I. Introduction

The *Phaedrus* aims at, among other targets, redeeming Socrates from his depiction in the *Clouds*. This has never been acknowledged, despite a mass of evidence in favor. That Plato repeatedly addresses Aristophanes’ picture of a radically naturalizing Socrates 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. This paper argues 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. Aristophanes’ anticipation of Plato and

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1 See Yunis 2011, 1-17, for the principle goals of the *Phaedrus*, and Werner 2007 for the history of interpretation.
2 Dover 1968, xliii, rejects a possible allusion by Plato’s διαίρεσις (266b) to Aristophanes’ ὀρθῶς διαιρῶν καὶ σκοπῶν (742); his haste seems to come from his distaste of the hypothesis that *Theaetetus* 150e echoes Strepsiades’ having caused a miscarriage of an idea (*Clouds* 137). Konstan 2011, 80-81, notes only that the *Phaedrus* includes “an account of the heavens” and thus supports Aristophanes’ view that Socrates discoursed on the cosmos. Kleve 1983, 25, 28, notices three similarities between the two works. Tarrant 1988, 122n24, asserts without argument in a note that *Phaedrus* 270a—about the importance of ἀδολεσχία, μετεωρολογία, and friendship with Anaxagoras to Pericles’ excellence in public speaking—shows knowledge of the *Clouds*. Evidence below supports Tarrant’s assertion.
3 Apology 19c3-4 and Clitophon 407a8-b1 (cf. Slings 1999 ad loc.); perhaps the dialogues that depict the phrontisterion’s co-director, Chaerephon (Chrm. 153b2-154d8, Grg. 447a8-449a1; cf. Taylor 1911, 146-147); maybe Euthyd. 277d and Prot. 315b-c (cf. Adkins 1970, 18-19, but de Vries 1973 resists); and perhaps others (Phd. 70bc, 99b; Rep. 488e-489c; Crat. 401b7-8; Parm. 135d5; Plt. 229b6-8, per Tarrant 1988, 122n24; see also Kleve 1983 generally). Nussbaum 1980, 82-85, relates *Clouds* with *Protagoras* thematically but does not claim there are allusions. Taylor 1911, 148-151, and Tomin 1987, 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 1988 doubts that the language of miscarriage in the *Clouds* is at all connected to Socrates, and certainly not to the *Theaetetus* Socrates.
4 Yunis 2011, 24, puts the *Phaedrus*’ composition anywhere between 370-350, more than five decades after the two versions of the *Clouds*, 423/419-416.
5 Wander Vaerdt, 53n18, argues that even Xenophon responded to the *Clouds*, in his *Oeconomicus*, *Symposium*, and *Memorabilia*. Most recently, Konstan 2011, 76-77, 82-85, 88, and Woodruff 2011 observe the ways in which Aristophanes seems to have drawn an important but incomplete picture of Socrates; see also Nussbaum 1980, 71-76.
Aristotle on the centrality of self-knowledge to the Socratic life provides an important historical datum.6 We should count even more valuable Aristophanes’ sketch of the nature of Socratic self-knowledge. Much contemporary reflection on Socratic self-knowledge assumes a false dichotomy. Either it is abstract and theoretical, concerned to discern the nature of humans, souls, or selves as such; or it is personal and observational, tallying up one’s private history and beliefs.7 The Clouds undermines this dichotomy. Through Socrates’ and his Cloud-Chorus’ remarks and practices, Aristophanes treats self-knowledge as a matter of reviewing one’s fundamental commitments in light of one’s (presumably universal) moral norms, granting one the opportunity to change them. This constitutes neither parochial cataloguing (generally denigrated as “psychotherapy”) nor general theorizing (thought of as “doing philosophy”), though including both. We may bring this fresh perspective to Socrates’ frustratingly brief remarks about self-knowledge in the Phaedrus, his most explicit ones in Plato.

The Clouds present Socrates as rectifying 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). As a person who replaces explanations that appeal to anthropomorphic divine agents with those that appeal to mindless events and forces, Socrates is assimilated to a wave of new intellectuals (ψυχῶν σοφῶν 94).8 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.9 The Phaedrus confronts Aristophanes’ assimilation of Socrates to this trend directly. Socrates’ friend Phaedrus asks him about his belief

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6 Plato: e.g., Apol. 38, Alc. I, 124b, etc., Prot. 343b, Chrm. 164d, Phdr. 230a, Phlb. 48c; Aristotle: On Phil., fr. 1.
7 Rowe 2011; Griswold 1986, 43.
8 Cf. Whitehorne 2002, esp. 33-34.
in divine meteorology (229b1-5), and Socrates says it would not be strange for the intellectuals
(oĩ οοφοί 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).\(^\text{10}\) So it may seem that Plato
depicts the Phaedrus’ 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 atheism, and
directing his novel pursuits elsewhere, toward examination of himself and others.\(^\text{11}\)

It would be wrong, however, to think that Plato simply rejects the Clouds’ Socrates as a
complete fiction or a cento of sophistic characteristics.\(^\text{12}\) 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 τά τοιαύτα χαρίεντα ἠγούμαι 229d3). Plato thus does not reject the impression
that Socrates could and did know how to rectify myths.\(^\text{13}\) 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.\(^\text{14}\)

