

## Leo Strauss and the quarrel between poetry and philosophy

Dolores Amat<sup>1</sup>

### Modern and classical alternatives

Leo Strauss writes under the shadow of what he calls the contemporary collapse of rationalism. This collapse leads him to consider the origin of rationalism, which according to his perspective “can be identified with the problem of Socrates, or the problem of classical political philosophy in general”<sup>2</sup>. This problem appears clearly in the difference between Aristophanes’ and Plato’s presentation of Socrates. According to Strauss, this difference is an expression of a fundamental quarrel of Western tradition, the secular quarrel between poetry and philosophy as alternative solutions to the problem of human happiness. In this sense, if Plato and Aristophanes represent the classical options, Strauss’ position can be interpreted as a modern affirmation of philosophy as the answer to the fundamental problems of our time. Hence, the author speaks out against the many voices that declare the end of philosophy and argues for the possibility of resuming the path outlined by Plato, in addressing the challenges that arise in modernity. This paper seeks to explore this return to classical philosophy to which the author invites, to consider its possibilities and implications.

### Aristophanes: the case for poetry

If, as we just said, philosophy and poetry offer different solutions to the problem of human happiness, and if this difference can be appreciated in the divergent presentations of Socrates that Plato and Aristophanes produce, we need to study both portraits in order to illuminate the case in point. This contrast is clearly outlined in the six lectures on Socrates delivered by Strauss in 1958 at the University of Chicago.

Strauss notes that Aristophanes’ comedy, the *Clouds*, is the oldest of the most important sources about Socrates. The comedy is an attack on Socrates -Strauss states at first-, where the philosopher is presented as extremely evil, foolish and ridiculous. It is an attack that becomes a model and a source of the official accusation that ended in Socrates’ death. It is a calumny that Socrates’ friends (Plato among them) will have to prove false. “And, finally, Aristophanes’ comic treatment of Socrates, a treatment characterized by the utmost levity, must appear to be shocking to the highest degree if one looks forward to Socrates’ tragic end.”<sup>3</sup>, Strauss asserts.

The *Clouds* tells the story of a rustic man, Strepsiades, who comes to Socrates’ “think-tank” in order to learn how to use words in his own benefit. He is a simple man of the common people who has married a patrician lady. He can not pay for the expensive tastes of his family, he is in debt, and he expects Socrates to teach him “how to talk himself out of his debts at lawcourts”<sup>4</sup>. Strepsiades is received at the school by a pupil of Socrates and the words and deeds of the student present his teacher as ridiculous. The pupil claims that what is done and said in the “think-tank” may not be divulged, but he reveals Strepsiades his secrets during their first conversation. According to the pupil, Socrates’ inquiries are serious and profound, but we learn from him that he investigates things like how many feet of its own a flea can jump. Besides, the flea under examination is one that has bitten Socrates and Chaerephon: the philosopher and his friends are dirty, needy. After such an introduction, Socrates appears, suspended in the air inside a basket. And as the plot unfolds, the extravagance of the teacher becomes dangerous: his teachings discredit the gods and question the legitimacy of law and family. Eventually, it is the philosopher who suffers the worst consequences of his imprudence: Strepsiades, frustrated by his inability to use Socrates’ lessons in his own benefit, and furious about the outcome of his son attending to the school of philosophy, burns down the think-tank.

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<sup>1</sup> Ph.D student at the University of Buenos Aires and the Université Paris Diderot (Paris 7). Scholarship: National Council of Scientific Research (Conicet), Argentina.

<sup>2</sup> Strauss, Leo, “The Origins of Political Science and The Problem of Socrates: Six Public Lectures”, in Interpretation. A Journal of Political Philosophy, Volume 23 Number 2, Winter 1996, pp. 193.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 140.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 152.

This harsh portrait of the philosopher can be nothing but opposed to the Socrates that is depicted in Plato's dialogues, that admirable figure that Strauss calls "the real Socrates", the master who founded rationalism and political philosophy.

