This article argues that Aristophanes’ *Clouds* treats Socrates as distinctly interested in promoting self-knowledge of the sort related to self-improvement. Section I shows that Aristophanes links the precept *gnôthi sauton* with Socrates. Section II outlines the meaning of that precept for Socrates. Section III describes Socrates’ conversational method in the *Clouds* as aimed at self-revelation. Section IV identifies the patron Cloud deities of Socrates’ school as concerned to bring people to a therapeutic self-understanding, albeit in a different register than Socrates does. Section V discusses a sequence of jokes connected to ‘stripping’ that give a concrete image to the search for self-knowledge. Both the action of the Clouds and the tales of cloak-stripping provide models for understanding self-knowledge in a Socratic key. Section VI argues that Socrates’ other interest in the *phrontisterion*, myth-rationalization, is consistent with the promotion of self-knowledge. Section VII supports the claim that Plato’s *Phaedrus* alludes constantly to the *Clouds*, and because the *Phaedrus* pays careful attention to self-knowledge, Plato must think that the *Clouds* does too. It notes in particular that we can explain the Platonic Socrates’ famous self-knowledge-related curiosity about his similarity to Typhon (230a) as Plato’s allusion to Aristophanes’ coordination of Socrates with self-knowledge. Section VIII concludes the paper.

1. Socrates and the *Gnôthi Sauton*

In the *Clouds*, Strepsiades proves an indifferent student. He fails to learn Socrates’ lessons. He does, however, listen to Socrates’ words. In convincing his son to take his place at the *phrontisterion*, he continuously parrots Socrates’ language. He appeals to Fog and Whirl, scorns traditional beliefs in Zeus, laughs at archaic thought, announces that he has secret new thoughts, and vaunts the value of education.1 His son calls his father out for such unfamiliar language, and asks who he got it from (816-7, 829, 832-3, 840, 844-6). Strepsiades admits he gets his terms from Socrates (830), a man he says he holds worthy of respect despite his peculiarities (833-7). Pheidippides asks, ‘What would someone even usefully learn from those people?’ (840), meaning Socrates and the school’s co-director Chaerephon. Strepsiades responds:

---

Really? However much wisdom (σοφὸ) people have. And you’ll know yourself, how unlearned and thick you are (γνώσει δὲ σαυτὸν ὡς ἄμαθής εἰ καὶ παχύς). (841-2)

Strepsiades goes on to echo Socrates’ grammatical training and show off his Socratic-style dress (847-59). Then Socrates enters, and, with some hesitation, accepts Pheidippides’ discipleship.

Most of Strepsiades’ lines in the passage 814-859 repeat Socrates’ remarks earlier in the play. Even his remarks about wisdom (σοφὸ) and the content of the self-knowledge (ὡς ἄμαθής εἰ καὶ παχύς) echo Socrates. Socrates tells Strepsiades to attend closely ‘whenever I toss up something wise’ (ὅταν τι προβάλωμαι σοφὸν, 489), and when Strepsiades balks, Socrates says that ‘this man here is unlearned and barbaric’ (Ἀνθρώπος ἄμαθης σύντοσι καὶ βάρβαρος, 492).

Only one phrase does not explicitly repeat something Socrates has said: that being with Socrates will bring Pheidippides to know himself (γνώσει δὲ σαυτὸν). The fact that this phrase is new draws attention to it; the fact that everything else Strepsiades says repeats Socrates suggests that even this repeats him, either his real or imagined off-stage person. Aristophanes thereby associates the advice to gain self-knowledge to Socrates. He may even be associating the precept gnôthi sauton itself, eventually associated with the Seven Sages and the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, to Socrates. Strepsiades’ dig at his son’s education does not grammatically require the reflexive pronoun σαυτόν (‘yourself’), since the verb γνώσει (‘you will know’) can take the indirect question ‘how ignorant and thick you are’ alone. This passage therefore represents the earliest attribution of the gnôthi sauton to Socrates.

II. KNOWING YOURSELF, HOW UNLEARNED AND THICK YOU ARE

Strepsiades’ insult to his son, that he will come to recognize the extent to which he has not learned (ἄμαθης), and cannot readily learn (παχύς), gives important content to the gnôthi sauton as Strepsiades attributes it to Socrates. He does not say that Pheidippides will learn that he is mortal, or that he has some position in the cosmic order, or that he must take divinity more seriously. Instead, Strepsiades says that Pheidippides will come to assess two central and related

---

2 Perhaps Strepsiades does echo Socratic speech as viewers of the Clouds hear it, since forms of αὐτός and reflexive pronouns are associated with Socrates. Socrates is introduced as αὐτός, and Strepsiades asks, τίς αὐτός; (219). Just earlier, Socrates’ student refers to the πρόκτος of Socrates’ other students studying astronomy αὐτός καθ’ αὐτόν (194). See E.A. Havelock, ‘The Socratic Self as It Is Parodied in Aristophanes’ Clouds’, YCIS 22 (1972), 1–18, at 10-14, on reflexives in this play.

3 It is associated with both earliest in Plato, at Prot. 343ab, Alc. I 124b1, 129a2-3, 132c10, Phdr. 229e. The precept is cited at most three times earlier than at Clouds 571: at Heraclitus 116 DK, [Aes.] Prometheus Bound 309, and Ion of Chios fr. 55 TrGF.


5 On these views of the meaning of the gnôthi sauton, see, e.g., Wilkins (n. 4), 12-22, and her The Delphic Maxims in Literature (Chicago, 1929), 1-10, 49-68; M.P. Nilsson, Greek Piety, trans. by H.J. Rose
aspects of himself: his education and his educability. Strepsiades’ harshly negative evaluative language implies that his son will learn more than facts at Socrates’ school. He will realize that he is badly off in these two central ways. In realizing that he is badly off, Strepsiades implies that he will seek to rectify his imperfections; this is implied by Strepsiades’ (admittedly self-interested) hopefulness about his son’s coming to learn to speak (859-87). Coming to know oneself thus includes wanting to improve oneself. Strepsiades articulates Socratic self-knowledge in the negative terms that Plato’s Apology of Socrates characterizes as knowledge of ignorance (21b4-5, d6, 22d1). There, Plato’s Socrates expresses gladness that while he lacks the wisdom of craftsmen, he also lacks their unlearnedness (μήτε τι σοφὸς ἄν τὴν ἐκείνην σοφίαν μὴτε ἀμαθῆς τὴν ἀμαθίαν, 22e3-4), and so he keeps going around asking people questions about virtue. Here, Strepsiades’ claim that Pheidippides may learn ‘however much wisdom people have’ (ὅσαπέρ ἐστιν ἄνθρωποι σοφά) parallels the Platonic Socrates’ observation that he has discovered himself to have at most a ‘human wisdom’ (ἄνθρωπην σοφία, Apol. 20d8), where this wisdom prompts continued self-improvement. ‘Wisdom’ (σοφία) in the Clouds usually means thoughtfulness (Aristophanes’ playwrighting: 522, Nestor and his ilk: 1057), good judgment (the primary trait of the audience: 520, 526, 575, 899), and intellectual success (the primary trait of members of the phrontisterion: 94, 1202, 1207, Euripides and other poets: 1370, 1378); only occasionally does it mean mere ‘cleverness’ (764 with 773, 895).

Aristophanes’ Socrates, like Plato’s, urges a self-knowledge that recognizes the distance between one’s ideal and one’s present position, and that motivates self-improvement toward that ideal.