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

\(^{10}\) On Socrates’ use of myth in the Phaedrus, see Werner 2012 and Collobert, Destrée, González 2012, chs. 14-15.
\(^{11}\) On the way Socrates seems but is not actually similar on a range of dimensions to contemporary sophists see
Woodruff 2011.
\(^{12}\) Sommerstein 1982, 3, believes that Socrates was “singled out as a typical sophist”; that this classification of
Socrates was untrue, “Aristophanes either did not know or did not care.” Dover 1968, xxxvi-lvi, is also extremely
skeptical that Aristophanes knew or cared much about the details of Socrates’ life and motivations. Konstan 2011, 85
and throughout, takes a balanced position between “hodge-podge” and derivation from Socrates’ actual practice.
\(^{13}\) Yunis 2011 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.
\(^{14}\) 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.
living well, Aristophanes too dramatizes Socrates’ interests in self-knowledge. The Clouds’ Socrates asks people to reveal their passions and abilities and then helps reflect their commitments and skills back to themselves (345, 478-482). He deploys the cloud-chorus for the same purpose (350-352, 1451-61). “Knowing thyself” (842) is practically the central theme of the play: it is what Strepsiades says the phrontisterion teaches, and in what he appears to make some progress by the end of the dramatic action.15 This theme should not merely be assimilated to general “Socratic practice.”16 It is true that the theme of self-knowledge gets lost behind the absurdity of linguistics lessons (639-694), demands for cogitation (696, 700-705, 722-724, 733-745), and the struggle between the Better and Worse Arguments (889-1111). But self-knowledge is also the central theme of the Phaedrus, and it just as much gets buried by concerns with erôs and rhetoric.17 So in writing a dialogue about Socrates’ commitment to the Delphic imperative, Plato has not abandoned Aristophanes’s 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-rectification and pursuing self-knowledge—related under the rubric, as I argue 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.18

The Phaedrus is replete with parallels to the Clouds, and they are neither erudite nor infrequent. They indicate more than that Plato wrote the Phaedrus as a general response to the

15 Taylor 1911, 175; Griswold 1986.
17 See Belfiore 2012, 211-271; Griswold 1986; […] and Scott 2011 show that the speeches in the dialogue—especially about the powers of love and speaking—demand of the listener careful assessment of his own susceptibility to the lovely, persuasive arguments, and that the conversation of the dialogue points out that demand.
18 Contrast this with the view of Vander Waerdt 1994, that Aristophanes had already implicitly unified Socrates’ interests, both via a complete uptake of Diogenes of Apollonia’s interests (on Socrates’ Diogenism, see also Janko 1997), and (reconstructing via Xenophon’s account of Socrates) through an acknowledgement that some nature-investigation is appropriate to ethical inquiry.
Clouds. Their concentration in certain areas of the two texts show that Plato meant to address specifically the Socratic attitude toward myth-rectification and self-knowledge. 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.

Analysis of the Clouds–Phaedrus connection provides us with valuable historical insight, both into Plato’s anxieties (and thus the status with which philosophers stood in the first half of the fourth century) and into Socrates’ career. More importantly, it provides us with philosophical insight, both into the norms of and problems with scientific naturalization, and the structure and goals of responses to the Delphic “know thyself.”

II. Plato’s many allusions to the Clouds

The Phaedrus contains a surprising number of precise dramatic, linguistic, characterological, and thematic matches to aspects of the Clouds. A hunt for them may be prompted by Phaedrus’ warning that they are at risk of speaking like characters in comedies (τῶν κωμῳδῶν, 236c2). But even a basic familiarity with the two works brings out both fundamental and detailed similarities.

19 A topic helpfully revisited by O’Sullivan 2008.
The *Phaedrus* follows the main action of the *Clouds*. Strepsiades wants to learn to speak effectively (98-99, 11-118, 130, 239, 422, 792), seeks out a teacher (182-183, 244), and is open to the mode of speech that does not hew to norms of truth or justice (245, 434, 883-885). 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 (228a3-4, e3-4), seeks out a teacher in Lysias (227a2, c7, 228a6-b6, 257b2-b4, 278b8), and is open to the mode of speech which cares only for what is persuasive (260a1-4), not for what is excellent and true. 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 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 (14-32, 64, 83, 122, 1401, 1407). This love is articulated in Phidippides’ 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-guider (ἱππονώμαν 571).20 The *Phaedrus* begins with a reference to Pindar’s ode to a charioteer (227b9-10),21 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).22 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). We can note

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20 See Blyth 1994, 41.
21 See [...] on the importance of this reference to understanding the dialogue.
22 See also Woodbury 1980, 125-127, on another significant allusion to horses at 1105-1110.
here that Aristophanes anticipated Plato in the related winged-soul language: upon hearing that the Clouds will teach him, Strepsiades says his “soul has taken wing” (ἡ ψυχή μου πεπότηται 319); the Palinode’s most famous image is of the wings on the philosophical lover’s soul growing upon his gazing on and thereby benefiting from his beloved (251c4).

The Phaedrus follows the Clouds in three other large-scale structural matters. First, Socrates’ acceptance of Strepsiades’ tuition at the phrontisterion explicitly parodies an initiation rite (140-143, 252-274).\(^{23}\) The Phaedrus also plays up the formulas of mystery religion (248b1, 249c6-d1, 250b4-c5).\(^{24}\) Second, just as the Clouds jokes about being indoors, behind the phrontisterion’s walls (92, 103, 132, 198-199, etc.), the Phaedrus thematizes the unusual case of being out of doors, beyond the town walls (227a2-7, 230c6-e1).\(^{25}\) Both works use the contrasting language of urbane (ἀστεῖος, 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 ὁ οὗτος 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);\(^{26}\) 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 see the Phaedrus recapitulating the Clouds expands when we look at details. Phidippides frequently draws attention to Socrates being unshod (103, 363, 719);\(^{27}\) Phaedrus, for reasons otherwise difficult to explain, also draws attention to the fact


\(^{24}\) See Yunis 2011, ad loc, Schefer 2003, Rinella 2000.

