

James McGuirk
Eros, Otherness, Tyranny

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James McGuirk

Eros, Otherness, Tyranny

The Indictment and Defence
of the Philosophical Life
in Plato, Nietzsche, and Lévinas

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For Mam and Dad

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgements | 12 |
| Introduction | 13 |
| 1. <i>Structure of the work</i> | 17 |
| 2. <i>The Argument</i> | 19 |
| 2.1. Philosophical Eros and Will-to-Power: Tyranny and Tragedy | 19 |
| 2.2. Philosophical Eros and the Other: The Will to Knowledge and the Instrumentalization of the Other | 25 |
| 2.3. A Defence of Plato: Philosophical Eros and the Vindication of Philosophy | 32 |
| Wholeness, Tragedy and the Hubris of Philosophy: The Speech of Aristophanes and the first Indictment of Philosophy | 36 |
| 1. <i>Introducing Aristophanes</i> | 37 |
| 1.1. Background and Political Affiliations | 37 |
| 1.2. Aristophanes and Plato: The Clouds of Aristophanes | 38 |
| 2. <i>The Speech of Aristophanes</i> | 41 |
| 2.1. Aristophanes Tragic Myth | 45 |
| 2.2. Rebellion, Punishment, Re-orientation | 47 |
| 2.3. Philosophy and Poetry | 53 |
| 2.4. Naming Eros: The Threat of Nihilism | 57 |
| 2.5. Eros Turranos and Eros Ouranos: Two Erotes or One? | 61 |
| 3. <i>Eros, Politics and Philosophy</i> | 65 |
| Defending Philosophy I: Nietzsche's Will-to-Power and Philosophy as Creative Excess | 71 |
| 1. <i>The Problem of Nietzsche and Socrates</i> | 73 |
| 1.1. Introducing Nietzsche | 73 |
| 1.2. The Problem of Nietzsche | 76 |
| 1.3. Nietzsche, Socrates, Plato | 80 |