III. SOCRATES’ REVELATORY CONVERSATION

A fifth of the way into the play, Socrates accepts Strepsiades’ desire for tutelage, initiates him into the school, and introduces him to the Cloud chorus. Strepsiades only gradually recognizes the Cloud chorus as a chorus (326-8). Socrates diagnoses his problem in terms of an epistemic failure: Strepsiades neither ‘knew’ (οὐκ ἐδήσθε) nor ‘believed’ (οὐδ’ ἐνόμιζε) that they were goddesses, and he is not ‘aware’ (οὐ... ὁδεθ’ that they nourish sophists (329-30). When Strepsiades queries their status as clouds, since the choral dancers look like women, Socrates asks Strepsiades what he thinks clouds in general look like (φέρε, ποία χάρ τινες εἰσιν; 342). In his next remark, Socrates asks Strepsiades to give his view in response to further questions (ἀπόκρισιν ὑπ’ ἄττ’ ἐν ἐρώμαι, 345). His questions are about Strepsiades’ experiences looking at cloud-formations. When Socrates suggests a physical account of thunderstorms, and Strepsiades wonders why he should believe it (τοῦτο τῷ χρῆ πιστεύειν; 385), Socrates says ‘I shall teach it to you from you yourself’ (ἀπὸ σαυτοῦ ἡ γῆ σε διδάξω, 385).

The account of the nature of the Clouds complete, Strepsiades is ready to learn to speak. The chorus leader tells Socrates to ‘move through’ (διακίνει) Strepsiades’ mind and to ‘test out his judgment’ (τῆς γνώμης ἀποσειρῶ, 477). The first task seems to require displaying
Strepsiades’ mind at a fine-grained level of resolution; the second task, assessing Strepsiades’ mettle. Socrates follows the chorus leader’s instructions and says to Strepsiades: ‘Come then, tell me your character (τὸν σαυτοῦ τρόπον), so that knowing it, what it is (σαυτὸν εἰδῶς ὡς ὡς ἔστι), on those bases I can apply to you novel mechanisms’ (478-480). Socrates rephrases what he means: he wishes to make some brief enquiries (σοῦ παράσημοι, 482). He thereby forces Strepsiades’ self-revelation (483, 487, 489). Later he tells Strepsiades to ‘say yourself what you wish to discover’ (σαυτὸς ὃτι βούλει... ἐξευρέων λέγε, 737).

Aristophanes gives Socrates remarks that sound to be, in their awkwardness, imitations of a distinctly Socratic manner of talking. The most notable ones are those that ask a person to reveal his opinions, attitudes, and proclivities. They distinguish him from other lecturers who intend for their students simply to listen and accept. He is unlike the Worse Argument, who goes in exclusively for silencing, not for revelation (891-931, 1101-1104). His repeated, and seemingly pointless, encouragements of Strepsiades to think for himself, and then to articulate those thoughts (696, 700-705, 722-724, 733-745), is of a piece with his question-asking method. Socrates’ concern for self-knowledge has its pedagogical realization in his strategy of coaxing others’ views out of themselves. Socrates teaches very little in this play besides myth-rectification, which we will discuss below, and the gender-reassignment of common nouns; both aim to provide more coherent accounts of beliefs that people already have. Aristophanes may have treated many of the other views expounded in the phrontisterion as contributions by Chaeophon, other teachers, or students; he does not attribute them to Socrates, despite the ease of doing so. Socrates departs before Better and Worse Arguments compete for Phleidippides’ attention (886-8); Phleidippides’ education comes to be provided solely by Worse Argument. Therefore, Socrates’ teaching, whatever it is, is at least characteristically self-revelatory, aimed at instilling self-knowledge, whether this self-knowledge attends to beliefs about oneself or about one’s place in the world and the way one communicates in it.

IV. THE MANIA-MIRRORING CLOUDS

The Cloud chorus serves as a sort of agent for Socrates and the phrontisterion. It may therefore seem to consolidate Socrates’ interest in meteorology; serve as a band of nature deities; suggest the airiness and malleability of sophistic reasoning; or stand in for traditional divine justice. Whether any of these views are true, it is important to see as well that they especially

---

7 Dover (n. 1), xxxiv, calls it his ‘tutorial’ method—involving assessment of character, setting of problems, reduction of problems to constituent parts, and assessing responses—in contrast to the ‘expository’ method.
8 Thus Dover (n. 1), xxxv, is wrong to say that ὁ κρείττων λόγος ‘embodies the spirit of Socrates’ teaching.’ See Nussbaum (n. 6), 66.
help their viewers see themselves. They act as vehicles for self-knowledge and as symbols of Socrates’ intentions to bring his interlocutors to self-knowledge.

Aristophanes carefully develops the theme of self-knowledge in his treatment of the Clouds. Among Socrates’ earliest descriptions of the clouds is his claim that they ‘mock’ (σκόπτεσθαι) a person’s ‘obsession’ (τῆς μανίας, 350). The word σκόπτειν means to draw attention to saliently embarrassing or laugh-inducing traits of a person, often by exaggerated mimicry; it does not mean merely to ‘jeer’ or ‘scoff at.’ Earlier in the play, Socrates tells Strepsiades not to ‘mock’ (σκόμιει), that is, not to ‘make like’ (ποιήσεις ἀπερ) those comedians (296). Strepsiades is cracking scatological jokes, which is what other comedians do, so ‘mocking’ means imitating to draw out the (morally or aesthetically) relevant traits of Aristophanes’ competitors. Aristophanes uses the word three more times in the play; one of them is especially telling. The parabasis states that Aristophanes does not make fun of bald men; because the parabasis had just stated that Aristophanes does not dress his characters up with extravagant phallusses (538-9), the counterfactual mocking would probably be effected by dressing up actors with bald-headed masks (540), thereby physically exaggerating their appearances. Elsewhere in the Aristophanic corpus, σκόπτειν means either to caricature in one’s own person or otherwise to exaggerate (attention to) someone’s features. At Acharnians 854, the Chorus says that Pauson will no longer mock (σκόπεται) Dicaeopolis; Aristotle speaks of a Pauson who depicts (ἐκαζεῖν) people as worse (Poetics 2.2; cf. Pol. 8.5.7). If these are the same Pauson, and if depiction as ‘worse’ caricatures people as they really are, then this passage treats σκόπτειν as ‘to mimic’. At Knights 525, Magnes is said to have written his Choruses to imitate many animal sounds and appearances, but in old age he lost his power to ‘mimic’ (σκόπτειν). These cases, and many others, show that the Clouds imitate with the goal of revealing something unpleasant about the person imitated.

The Clouds do not simply mock individuals; they mock a person’s mania. Pheidippides twice refers to his father’s wholesale conversion to Socratism (818-843) as his mania (832, 846).

11 In the second instance, the Better Argument tells Pheidippides to flare up at those who mock him (992), but the Better Argument does not specify the kind of mocking he has in mind. In the third instance, a creditor charges Strepsiades with mocking him when Strepsiades, noting his tragic diction, implies that the creditor is Xenocles’ Alcmena (1267).


13 Wasps 542: if Bdelycleon loses the debate to his son, people will call him and his friends θαλάφωροι, ‘olive-bearers,’ and will thereby be pointing out (σκοπτόμενοι) their agedness; Wasps 1320: at his debut party, Philocleon asks Thuphrastus, “Why do you act like a bigwig and pretend to be stylish, when you’re only a clown sucking up to anyone who’s doing well at the moment” (tr. Henderson), and Xanthias comments that his master περιστρίζειν and σκοπτῶν ἁγροκῶς, rustically calls out someone for their embarrassing qualities; for further key evidence for this claim see also Ecclesiazusae 1005, 1074, Frogs 58, 417, Peace 740, 745, Birds 96, Wealth 557; more diffuse but still consistent evidence is at Wasps 567, Frogs 392, Peace 173, Wealth 886, 973.