\(^{25}\) Cf. Segal 1969, 145-147, on the importance of the outside-inside contrast in the Clouds.

\(^{26}\) On the rich possible meanings of Socrates’ basket-thinking, see Nussbaum 1980, 70, 72.

\(^{27}\) Cf. Nussbaum 1980, 71.
Socrates’ language of his students’ rear-ends learning astronomy αὐτὸς καθ᾽ αὑτὸν (“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 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). 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, (σοφιστάς), diviners (θουριομάντεις), medical experts (ἰατροτέχνας), lay-abouts (οφραγιδονυχαργοκομήτας), song-twisters of spiraling choral odes (κυκλίων τε χορῶν ἄνθρωποι καμπτασ), and men of atmospheric thought (ἄνδρας μετεωροφένακας)” (331-3). The Phaedrus also mentions the life of the sophist (σοφιστικός 248e3), diviners (μαντικήν 244a8-245a1), medical experts (ἰατρός 268c3; cf. 268b7-269a3, 270b1-d1), lay-abouts (259a4-6), choral-ode twisters (238d1-3), and men of atmospheric thought (Anaxagoras and his μετεωρολογίας 270a5). Both the Clouds and Phaedrus include cicadas in their action (1360; 230c2, 258e6-259d7); the Phaedrus’ cicadas singing overhead and encouraging philosophical discussion and discouraging sleep seem presaged by the bugs—fleas and gnats—that provide the inspiration for Socrates’ and Chaerephon’s investigations (145-168, 831) and hinder Strepsiades’ sleeping and thinking (634-5, 695-699, 706-730). Both the Clouds and the Phaedrus speak at length about the correct way for the erastês and eromenos to act. The two works also share

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29 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).
30 On the Clouds, see Nussbaum 1980, 55-56.
reference to the oaks of Zeus (402; 275b5-6); Prodicus (361; 267b3); Pericles (213, 859; 269b6, 270a3); and Nestor as a great orator (1055-1057; 261c2).

For the sake of this paper, these many allusions serve simply show that Plato is in fact alluding to the Clouds; this increases the confidence that his apparent allusions concerning self-knowledge are actual allusions. 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 braced,” and “plaits of hundred-headed Typhus” (πλοκάμους θ᾽ ἑκατογκεφάλα Τυφῶ), and “blasting squalls” (πρημαινούσας τε θυέλλας), 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 (κενταύρῳ), 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 (σκώπτουσαι τὴν 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 the tale given that it involves an anthropomorphic 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 ἱπποκενταύρων εἶδος 229d5*) and other beasts (he gives three examples, as did the Aristophanic Socrates). Because he does not have time to rectify them, Socrates says he accepts what is popularly believed, what it is in common circulation (*τῷ νομίζομένῳ 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” (*Τυφῶνος πολυπλοκότερον 230a4*).

It must be more than coincidence that in two brief passages about self-knowledge both Aristophanes and Plato discuss weather gods; *sophoi*; centaurs; Typhus; and skepticism about mythological beings. Plato must want to draw critical attention to Aristophanes’ linking of Socratic myth-rectification and Socratic self-knowledge. Let us then look first at myth-rectification in the *Clouds*. 
III. Myth-rectification

The first activities attributed to the workers in the *phrontisterion* concern 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). The gnat’s singing power is revealed (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 (202-217).

Questions of the gods arise only once Strepsiades coaxes Socrates down from his thinking-basket and swears by the gods to pay for lessons in cash. At this, Socrates says that the gods count for nothing around here (θεοὶ ἡμῖν νόμισμ᾽ οὐκ ἔστι 248). He then asks Strepsiades whether he “would like to know clearly, regarding divine matters, what is correct” (ὀρθῶς 251). Strepsiades does. He accepts Socrates’ offer to interact with them. What are they? They are the *phrontisterion*’s divinities (δαίμοσιν 253). That the clouds are divine is a regular theme of the play (263-266, 269-274, 291-292, 296-297, 316). It is thus absolutely clear that Socrates replaces one divine thing (the pantheonic Zeus) with another divine thing (meteorological *daimones*). The *phrontisterion* introduces the clouds—which it appears also to refer generally to as air and aither, and sometimes chaos and whirl and tongue (e.g., 424, 627)—not because it is essentially materialistic or atheistic; indeed, no such principled disavowal of supernatural forces is ever made. The *phrontisterion* appears simply to aim instead for a better (*orthōs*) explanation.

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31 Contra, e.g., Berg 1998, 2-6; Sommerstein 1982, 2. Dover 1968, 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.”
for the way the world goes. We see this concern for explanation once Socrates begins the argument for replacing Zeus with the clouds at 365. He says that he will produce a powerful argument (μεγάλοις δὲ σ᾽ ἐγὼ σημείοις αὐτὸ διδάξω 369): the clouds alone are gods, and those others once thought to be gods mere nonsense (φλύαρος 365, ληρήσεις 367). In a series of analogies and inferences, Socrates links the rain to the clouds’ presence; thunder to the clouds’ sodden crashing; and cloud drift to cosmic rotation (370-394). One could suppose that Socrates deploys this argument only to bring Strepsiades around to beliefs that the phrontisterion accepts for who-knows-what reason. But since Socrates never questions myth as such, nor vaunts physical explanation as the only rational approach, we should assume that those at the phrontisterion (simply) find their explanations more tenable.