| | | |
|---|---|-----|
| 2. | <i>Philosophy as Spiritual Sovereignty</i> | 85 |
| 2.1. | Philosophy in the Birth of Tragedy | 85 |
| 2.2. | Revolutions in Nietzsche's Thought: Re-evaluating the Need for Justification | 89 |
| 2.3. | The 'Yes' and the 'No' to Life: Vitalism, Eros and Will-To-Power | 92 |
| 2.4. | Cultural Critique and the Transvaluation of Values | 96 |
| 3. | <i>The Place of Socrates in the Later Thought of Nietzsche</i> | 104 |
| 3.1. | Socrates as Cultural Critic | 104 |
| 3.2. | Philosophical Eros: Philosophy as Refined Will-To-Power | 107 |
| 3.3. | The Turn to Philosophy: Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks | 108 |
| 3.4. | The Later Works and Affirmation as Self-affirmation | 111 |
| 3.5. | Platonic Eros and Will-To-Power | 112 |
| 3.6. | Overthrowing the Gods and Dionysian Chaos | 114 |
| 3.7. | Tension in Affirmation: Ambition and the Hidden Goal of Eros | 116 |
| 4. | <i>Defending and Overcoming Socrates: Nietzsche as the Fulfilment of an Aristophanic Prophecy</i> | 119 |
| | | |
| The Inhumanity of Philosophical Eros: The Speech of Alcibiades and the Second Indictment of Philosophy | | 124 |
| 1. | <i>Alcibiades: By Way of Introduction</i> | 127 |
| 1.1. | Alcibiades the Man | 127 |
| 1.2. | Alcibiades and Socrates | 129 |
| 1.3. | Alcibiades and the Symposium | 130 |
| 2. | <i>A Reading of the Speech of Alcibiades</i> | 133 |
| 2.1. | The Beginning: Alcibiades Arrives | 133 |
| 2.2. | Introducing the Speech: Rival Visions of Eros and Language | 135 |
| 2.3. | Portrait of a Strange Man: Socrates in Images | 137 |
| 2.4. | Socratic Dualism and an Initial Accusation of Ethical Indifference | 140 |
| 2.5. | Sex and Philosophy: Ascent of the Soul and Descent of the Body | 144 |
| 2.6. | Socrates and the Cardinal Virtues | 148 |
| 3. | <i>Canonical Readings of the Text</i> | 150 |
| 3.1. | Gregory Vlastos: Plato's Ethical Blindspot | 150 |
| 3.2. | Martha Nussbaum: Plato's Recognition of the Inhumanity of Socrates | 153 |
| 4. | <i>In Conclusion: Philosophical Eros, Dualism and Otherness</i> | 156 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Defending Philosophy 2: | |
| Desire and Dualism as the Prerequisites of Ethics in the Early Thought of Emmanuel Lévinas | 159 |
| 1. <i>Lévinas: By Way of Introduction</i> | 162 |
| 1.1. Lévinas and the Indictment of the Western Tradition | 162 |
| 1.2. Lévinas, Alcibiades and Plato | 168 |
| 2. <i>Ethics as First Philosophy</i> | 170 |
| 2.1. The Same (Le Même) and the Other (l'Autrui): Lévinas and Phenomenology | 171 |
| 2.2. The Fundamental Structures of Ethics | 173 |
| 3. <i>Lévinasian Being: The Elemental, Sensibility and Il y a</i> | 181 |
| 3.1. Enjoyment and the Same (Le Même): Need and Living From the Elements | 182 |
| 4. <i>Eros and Ethics in the Early Lévinas</i> | 190 |
| 4.1. Re-interpreting Plato's Erotic Lack: Eros and the Early Works | 191 |
| 4.2. Ambiguity, Dualism and the Relegation of Eros: Eros in Totality and Infinity | 195 |
| 5. <i>Conclusions Based on the Early Work</i> | 199 |
| Ethics and Erotic Paradigms in the Later Lévinas: Towards a Redemption of Philosophy | 205 |
| 1. <i>A Critique of Lévinas: Ontology, Chronology, Methodology</i> | 206 |
| 1.1. Derrida's Critique | 206 |
| 1.2. A Phenomenological Paradox: Fundamental Ethics and the Pre-Ethical | 208 |
| 2. <i>Otherwise than Being: Ethics and the Sensual</i> | 209 |
| 3. <i>Focal Points: Delineations of Subjectivity and Erotic Paradigms in Otherwise than Being</i> | 212 |
| 3.1. Subjectivity and Alterity: An-archy and Gift | 212 |
| 3.2. The Erotic Paradigm Deepens: Proximity and Distance | 218 |
| 3.3. Substitution: The One for the Other and the De-centring of the Subject | 223 |
| 3.4. The Saying and the Said: Philosophy and Justice | 227 |
| 4. <i>Concluding Remarks and Problems: Leaving Lévinas</i> | 233 |
| 4.1. Eros, Philosophy and Ethics | 233 |
| 4.2. The il y a and the Meaning of Being: Dualism | 236 |
| 4.3. Self-Abnegation and Violence in the Unfolding of the Good | 238 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| The Speech of Socrates: | |
| Ultimate Good, Relative Goods and the Hermeneutics of Eros | 242 |
| 1. <i>Initial Manoeuvres: Lack and Divine Origins</i> | 245 |
| 1.1. A Dialogic Interlude: The Deficiency and Lack of Eros | 245 |
| 1.2. Diotima's First Lesson: Eros as Metaxu | 251 |
| 1.3. Diotima's Second Lesson: | |
| The Origin of Eros: Metaxu and Doubleness | 254 |
| 2. <i>Transforming Eros: Empowerment and Creativity</i> | 257 |
| 2.1. Transitional Language | |
| and the Ambiguity of Erotic Desire for the Good | 258 |
| 2.2. Forms of Erotic Transcending: Power and the Excess of Self | 260 |
| 3. <i>Hermeneutic Eros and the Final Ascent:</i> | |
| <i>Vindicating Philosophy</i> | 266 |
| 3.1. Hermeneutic and Heuristic Identifications of Ultimacy | 268 |
| 3.2. Birth in Beauty Revisited: Eros as Spontaneous, Generous, Joyful | 275 |
| 4. <i>The Indictment One Last Time</i> | 278 |
| 4.1. Aristophanes | 278 |
| 4.2. Nietzsche | 280 |
| 4.3. Alcibiades | 281 |
| 4.4. Lévinas | 283 |
| Appendix: The doctrine of eros in the Phaedrus | 287 |
| 1. <i>Eros in the Phaedrus</i> | 288 |
| 2. <i>Dating and themes of the Phaedrus</i> | 289 |
| 3. <i>The action of the dialogue</i> | 291 |
| 3.1. Prologue | 291 |
| 3.2. The speech of Lysias and the first speech of Socrates | 293 |
| 3.3. Interlude | 295 |
| 4. <i>The second speech of Socrates</i> | 296 |
| 4.1. Madness, inspiration, and reason | 296 |
| 4.2. Affectivity and aesthetics | 298 |
| 4.3. Eros and intersubjectivity | 301 |