14 In the one use of this verb in Plato’s Phaedrus, Phaedrus uses the term to describe Socrates’ mocking of Lysias’ speech for lacking rational order (264e3). Socrates does so by likening it to a four-line epitaph that could be, so he says, read in any order. Phaedrus calls Lysias’ speech ‘our’ speech. Thus Phaedrus takes himself to be mocked: his preferences—for superficially-provocative rather than structurally-sound speeches—are being made manifest, brutally so. Socrates is bringing self-awareness to Phaedrus.
In the contest between Better and Worse Argument, Better Argument says that the city and Worse Argument share a *mania* for captious argument (925-8). The ‘obsession’ relevant to the Clouds appears to be the central failing of the character: in Strepsiades’ case, his overzealous commitment to an unfamiliar mode of argument, and in the Worse Argument’s case, a preference for victory over solid education. To the extent then that the Clouds mock someone’s obsession, they bring to light, perhaps exaggeratedly, that person’s central failing.

Socrates also says that the Clouds reveal (ἐπιφανείνουσαι) a person’s nature (τὴν φύσιν 352). Should we wonder what ‘revealing’ someone’s ‘nature,’ means, Aristophanes glosses both words throughout his play. It means proving to a person something deeply important about himself that he would not readily accept. Several lines after Socrates characterizes the Clouds as nature-revealers, Strepsiades says that he wants the source of rain ‘revealed’ to him (ἐπιφανείσας, 368). He is compelled to agree, based on his pre-existing beliefs, that rain-clouds account for rain (372-373). This is the biggest step in his rejection of Zeus. Later in the play, Pheidippides says he will ‘reveal’ to his father the propriety in beating him (1331). He glosses this term with ἐπισειεῖςω (‘prove,’ 1334), and goes about revealing the propriety by giving a long argument (1408-1439). It is this argument that, accompanied by the argument that it is proper to hit one’s mother, brings Strepsiades to realize his faults and reject them (1462-1464). He recognizes that he was in a crazed state and manic (παρανοίας... ἐμαυνόμην... παρανοήσαντος 1476-80). Revelation, then, is making compellingly clear something important, something that one would at first very much not like to acknowledge.

In the *Clouds*, one’s nature (φύσιν) is one’s most significant quality, as we see from a range of uses. The Cloud chorus sings a song (276-290) to its own ‘form,’ its dewiness which for those not yet initiated to the *phrontisterion* is its primary constituent (276). Socrates asks whether Strepsiades has speaking ability in his ‘nature’ (486). After studying at the *phrontisterion*, Strepsiades worries that he may become indistinguishable from Chaerephon in respect to nature (503). Strepsiades is said to ‘color’ his nature with novelties and to cultivate wisdom (νεωτέρος τὴν φύσιν αὐ- | τοῦ πράγμασιν χρωτίζεται | καὶ σοφίαν ἐπασκει, 515). The play itself, the Choral leader says in the parabasis, is restrained ‘by nature,’ and this distinguishes the play from its riotous competition (537). Strepsiades says it will be easy to teach his son, since he is δθωμόσοφος (‘desirous of being wise’) by nature (877). Better Argument is told by the Chorus Leader to speak of his own nature, namely its pedagogical perspective (960). Worse Argument acknowledges the supposedly unchangeable human ‘nature’ (1075, 1078). Solon is by nature a φιλόδημος (‘populist,’ 1187).

The Clouds draw out from people their desires and help them act on those desires; when something goes wrong, those people are forced to realize that their own character is responsible (αὐτός... σαυτῶς ὑν τοῦτῳν αίτιος, 1454). The collocation of intensifiers here emphasizes this reflexive relationship. The Clouds can help people understand themselves by appearing to each person in the way he or she wants them to look. This mirroring helps explain why the Cloud chorus can appear bimorphic in the play, early on as ‘protrectresses of the windy, up-in-the-air nebulosities of Socrates and his crew,’ and later as ‘Aeschylean moralizers.’ Charles Segal has

---

15 Other commentators have read the uses of *phusis* mainly in contrast to *nomos*, e.g., Steven Berg, ‘Rhetoric, Nature, and Philosophy in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, AncPhil 18 (1998), 1–19, and Nussbaum (n. 6), 52-54 (but see 52n17).

put the point well: ‘To Strepsiades [the Clouds] hold out the promise of change and evasion, of avoiding the realities… of life’:

The enormous horizons which the Clouds encompass only mirror back to Strepsiades his own pettiness. When he is finally brought into ‘converse’ with them, they address him as a man who ‘desires great wisdom from us’ (ὡ τὴς μεγάλης ἐπιθυμήσας σοφίας ἀνθρώπῳ παρ’ ἡμῶν, 412). But he replies, ‘Don’t tell me great thoughts, for I don’t want them’ (μὴ μοι γε λέγειν γνώμας μεγάλας: οὐ γὰρ τούτων ἐπιθυμῶ, 433). And they answer him with a confirmation of that very smallness which he seeks from them: ‘You will get your desire; for your desires are not great’ (τευξεί τούν ὡν ἰμερεῖς: οὐ γὰρ μεγάλων ἐπιθυμεῖς, 435).\(^{17}\)

The clouds end up mocking Strepsiades’ mania for simple solutions to his novel problems, and revealing his nature as someone over his head in trying to live an urban life.\(^{18}\)

V. JOKES ABOUT SELF-REVELATION

Near the beginning of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates and Phaedrus walk beyond the city walls. Phaedrus has told Socrates—in response to Socrates’ correct surmise about his morning (ὦ Φαίδρε, εἰ ἔγὼ Φαίδρου ἄγνω, καὶ ἐμαυτῷ ἐπιλέλησαμι..., 228a5-6)—that he wants to talk about a speech that Lysias let him see. Socrates suspects that this is not the real reason for Phaedrus’ desire for companionship. ‘Show me first, dearest friend, what really you have in your hand under your cloak’ (δείξας γε πρῶτον, ὦ φιλότης, τί ἄρα ἐν τῇ ἀριστερᾷ ἐχεις ὑπὸ τῷ ἑμαντίῳ, 229d6-7). Socrates guesses that Phaedrus carried the rolled script of Lysias’ speech. He guesses that Phaedrus wants to treat Socrates as an audience for his memorization practice. Socrates refuses to allow it. As the conversation proceeds, Socrates reveals Phaedrus’ commitment to Lysianic oratory and strives to wean him from it. What Socrates has seen inside Phaedrus’ cloak reveals something important about Phaedrus’ true, not simulated, desires.\(^{19}\)

Presaging the Platonic Socrates’ ribald joke is the Aristophanic Socrates’ chastisement.\(^{20}\) After Strepsiades botches the grammar lessons, Socrates gives Strepsiades something different to do (694). He instructs his student to ‘reason out something of your own matters’ (ἐκφρόντισον τί τῶν σεαυτοῦ προγράμματος, 695). The Cloud chorus echoes Socrates’ demand: ‘So think and scrutinize, twist and condense your every trait; quickly now, whenever you fall into perplexity, leap to another thought of mind’ (φρόντιζε δή καὶ διάθρει | πάντα τρόπον τε σεαυτοῦ | στράβει πυκνώσας. ταχὺς δ’, ὅταν εἰς ἄπορον | πέσης, ἐπὶ ἀλλο πῆδα | νόημα φρενὸς, 700-702).