Nevertheless, Strauss suggests in various ways that Aristophanes's painting is not entirely misguided. To begin with, the author notes that "there is some Platonic and Xenophontic evidence to the effect that Socrates was not always the Socrates whom these disciples have celebrated"<sup>5</sup> Besides, Strauss suggests that Socrates's story might suit the structure of a comedy better than the design of a tragedy. Even the Platonic Socrates left no example of weeping but he left an example of laughing. He left examples of joking and none of indignation. And his irony was proverbial. It is then not altogether an accident that our oldest and hence most venerable source regarding Socrates is a comedy"<sup>6</sup>, he concludes. Accordingly, Strauss proposes a careful reading of the comedian's portrait.

To begin with, the author argues that in order to fully understand the *Clouds* it is necessary to consider the poet's work in general. Aristophanean comedies are profound because they contain the serious and the solemn within the comic. However, the serious only appears in the comedies under the disguise of the ridiculous. Justice is one of the serious issues that find place in Aristophanes' comedies and one of the main problems concerning justice outlined in the plays seems to be the bond between nature and convention. Nature is presented as an overwhelming power, heterogeneous, mysterious and never fully comprehended by any law. Nevertheless, nature is never completely free from rules and conventions within the human realm. Still, these two elements appear repeatedly in tension: no *nomos* may contain entirely the exuberant nature of men. Hence, Aristophanean comedies underline the problematic bond between *nomos* and *physis*, the fragile balance on which every human venture depends.

In this sense, the failed communism of the *Assembly of Women* is particularly eloquent. The play depicts a group of women that participate in the political assembly disguised as men in order to have the government take the most democratic decisions. Soon the women take over the assembly and transform the city into a household: they decide to establish complete communism, communism regarding not only property but also bodies. In this spirit, to avoid the ugly, the old and the unwanted to go without the enjoyment of carnal pleasures, severe rules regarding sexuality are enacted: every man and every woman can enjoy the body they want the most, but only after fulfilling their duties with the most unattractive people of the city. "The women have decreed, that if a young man desires a young girl, he can only possess her after having satisfied an old woman; and if he refuses and goes to seek the maiden, the old women are authorized to seize him by his privates and so drag him in."<sup>7</sup>

The noble end of the law is to assure everybody's happiness, but it results however in considerable problems. The quarrels that come about when a beautiful boy seeks an attractive young woman are specially amusing. The girl tries to respond to her beloved, but the union is hindered by several elderly women that claim their rights. Finally, the required young boy is dragged away by an ugly woman that won't leave him until he fulfils his duty as a citizen. Problems with common property also arise: some people are willing to satisfy their needs with the goods of others but refuse to give their wealth to the rest.

Even though complete communism seems desirable at first, Aristophanes's play warns about the dangers of trying to tame certain human impulses. Desire and passions might be purified, but they can never be "shaped" completely.

According to Strauss, Aristophanes releases with his comedies the desire of people to get around the rules and prohibitions that they endure daily, and, at the same time, he points out with his plays certain aspects of human nature that can not be understood or lead by reason. Furthermore, the poet shows that the vast majority of people is not ruled chiefly by their minds and his portrait of Socrates reveals that even philosophers are not entirely rational. In this sense, Aristophanean

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 140.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*. pp. 142.

<sup>7</sup> Aristophanes, *The Eleven Comedies*, BiblioLife, 2008.

comedies point to the conclusion that every political order depends on a fragile balance between reason and impulses, needs and convictions, intentions and inclinations. Neglecting this reality could be dangerous both for the city and for those who disregard it.

It is precisely this reality that the Aristophanean Socrates neglects. The poet presents Socrates as a philosopher of nature who does not understand political things. He is not unjust, he is indifferent to justice. According to the poet, philosophy lacks self-knowledge and it is completely unaware of its role in the *polis*, Socrates disregards the fact that he depends on the city and he is not conscious of the “devastating effect which his indifference to practical matters” could have on society. If all men were devoted to contemplation -Strauss notes-, nobody would have the incentive for hurting anyone else. “yet, and this seems to be the beginning to Socrates's error, not all men are capable to lead a life of contemplation”<sup>8</sup>. Thus, what characterizes the master of philosophy in Aristophanes's portrait is the lack of *phronesis*, of practical wisdom or prudence. This is the reason why Socrates is so radically impolitic. Unlike poetry, philosophy cannot address and charm the multitude. “It cannot teach the just things, whereas poetry can”<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, to become just, philosophy needs to become subordinated to poetry. It is in this sense that Strauss says that “Aristophanes's comical presentation of Socrates is the most important statement of the case for poetry in that secular contest between poetry and philosophy”<sup>10</sup>.