Until this point in the play, Socrates seems to have repaired the explanations for matters of seemingly little public controversy. The precise noise-making mechanism of thunder might have little interest but to physicists, who study what must happen (δι᾽ ἀνάγκην 377, ὑπ᾽ ἀναγκης 405) in accord with things’ respective natures (φυσᾷ 405). But it is a mistake to think of this research as merely impious esotericism. 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, he notes (397). No he doesn’t, 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, ὑβρίζετε 1506, ἠδίκουν 1509), highlights the importance of this passage. Further strong evidence comes from the choral leader’s joke that if the judges of the

32 Contra Vander Waerdt 1994, 68. Woodruff 2011, 95-96, 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 ideals in more effective ways.
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 piety and justice. 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 political. The proper accounting for meteorological events determines how we think about human issues.

All the same, even were the Aristophanic Socrates’ myth-rectification ultimately ethical and political, the rest of his curriculum looks like a hodge-podge. Lessons in myth-rectification, 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 must be historically inaccurate or at least interpretatively weak-minded. It could still be explained in several ways. The joke could be in kitchen-sinking, attributing every possible novel pursuit to this intellectual, and thereby presenting him as an incoherent bundle of desires for the cutting edge. Or Aristophanes could have connected Socrates with the dubious ideal of the omnicompetent sophist (Hippias Major, Dissoi Logoi 8). Or it could be that Socrates is presented

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33 See also Woodbury 1980, 111, arguing that Strepsiades’ experience as a farmer causes him to ask about and be interested in the weather.
34 Blyth 1994, 37-42, shows the way Aristophanes links the cloud chorus with Pantheonic justice served via weather.
35 Thus it is hard to accept the claims of Wander Vaerdt 1994, 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.”
36 Sommerstein 1982, 2: “All these pursuits are depicted as useless and absurd.” Dover 1968, 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.
as a student or doppelganger of Diogenes of Apollonia, who himself may have had diverse interests.\textsuperscript{37} Or some of the pursuits could be taken as oriented to potential or actual students of the \textit{phrontisterion}, as propaideutic or initiatory or memory-testing.

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 \textit{phrontisterion} puts science and technology in human terms. Second, it engages in myth-rectification in a way that yields public benefit. Third, the \textit{phrontisterion} is the obvious place for Strepsiades 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 wholly cynically, and remember that the \textit{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 best executed? Weather—seasons, winds, storms—would influence health (Hdt. 1.142, 2.77, 3.106.1, 7.102, 9.122),\textsuperscript{38} 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 (\textit{μετεωρολογία} Phdr. 270a1). Not everyone would be happy to

\textsuperscript{37} Vander Waerdt 1994 and Janko 1997.
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.\(^{39}\)

Thinking about the democratic and war-engaged background, we can see the coherence of Aristophanes’ picture of Socrates. We do not need to see myth-rectification 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 (Epicurus, Zeno), and so one could easily-enough 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 librations, 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. Whether Aristophanes presents Socrates in this coherent manner because he really sees Socrates this way, or because he needs it for dramatic plausibility, we cannot say. Presumably he found Socrates talking about topics related to myth-rectification and speech-improvement so often that he could fairly attribute to him such a life.

The *Phaedrus* also finds the myth-rectifying trend in mid-war Athens, and Socrates associated with it. There are some *sophoi* who aim, for example, to give a better account of

\(^{39}\) See Coppola 2010 on a full account of the early Greek appeal to winds. The literary, metaphysical, and ethical connotations of clouds are discussed at Dover 1968, lxvii-lxix.
(ἐπανοθοσθαι, “to restore,” 229d6) the myth of Boreas. Boreas—the personified north wind—had, during the Persian Wars, been called on to wreak damage on the Persian fleet, and he served as the link between Athens and Thrace (Hdt. 7.189, Thuc. 2.29). The rectification of the stories about Boreas would involve reattributing Athenian naval success to something other than helpful gods, and reevaluating diplomatic ties to their northern neighbor. Understanding what caused belief in the centaur, as Socrates said the sophoi would have to do next, would affect the way Athenians understood their recent past; the Lapith victory over the centaurs depicted on the Parthenon metopes may have symbolized the Athenian’s heroic victory over the Persians, or over powers of irrationality more generally. Naturally, during the Peloponnesian War Athenian obligations, expectations, and ideals would be central topics in democratic deliberation. As old tropes proved useless, new accounts would find favor.