---

17 Segal (n. 16), 149.
18 For other views that the clouds deceive and mock, seduce and disavow, see K. Reckford, ‘Aristophanes’ Ever-Flowing Clouds’, *Emory University Quarterly* 22 (1967), 222–35, at 222–3, 225; A. Köhnken, ‘Der Wolken-Chor Des Aristophanes’, *Hermes* 108 (1980), 272–8; Nussbaum (n. 6), 76. Blyth (n. 10), 29, criticizes the idea that the clouds mock for not ‘acknowledging any serious moral realization in Strepsiades,’ overlooking the ethical benefits in coming to self-knowledge.
20 This allusion is drawn by E.S. Belfiore, *Socrates’ Daimonic Art: Love for Wisdom in Four Platonic Dialogues* (Cambridge, 2012), 242.
5, cf. 743-5). When Socrates checks back in, Strepsiades is under bedcovers, and he asks for a progress report. ‘What have you thought?’ (721). Strepsiades having thought nothing yet, Socrates departs. When he returns again, he asks again whether Strepsiades ‘has anything… anything at all?’ Strepsiades replies: ‘Nothing, except my penis in my hand’ (οὐδὲν γὰρ πάλιν ἦ τὸ πέος ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ, 734). Socrates tells him to cover himself up and really to try to think (735). The surface joke is that where Socrates seeks some internally-generated idea—inside Strepsiades—his student reveals only his self-indulgence. The deeper joke is about seeking knowledge within a person, or pulling away the outer to learn about the inner.

This joke about revealing a person’s inner realm pervades the play. Socrates is said to have snatched a ‘cloak’ (θοιμάτιον) from the wrestling school (179). Strepsiades covers himself against the effects of the Clouds (267). Socrates tells Strepsiades to relinquish his cloak before studying, as is their custom (497-504). Pheidippides notes that his father has lost his cloak; Strepsiades avers that it is merely ‘thought away’ (καταπεφρόντικα, 856-7). The Worse Argument shames the Better Argument, and triumphs; in capitulation, the Better Argument gives up his cloak and surrenders himself over (ἕξαυτομολῶ) to the tutelage of his once opponent (1102-4). In Strepsiades’ final remarks, mocking Socrates’ words throughout, he announces himself, as the arsen of the phrontisterion, to be he whose cloak was stolen (1498). Such stripping before engaging in Socratic studies is an image of self-revelation. It is a theme we see again throughout Plato’s descriptions of Socrates. Socrates wants to examine Theodorus’ idol Protagoras, but doing so requires examining Theodorus. Theodorus responds that it is hard to refuse to give an account to Socrates, and that Socrates would never let him stay dressed, but is like Antaeus who forces all comers to wrestle, naked. Socrates agrees with the formulation (Tht. 169a5-c3). Socrates wishes that Charmides would strip, though not his body of his clothes, as Chaerephon has suggested, but his soul, to see whether it is sôphrôn (Chrm. 154d1-e8). Socrates tells Alcibiades to ignore his neighbors’ attractive facades and ‘study them stripped naked’ (ἀλλ’ ἀποδύνατα χρή αὐτόν θεάσασθαι, 132a8). The Gorgias ends with Socrates’ speech about the final judgment, where the gods only eventually realize that proper assessment comes with a stripped-down body and soul (Grg. 523c1-525a10).

One more joke in the Clouds may develop the theme of stripping and self-knowledge. Strepsiades leaves the school to bring his son in. As Socrates enters the scene, the Clouds say to him: ‘You, recognizing (γνοὺς) a man out of himself (ἐκπεταληγμένου) and obviously lifted up, you will lap up / take away (ἀπολάψεις / ἀπολέψεις) however much you can’ (808-11). John


22 M.F. Burnyeat, ‘Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration’, BICS 24 (1977), 7–16, at 12, describes self-knowledge in the context of the Theaetetus: it is not merely discerning one’s private belief or articulating a theoretical framework (either of which he would call ‘to have formulated a proposition in words’) but to have ‘thought through its implications in a systematic way, confronting it with other relevant beliefs and considering whether these require it to be withdrawn or revised.’ This evaluative effort, which Burnyeat says is also ‘a vital force in the process itself,… sustained by the pupil’s growing awareness of his own cognitive resources, their strengths and their limitations,’ is—as is clear from the structure of the Theaetetus’s argument, not a ‘psychotherapeutic’ or ‘biographical’ matter, but something that takes simultaneously awareness of one’s current commitments and of one’s norms governing and limiting those commitments.
Newell provides five possible readings: (i) strip off his [Pheidippides’] tan, to match the other scholars; (ii) strip away his errors; (iii) remove his cloak, a symbol of self-deceit; (iv) cleanse him of error, as a cat does itself; or (v) digest him, i.e., get to know him well. Each interpretation could conceivably advance the theme of Socratic self-knowledge.23

VI. SOCRATES’ SEVERAL ACTIVITIES

Aristophanes of course portrays Socrates as concerned with a richer variety of activities than solely drawing others’ views out. Further, the Clouds has a comic and literary function beyond Socrates’ practices. Still, by making Socrates’ gods—the play’s chorus—vehicles of self-knowledge, the interlocutor-revealing part of Socrates’ intellectual practice is given thematic centrality. The play’s resolution is in Strepsiades’ coming to self-understanding, about the badness of trying to escape his debt through nefarious means.24 He comes to understand this once similarly nefarious means are turned against himself. When his son beats him (1408-1442), and threatens to beat his mother, Strepsiades’ wife (1443-1445), he sees the potential effects of his own interests. He now appreciates more fully the value and consequences of his nature set in its urban and expensive context. Knowing oneself is not merely having access to one’s internal milieu as a spectator would look upon a sculpture or a reader a book. It is a matter of reflecting on one’s experiences, assessing one’s abilities, and judging one’s intellectual and moral qualities. It is to lead to one making decisions about what to believe, what to value, and what to pursue. It would be an accomplishment to learn, for example, about one’s ignorance and one’s zeal. Socrates and his Clouds do not teach about human nature, about the structure of the soul, about one’s mortality, or about one’s social role, all of which are typical interpretations of Socratic self-knowledge. They bring a person to assess himself and decide how he must try to be.25

Because self-knowledge provides a unifying but not totalizing thematic role in the play, it is worth understanding the relationship between Socrates’ concern for self-knowledge and his other projects. The first activities attributed to the workers in the phrontisterion involve looking at science from a human perspective. The Socratics have decided that the world is like a cooker, and people are like the coals (95-97). They measure flea-leaps in terms of flea-feet, making their jumping power commensurate with our own (144-152). They study the gnat’s singing power (ξῆδειν, σάλπιγγεξ), and thus its connection to human culture (157-168). They study the moon’s revolutions and other astronomical phenomena (171, 194, 201, 225-232); geology (187-192); and surveying and map-making, for the sake of democracy (202-217).

Questions of the gods arise once Strepsiades coaxes Socrates down from his thinking-basket and swears by the gods to pay for lessons in cash. At this terribly human use of the gods, Socrates says that the gods count for nothing around here (θεοὶ ἡμῖν νόμισμα oun êstí, 247-8), playing on ‘currency’ language to emphasize Strepsiades’ anthropocentric piety. Socrates then asks Strepsiades whether he would like to know clearly, regarding divine matters, what is correct (ὄρθος, 251). Strepsiades does. He accepts Socrates’ offer to interact with divinities (συγγενέσθαι... εἰς λόγους, 252), which emphasizes human-divine traffic. What or who are these divinities? They are ‘our’ divinities (τὰ ἡμετέρας δαιμονίων, 253).

23 Newell (n. 9) favors (iii) on the basis of the other cloak-stealing jokes through the play; he says that Socrates and the clouds will together dissemble (be ‘ironic’) to bring Strepsiades into self-knowledge. If not directly, then at least indirectly does (i) support the theme.
24 A similar view may be found at Konstan (n. 10), 81.
25 Aristophanes might, of course, disapprove of this pedagogical manner, as Nussbaum (n. 6) argues.
That the Clouds are divine is a regular theme of the play (263-266, 269-274, 291-292, 296-297, 316). Socrates’ meteorological daimones simply replaces the pantheonic Zeus. No principled disavowal of supernatural forces is ever made. The phrontisterion appears simply to aim instead for a ‘correct’ (orthōs) explanation for the way the world goes, better in terms of human appreciation. In a series of analogies and inferences (μεγάλοις δὲ σ’ ἐγὼ σημείοις συντὸ διδάξω, 369), Socrates links the rain to the clouds’ presence; thunder to the clouds’ sodden crashing; and cloud drift to cosmic rotation (370-394).