Up to this point, through our study of the development of the lectures called “The Origins of Political Science and the problem of Socrates”, we have witnessed the ascension of Aristophanes. The poet started in Strauss' speech in the most vulgar and indecent place: he was presented as an evil creator of calumny that was partly responsible for Socrates' death. Compared to philosophy, which was responsible for the presentation of the truth about the greatest man, the poetry of Aristophanes was clearly inadequate to provide the bases for human happiness. But it seems the poet can be compared to the main character of *The Peace*, who flies to heaven in the back of a dung beetle. Based on his comedies, that are fed with scum just like Trygaios' animal is fed with excrements, Aristophanes is able to reach the sky<sup>11</sup>. From that perspective, he is able to help his country: he imitates the human comedy, he releases the desire of people to get around the rules and prohibitions, and he teaches justice. Moreover, he is able to compete with philosophers in the secular contest regarding wisdom and human happiness<sup>12</sup>.

### Plato: the praise of philosophy

As a rival to Aristophanes, Plato depicts a radically different Socrates: he is a master of self-knowledge, of practical wisdom and, therefore, of politics. Plato presents philosophy as something different from the physiology practised by the Aristophanean Socrates. Philosophy comprehends nature as well as the human soul, it is at a time the foundation and the crowning of wisdom, within which poetry finds its place or by which it becomes something good for human life. Plato indicates this way, that poetry should be subordinated to philosophy.

Platonic Socrates is then the response to Aristophanean Socrates. Plato gives several signs of having understood the comedian's warning and this understanding is at the origin of rationalism and political philosophy. From that moment on, the division between open teachings, available to everyone, and those meant only for initiates, becomes sharper. Philosophers present themselves before the city as exemplary citizens and when they write, their true teachings are only revealed to those capable of interpreting them. Although the practice of philosophy involves questioning all the gods, philosophers now understand that social life requires the validity of certain authorities to legitimate the law and to guide the inexorable and often unpredictable impulses of men.

Strauss suggests reading Plato's dialogues in this same spirit: “The Platonic dialogues do

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8 Strauss, Leo, “The Origins of Political Science and The Problem of Socrates: Six Public Lectures”, in Interpretation. A Journal of Political Philosophy, Volume 23 Number 2, Winter 1996, pp. 157.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 158.

10 *Ibid.* pp. 157.

11 See Strauss, Leo, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, Chicago – London, The University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 136-159.

12 See Strauss, Leo, *On Plato's Symposium*, Chicago – London, The University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 6.

say, and they are meant to say, different things to different men”<sup>13</sup>. The author points out in the first place that the platonic writings are works of art rather than reports. He therefore proposes paying attention to the settings of the dialogues, to the actions and to everything which is not clearly stated in the speeches. Something essential is generally subtracted from the play, and this abstraction is always eloquent regarding the most important subject in the work. Besides, Strauss states that the number and variety of the Platonic works can help understand the whole collection: there are different kinds of dialogues, and each one is characterised by the way it treats the subject, rather than by the subject itself. Among other distinctions, Strauss discriminates between dialogues in which Socrates leads the conversation and those in which he doesn't, between narrated and performed dialogues, and also between volunteer and compulsive dialogues, either sought by Socrates or not.

