in mind is, of course, the theory which Plato puts into the mouth of Aristophanes in this *Symposium*, and which deals not only with the *origin* of the sexual instinct but also with the most important of its variations in relation to its object.' Freud goes on to cite the speech, particularly how Zeus severed the original humans. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud states, 'In its origin, function, and relation to sexual love, the 'Eros' of the philosopher Plato coincides exactly with the love-force, the libido of psycho-analysis...' (SE XVIII, p. 91). In 'The Resistances to Psycho-Analysis', Freud decries equating 'sexuality' with 'genital pleasure' and writes, 'it had far more resemblance to the all-inclusive and all-preserving Eros of Plato's *Symposium*' (SE XIX, p. 218). Finally, in his letter in response to Albert Einstein, called 'Why War?', Freud writes,

According to our hypothesis human instincts are of only two kinds: those which seek to preserve and unite—which we call 'erotic', exactly in the sense in which Plato uses the word 'Eros' in his *Symposium*, or 'sexual', with a deliberate extension of the popular conception of 'sexuality'—and those which seek to destroy and kill which we group together as the aggressive or destructive instinct. (SE XXII, p. 209)

Freud never directly cites *Symposium* in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, but the influence of Aristophanes is clear. In the fourth part of *Civilization*, Freud discusses how society restrains erotic desire through law which defines what constitutes an acceptable sexual relationship. To defend his view that monogamous, heterosexual relationships are not normative by nature, but only by custom, Freud writes in a footnote, 'Man is an animal organism with (like others) an unmistakably bisexual disposition. The individual corresponds to a fusion of two symmetrical halves, of which, according to some investigators, one is purely male and the other female' (SE XXI, p. 105 n. 3). Despite a misinterpretation of Aristophanes' original humans—some were androgynous—it is clear that 'some investigators' must be Aristophanes. Later in part V, while discussing the role of *erōs* in civilization, Freud writes, 'In no other case does Eros so clearly betray the core of his being, his purpose of making one out of more than one; but when he has achieved this in the proverbial way through the love of two human beings, he refuses to go further' (SE XXI, p. 108). This might as well have been directly lifted from Aristophanes' speech. That Freud read and internalized Aristophanes is clear. However, listing Freud's relevant citations—including indirect references—to *Symposium* does not tell the complete tale of the dialogues' profound influence. It is only after we flesh out Freud's political thought in *Civilization* that we can fully understand the deep connections.

FREUD'S POLITICAL THOUGHT AS THINKING THROUGH *SYMPOSIUM*

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud follows the general trajectory of Plato's Aristophanes. He begins by stating that humans have a state of original nature to which they seek return, posits the existence both of *erōs* and a death instinct that together create a fundamental tension in civilized society, and explains that the decisive step towards civilization is curbing individual instinct for the sake of community. Guilt is the price for living in civilized society.

In *Civilization* sections I and II, Freud attempts to explain the source of religious feeling. He surmises that the root of religious sentiment is not in an 'oceanic feeling' of original wholeness *pace* his friend, Romain Rolland, but rather in a return to the state of the undifferentiated ego. A child at the mother's breast does not differentiate between its ego and other external objects. Rather, the growing awareness of these distinctions is the process of human development. For Freud, distinguishing between the ego and the object is 'the first step towards the introduction of the reality principle which is to dominate future development' (*SE XXI*, p. 67). The past life of the mind can never be completely forgotten and while all may not share the religious feeling (Freud claims he does not), all humans have the experience of helplessness and desire for the protection of the father.

Freud is very clear that the best approximation of our pre-differentiated state is the experience of being in love. In section I, Freud states that, 'At the height of being in love the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away. Against all evidence of his senses, a man who is in love declares that 'I' and 'you' are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact' (*SE XXI*, p. 66). In section II, after listing various causes of human suffering and various means that offer succor, Freud writes about the best succor of all, 'And perhaps it does in fact come nearer to this goal than any other method. I am, of course, speaking of the way of life which makes love the centre of everything, which looks to all satisfaction in loving and being loved' (*SE XXI*, p. 82). Freud begins his inquiry in the same manner as Aristophanes. Both posit an original nature for human beings and then argue that the best process by which to face our desire for protection and happiness—our original state—is to fall in love. In fact, Lear notes that Aristophanes' grounding of the erotic in human affairs is simply that which Freud called 'transference': 'For transference just is human love life as it manifests itself in the social realm' (Lear, 1998/1999, p. 152).