Socrates’ assessment of myth-rectification is mixed. While he says it is appealing, he also says it is a never-ending task. He implies that there is no criterion for a plausible world-view can be found and thus propounded at once. There are no natural categories of the “unpersuasive” and the “persuasive” stories, no bright-line distinction between mere myth and legitimate history. The contiguity between the legendary and the recorded past meant that the myth-rectifier had nothing more general to appeal to for discrediting stories than his incredulity at the story itself. For this reason, the myth-rectifier must evaluate the stories, and keep or change them, one by one. That it is a never-ending task means that Socrates has no time for it, obligated as he is to the Delphic inscription, “Know thyself” (229e5-6). Further, because Socrates is not in the business of advocating wartime diplomatic policy, especially not policy based on demythified accounts of national identity and fraternity, he has little reason to explain their etiology. Mythic

40 For other discussions of this passage, see especially Griswold 1986, 36-44 and Warnek 2005, 158-169.
41 For discussion of this latter point I thank Mark Munn.
42 For the complete argument that the previous two paragraphs summarize, see […].
tales and creatures serve for him instead as vivid personifications of ways of being. He wonders whether he is like Typhon, a most famous representation of inconsolable hubris (230a4). He later takes up the image of the avid chariot-driver to represent the soul in love (249d4-257c6). He depicts ancient singers and ancient inventors (259b5-d8, 274c5-275b2). Zeus becomes an ideal leader of philosophical men (246e4); the celestial sphere becomes the seat of the eternal verities (247c5-e6). Thamos and Theuth debate the value of composition (274c5-276a10); the farmers of Adonis represent short- and long-term interests (276b1-c5). Socrates need take no position about the origins of myths, whether they came from mistaken reports or were instead intentional creative productions. They survived presumably because they were helpful to humans for thinking about central human questions.43

Plato acknowledges Socrates’ understanding of and facility with myth-rectification, and so vindicates at least part of Aristophanes’ story. Socrates could be associated with the practice. Plato emphasizes, though, that Socrates did not value this activity in the same way other sophoi would have. Socrates has other and better things to do with these myths. Those activities relate to his projects of self-knowledge. Plato unified Socrates’ diverse activities under the aegis of self-investigation. Aristophanes presented Socrates as subordinating self-knowledge to speaking well, presumably because self-knowledge, particularly the recognition of one’s ignorance, gives one the impetus to learn more and to abandon self-destructive behavior. Plato rectifies this account by subordinating speaking well to self-knowledge. Before we look into the Platonic Socrates’ concern with self-knowledge, we should look at the Aristophanic one.

IV. Self-Knowledge

43 Redfield 1999, 58-61, refers to this as finding myths “meaningful” not necessarily “intelligible,” and thinks that Worse Argument and Socrates reject the former for the latter.
The cloud-chorus serves as a sort of agent for Socrates and the *phrontisterion*. Consistent with that, most readers have tried to explain Aristophanes’ choice of clouds for the chorus as consolidating Socrates’ interest in meteorology; serving as nature deities; suggesting the airiness and moldability of sophistic reasoning; or standing in for traditional divine justice. These readers often give little weight to the way they help their viewers see themselves, and thus the way they act as vehicles for self-knowledge and as symbols of Socrates’ intentions to bring his interlocutors to self-knowledge.

John Newell (1999) made an early attempt to capture this function. He observed that Socrates asserts very little in this play. Socrates’ idiosyncratic mode of interaction involves dissembling and bringing out the views of those with whom he talks. The same holds for the clouds. They aim to reveal a person’s *mania* and get them to realize his errors. Newell focuses on the cloud-chorus’ instructions to Socrates about his treatment of Pheidippides. “And you, recognizing (γνούς) a man [sc. Pheidippides] infatuated and visibly keyed up, will lap up / take away (ἀπολάψεις / ἀπολέψεις) as much as you can” (808-811, tr. Henderson, modif.). The main verb is a crux. 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. Favoring (iii) on the basis of cloak-stealing jokes throughout the play, Newell says that Socrates and the clouds will together dissemble (be “ironic”) to bring Strepsiades into self-

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44 Konstan 2011, 78, on the first three, Blyth 1994 for the fourth. Vander Waerdt 1994, 73, explains it as a parody of Diogenes’ deification of air.
45 The basic idea was noted earlier in, e.g., Nussbaum 1980, 74.
knowledge. It seems intentional that the *Phaedrus* begins with Socrates asking Phaedrus to reveal what is under his cloak (228d6-7), a line almost identical to *Clouds* 733-734.

To what Newell noticed about stripping away the veils obscuring one’s true nature, we may add significant further evidence that Aristophanes carefully develops the theme of self-knowledge. The clouds are first said to “mock” (σκώπτουσαι) a person’s “obsession” (τὴν μανίαν 350). Though σκώπτω is sometimes translated “jeer” or “scoff at,” it really does mean “mock,” to imitate in an exaggerated way. Not much earlier in the play, Socrates says to Strepsiades not to σκώψει (“mock”) and not to make like those τρυγοδαίμονες (“comedians”) in cracking scatological jokes (296). Making like the comedians glosses σκώψει, and Strepsiades is cracking scatological jokes, so “mocking” is imitating. Aristophanes uses the word three more times in the play: the parabasis states that Aristophanes does not make fun of bald men, presumably by presenting bald-masked actors (540); the Better Argument tells Pheidippides to flare up at those who mock him; and the Second Creditor charges Strepsiades with mocking him when Strepsiades pretends the creditor is Xenocles’ Alcmena (1267). It is clear then that the clouds imitate with the goal of revealing something unpleasant about the person imitated. It is notable that in the one use of this verb in the *Phaedrus*, Phaedrus uses the term to describe Socrates’ mocking of Lysias’ speech (that it has no rational order) (264e3). Phaedrus calls it “our” speech. Thus he himself is being mocked: his preferences—for superficially-provocative rather than structurally-sound speeches—are being made manifest, brutally so. Socrates is bringing self-awareness to Phaedrus.