The *Republic*, which among other things is presented by Strauss as Plato's response to the *Clouds* and the *Assembly of Women*, “is the only dialogue narrated by Socrates which is compulsory”<sup>14</sup>. A group of young men urges Socrates to stay in the *Piraeus* and he accepts as a courtesy. There, a conversation on justice takes place. Strauss points out which is the abstraction of this dialogue: the body and, more generally, *eros*, are ostentatiously absent in the play<sup>15</sup>. Socrates and the rest of its participants remain in the *Piraeus* with the promise of a meal as well as of a torch race, but no further mention to the meal or the race is made. They are replaced by a conversation about justice. “The feeding of the body is replaced by the feeding of the soul”<sup>16</sup>. During the dialogue Socrates founds the perfect city in speech. Thus, while in the *Clouds* the philosopher is responsible for revealing the weakness of the Just Speech, here Socrates' mission is to demonstrate the strength of justice. Thrasymachus, the rhetorician, is his rival: he is of the opinion that what is fair equals what is legal, and since what is legal depends on the decisions of those who rule, justice is identical to the will of the strongest. “The manner in which Thrasymachus behaves -he forbids to say certain things, or forbids to give certain answers, and he demands a fine from Socrates for payment, for which Plato's brother vouches, just as Plato himself vouches for a payment of another kind demanded from Socrates on the day of his accusation- the manner in which Thrasymachus behaves reminds us of the behaviour of the city of Athens towards Socrates. The thesis of Thrasymachus, that the just is the legal, is the thesis of the actual *polis*, which does not permit an appeal beyond its laws”<sup>17</sup>.

Taking this as a starting point, Plato will address in his dialogue the conflict that was clearly reflected in the death sentence of his teacher. He will seek to change the ending of the story, he will call on a kind of justice superior to any particular law. Hence, the Socrates from the *Republic* distinguishes justice from mythology and tradition. What is just appears in his speech as an eternal standard, a rule no longer dependent on convention but rather on unalterable nature. Since this natural parameter appears to be rational (nature is presented as intelligible, rational), the faculty by which is possible to get to know it, is reason. “The just city is a perfectly rational society” This way, justice is presented “as the preserve of the wise”<sup>18</sup>.

But a question is raised during the discussion: how would the wise obtain the obedience of those who are not wise? There will always exist different characters and impulses. In every community there are beings drawn toward the sensual pleasures, others dedicated to the search for recognition and honour and some others devoted to the challenges of the spirit. There will always be people unwilling to follow the rules as well. Hence, the *Republic* seems to suggest that to place everybody within the limits of the law, persuasion and in certain occasions the use of force are needed. Besides, if knowledge of justice is the task of the wise, it is to be expected that those who

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13 *Ibid.* pp. 179.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 182.

15 See Strauss, Leo, “Plato”, in Strauss, Leo and Cropsey, Joseph (de), *History of Political Philosophy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981.

16 Strauss, Leo, “The Origins of Political Science and The Problem of Socrates: Six Public Lectures”, in *Interpretation. A Journal of Political Philosophy*, Volume 23 Number 2, Winter 1996, pp. 183.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 183.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 184.

are not wise will not attain a complete understanding of it. Therefore, as a complement to persuasion, noble lies will be needed as well. Thus, according to Strauss, Plato's *Republic* points out that "even the rational society, the society according to truth and nature, is not possible without a fundamental untruth"<sup>19</sup>. The heterogeneity of human nature, the existence of diverse characters and impulses, reveal the limits of reason in political affairs. In this way, Plato acknowledges the warning of Aristophanes: his *Republic* is a sample of the prudence of Socrates, who understands the limitations of politics. Accordingly, the founding of the best republic in speech is meant to establish a model, a parameter of legitimacy, but it is not supposed to outline the most desirable policy. The perfectly just city is not actually possible, but its existence in speech seems to be useful. In this sense, Strauss suggests, the task of political philosophers like Plato is dual: they present the fiction of the possibility of the just city to the multitude, while they indicate the essentially defective nature of the city to future philosopher<sup>20</sup>.

Now, apart from Aristophanes' ascension in Strauss speech, we have witnessed up to this point Plato's descent to the cave. The philosopher was at first presented like a truthful and pure reporter of the life of the greatest man, but we have learnt afterwards that he presents fictions where he conceals a part of reality. And, according to Strauss suggestions, we can state that it is partly thanks to the perspective that he acquires in the descent to the cave, that he can teach justice and thus compete with poetry in the contest regarding wisdom and human happiness.