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| Bibliography | 305 |
| 1. <i>Plato: Primary Works</i> | 305 |
| 2. <i>Other Primary Works</i> | 306 |
| 2.1. Lévinas | 306 |
| 2.2. Nietzsche | 308 |
| 3. <i>Plato: Secondary Works</i> | 309 |
| 4. <i>Other Secondary Works</i> | 313 |
| 4.1. Lévinas | 313 |
| 4.2. Nietzsche | 317 |
| 5. <i>General bibliography</i> | 320 |

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The concern of the book is the indictment and defence of the philosophical life as this charge is played out in Plato's *Symposium*, as well as in the philosophical oeuvre of Friedrich Nietzsche and Emmanuel Lévinas. At the same time, it is hoped that the themes of the work, including the role of philosophy in public life, love and the life of the mind, and the role of hierarchies in the ethical life can contribute to debates outside of any specific concern with the work of Plato, Nietzsche, or Lévinas.

I would like to thank the many colleagues, former students, and friends who generously read all or part of the book and whose invaluable contributions have helped make the book as good as it could be. Chief among these is William Desmond, who was not only a patient adviser, but also a significant philosophical influence on the development of the present work. I would also like to thank Mette Lebech, Richard Kearney, the late Thomas Kelly, and the late James McEvoy for their input at various stages of the development of the manuscript. I thank Ian Leask, Ignace Verhack, and Bart Pattyn for their many useful suggestions for improving the text.

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The book is dedicated to my mother, Nuala and the memory of my late father, Sean.

Introduction

In the year 399 BC, Socrates, the most emblematic figure in the history of western philosophy, was sentenced to death by a jury of his peers on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. Socrates was the self-styled ‘philosopher’ whose mission was to obey the command of the Pythian god¹ to ‘know thyself.’ Thus, in the *Phaedrus*, in a discussion concerning the conflict between science and myth, Plato has him proclaim,

I can’t as yet ‘know myself’, as the inscription at Delphi enjoins; and so long as that ignorance remains it seems to me ridiculous to inquire into extraneous matters. Consequently I don’t bother about such things, but accept the current beliefs about them, and direct my inquiries, as I have just said, rather to myself, to discover whether I really am a more complex creature and more puffed up with pride than Typhon, or a simpler, gentler being, whom heaven has blessed with a quiet, un-Typhonic nature.²

This is clearly a defence of Socratic activity by Plato against the accusation of Meletus and company.³ He (Socrates) accepts the traditional beliefs on religious matters and his quest for self-knowledge seems a reasonably private and modest pursuit. Yet, his concern about the type of being he is indicates Plato’s awareness of a certain force in the charges against Socrates. Whether these charges are founded or not remains to be seen but we know, at least, that Plato is willing to address them. And, of course, his interest in this matter involves more than just his loyalty to his teacher. The trial of Socrates is, in a certain sense, the trial of philosophy. Socrates is the philosopher *par excellence* and yet he is accused of impiety and corruption, and so the implication is that it is not only Socrates but also philosophy that is

¹ i.e. the oracle at Delphi.