Until this point in the play, Socrates seems to have provided ‘more correct’ explanations for matters of little human relevance, even if they have been put into human terms, ones that allow students to think about themselves in new contexts. The precise noise-making mechanism of thunder might have little interest but to physicists, who study what must happen (δι’ ἀνάγκην, 377, ὑπ’ ἀνάγκης, 405) in accord with things’ respective natures (φυσά, 405). Myth-rationalization about Zeus may even seem equally esoteric, even if more impious. Who cares whether thunder acts like flatulence? But the popular and mundane relevance of the phrontisterion’s research program comes to the fore when Strepsiades asks about scorching lightning. Zeus hurls it against perjurers, Strepsiades notes (397). No he does not, Socrates says; those who obviously perjure are not struck, and Zeus’ own temple and sacred trees have been burnt by lightning (398-402). That the play ends with the phrontisterion being burnt down (1483-1509), most emphatically not by natural forces but by Strepsiades himself spewing morally-charged language (δοῦναι δίκην, 1491, ψβριζετε, 1506, ἑδίκουν, 1509), highlights the importance of this passage. Further strong evidence for the human relevance of the phrontisterion’s research comes from the choral leader’s joke that if the judges of the play vote for its victory, their crops will get the most appropriate amount of rain; but if they do not, they will get evil weather (1115-1130). Aristophanes shows that the cause of lightning and sky-borne fire is indeed a matter of public concern. The fact that, as Socrates says, lightning comes from compressed dry wind (404-407) means that we cannot expect people to receive their cosmic due, or to be free, despite their holiness, from accident. What seemed like an academic concern—the source of storms and residential conflagration—proves in fact ethical and

26 Contra, e.g., Berg (n. 15), 2-6; A. Sommerstein, Aristophanes: Clouds (Warminster, 1982), 2. Dover (n. 1), xxxv, thinks that Socrates’ calling the clouds divine is an accident, not the result of intending to correct Athenian theology: ‘The Greek tendency to personification of natural phenomena and abstractions ensures that a man who is regarded as rejecting the traditional gods is assumed to worship gods of his own choice, not to reject worship as such.’

27 Contra Vander Waerdt (n. 10), 68. P. Woodruff, ‘Socrates and the New Learning’, in D.R. Morrison (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Socrates (Cambridge, 2011), 91–110, at 95–6, 102–3, claims that advocates of the ‘new learning’ sought ‘necessary causes… in place of [the] teleological ones’ that Socrates sought; in either case, these thinkers were concerned not to disenchant the world but to account for events and ideas in more effective ways.


29 Blyth (n. 10), 37-42, shows the way Aristophanes links the cloud chorus with Pantheonic justice served via weather.
political. The proper accounting for meteorological events determines how we think about human issues.

All the same, even were the Aristophanic Socrates’ myth-rationalization ultimately ethical and political, or at least mundanely human, into which we might place teaching about self-knowledge and therefore one’s appreciation of one’s values, the rest of his curriculum looks like a hodge-podge. Lessons in myth-rationalization, as well as in the natural and earth sciences, seem to fit uneasily with the commands to think harder, to change the gender of common nouns, and to learn how to argue from the conservative or radical perspective. This might suggest that Aristophanes’ characterization of Socrates is interpretatively useless, there being no coherent individual to discover and think about. Aristophanes’ very joke may come from this kitchen-sinking, attributing every possible novel pursuit to this intellectual, and thereby presenting him as an incoherent bundle of desires for the cutting edge. Alternatively, Aristophanes might depict a coherent individual, but an uninteresting one. He may have connected Socrates with the dubious ideal of the omnicompetent sophist (Hippias Major, Dissoi Logoi 8), or as a student or doppelgänger of Diogenes of Apollonia, who himself may have had diverse interests. Or some of the pursuits could be taken as oriented to potential or actual students of the phrontisterion, as propaedeutic or initiatory.

The starting assumption, however, that Aristophanes attributes to Socrates and his school a hodge-podge curriculum, might be wrong. Let us reflect on Aristophanes’ presentation again. First, the phrontisterion puts science and technology in human terms. Second, it engages in myth-rationalization in a way that yields public benefit. Third, the phrontisterion is the obvious place for Strepsilades to go ‘to learn to speak’ (98-99, 111-118, 130, 239, 422, 792). A viewer would likely infer that the first two aspects of Aristophanes’ presentation explain the third. What is often seen as speculations in natural philosophy and impious assertions of atheism are actually instructions on the way to speak well. Speaking well—if we do not take ‘speaking’ as a cynical pursuit, and remember that the phrontisterion (also) teaches how to speak well (113, 244, 883, 886)—involves giving the best explanations of events. During the Peloponnesian War, how injustice and impiety are punished, or not—whether by Zeus, or randomly by thunder-storms—would be of central concern. How should a storm-caused shipwreck be interpreted (Hdt. 6.44)? How should burnt fields be understood? How might favorable winds be conjured (Hdt. 7.189)? How might prayers for safe passage be executed? Weather—seasons, winds, storms—would influence health (Hdt. 1.142, 2.77, 3.106.1, 7.102, 9.122), and of particular importance, plagues (Thuc. 1.23). Pericles, thought to be among the very best speakers, is said to have studied the patterns of sky-borne events (μετεωρολογία, Phdr. 270a1). Not everyone would be happy to

30 Thus it is hard to accept the claims of Vander Waerdt (n. 10), 65, that Aristophanes’ Socrates has ‘little or no interest in the ethical questions (e.g., whether law is founded in nature or convention…) favored by contemporary sophists.’

31 Sommerstein (n. 26), 2: ‘All these pursuits are depicted as useless and absurd.’ Dover (n. 1), xxxiv, xxxvii, says that, unlike metric and grammar, ‘There is no direct indication that natural science is propaedeutic to oratory’ and ‘astronomy and physics have no relevance’; but we see that the relation is made clear by the talk of lightning; see also Gorgias, ‘On Helen,’ 13, about the persuasive task of astronomers, and Aristotle, fr. 15 Ross on Empedocles as the inventor of rhetoric.


depend on explanations appealing to regular and unpredictable and dumb weather patterns, but an able speaker would need to know how to appeal to such natural phenomena.\footnote{See D. Coppola, \textit{Anemoi: morfologia dei venti nell’immaginario della Grecia arcaica} (Napoli, 2010), on a full account of the early Greek appeal to winds. The literary, metaphysical, and ethical connotations of clouds are discussed at Dover (n. 1), lxvi-lxix, and Bowie (n. 34), 125-130.}

Thinking about the democratic and war-engaged background, we may see the coherence of Aristophanes’ picture of Socrates. We do not need to see myth-rationalization as merely a sort of cleverness, replacing difficult-to-prove explanations with other difficult-to-prove explanations, more rhetoric than discovery. Many philosophers could have seen that we have long been in ignorance about the true nature of the divine, and so one could with ease accept explanations appealing to novel gods, or foreign gods, or innovative spiritual methods. Such views would not appeal to arch-traditionalists, but those men are not the only members of the voting public. Wartime puts a higher price on certainty about to whom to sacrifice, pour libations, and offer incense (426). Socrates’ apotheosis of the clouds is not a case of incomplete naturalization. His goal is not disenchantment itself: disenchantment alone would serve little persuasive or political function. The clouds are posited as a result of rectification and correction, the search for improved predictability and explanation. Socrates is being presented—satirically, sharply, perhaps derisively—as a dean of this sort of study oriented toward better public (and forensic) speaking. Socrates’ encouragements to self-knowledge would be part of this overall program of improvement. Whether Aristophanes presents Socrates in this coherent manner because he really saw the historical Socrates this way, or because it makes for dramatic plausibility, we cannot say. Presumably he found Socrates talking not just about self-knowledge but also about topics related to myth-rectification and speech-improvement so often that he could fairly attribute to him such a life. In this understanding of Socrates Aristophanes was not alone. Plato presented Socrates in a similar way.