### Subtle differences

Let us go back to the beginning: we stated that philosophy and poetry offer alternative solutions to the problem of human happiness, we also suggested that this difference could be appreciated in the divergent Socrates that Plato and Aristophanes present. It was therefore to be expected that a thorough interpretation of the diverse figures of Socrates would capture the differences between philosophy and poetry in a clear and antagonistic way. However, in going back with everything we have said up to now, we are surprised by the fact that we have found nothing but agreement between Plato and Aristophanes. In Strauss' speech philosophy and poetry are presented at first as antagonistic views but afterwards they are found to be not so dissimilar.

We found that both the philosopher and the poet write works of art in which they address the problematic nature of human life. We also discovered that they both deploy fictions with which they seek to favour justice, and we finally stated that they both recognise and put across the limits of reason in politics. Their ideas, their intentions, their goals and even their tasks seem to be similar. By the same token, Strauss asserts in his last lecture on Socrates that "the core, or the *arche*, the initiating principle of Platonic philosophy is the doctrine of the soul, and this core, or *arche*, is identical with the theme of poetry".

What is it then that which confronts poetry and philosophy? Why are them presented by Strauss as being mutually exclusive alternatives? How are their answer to the problem of human happiness different?

Strauss explicitly addresses this questions only toward the end of his lectures on Socrates. At that point Strauss asks himself if it is not evident that the way of Platonic philosophy is completely different from the way of poetry. On the one hand "the poet sets forth his vision of the soul, he does not try to prove that vision or to refute alternative visions. His organ is a vision with the mind's eye, *nous*, not reasoning, *logismos*"<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, philosophy "expresses itself in treatises"<sup>22</sup> that present methodical and impersonal reasoning. Nevertheless, after considering the *Phaedo*, the dialogue in which Socrates' death is depicted, Strauss points out that Platonic dialogues are a sort of drama, which are far from being impersonal or detached. Furthermore, the arguments in Plato's plays are rarely structured in an entirely rational way, but they are rather embedded in the human drama and are therefore as biased and defective as those put forward by the characters of poets like

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19 *Ibid.* pp. 185.

20 See Hilb, C., *Leo Strauss: el arte de leer. Una lectura de la interpretación straussiana de Maquiavelo, Hobbes, Locke y Spinoza*, Buenos Aires, FCE., 2005, p. 135.

21 Strauss, *Op. cit.*, pp. 202-203.

22 *Ibid.* pp. 203

Homer, Dante or Shakespeare.

We keep the question then: what distinguishes Platonic philosophy from poetry? It is often said that philosophy appeals to our understanding alone, while poetry deals mainly with passion. However, Strauss says that this would only be true if philosophy were a science like mathematics and not a solution to the problem of happiness. As such, Platonic philosophy is bound to affect our whole being, just like poetry. Based on a deep knowledge of the human soul, both poetry and philosophy are able to guide men and women in the search for happiness, to contribute in the purification of passion. Therefore, our question remains unanswered: in which sense are philosophy and poetry two mutually exclusive alternatives?

Strauss talks about a transformation of Socrates, a fundamental change that transformed him from a simple philosopher of nature into a complete philosopher. He describes this transformation as a “return from madness to sanity or sobriety” that allowed Socrates to become the originator of political science. And he asserts that this transformation took place when the philosopher discovered “the paradoxical fact that, in a way, the most important truth is the most obvious truth, or the truth of the surface”<sup>23</sup>. Perhaps we also need to explore this idea in order to be able to grasp the meaning of the quarrel that according to Strauss is in the origin of political philosophy and rationalism as well. To find the difference between the poet and the philosopher we thus might need to look in the surface. And what is in the surface of this quarrel? The figure of Socrates.