47 For a similar view that the clouds deceive and mock, seduce and disavow, see Reckford 1967, 222-223, 225; Köhnken 1980; Nussbaum 1980, 76. Blyth 1994, 29, criticizes the view for not “acknowledging any serious moral realization in Strepsiades”; my paper aims to show the pedagogical or ethical effects of helping someone come to self-knowledge.

The clouds do not simply mock individuals; they mock a person’s \textit{mania}. Pheidippides twice refers to his father’s utter conversion to Socratism (818-843) as his \textit{mania} (832, 846). In the contest between Better and Worse Argument, Better Argument says that the city and Worse Argument share a \textit{mania} for captious argument. 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 (\emph{ἀποφαίνουσαι}) a person’s nature (\emph{τὴν φύσιν} 352). Several lines later, Strepsiades wants the source of rain “revealed” to him (368). He is compelled to agree that rain-clouds account for rain (372-373), and this is the biggest step in his rejection of Zeus. Later in the \textit{Clouds}, Pheidippides says he will reveal to his father the propriety in beating him (1331). He glosses this term with \emph{ἀποδείξω} (“prove,” 1334), and goes about revealing the propriety by giving a long argument (1408-1439). It is this argument which, accompanied by the argument that it is proper to hit one’s mother, that brings Strepsiades to realize his faults and reject them (1462-1464). Revelation, then, is making compellingly clear something important, something that one would at first very much not like to acknowledge. Add to that the fact that, in the \textit{Clouds}, one’s nature (\emph{φύσιν}) is one’s most significant quality.\footnote{The clouds’ “form” (276); Socrates asks whether there Strepsiades has speaking ability in his “nature” (486); after studying at the \textit{phrontisterion}, Strepsiades will become indistinguishable from Chaerophon in respect to nature (503); Strepsiades is said to “color” his nature with novelties and to cultivate wisdom (515); the \textit{Clouds} is restrained “by nature” (537); Strepsideas says it will be easy to teach his son, since he is a \textit{thumososphos} by nature (877); Better Argument is told by the Chorus Leader to speak of its own nature (960); Worse Argument acknowledges the supposedly unchangeable human “nature” (1075, 1078); Solon is by nature a \textit{philodêmnos} (1187). Other commentators have read the uses of \textit{phusis} mainly in contrast to \textit{nomos}, e.g., Berg 1998 and Nussbaum 1980, 52-54 (but see 52n17).} Revealing one’s nature, then, involves proving to a person something deeply important about himself that he would not readily accept.
The clouds draw out from people their desires and help them act on those desires; when something goes wrong, those people have proven to them that their own character is responsible (αὐτὸς... σαυτῷ ὁ τούτων αἴτιος 1454-5). The clouds can do this by appearing to each person how they want them to look. This mirroring helps explain why the cloud-chorus can appear bimorphic in the play, early on “protrectresses of the windy, up-in-the-air nebulosities of Socrates and his crew,” and later “Aeschylean moralizers.”\footnote{Segal 1969, 143, 148-150.} Charles Segal has established this: “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 “wishes great wisdom from us” (ὦ τῆς μεγάλης ἐπιθυμήσας σοφίας ἄνθρωπος παρ᾽ ἡμῶν, 412). But he replies, “Don’t tell me great thoughts, for I don’t want them (μή μοί γε λέγειν γνώμας μεγάλας: οὐ γὰρ τούτων ἐπιθυμῶ, 432). 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” (τεύξει τοῖνυν ὅν ἰμείρεις: οὐ γὰρ μεγάλων ἐπιθυμεῖς, 435).\footnote{Segal 1969, 149.}

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.\footnote{Blyth 1994, 33 (with n33 for bibliography): Strepsiades admits that the clouds’ “song by itself has caused him to be overcome by his lust for sophistry (319-21)”; this adds evidence to his predisposition to injustice, “which has motivated firstly his failed attempt to corrupt his son, and then his own approach to the phrontisterion, and is further evidence in his lack of moral outrage at Socrates’ theology.”} The clouds advance their viewers’ self-knowledge by mocking and mirroring—or “stripping”—them. Socrates, who is not so literally polymorphic, advances his interlocutors’
self-knowledge by asking questions. Just as he introduces the clouds and their mirroring ways, he says—in such a mannered way that Aristophanes appears to be mimicking actual Socratic language—“Answer now what I would ask” (ἀπόκριναι νυν ἄττ᾽ ὁν ἕρωμαι 345). His questions are about Strepsiades’ experiences looking at cloud-formations; he says “I shall teach it to you from you yourself” (ἀπὸ σαυτοῦ ἃττ’ ὅν ὑμεῖς διδάξω 385). At the beginning of Strepsiades’ lessons, the chorus leader tells Socrates to “move through” (διακίνει) Strepsiades’ mind and to “test out” his “judgment” (τῆς γνώμης ἀποπειρῶ, 477); the first requires displaying Strepsiades’ mind at a fine-grained level of resolution; the second requires assessing Strepsiades’ mettle. Socrates follows the chorus leader’s instructions in the following way, saying to Strepsiades: “Come then, tell me your character, so that knowing it, what it is, on those bases I can apply to you novel mechanisms” (478-480). That is, Socrates rephrases, he wishes to make some brief enquiries (482), and thereby to force Strepsiades’ self-revelation.53 He goes on to ask about his memory and ability to speak (483, 486). After Strepsiades has proven an indifferent student—but not a deaf one—Strepsiades tries to convince his son to join the phrontisterion. Overtly paraphrasing Socrates (814-837, 848-857), Strepsiades says to his son that by studying with Socrates “you will know thyself (γνῶσι ἐπὶ σαυτόν),54 how ignorant and thick you are (ὡς ἀμαθὴς καὶ παχύς)” (842), in contrast with all the wisdom available to humans (841). The thinker Socrates is most explicitly related to in this play, Thales (180), was said (at some unknown time) to have coined the γνῶθι σαυτόν (DL 1.20; Clement Strom. 1.14).