\textbf{VII. THE CLOUDS AND PLATO’S PHAEDRUS}

An important piece of evidence that the \textit{Clouds} highlights Socratic self-knowledge is that Plato seems to think it did. His \textit{Phaedrus} seems to aim at, among other targets,\footnote{See H. Yunis, \textit{Plato: Phaedrus} (Cambridge, 2011), 1-17, for the principal goals of the \textit{Phaedrus}, and D.S. Werner, ‘Plato’s \textit{Phaedrus} and the Problem of Unity’, \textit{OSAph} 32 (2007), 91–137, for the history of interpretation; neither mention the \textit{Clouds}.} redeeming Socrates from his depiction in the \textit{Clouds}. This has never been acknowledged; yet a mass of evidence exists in its favor.\footnote{Dover (n. 1), xliii, rejects a possible allusion by Plato’s \textit{διαίρεσις} (266b) to Aristophanes’ \textit{όρθως διαίρεσις καὶ σκοτών} (742); his haste seems to come from his distaste of the hypothesis that Theaetetus 150e echoes Strepsiades’ having caused a miscarriage of an idea (\textit{Clouds} 137). Konstan (n. 10), 80-81, notes only that the \textit{Phaedrus} includes ‘an account of the heavens’ and thus supports Aristophanes’ view that Socrates discoursed on the cosmos. K. Kleve, ‘Anti-Dover or Socrates in the \textit{Clouds}’, \textit{SO} 58 (1983), 23–37, at 25, 28, notices three similarities between the two works. H. Tarrant, ‘Midwifery and the \textit{Clouds}’, \textit{CQ} 38 (1988), 116–122, at 122n24, asserts without argument in a note that \textit{Phaedrus} 270a—about the importance of \textit{ἀδολεσχία}, \textit{μετεωρολογία}, and friendship with Anaxagoras to Pericles’ excellence in public speaking—shows knowledge of the \textit{Clouds}. Evidence below supports Tarrant’s assertion.} It is clear that Plato repeatedly addresses Aristophanes’ picture of a radically naturalizing Socrates.\footnote{\textit{Apology} 19c3-4 and \textit{Clitophon} 407a8-b1 (cf. S.R. Slings, \textit{Plato, Clitophon} (Cambridge, 1999) ad loc.; perhaps the dialogues that depict the \textit{phrontisterion’s} co-director, Chaerephon (\textit{Chrm.} 153b2-154d8, \textit{Grg.})} This testifies to the dramatist’s influence on the coming
century’s interpretation of the Socratic legacy. Aristophanes must have done more than prejudice the jury of 399; he described Socrates with enough accuracy that his Clouds could still mislead men otherwise familiar with its target. It would seem that the Clouds, according to Plato, got something wrong—Socrates was not so preoccupied with fixing mythic tales as Aristophanes implies; but he got something very right—he was committed to promoting self-knowledge.

The Clouds, as we have seen, presents Socrates as rationalizing stories about divine meteorology. Socrates accepts the phenomena—rain, sky—but disproves old stories (e.g., the rain as Zeus’ urine, 368) and provides new accounts (e.g., the sky as a stove’s lid, 96). In this provision of improved accounts, Socrates is assimilated to a wave of new intellectuals (ψυχων σοφων, 94). These ‘wise souls’ have improved upon the way men have dealt with their affairs in Athens, Hellas, and the world; they have applied instruments, technique, and reflection to the casual and formal tasks of domestic and political persuasion. The Phaedrus confronts Aristophanes’ assimilation of Socrates to this trend directly. Socrates’ friend Phaedrus asks him about his belief in divine meteorology (229b1-5), and Socrates says it would not be strange for the intellectuals (οι σοφοί 229c6) to try to provide a better explanation; but he himself, he says, cannot spend any time doing that. He has to seek self-knowledge instead. And instead of demolishing implausible myths, as the dialogue goes on to show, Socrates in fact deploys new myths and elaborates on old ones (246a6-256e2, 258e6-259d7, 274c1-275c2). So it may seem that Plato depicts the Phaedrus’s Socrates, at the same age as the one depicted in the Clouds, as—unlike the one in the Clouds—avoiding the exact sciences, uninterested in the fashionable

447a8-449a1; cf. Taylor (n. 4), 146-147; maybe Euthyd. 277d and Prot. 315b-c (cf. A. W. Adkins, ‘Clouds, Mysteries, Socrates and Plato’, Antichthon 4 (1970), 13–24, at 18-19, but G.J. De Vries resists, in his ‘Mystery Terminology in Aristophanes and Plato’, Mnemosyne, 4th s. 26 (1973), 1–8); and perhaps others (Phd. 70bc, 99b; Rep. 488e-489c; Crat. 401b7-8; Parm. 135d5; Plt. 229b6-8, according to Tarrant (n. 36), 122n24; see also Kleve (n. 36) generally). Nussbaum (n. 6), 82-85, relates Clouds with Protagoras thematically but does not claim there are allusions. Taylor (n. 4), 148-151, and Tomin (n. 21), 99, claim that the reference to intellectual midwifery in Tht. 149e-151d is historical to Socrates, partially on the grounds that the Aristophanes’ Socratic phrontisterion also uses the language of miscarriage of discovery, though neither claim that these ‘textual affiliations’ are allusions; Tarrant (n. 36) doubts that the language of miscarriage in the Clouds is at all connected to Socrates, and certainly not to the Theaetetus Socrates. R. Hunter, Plato and the Traditions of Ancient Literature: The Silent Stream (Cambridge, 2012), 73-76, suggests that the Republic might show influence from Knights.

38 Yunis (n. 35), 24, puts the Phaedrus’ composition anywhere between 370-350, more than five decades after the two versions of the Clouds, 423/419-416.

39 Vander Waerdt (n. 10), 53n18, argues that even Xenophon responded to the Clouds, in his Oeconomicus, Symposium, and Memorabilia. Most recently, Konstan (n. 10), 76-77, 82-85, 88, and Woodruff (n. 27) observe the ways in which Aristophanes seems to have drawn an important but incomplete picture of Socrates; see also Nussbaum (n. 6), 71-76.


attention to nature, and directing his novel pursuits elsewhere, toward examination of himself and others.  

It would be wrong, however, to think that Plato simply rejects the Clouds’ Socrates as an implausible fiction or a cento of sophistic characteristics. In the first place, Plato’s Socrates also reduces supernatural to natural explanations: he re-explains the disappearance of Oreithuia, often thought to be seized by Boreas the Thracian monster, as a tumble from rocks due to Boreas the gusting wind (229c7-d2). He admits to finding the practice of doing so appealing in certain ways (ἄλλως μὲν τὰ τοιαύτα χαρίεντα ἠγούμαι, 229d3). Plato thus does not reject the impression that Socrates could and did know how to fix myths. He only specifies that Socrates does not make a life of it, and that he believes himself to have a more urgent task, looking into himself. But even in reaffirming the importance of self-knowledge to Socrates Plato is not overturning the Aristophanic image. Far from presenting Socrates as interested solely in pursuits abstracted from living well, Aristophanes too dramatizes Socrates’ interests in self-knowledge, as we have seen. Self-knowledge is also the central theme of the Phaedrus, and it just as much gets obscured, by some readers, behind its concerns with erōs and rhetoric. So in writing a dialogue about Socrates’ commitment to the Delphic imperative, Plato has not abandoned Aristophanes’ portrayal. It would be better to say that Plato has rectified the tales about Socrates. Socrates does not simply engage in two novel pursuits—practicing myth-rationalization and pursuing self-knowledge—related under the rubric, as I argued they are for Aristophanes, of learning to speak well. Plato asserts that myth-rectification is subordinated to the other practice. Plato’s work unifies Socrates’ interests by placing them under the central goal of attaining self-knowledge.