#### Socrates: the only difference between poetry and philosophy

According to Strauss, not only the *Republic* but also the *Symposium* are responses to the Aristophanean portrait of Socrates. The *Symposium* depicts a gathering in which various characters, including Aristophanes, agree to praise *eros*. One by one, the guest to Agathon's party offer speeches about the nature of *eros*, taking turns around the table. However, when the comedian's turn arrives something unexpected happens: he suffers a hiccup attack and is unable to speak. The body rebels against the rules that had been established and Aristophanes is forced to request Eryximachus, the physician, to take his place. Aristophanes can not control his body completely and, as in his own comedies, the poet exhibits the existing tension between *physis* and *nomos* in a laughable way. Nature exceeds reason and words, which can only reappear after the body is quieted. When Aristophanes recovers the normal state of his diaphragm, he goes back to the game. Plato has learnt from Aristophanes the weak nature of any human venture and law in the face of the requirements and demands of nature, and he shows in the *Symposium* that even the most willingly-accepted rule can be hindered by unexpected impulses.

When Aristophanes finishes his speech, Agathon follows, and after him it is Socrates who has the floor. The speeches of Aristophanes and Socrates agree in one point: *eros* is the impulse that leads to happiness, and both the body and the spirit are moved by it. As regards their differences, Strauss points out the fact that while according to Aristophanes “the direction of *eros* is horizontal”, according to Socrates “the direction of *eros* is vertical”<sup>24</sup>. In other words, while Aristophanes presents *eros* as an impulse that leads every human being to his or her own nature, Socrates establishes the possibility of an ascent from primitive forms of *eros* to more perfect forms, and he places philosophy in the highest step. To make things clear, Strauss links this idea with the response given by Plato to *The Assembly of Women*: “Plato contends that complete communism requires as its capstone or its foundation the rule of philosophy, about which Aristophanes is completely silent. This difference corresponds to a difference indicated in Plato's *Banquet*. According to Aristophanes the direction of *eros* is horizontal. According to Plato the direction of *eros* is vertical”<sup>25</sup>.

Therefore, it seems that what confronts poetry and philosophy is less their irreconcilable differences than their similarities. Poetry and Platonic philosophy both offer sensitive imitations of the problem of human happiness and they both propose possible solutions to this problem. The single point in which they differ is Socrates, or the presence or absence of the philosopher at the

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23 *Ibid.* pp. 171.

24 *Ibid.* pp. 158.

25 *Ibid.* pp. 158.

peak of humanity.

According to Strauss, “the life which is not philosophic is either obviously incapable of solving the human problem or else it does solve the human problem in a wholly inadequate or in an absurd manner. In the first case it is the theme of tragedy. In the second case it is a theme of comedy.”<sup>26</sup> Platonic philosophy, on the other hand, offers to the eyes of Strauss the only possible solution to the problem of happiness, the philosophical way of life: “to the extent to which the human problem cannot be solved by political means it can be solved only by philosophy, by and through the philosophic way of life”<sup>27</sup>. For this reason, philosophy attempts to push poetry into a ministerial function: “Poetry presents human life as human life appears if it is not seen to be directed toward philosophy. Autonomous poetry presents non-philosophic life as autonomous. Yet by articulating the cardinal problem of human life as it comes to sight within the non-philosophic life, poetry prepares for the philosophic life”. “It ennobles passion and purifies passion. But autonomous poetry does not know the end for the sake of which the purification of passion is required”<sup>28</sup>. The meaning of the differences between Aristophanes and Plato in terms of the quarrel between poetry and philosophy, now seems clear: what is at stake is the plausibility of a way of life that transcends the turmoil of human passions.

But what becomes evident in the *Symposium* is that neither the poet nor the philosopher can demonstrate their point in an entirely rational way, precisely because *eros* -this impulse which direction is assumed horizontal by Aristophanes and vertical by Socrates- is a part of *physis*<sup>29</sup>, a part of the mysterious and elusive dimension of human beings that cannot be wholly grasped by reason. Hence, Aristophanes and Socrates both find themselves in need of presenting beautiful and persuasive stories to support their arguments. As regards Plato, who does not write treaties and who is aware of the limits of reason, he does not hope to offer indubitable reasons to support the superiority of philosophy, but rather points it out in his works of art.