² *Phaedrus* 230a. Roger Hackforth suggests that the name Typhon may be connected with the word *tuphos*, meaning vanity. Hackforth, R. (1952). *Plato’s Phaedrus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. All future reference is to this edition unless otherwise stated.

³ *Apology*, 19a-b.

impious and corrupt. As apologist, Plato must defend not only Socrates but also Socratic activity; i.e. philosophy.⁴

In what follows, I will attempt to explore this indictment of philosophy. I will be asking whether the movement of philosophy is intrinsically hostile towards peaceful co-existence and ethical pluralism or whether it is their ground. I will explore this from a certain, very definite perspective. I will examine the problem from the point of view of Plato's famous erotic dialogue, the *Symposium*, as well as reading selected contemporary philosophers. The reason for this latter is that the questions of the relation of philosophy with otherness and the erotic quest for the Good are of specific concern for these thinkers.

I am interested in the indictment of philosophy for the following reason: it is usual in accounts of the life of Socrates to dismiss the charges against him as trumped up by those whose wrong-doing was brought to light by the ethical inquiries of the philosopher.⁵ Socrates was a gadfly, who undermined the great men of Athens through his elenctic method of questioning, exposing their belief in their own righteousness to be groundless. In the early dialogues of Plato, we see Socrates encountering some very high profile Athenians, convinced of their various expertise in matters such as virtue (*Meno*), justice (*Republic I*), courage (*Laches*) and piety (*Euthyphro*). In most cases, the 'experts' leave the scene humiliated. This is generally thought to be an important reason for the resentment felt towards Socrates by his peers.⁶ While there is, no doubt, a great deal of truth to this, but I am equally convinced that there is more to the matter. If the reason for the execution of Socrates was petty jealousy alone, it is unlikely that Plato would devote so much time and effort to his various defences of the practice of philosophy.

⁴ A great deal of Plato's writings are concerned with this question in one way or another, whether through the straightforward defence of the *Apology*, or the defence of philosophy as distinct from sophistry in the *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*.

⁵ The actual charges against Socrates are brought by a young man named Meletus, who is mentioned at *Euthyphro* 3a and again at *Apology* 19b. Socrates is aware, however, that Meletus is a shield for those who did not wish to make their animosity towards Socrates public.

⁶ This is not the only reason, of course. Another reason that we will return to was Socrates's association with Alcibiades, who delivered Athens into the hands of the Spartans in the Peloponnesian war.

Why, then, the *Symposium*? If the indictment of philosophy is to be the theme, why not the *Apology*, or even the *Republic*? The reason is that the *Symposium* is about eros and eros is the key to understanding Plato's conception of philosophy and therefore to its assessment and possible defence against the charges of corruption. It is a well-known feature of the Platonic Socrates that he professes ignorance on all matters. All matters but one. He will claim expertise only in matters of love.⁷ He is ignorant about most things but he is an expert on the eros of the philosopher and it is precisely the eros of philosophy that is most closely associated with the indictment of philosophy.

Plato himself recognises that while eros is of the essence of the philosophical soul, it is also essential to the soul of the tyrant.⁸ We might naturally wonder, then, if the quest of the philosopher is no more than a disguised quest for tyranny. In other words, does the philosopher's eros make him more puffed up with pride than Typhon or does he have a quiet, un-Typhonic nature?