After arguing that nothing does more to collapse the boundaries between ego and object than loving another, Freud states,

The science of aesthetics investigates the conditions under which things are felt as beautiful, but it has been unable to give any explanation of the nature and origin of beauty, and, as usually happens, lack of success is concealed beneath a flood of resounding and empty words.... All that seems certain is its derivation from the field of sexual feeling. The love of beauty seems a perfect example of an impulse inhibited by its aim. 'Beauty' and 'attraction' are originally attributes of the sexual object. (*SE XXI*, p. 82–83)

This is a significant passage. Freud sees the concept of beauty originating in a sexual object. He does not seem to think that beauty can lead to any kind of real transcendent experience, and he certainly does not suggest that there is a form of Beauty to which one can ascend—both claims that Socrates makes in his own *Symposium* speech. Rather, Freud seems to be much more in line with Plato's Aristophanes in thinking that *erōs* comes to rest in human relationships. To cite Lear again, the aim of Freudian psychoanalysis 'is not to leave the human realm behind but to get deeper into it... Whatever 'higher' or 'deeper' meanings there may be, they do not transcend human life, but lie immanent in it' (Lear, 1998/1999, p. 166). The significance of this position becomes clear as we consider further Freud's work.

Freud goes on to argue that *erōs* is not the only drive at work in human beings. In sections IV and V, Freud shows how *erōs* is used to eventually serve the ends of human civilization, but also points out that there exists an aggressive drive in human beings that works against the unifying nature of *erōs* (*SE XXI*, p. 112–114). In section VI of *Civilization*, Freud names this natural aggression as a 'death instinct' and thus puts his finger on the very central conflict that Plato's Aristophanes articulates in his myth but does not adequately address. Namely, whereas Aristophanes does not ask probing questions about why humans in a state of original wholeness rebel against the gods, Freud posits that there exists in humans both a death instinct as well as *erōs* which cannot be easily quelled.

We have to pause here and appreciate how Freud has thought out Aristophanes' original conundrum. As we saw earlier, Aristophanes sees different sets of desires in human beings. On the one hand, *erōs* manifests itself in the desire to be with our other half, both physically and spiritually. On the other hand, Aristophanes sees a violent desire in original humanity to storm the heavens and overthrow the gods—a desire that he thinks is clearly destructive for society. However, Aristophanes does not spend the same amount of time discussing the desire to overthrow the gods as he does discussing *erōs*. It seems to be Aristophanes' political strategy not to call attention to this violent desire and instead emphasize union with one's other half as the best approximation of original nature. This makes sense. Politically, it is more efficacious to emphasize the desire that can find some legitimate succor in human relationships, but better to use a myth that implores obedience than probes the depths of the violent desires. However, it is also clear that Aristophanes takes issue with the pursuit of truth that Socrates undertakes and in which pursuit Socrates encourages the young—perhaps because Plato's Aristophanes thinks that this will lead to the kind of inquiry that he seeks to avoid and that may lead to political instability.

I have no direct evidence that Freud explicitly derived his concept of the death drive from the conflict in Aristophanes' speech. I have shown that Freud had read and cited Aristophanes' speech before he first spoke about the death instinct in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (indeed, one of the works where he cites Aristophanes). It is fair to say that Freud, either consciously or unconsciously, appropriates the unresolved tension in Aristophanes' myth and attempts to deal with it by positing another drive in addition to *erōs*, the aggressive

drive. At the same time, Freud hedges his bets a bit as he is very much aware that the death instinct is closely related to *erōs* and in some cases even subsumed under it (e.g., *SE XXI*, pp. 117, 119). It would be a mistake therefore to draw too strong a divide between these two forces. Nevertheless, Freud ultimately concludes that while 'civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind', the aggressive instinct works against *erōs*. Freud says, 'And now, I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species' (*SE XXI*, p. 122).

For Freud, the question of whether civilization is a good thing for human beings is one that is not settled. Freud states quite early in the course of his inquiry that it is a mistake to presume upon the goodness of civilization (*SE XXI*, p. 86–87). One of the reasons Freud takes such a stance is because of the repression against individual drives that is the necessary work of civilization. Freud declares regarding civilization, 'The essence of it lies in the fact that the members of the community restrict themselves in their possibilities of satisfaction, whereas the individual knew no such restrictions' (*SE XXI*, p. 95). Civilization, he argues, is not for the perfection of humans, but quite possibly the opposite. Freud eventually goes so far as to say:

The tension between the harsh super-ego and the ego that is subjected to it, is called by us the sense of guilt; it expresses itself as a need for punishment. Civilization, therefore, obtains mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city. (*SE XXI*, p. 123–124)

Guilt is the price human beings must pay for living in civilized society. The individual must be restricted in important ways in order for society to function.