In the *Symposium*, Socrates is the last one to praise *eros* and his speech earns the applause of his companions. But just as in the *Republic*, his triumph is rhetoric, or poetic. Aristophanes attempts to reply, he seems to have something to say about the Socratic perspective of *eros*, but we cannot know his words, since the poet is interrupted by a new guest –by chance, a close friend of Socrates'- who arrives in a noisy manner. The impossibility to demonstrate by means of rational arguments the superiority of the philosophical *eros* –and therefore of the philosophical way of life- seems to lead Plato to protect Socrates by means of literary ruses. The needy, incontinent and flea-bitten master from the *Clouds* is shown triumphant and vigorous in the *Symposium*. In this sense, Strauss suggests that Platonic dialogues also play a ministerial role, since they are meant to praise and favour the philosophical way of life.

In his second lecture on Socrates, Strauss comments on the final part of the *Symposium*: “There is only one Platonic dialogue in which Aristophanes participates, the *Banquet*. The dialogue is presented as having taken place about seven years after the performance of the *Clouds*. The occasion was a banquet at the end of which only three men were still sober and awake, two of them being Aristophanes and Socrates. The three men were engaged in a friendly conversation ending in agreement about a subject than which none was more important to Aristophanes, the subject of comedy. The agreement was an agreement of Aristophanes to a thesis propounded by Socrates”<sup>30</sup> But no mention is made by Strauss of the circumstances in which this agreement takes place, even though in many passages he explicitly asserts that the settings of Plato's dialogues and the actions of the characters are decisive. Therefore, we must address the inevitable question: What happens at the end of the *Symposium*?

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26 *Ibid.* pp. 205.

27 *Ibid.* pp. 205.

28 *Ibid.* pp. 205.

29 See Strauss, Leo, *On Plato's Symposium*, Chicago – London, The University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 10. “The tension between spiritedness and *eros* corresponds somehow to the tension between the political and the nonpolitical.” “... the nonpolitical was called traditionally the natural”.

30 Strauss, Leo, “The Origins of Political Science and The Problem of Socrates: Six Public Lectures”, in *Interpretation. A Journal of Political Philosophy*, Volume 23 Number 2, Winter 1996, pp. 140.

It is already morning, and after long hours of celebration, Socrates, Aristophanes and Agathon –a philosopher and two poets- are the last ones standing. Wine and fatigue have led some to retire and some others to fall asleep. Socrates starts a conversation about poetry and he forces the exhausted poets to accept his point of view. Not being able to fully follow the arguments and nodding off, the poets agree with the philosopher before falling utterly sleep. In Plato's words: "Aristodemus was only half awake, and he did not hear the beginning of the discourse; the chief thing which he remembered was Socrates compelling the other two to acknowledge that the genius of comedy was the same with that of tragedy, and that the true artist in tragedy was an artist in comedy also"<sup>31</sup>. To this they were constrained to assent, being drowsy, and not quite following the argument. And first of all Aristophanes dropped off, then, when the day was already dawning, Agathon. Socrates, having laid them to sleep, rose to depart"<sup>32</sup> Once again, it is not completely by reason that Socrates imposes himself but by his own figure, which in the plot woven by his disciple, is able to keep his strength and lucidity where everyone else cannot. Thus, while the superiority of the philosopher is present in speech, it is only established in an indisputably manner in deeds.

### Conclusion

Let us trace the way we have followed up to this point. We stated that what Leo Strauss calls the contemporary collapse of rationalism leads him to consider the origins of rationalism. According to his perspective, the origins of rationalism can be identified with the problem of Socrates, which can be appreciated in the traditional quarrel between poetry and philosophy as alternative solutions to the problem of human happiness. We also said that this quarrel appears clearly in the difference between Aristophanes' and Plato's presentation of Socrates. Therefore, we decided to study both portraits, in order to illuminate the case in point and thus consider the return to classical philosophy or classical rationalism to which Strauss invites.

Based mainly in the six lectures on Socrates delivered by Strauss in 1958 at the University of Chicago, we noticed that unlike what we could have expected at first, what confronts poetry and philosophy is less their irreconcilable differences than their similarities. In Strauss' speech philosophy and poetry are presented at first as antagonistic views but afterwards they are found to be not so dissimilar. We saw Aristophanes ascend from vulgarity and Plato descend to the cave. Their works seem to meet at the highest point of the cave, where they can imitate the human drama, purify passion and teach justice.