Let us pause over Strepsiades’ remark. The σαυτόν (“yourself,” “thyself”) is not grammatically necessary; the verb can take the indirect statement “how ignorant and thick you are” as argument alone. So it appears that Aristophanes means a quotation of the Delphic

54 Cf. Jeremiah 2012, 188, Havelock 1972, 14n38, Wilkins 1917, 102, Taylor 1911, 172, on an allusion to the Delphic gnōthi sauton; Tortzen 2002’s discussion of the imperative does not mention this one.
inscription, and implies that it is a Socratic motto. Since Strepsiades does not imply he is modifying its Socratic usage, even as he deploys it with greater furor and thus humor, he reveals the Socratic class of object of self-knowledge. One’s ignorance and thickness are neither simply items in one’s belief-set, nor general points about human nature writ large. These judgments serve as assessments of two central and related aspects of character: one’s education and one’s educability. They assess these, rather than describe or observe them, because they use (harshly negative) evaluative language. By involving the assessment of central aspects of character in an explicitly educational setting, it is clear that gaining self-knowledge directly involves also to improve oneself.

Even if Socrates’ question-asking is not his exclusive mode of instruction, it appears his most notable. It certainly distinguishes him from Pythagoras and 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, 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 the myth-rectification discussed above and the ludicrous gender-reassignment of common nouns. Many of the views of the phrontisterion could have been generated by Chaerephon, other teachers, or students. Socrates departs before Better and Worse Arguments compete for Phidippides’ attention; Phidippides’ education comes to be

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55 Dover 1968, 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.  
56 Thus Dover 1968, xxxv, is wrong to say that ὁ κρείττων λόγος “embodies the spirit of Socrates’ teaching.” See Nussbaum 1980, 66.  
57 Newell 1999.
provided solely by Worse Argument. This picture of Socrates as a sounding-board is obviously familiar to all readers of Plato.

Aristophanes of course portrays Socrates as concerned with a richer variety of activities than solely drawing others’ views out; and it is not my intention to claim that the Clouds’ goal is to depict Socratic self-knowledge. But by making Socrates’ gods, and 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. He comes to understand this once those 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 challenging citified 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 will 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. They bring a person to assess himself and decide how he must try to be.

In the Phaedrus Socrates says he has yet to be able to know himself. He does not say what this ability or this knowing involves. He goes on to wonder whether he is more “many-

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58 A similar view is at Konstan 2011, 81.
59 Aristophanes might, of course, disapprove of this pedagogical manner, as Nussbaum 1980 argues.
plaited” and “fuming” than the Typhon, or whether he is instead a more gentle and simple creature with a share of a divine and untuphonic portion (230a4-6). He does not say whether he would want to know more about himself than about his similarity to Typhon, but his inability yet to know himself suggests that what he wants to know is something that would take a long time to discover. In this case, seeing whether one is more or less violent than Typhon would either be merely preparatory information—to see whether one was a reformable beast in the first place—or much more complex and detailed than it seems. Thus Christopher Rowe’s view that the charioteer myth tells us that that the human is a complex being cannot be right.\(^\text{60}\) For if Socrates knew this on the day he was talking to Phaedrus, he would be lying that he was not yet able to know himself. In fact, any view that sees Socratic self-knowledge here as a matter of knowing the human must explain the two main features of Socrates’ remarks mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph: Socrates’ inability yet to be able to know himself, and the fact that he says, of what he wants to know, only that he wants a comparison of himself to Typhon in a very particular way.\(^\text{61}\)

The Palinode’s metaphor of seeing oneself in one’s lover as in a mirror (255d5-6), echoing the famous Alcibiades I account of self-knowledge (124a-133e), suggests that self-knowledge is more fine-grained, a more continuous effort, and indeed an aspirational activity, than simply comparing oneself to Typhon. But even restricted to comparisons with Typhon, self-knowledge amounts not to an internal cataloguing or a theorization of the species “human” but an assessment of skills, expectations, and commitments: what norms direct my activity, how do I respond to criticism, what is actually important to me, am I blinded by my hopes for domination?

\(^{60}\) Rowe 2011, 213 and 1987, 141.\(^\text{61}\) Yunis 2011 ad 229e5 is the most recent commentator to assert that self-knowledge is knowledge of the human generally, and does not consider this claim in light of the difficulties mentioned.
As in the *Clouds*, Socrates in the *Phaedrus* talks about helping people know themselves more than he talks about knowing himself. In particular, he says, in a roundabout fashion, that he will bring Phaedrus through an examination of him. It is worth seeing how this is so, since the dialogue’s element of examination is rarely noticed. After the dialogue’s first back-and-forth argument, Socrates asks: “What is the way to write finely or not finely?” He continues: “Do we need, Phaedrus, to examine (ἐξετάσαι) Lysias about this, and anyone else (ἄλλον) who has so far written anything or will write anything, whether a political writing or an ordinary one (ἰδιωτικόν), whether in meter as a poet or without meter as an ordinary person (ἰδιώτης)?”