The Greeks often made a distinction between two types of eros. These were *Eros Ouranos*, or heavenly eros and *Eros Turranos*, or tyrannical eros.⁹ In a sense, the question is: to which of these does the philosophical soul belong? Is philosophical eros a response to beauty and value, or the source of their valuation? Does it approach the divine with respect or seek, rather, to usurp the place of the divine and in doing so, arrogate to itself the position of sovereignty over the whole?

This is a complex question and we shall see as we proceed that the eros of philosophy is ambiguous to the extent that it may realise either one of these possibilities. But the complexity of this question entails at least that we must take the indictment of philosophy seriously. This is also intimately related to the command of the Delphic oracle. In coming truly to know ourselves, we come to see the centrality of eros for the human soul in gen-

⁷ *Lysis* 204c and *Symposium* 177d. Unless otherwise stated, all references to the *Symposium* are taken from Plato (1999). *Symposium*. Christopher Gill (translator). London: Penguin Books.

⁸ See *Republic* IX and also *Phaedrus* 248e. In fact, eros is of the essence of all souls. Philosophy and tyranny are simply manifestations of excessive forms of eros.

⁹ Throughout the body of the book, I will capitalise the word eros only when it explicitly refers to the god himself.

eral and also to understand the intense ambiguity of this eros and its tendencies towards the excessive, as either good or evil. The (Platonic) philosopher claims to be marked most essentially by an erotic pursuit of truth and of the Good. But inasmuch as eros also involves assertion of self, is it not possible that this philosophic orientation might degenerate into an overblown pride, in which the philosopher comes to see him/herself as adequate, through conceptual mastery, to the whole of reality? If so, does not philosophy run the risk of embodying an insidious kind of violence in which all that is other is reduced to what can be known? In this case, the philosopher might end up taking the position that worth and value can only appear through the categories of thought that are, finally, his/her own. In other words, philosophy runs the risk of reducing value to its own meaning-giving activity.

For Plato and Socrates, the injunction to 'know thyself' entails discovering whether the soul of philosophy entails an eros for wisdom or for tyranny. Or more specifically, the eros of the philosophical soul may entail a tendency towards both on account of its ineradicable ambiguity, so the task involves the cultivation of the best part of the self. On this understanding, philosophy may very well become a therapy for the soul.

In short, the *Symposium* is the central text for the issue of the indictment of philosophy specifically because it puts the meaning of philosophical eros in the dock. In *The Erotic Phenomenon*, Jean-Luc Marion laments the lack of attention to love in philosophy, and by this he means not just the exploration of love as phenomenon, but of the meaning of love for and within philosophy. To do philosophy is not only about knowing, but about the enjoyment of knowledge and the act of knowing.¹⁰ If philosophy is a loving enterprise, then, it is important to reflect upon what this love signifies, what it communicates, and what can be communicated through it. In the *Symposium*, we find precisely this is at stake.

¹⁰ Marion, Jean-Luc (2007). *The Erotic Phenomenon*. Translated from French by Stephen E. Lewis. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, p. 11.

1. Structure of the work

In the light of these themes, the present work will divide into three parts, the first two of which will involve reading Plato alongside a more contemporary figure from the western tradition, respectively Friedrich Nietzsche and Emmanuel Lévinas. The point of these comparative readings is to explore some of the main themes brought out in the Platonic texts in a way that throws light on both his own thought and the thought of Nietzsche and Lévinas. There is no assertion of any simple equivalence between, for example, the speech of Alcibiades and the work of Lévinas, but only an attempt to elaborate themes across these texts.