This closely aligns with the lesson of Aristophanes' myth. Aristophanes praises *erōs* by stating how he brings us as close to our original nature as far as possible, but his speech does not finish on this high note. The *encomium* does not end with the beautiful definition of *erōs* as our universal longing for completion. Rather, we are left with an admonition and threat of future violence. If we do not restrain ourselves, we will be punished again by Zeus. Aristophanes' myth makes our very bodies a token of shame. When we look down at our bellies, we are reminded of our disobedience and subsequent punishment by the gods. The reminder of guilt prevents us from making the same mistake twice.

So far, we are able to see how Freud's work on political theory closely follows the movement of Aristophanes' speech in *Symposium*. Both begin with a statement about human origins, both point out a fundamental tension that *erōs* and a violent instinct bring to societal existence, and both conclude that guilt is the price of living in civilized society. We also see how closely related Freud's two primordial human instincts are to the fundamental erotic

tension in Aristophanes' speech. However, there is also a significant difference in the political thinking of these two figures.

Plato's Aristophanes sees a problematic tension with *erōs*, crafts a myth such that a careful reader will see the tension, but ultimately concludes his speech by not calling explicit attention to the tension and proposing a solution to that tension which he knows is not a fully adequate 'cure'. Freud, on the other hand, explicitly calls attention to this all-important tension and even intensifies it by positing a separate death instinct in opposition to the life instinct of *erōs*. The question remains, 'What is the upshot of explicitly naming the conflict inherent in human nature rather than alluding to it in myth?'

Freud has no issues in explicitly naming the conflict between the aggressive and erotic desires and explaining civilization's repression of them precisely because he is comfortable with leaving the question of civilization's goodness ambiguous. Aristophanes, on the other hand, is much more circumspect because he has decided the question in favor of civilization. Aristophanes is concerned with the preservation of the *polis*. The ultimate purpose of his myth is to promote stability and order through fear and shame. It is not Socrates' philosophical dialectic that promotes the *polis*, but rather Aristophanes' civic myth. Indeed, it is clear that the historical Aristophanes thought that the works were politically efficacious. We need only to look to the *parabasis* of *Clouds* where the leading cloud, speaking for Aristophanes, explains how he was responsible for the downfall of the tyrant, Cleon, and how he, more than any of the other gods aids the *polis* (Aristophanes, ca. 423 BCE/1998, pp. 535–579). Aristophanes wants to praise *erōs* and show its capacity for healing, but his speech leaves ambiguous the role of a violent desire in the original humans' downfall. He allows his myth to instill fear and to admonish the listener to act well lest he anger the gods.

I can now show how Freud is a qualified Socratic ally. Since Freud is not convinced that civilization is an unrestricted good for the individual human, he allows for humans to find modes of expression in the face of civilization's repression of instinct. Freud writes,

Other instincts are induced to displace the conditions for their satisfaction, to lead them into other paths.... Sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychological activities, scientific, artistic, or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life. If one were to yield to a first impression, one would say that sublimation is a vicissitude which has been forced upon the instincts entirely by civilization. (*SE XXI*, p. 97)

For Freud, the repression of human instincts by civilization leads to higher psychological activities. Although he does not use the language of 'repression' or 'sublimation', the speaker to immediately follow Aristophanes in *Symposium*, Agathon, speaks of the higher activities for which *erōs* is responsible. Agathon claims, 'Eros is a poet who is, in sum, good in respect to all creation over which the Muses preside' (196e). Agathon goes on to point out that each of the gods who are responsible for a particular *technē*, are inspired by *erōs*. Apollo invents

archery, medicine, and divination; the Muses, music; Hephaestus, smithing; and Athena, weaving. Each of these gods and goddesses produces these things 'under the guidance of eros and desire' (197a). Even Zeus, 'in guiding of gods and men', is inspired by *erōs* to practice his craft (197b). Agathon has a very strong sense of the power of erotic love to inspire human beings (and even gods!) to higher 'psychical activities'. Whereas Aristophanes emphasizes human longing in his speech and the necessity of *erōs* to lead human beings towards a state resembling original nature, Agathon emphasizes human fullness and ability in all the arts and sciences. For Agathon, *erōs* is responsible for this fullness and therefore deserves praise and honor. For Socrates, *erōs* finds an outlet in philosophy which leads to a vision of the Good.