Therefore, we turned to the obvious question: what confronts poetry and philosophy? In other words, why are them presented by Strauss as being mutually exclusive alternatives? The answer we found was also obvious: the only thing that distinguishes philosophy from poetry was that thing that was mentioned from the beginning: the figure of Socrates. The most important difference between Aristophanes and Plato is the presence or absence of the philosopher at the peak of humanity, above the human drama depicted in poetry. To put it differently, what is at stake is the possibility of surpassing the cave, of reaching the higher kind of life that neither tragedy nor comedy can describe<sup>33</sup>.

But what we have learnt through the study of the *Symposium* is that neither the poet nor the philosopher can demonstrate their point in an entirely rational way, because none of them possess a complete and conclusive knowledge of nature<sup>34</sup>. In other words, neither philosophy nor poetry can

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31 As regards the meaning of this assertion, the following words by Seth Benardete might be illuminating: "Plato completes Aristophanes presumably because comedy, though it soars higher than tragedy, is parasitic on tragedy, and philosophy altogether transcends their difference." See Benardete, Seth, "Leo Strauss' The City and Man", *The Political Science Reviewer*, vol. 8, 1978, pp. 7.

32 Plato, *Symposium*, The Ecco Library, UK, 2006, pp. 57.

33 In this spirit, Strauss asserts the following: "...the philosopher is not an individual like myself or like other professors of political philosophy or of philosophy *tout court* or *tout long*". Strauss, Leo, "The Origins of Political Science and The Problem of Socrates: Six Public Lectures", in *Interpretation. A Journal of Political Philosophy*, Volume 23 Number 2, Winter 1996, pp. 204.

34 See Strauss, Leo, *On Plato's Symposium*, Chicago – London, The University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 4: "Everyone knows, or has heard, that according to Plato man is incapable of acquiring full wisdom; that the very name of philosophy, love of wisdom, indicates that wisdom proper is not accessible to men. Or to use the other

assert conclusively whether *eros* is horizontal or vertical and the position attributed to Socrates in the schema of the Whole cannot be proven by any of the two.

It is in this sense that Aristophanes and Plato present two mutually exclusive alternative perspectives about the world and human life. These alternatives cannot be amalgamated and the quarrel, that is present in the origins of the rationalism that Strauss praises, has not been settled yet. Taking this as a starting point, Strauss asserts the dogmatic character of the voices who declare the definite death of philosophy and he argues for the possibility of resuming the path outlined by Plato in addressing the challenges of our time.

In any case, we arrive to a paradoxical conclusion: if the figure of Socrates is the sole thing that allows us to tell apart Plato from Aristophanes, and if the superiority of Socrates' way of life cannot be proven in a rational way, what distinguishes rationalism from its alternative is not altogether rational, or it is not completely based in a rational choice. To put it differently, it seems that Plato's inclination towards philosophy is not entirely due to a reason or an indisputable argument.

From this starting point, we are compelled to address another question: why does Strauss choose the philosophical alternative over the poetical one? Is it because of his personal preference? Because of a particular kind of faith? Because of the implications of the assumption of the possibility of a higher life? Or is it due to an ineffable or inexplicable experience? As far as we know, Strauss does not answer to these questions in a clear and explicit manner. However, as we stated before, he does point to the end of the *Symposium* when he addresses the possibility of an agreement between philosophy and poetry.

At the end of the *Symposium* the agreement is propounded by a philosopher and accepted by two poets. Socrates compels a tragic poet and a comic poet to accept his thesis on tragedy and comedy. Then, he leaves everybody sleeping and he rises to start a new day. As we have already suggested, what the end of the dialogue shows beyond doubt is the factual superiority of Socrates, who is not only the best in speech but also in deed. Unlike what Aristophanes' portrait of Socrates implies, philosophers understand and know how to handle nature, human affairs and rhetoric. They are the key to human happiness not only because of their theoretical wisdom but also thanks to their practical skills. Unlike the Socrates of the *Clouds*, who endangers the city and the lives of the philosophers, the Socrates of the *Symposium* manages to let others sleep peacefully while he and his friends devote themselves to their activity.

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formula, philosophy is knowledge of ignorance rather than the complete system".