The hermeneutical approach I employ, in this respect, is rooted in the attempt to articulate and reflect upon themes that are addressed and developed at different times and places, but which are perennial in their interest for philosophy and for human life in general. This will not be a work of Platonic exegesis. Instead, I am interested in the themes that Plato explores and the readings which his texts afford. This is a concern with what Paul Ricoeur calls “the world in front of the text”¹¹, in the sense that I am concerned with the ways in which the text can continue to speak to us today by raising issues that continue to be of concern to us. But texts are not infinitely malleable. While bringing Plato in contemporary debates, we must also recognize the integrity of the original text itself. One must, in other words, avoid the Scylla of simple exegesis and the Charybdis of doing a violence to the text by finding in it only what one has oneself put there. As to how successful this approach has been, I leave to the reader to judge.

Parts I and II will develop arguments in support of the indictment of the eros of Platonic philosophy alongside contemporary efforts to defend or re-work Platonic ideas against this indictment. Part III, on the other hand, will comprise a defence of Plato based on Plato’s own words. The readings of Plato will be taken mostly from the dialogue *Symposium* since it is in this dialogue that the canonical treatment philosophical eros is found. Part II will end with a brief discussion of Plato’s other central work treating

¹¹ Ricoeur, P. (2008). The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation. In: *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*. Translated from French by John B. Thompson. London: Continuum, p. 82.

eros, the Phaedrus, in order to whether the two accounts are as incompatible as is sometimes claimed.¹²

The *Symposium* is a complex dialogue that comprises seven speeches in which seven, more or less distinct understandings of eros are proffered. Six of the speeches can be read as partly prefiguring the speech of Socrates, but their various emphases can also be read as offering critiques of Socratic eros to which Socrates will need to respond.¹³ I will not offer a reading of all seven but only three. These are the speeches of Aristophanes, Alcibiades and Socrates. The reason is that I am interested in the indictment of philosophy and I believe that this indictment can be explored sufficiently through these three speeches. I have chosen to do this for reasons of space and also structural cohesion. Inasmuch as the speeches of Aristophanes and Alcibiades put forward fairly definite accounts of eros, they also entail a critique of Socratic or philosophical eros from different perspectives and it is precisely these critiques that I wish to explore.

The contemporary presences in the argument are Friedrich Nietzsche and Emmanuel Lévinas. Nietzsche and Lévinas are tied to Plato not just by their general interest in his philosophy¹⁴, but by their concern with the ethico-political implications of love for the spiritual activity that is philosophy. If they cannot straightforwardly be considered Platonists, it is undoubtedly true that Plato is a major spur for their thinking. Plato is either the greatest ally to their thinking or its greatest adversary. Sometimes both.

Furthermore, all three put reflections on the meaning of desire at the heart of their philosophical enterprises. Though they will not always use the language of eros in this respect, it will become clear that their works can

¹² Martha Nussbaum makes this point. Cf. Nussbaum, M. (2001b). ‘This story isn’t true’: madness, reason, and recantation in the *Phaedrus*. In: *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 200-34.

¹³ All of the speakers identify moments that are important for any full-blown understanding of love. Aristophanes speaks to the centrality of wholeness, Eryximachus emphasizes balance, while Phaedrus and Alcibiades emphasize sacrifice and particularity respectively. There is a sense in Socrates’s response that in claiming to be wholly true, these partial truths of eros become wholly untrue.

¹⁴ If Whitehead is right that the history of philosophy is “a series of footnotes to Plato”, then a general interest in Plato would surely be insufficient. Whitehead, A.N. (1978). *Process and Reality*. New York: The Free Press, p. 39.

certainly be treated in the context of a discussion of eros.¹⁵ All three are interested in the movement of philosophical eros and the implications this may have for philosophy and its relation to the questions of otherness and goodness.

The emphases in each reading will vary, however, and my intention will differ slightly from one part to the next, so it would be best to say a few words about the purpose of each section in advance in order to throw some light on the project as a whole.

2. *The Argument*

2.1. Philosophical Eros and Will-to-Power: Tyranny and Tragedy

Part I comprises a reading of the speech of Aristophanes¹⁶ alongside consideration of the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. Broadly speaking, this part deals the indictment of philosophy as hubristic in the sense that the eros of philosophy entails desire for a spiritual sovereignty that is, at root, tyrannical. Essentially, the critique is that the abstract object of the philosopher's eros masks the truth about erotic striving.