---

43 On the way Socrates seems but is not actually similar on a range of dimensions to contemporary sophists see Woodruff (n. 27).
44 Sommerstein (n. 26), 3, believes that Socrates was ‘singed out as a typical sophist’; that this classification of Socrates was untrue, ‘Aristophanes either did not know or did not care.’ Dover (n. 1), xxxvi-lxi, is also extremely skeptical that Aristophanes knew or cared much about the details of Socrates’ life and motivations. Konstan (n. 10), 85 and throughout, takes a balanced position between ‘hodgepodge’ and derivation from Socrates’ actual practice.
45 Yunis (n. 35) ad 229c5 claims that Socrates’ rectification ‘is an obvious one’ because it would take no great originality to invent it. All the same, Socrates is highly competent at making difficult things look easy; consider his two speeches in this dialogue. See Moore (n. 42) for the connection between Socrates and myth-rectification.
46 In this, Plato is similar to Xenophon Memorabilia 4.7.3, argued that Socrates could do advanced geometry but chose not to, on the grounds that doing so would take up one’s whole lifetime. See C.R. Moore, ‘How to “Know Thyself” in Plato’s Phaedrus’, Apeiron, 2014, for an account of myth-rationalization and self-knowledge in the Phaedrus.
48 Contrast this with the view of Vander Waerdt (n. 10), that Aristophanes had already implicitly unified Socrates’ interests, both via a complete uptake of Diogenes of Apollonia’s interests (on Socrates’
The *Phaedrus* is replete with parallels to the *Clouds*. They indicate more than that Plato wrote the *Phaedrus* as a general response to the *Clouds*. Their concentration in certain areas of the two texts show that Plato meant to address specifically the Socratic attitude toward self-knowledge and myth-rectification. If one takes seriously the way the *Clouds* makes sense of Socrates’ interest in natural science, one may see the continuity in the *Phaedrus* account. In both, Socrates is attentive to questions of plausibility but reflects on that interest without appeal to formulated principles of atheism or materialism. One may also see continuity between the Aristophanic and Platonic pictures of Socrates’ self-avowed interest in self-knowledge. In neither is self-knowledge concerned explicitly with general anthropological, psychical, or metaphysical knowledge of the human being *per se*, but rather with one’s commitments and the skills appropriate for meeting those commitments.

Attention to the dramatic, linguistic, characterological, and thematic parallels between the *Clouds* and the *Phaedrus* may be prompted by Phaedrus’ warning that he and Socrates are at risk of speaking like characters in comedies (τῶν κακομεθέων, 236c2). But even a basic familiarity with the two works brings out both fundamental and detailed similarities.

The *Phaedrus* follows the main action of the *Clouds*. Strepsiades wants to learn to speak effectively, seeks out a teacher, and is open to the mode of speech that does not hew to norms of truth or justice.49 His son—his heir to discipleship—is audience to a competition between two rhetorical ideals (886). Phaedrus, in turn, also wishes to become a great speaker, seeks out a teacher in Lysias, and is open to the mode of speech which cares only for what is persuasive, not for what is excellent and true.50 He then is audience to a competition between (an absent) Lysias and Socrates (235c5-236b8, 257c1-4). Both Strepsiades and Phaedrus, by the end, drop their interest in unjust rhetoric (1462-3; 278b5) and decide to revere the gods (1509, 279c6).

Plato’s dialogue explicitly adapts the motivation for the play’s main action. Strepsiades’ desire for education arises from the debt he has incurred from his son’s love of horses and chariot-racing, as is frequently referenced.51 This love is articulated in Pheidippides’ name, the horse-based etymology of which Strepsiades discusses at great length (62-74). The cloud-chorus, in a most significant choral ode, calls the sun a charioteer, literally a horse-guides (ἵππονόμων, 571).52 The *Phaedrus* begins with a reference to Pindar’s ode to a charioteer (227b9-10),53 features a chariot and chariot-driver as the chief image of its central myth (246a6-255a1), and uses the example of intending to buy a horse as part of its discussion of rhetoric (260b1-c1).54 While it is not Phaedrus’ *philippia* that causes him to need to study rhetoric, Socrates’ desire to praise the (charioteer-depicted) philosophical lover in the right way—just as Pindar wanted to praise his charioteer-client Herodotos in the cited *First Isthmian*—is his reason for teaching good rather than bad speech (242b4-244a5).

---

49 Strepsiades’ desire to become an effective speaker: 98-99, 11-118, 130, 239, 422, 792; seeking a teacher: 182-183, 244; cynicism about truth: 245, 434, 883-885.

50 Phaedrus’ desire to become an effective speaker: 228a3-4, e3-4; seeking a teacher: 227a2, c7, 228a6-b6, 257b2-b4, 278b8; cynicism about truth: 260a1-4

51 14-32, 64, 83, 122, 1401, 1407; cf. 1264-5, 1298-1302

52 See Blyth (n. 10), 41.

53 See C. Moore, ‘Pindar’s Charioteer in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (227b9-10)’, *CQ* 2014, on the importance of this reference to understanding the dialogue.

54 See also Woodbury (n. 28), 125-127, on another significant allusion to horses at 1105-1110.
The Phaedrus parallels, and perhaps mirrors, the Clouds in three other large-scale structural matters. First, Socrates’ acceptance of Strepsiades’ tuition at the phrontisterion explicitly parodies an initiation rite. The Phaedrus also plays up the formulas of mystery religion. Second, just as the Clouds jokes about being indoors, behind the phrontisterion’s walls, the Phaedrus thematizes the unusual case of being out of doors, beyond the town walls. Both works use the contrasting language of urbane (ἀστείος, 205; 227d1) and rustic (ἀγροῖκος, 628, 138; 229e3). Third, the phrontisterion is introduced as the place in which people talk about the sky as a lid that surrounds us (περὶ ἡμᾶς ὄντος, 97). The Phaedrus’ Palinode provides, in response, a different account about the hyperouranian region that encircles us, as it says it will itself celebrate (247c3-4). Socrates in the Clouds thinks that only heights foster pure thought (228-235), in the Phaedrus’ Palinode the charioteers seek the highest orbit for access to contemplation of the pure forms (247c6-248c2).

The degree to which we suspect that the Phaedrus recapitulates the Clouds expands when we look at details. Pheidippides frequently draws attention to Socrates being unshod (103, 363, 719); Phaedrus, for reasons otherwise difficult to explain, also draws attention to the fact (229e3). Socrates’ language of his students’ rear-ends learning astronomy σωτός καθ’ σωτόν (‘itself in terms of itself,’ 194) has an echo in the Palinode’s description of the circling chariots’ astronomy, looking skyward at the abstractions themselves (247d5-6). The Clouds is populated by references to every kind of intellectual and pseudo-intellectual. One blast of references comes when the recipients of the Clouds’ nourishment are said to be ‘sophists, (σοφιστὰς), diviners (θυριομάντεις), medical experts (ἰατροτέχνας), lay-about (σφραγιδονυχαργοκοτρότεχνας), song-twisters of spiraling choral odes (κυκλίων τε χορὸν φαινομένης), and men of atmospheric thought (ἄνδρας μετέωροφενάκας)’ (331-3). The Phaedrus also mentions the life of the sophist (σοφιστικός 248c3), diviner (μαντική 244a8-245a1), medical expert (ἰατρός 268c3; cf. 268b7-269a3, 270b1-d1), lay-about (259a4-6), choral-ode twister (238d1-3), and man of atmospheric thought (Anaxagoras and his μετέωροφολογίας 270a5). Both the Clouds and Phaedrus include cicadas in their action; the Phaedrus’ cicadas singing overhead and encouraging philosophical discussion and discouraging sleep seem presaged by the bugs—fleas

55 140-143, 252-274; cf. Konstan (n. 10), 86; Janko (n. 32), 69; M.C. Marianetti, Religion and Politics in Aristophanes’ Clouds (Hildesheim, 1992); Nussbaum (n. 6), 73; S. Byl, ‘Parodie d’une initiation dans les Nuées d’Aristophane’, RBPh 58 (1980), 5–21; Dover (n. 1), xli and ad 143, 254; Adkins (n. 37), 13-14; de Vries (n. 37), 1-3; Taylor (n. 4), 166-169.