Socrates, who in his own speech describes an orderly ascent of *erōs* to the Good, or Beautiful, itself, attempts to reconcile these two proclivities of Aristophanes and Agathon. We see this first in Socrates' own myth that describes *erōs* as the offspring of poverty and resource (203b–204c). *Erōs* is a mix between human longing and human fullness. Among other things, this description of *erōs* is a thinly veiled attempt by Plato to personify Socrates *qua* man and *qua* philosopher as *erōs*. The man is roughshod but gives beautiful speeches. The philosopher is full of love for the wisdom that they can never fully possess.

Against this backdrop, we can better understand the 'ladder of love' portion of Socrates' speech (208e–210e). The passage begins with the recognition that some are pregnant in respect to their bodies and others in respect to their souls. When one is pregnant in soul and reaches the age when he might beget, he seeks the beautiful in whom to beget (209a8–b2). More specifically, the pregnant man 'is straightaway resourceful in speaking about virtue and what sort of thing the good man must be concerned with and his pursuits; and he undertakes to educate him' (209b–c). The ascent through love of bodies, then souls, then purposive practices and laws, then wisdom, then the Beautiful itself takes place against the backdrop of education. That is to say, erotic ascent takes place against the backdrop of Socratic dialectic. Whereas Aristophanes' mythical education instills fear, Socrates' dialectic education constitutes an ascent to the divine—just like the aboriginal humans who sought to displace the gods!

However, Socrates does not haphazardly promote a form of inquiry that is politically dangerous, at least according to Plato. *En route* to the vision of the Good, the potential philosopher learns to appreciate 'purposive practices and laws' on the one hand, and 'wisdom' on the other (209e–210e). Socrates recognizes, *pace* Aristophanes, the importance of both societal order and the individual pursuit of the Good. How else are we to understand this figure who features prominently both in *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, dialogues that treat, respectively, moral formation and erotic ascent? In Freudian language, the balance is more ambivalent. Does Socrates teach one to simultaneously repress and sublimate?

A Freudian interpretation of the Socratic balance between Aristophanes and Agathon is another study altogether. What is clear now is that Freud draws inspiration from the speech

of Aristophanes and the tension in Aristophanes' myth is at the center of Freud's own political thinking. However, it is also clear that Freud is a Socratic ally in the sense that he recognizes the importance of the higher psychical activities and the attempt at coming to a greater self-knowledge. Surely, Freud would not join Aristophanes in his skepticism about Socrates and the potential upending of the traditional order through the practice of philosophy. In fact, Freud's entire therapeutic method seeks to bring to light that which remains repressed. Aristophanes deflects and represses; Socrates and Freud philosophize or psychologize precisely to come to greater knowledge.

At the same time, Freud is only a Socratic ally in a qualified manner. This qualification is twofold. First, Freud is much more circumspect about the goodness of civilization than Socrates. While it is certainly true that Socrates throughout Plato's dialogues calls into question many of the traditional beliefs of ancient Athens, he certainly spends a lot of time talking about the ideal form of government. As briefly explained above, Socrates at least recognizes a tension between the pursuit of philosophy and the political good, but he thinks the tension itself is necessary— something one need navigate. This is not necessarily the case for Freud.

Second, for Socrates, *erōs* clearly has a transcendent object: the Good, or the Beautiful. As I showed earlier, Freud does not put any stock in such a transcendent object. Therefore, we need admit an important difference between the two thinkers on this point. When Allen surmises that Freud conflates the views of Socrates and Plato's Aristophanes because Freud cites Aristophanes' speech exclusively, I wonder if Freud simply understands the difference between these two speakers but does not wish to entangle himself with a Socratic erotic ascent that ends in admiration of a transcendent form (Plato, ca. 385–370 B.C.E./1991, pp. 31–32). This seems to me a much more likely explanation.

It is clear from our study that Aristophanes plays a very active role in Sigmund Freud's political thought. *Civilization and Its Discontents* follows the movement of Aristophanes' speech in *Symposium*, takes up the central conflict of that speech as the central conflict of individuals living in civilization, and ultimately comes to a conclusion more in line with the thinking of Socrates than of Aristophanes. The study as a whole shows the political importance of *Symposium*, a dialogue not often considered for its significance to political theory. It also reveals the debt of Freud to Plato and shows that while Freud's theories of the unconscious break new ground in the work of political theory, Freud nonetheless takes perennial political problems as the starting point for his own work.

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