The speech of Aristophanes is perhaps one of the most famous passages in the Platonic corpus. It involves a tragic myth about the origin of the human race and the meaning of eros for the human soul. What is especially important here is (a) that Aristophanes offers a *muthos*, not a *logos* and (b) that it is a tragic *muthos*. The myth is tragic because it claims that the human being is generated out of an original, now sundered, erotic wholeness to which return is no longer possible. On this account, human existence is irrevocably tragic. Furthermore, the point is expressed by Aristophanes as a myth and not a philosophical *logos*. This suggests his sense

¹⁵ I will claim, for instance, that Nietzsche's will-to-power is a manifestation of eros (chapter 2) while there is always a difficult tension in Lévinas between eros and metaphysical desire (chapters 4 & 5).

¹⁶ In the body of the text I will make reference to the difficulties in treating the speeches of both Aristophanes and Alcibiades. These are both fictional creations of Plato but the situation is complicated by the fact that they are genuine historical personages and rather prominent ones at that. The task of the reader, therefore, is to refrain from reading their speeches as accurate historical documents whilst keeping in mind what we know about them both.

that poetry or art is a better vehicle for the expression of the truth of the human condition. This is partly an endorsement of his own craft but it also constitutes a warning against the dangers of philosophy. Eros is a gift from the gods that ministers to our illness, according to Aristophanes. As such, there is no human expertise in this area. But such expertise is precisely what the philosopher claims – remember that this is the only area of Socratic expertise. Socrates claims to know what love signifies and thereby claims a kind of mastery of love through his philosophy. Aristophanes consequently warns us against the *hubris* of philosophy and its quest to harness eros with a view to control through knowing. Acknowledged or not, philosophy seeks a return to the original erotic wholeness, in which, so the story goes, human beings were so full of their own power that they mounted a challenge to the gods. Yet it is because of this kind of challenge that the human condition is tragic in the first place.

The irony throughout is that Aristophanes appears to fear that this desire for equality with the gods is really what is at stake in eros; that is, the attempt to close the circle by bringing the origin of love into the light of the known masks tyrannical ambition by wresting what is the province of the gods into the hands of men. And so recognising the perils of this position he seeks to re-orient human eros through poetry on the one hand and sexuality on the other. The hidden goal of eros is independence from one another and from the gods but the fruits of this pursuit will be disastrous.¹⁷ The impetus of philosophy to transcend the human condition is, in a sense, a desire for self-annihilation in the sense that it seeks to overcome the human condition as it exists now. Philosophical eros is, in other words, a desire to alter the human place in the cosmos. The intention of Aristophanes, by contrast, is to reconcile the human being with his situation through the re-orientation of erotic desire. This is carried out through the poeticisation of the human condition which, in contrast to philosophy, is able to suggest, in pictorial form, the dark, erotic power that underlies human self-transcending. Furthermore, the poet can redirect the orientation of erotic energy by making it a wholly bodily principle. In this way, the order of the city is safeguarded against what would otherwise be challenged by the excessive nature of this energy. The gods gave us the possibility of peace with the severing of the original wholes but it is a peace that can only be main-

¹⁷ I will mention Aristophanes's *Clouds* in which the parody of Socrates contains a real warning against the destructive force of philosophy, as he understands it.

tained so long as we remain in a position of mutual dependence. The impetus of philosophy for self-sufficiency is a threat to precisely this and so it threatens to undermine the very heart of the *polis*. The philosophising of Socrates, for example, is expressly a-political in the sense that he looks beyond the city towards the heavens.¹⁸ For Aristophanes, though, this can only be a divisive force in the *polis* in that Socrates, inadvertently or not, encourages his followers to challenge the laws and institutions of the city and obey only what they can understand rationally. The fragile balance of human community is disrupted thereby and the tolerable tyranny of the Olympians is replaced by an intolerable tyranny of men, each seeking sovereignty over the whole of reality.