57 Phrontisterion’s walls: 92, 103, 132, 198-199, etc.; Athens’ walls: 227a2-7, 230c6-e1. Cf. Segal (n. 16), 145-147, on the importance of the outside-inside contrast in the Clouds. Note also that the Cloud’s Better Argument describes its ideal of education as going outside the town walls into a veritable locus amoenus, with olives, reeds, woodbine, catkins, poplars, elms, and plane trees (1005-1008); the Phaedrus famously describes Socrates narrating to Phaedrus their walk outside the town walls as they see a verdant, peaceful, shaded spot beneath a plane tree (229b1-2, b7-8, 230b2-c5).

58 On the rich possible meanings of Socrates’ basket-thinking, see Nussbaum (n. 6), 70, 72.

59 Cf. Nussbaum (n. 6), 71.

and gnats—that provide the inspiration for Socrates’ and Chaerephon’s investigations and hinder Strepsiades’ sleeping and thinking. Both the Clouds and the Phaedrus speak at length about the correct way for the erastés and erômenos to act. The two works also share reference to the oaks of Zeus (402; 275b5-6); Prodicus (361; 267b3); Pericles (213, 859; 269b6, 270a3); Nestor as a great orator (1055-1057; 261c2), and covering one’s head (727, 237a4).

These parallels suggest, even if they do not prove, that Plato has the Clouds in mind. The parallels about self-knowledge go further to suggesting direct allusion. The theme of self-knowledge arises in the Clouds with the presence of the cloud-chorus. As the clouds enter, Strepsiades at first has a hard time seeing them. Eventually he can make them out.

Soc.: And you didn’t know that they’re goddesses, or believe (ἐνόμιζες) it?
Str.: God no; I thought they were mist and dew and smoke.
Soc.: You didn’t [sc. realize they’re divine] because you’re unaware that they nourish a great many sophists…and men of highflown pretension, whom they maintain as do-nothings because they compose music about these Clouds.
Str.: So that’s why they compose verses like ‘dire downdraft of humid clouds zigzaggedly bracelet’d,’ and ‘plaits of hundred-headed Týphus’ (πλοκάμους θ’ ἕκατογκεφάλα Τυφώ), and ‘blasting squalls’ (πρημαίνοντος τῆ θῆλασ), and then ‘airy scudders crooked of talon, birds swimming on high, and rain of waters from dewy clouds’…
 […]
Soc.: Have you ever looked up and seen a cloud resembling a centaur (κενταύρω), or a leopard, or a wolf, or a bull?
Str.: By Zeus I have. So what?
Soc.: Clouds turn into anything they want. Thus, if they see a savage with long hair…they mock his obsession (σκώπτουσα τῆν μανίαν) by making themselves look like centaurs. (329-338, 346-350, tr. Henderson, modif.)

In these first lines, the nature of the clouds is doubly ambiguous. The clouds are both meteorological phenomena and divine beings. And they are both ideal objects of veneration and reflections of a person’s idiosyncrasies. They reveal something particular about their viewers, as they do when they come to look like centaurs.

In the Phaedrus, in a remarkable parallel, Phaedrus asks whether Socrates believes a tale told about Boreas, the god of the north wind. Socrates says that certain sophoi would not believe this tale involving an anthropomorphic divine being; they would repair it by giving it a meteorologically-plausible account of a violent wind (πνεῦμα 229c7), and Socrates goes on to give the details of such an account. He says that these accounts are impressive, but, unfortunately, the task of creating them is never-ending. This he expresses by saying that the sophoi could not stop at the Boreas tale; they would need next to rectify (ἐπανορθοῦσθαι 229d5) the stories about centaurs (τὸ τῶν ἵπποκενταύρων εἶδος 229d5) and other beasts (he gives three examples, as did the Aristophanic Socrates). Because he does not have time to rectify them,

---

61 Cicadas and other insects in Clouds: 1360; 145-168, 831; 634-5, 695-699, 706-730. In the Phaedrus: 230c2, 258e6-259d7. Just as the cicadas report intellectual conversation to the Muses through their songs (259b4-d6), the Clouds nourish intellectuals who μουσοποιοῦσιν (‘make Muse-related song,’ 334).
62 On the Clouds, see Nussbaum (n. 6), 55-56.
Socrates says he accepts what is popularly believed, what it is in common circulation (τῶν νομισμάτων 230a2). But he does not ignore such stories altogether. He uses them for reflecting on himself. He wonders—in his sole example here—whether he is ‘more many-plaited than Typhon’ (Τυφώνος πολυπλοκότερον 230a4), a resounding echo of πλοκάμους ... Τυφών).63

It must be more than coincidence that in two brief passages about self-knowledge both Aristophanes and Plato discuss weather gods; sophoi; centaurs; Typhus/Typhon; and skepticism about mythological beings. Plato must want to draw critical attention to Aristophanes’ linking of Socratic myth-rationalization and Socratic self-knowledge. By doing so, he accepts the external picture there described: an inquisitive, innovative, pedagogically-invested, interrogative, character-revealing man. He even accepts that Socrates found fascinating, at least in principle, the fields pursued in the phrontisterion: cosmology, entomology, linguistics (see 244b6-d1), myth-rectification, and helping people attain self-knowledge. Plato’s rectification of the Socrates myth limits itself to explaining the relationship between Socrates’ interests. According to Plato, the sciences are to be pursued to the extent they can help one attain self-knowledge, and not if they cannot. To attain self-knowledge, Plato means to emphasize—though Aristophanes had already made the thought clear—is not, however, merely to do science on oneself and thereby to acquire self-related information. It is to work to understand the ideals that motivate one’s actions, and to seek to conform oneself to those ideals.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This article has argued for a way to read Aristophanes’ Socrates as a coherent and intellectually substantive character, one who advocates knowing oneself and, as it turns out, speaking well. Evidence comes from inside the play: Strepsiades’ echoing, Socrates’ conversational tendencies, the Cloud chorus’ activities, and a running joke. Evidence also comes from outside the play: the parallels and allusions in Plato’s Phaedrus. That Aristophanes has drawn a coherent and interesting character does not mean that he approves of his character or the man whom his character parodies; demands of dramatic realism or aesthetic excellence may explain his conception of the play’s antagonist. I suspect that Aristophanes’ connection of Socrates with self-knowledge gives evidence that the historical Socrates cared about self-knowledge in a notable way, but I have not argued that point here.64

---

63 No commentary on the Phaedrus or Clouds, to my knowledge, had identified this parallel, and yet I think it resolves much of the trouble in making sense of Socrates’ association of himself with Typhon. See R. Brouwer, ‘Hellenistic Philosophers on Phaedrus 229b-30a’, Cambridge Classical Journal 54 (2008), 30–48, for the post-classical struggles to make sense of this passage. See LSJ s.v. Τυφών for the conflation with Τυφωεύς/Τυφώς by the time of Pindar.

64 I thank several very helpful anonymous referees and Elizabeth Belfiore for comments on earlier drafts of this paper; none are to be assumed to agree with the conclusions drawn here.