As against philosophy, poetry, here represented by the myth of Aristophanes, is able to teach us about ourselves and our relation to the whole. The poet is acutely aware of the tension between human eros and the type of ordered existence that sustains human community. Philosophy upsets this balance by giving reign to the spiritual ambition or hubris latent in the spiritualisation of eros. Aristophanes will say that there is no *techne* of eros but, in fact, he will argue for poetry and the poets as mediators. They do not mediate eros as such but mediate between eros and the city. They will do this, not by suppressing eros, but by re-directing it to the body while the spiritual needs of man will be ministered by the poetic myths of the Olympians. In this way, peace is made possible insofar as we are reconciled with the gods and with each other.

Alongside the speech of Socrates, I will consider aspects of the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche. The point of this chapter is to read Nietzsche as a defender of Socrates and Plato in light of the indictment of philosophy as it is presented by Aristophanes. That is, for Aristophanes, philosophical eros manifests a desire to usurp the mystery of the cosmic order by reducing it to the work of the human soul. In other words, the eros of the philosopher, in its concern for wholeness, ends up by acknowledging nothing other than itself and becomes tyrannical and self-serving. And although undermining the human community is never the explicit intention of the philosopher, it is the fruit of his/her activity insofar as the

¹⁸ In the *Phaedrus*, for example, Socrates insists that he belongs within the city walls (230d), and yet while in the city, he is always looking beyond its walls in a way that destroys the borders of inside and outside. It would perhaps be better for all if Socrates would either accept the imposed limits of the city or just leave.

transcending pursuit of wholeness is one that seeks to heal the wound of heteronomy in the soul and become sovereign unto itself.

The connection with Nietzsche is obvious, which is not to say that Nietzsche's work is straightforward in this context. His attitude to Plato, Socrates and even the practice of philosophy is always ambiguous. This is a function of Nietzsche's thought and style of writing, of course. His work always defies univocal interpretation and cannot be reduced to a programmatic or systematic set of discernible doctrines. For Nietzsche, the point is to affect a series of sometimes-inconsistent positions in order to explore what he considers to be the important questions of philosophy, without allowing this exploration to be reduced to system or dogma. As such, it is possibly futile to seek strong consistency in Nietzsche's reflections on any given topic.

This is also the case regarding his references to Plato and Socrates. He tends to equivocate between hailing them as inspirations and giants of spirit and renouncing them as crude or insidious moralisers. In addition to this, his attitude to philosophy itself is rarely consistent. In his earliest major work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, he accuses philosophy of undermining the power of art or drama to justify human existence, not only by driving a wedge between the rational and irrational aspects of reality but by insisting that only the rational dimension is real.¹⁹ In his later works, however, Nietzsche begins to view philosophical activity as a creative outpouring of spirit that can be truly life-affirming without being simplistically rationalistic.

Yet, I believe that for all the ambiguity of Nietzsche's thought, there are certain consistent elements in his thinking that justify his inclusion here. What I am most concerned with is Nietzsche's project of making philosophy the core of his attempt to be spiritually affirmative. In his mature writings, he continues to espouse an almost Schopenhauerian metaphysics while refusing to resign himself to the pessimistic response of Schopenhauer to the tragedy of existence. He accepts from Schopenhauer, that is, the thesis that existence is marked by purposeless willing or striving but refuses to acknowledge that pessimism is the only legitimate human response to this. Rather, he seeks to transvalue traditional notions of value, which he believes to be rooted in a spirit of negative *ressentiment*, so as to

¹⁹ In many respects, this position is quite close to the Aristophanic indictment as I have presented it, though I will be arguing that there is more to Nietzsche than this.