Phaedrus’ tutelage from, reverence for, and desire to emulate the writer Lysias, his self-description as an ordinary person with respect to writings (ἰδιώτης: 228a2, cf. 236d5), and the frequent linking of speechwriting to speechmaking together make it clear that the speech-loving Phaedrus is a prospective writer and thus one of the people who must be examined. As the only prospective writer present, this examination must fall on him. The first half of the *Phaedrus* would be an unsurprising entry to this examination: it would bring Phaedrus to realize that speeches vary widely in quality, even speeches he at first loved and found exceedingly fine, and thus that he needs to work on his presently inadequately-sensitive judgment.

Phaedrus expresses eagerness to examine the nature of fine speaking and writing, the activities he is

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62 A similar list of people arises at 277d6-7 and 278c1-4.
63 Lysias as writer: 228a2, 257c7, 279a; linking of writing and speaking: 258d4-5, 259e, 261b4, 271c4, 272b1; speech-loving Phaedrus: 228a4, a5-c1, e4, 234c6-d6, 242a7-b4 (Phaedrus responsible for more speeches than anyone except Simmias). Added evidence is that as soon as Phaedrus agrees that they should engage in examination, Socrates says that they have the leisure for it (σχολή: 258e6); this appeal to leisure tends in Plato to indicate a time for examination and development of virtue (229e7, e.g., *Thet. 172c, d*). This dialogue’s opening citation of Pindar, by which Socrates claims he would choose to talk with Phaedrus even lacking leisure (227b9), seems to point to this. On leisure as time for the nurturance of virtue, see Anastasiadis 2004. Perhaps Socrates, too, is to be examined (he admits he hasn’t yet succeeded at knowing himself (229e10) and prays that he can bring himself “to become fine within” (279b10)), but he denies the ability to write (235c8), and the question about how he examines himself while examining others is occasioned by every dialogue.
64 A parallel case might be Socrates’ extended and variegated examination of Agathon in the *Symposium* about love, given the tragedian’s commitment to and confidence in writing about love in his plays. That Socrates must provide Phaedrus with a range of spoken artifacts to effect his examination explains, for me, the “unity” of the dialogue. For a good summary of work on unifying the dialogue, with an interesting original proposal, see Werner 2007.
studying, and thus what he would like to constitute himself. That Socrates immediately digresses to the story of the cicadas (258e7-259d10) before entering that examination gives further evidence that Socrates means to be revealing Phaedrus to themselves. The story gives reasons to an already eager-for-talking Phaedrus to keep talking (259d6); doing so makes sense only if Socrates needs to preempt any future slackening once Phaedrus realizes the examination concerns himself and so will not be easy.

When Phaedrus reports that he believes writing and speaking finely takes only knowledge of what seems to one’s audience to be the case (259e1-260a4), Socrates says that Phaedrus’ report must have come from some wise people, and goes on to say that they have reason to look into what the wise say (σκοπεῖν, 260a5-7). Though Socrates is saying that even what the wise say must be determined to be nonsense or not (cf. 235c3 with 242c4-244a3), since Phaedrus accepts it, the examination of the wise becomes the examination of Phaedrus. Phaedrus’ later interest in the logoi’s challenge against the Skill of Speech causes him to ask Socrates to examine them (ἐξέταζε 261a2). But of course Phaedrus becomes the recipient of their questions and so the examination is turned against him. By dialogue’s end, the examination of Phaedrus has led the man to decide to abandon Lysias’ tutelage, to esteem philosophy, and to join Socrates in friendship and the pursuit of wisdom. If what Socrates thinks is important—trying to know himself—is what he thinks is important for his friends, then Socrates is trying to get Phaedrus to achieve self-knowledge. But Socrates does not simply teach Phaedrus the nature of man or the nature of soul. He specifically disclaims being able to say anything precise about these matters (246a4-6, 271c6-8). He does demonstrate what an argument about soul would look like (245c3-246a2), but this pertains to all soul, both divine and human, and nowhere does Socrates say that

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65 Phaedrus studied Lysias’ speech upon his departure from Lysias (ἐπεσκόπει: 228b2, cf. 272b7).
66 For more on these wise people, see Rowe 1986 ad 235c3. Also interesting is that Socrates is modeling, and presumably recommending, openness to being refuted (ἐξελέγξουσι: 235b6).
knowing about the immortality of soul is importantly constitutive of self-knowledge. (The
dubiously-helpful equivalence of self and soul in the *Alcibiades I* is not made in the *Phaedrus*;
even if it had been, the *Alcibiades I* does not present knowing the soul as a matter of knowing an
argument about the immortality of all soul.) Seeing that Socrates means to examine Phaedrus’
view about good speech and writing, we can infer that self-knowledge for Phaedrus means
understanding his attitude toward rhetoric, and understanding that attitude means coming to
change it for the better. It involves knowing what is good and what is better. Self-knowledge is
self-rectification. 67

So in the *Phaedrus* as in the *Clouds*, Socrates stands for knowing oneself, especially in
helping others know themselves, and self-knowledge stands for self-rectification. Myth-
rectification contributes to public persuasion. But without knowing oneself, without knowing the
good, *what* policy to choose will be unknown. Myth-rectification is thus subservient to self-
knowledge.

V. The *Phaedrus* and the *Clouds*

It is clear that Plato alludes to the *Clouds*’ Socrates in the *Phaedrus*. 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, all the fields pursued in the *phrontisterion*: cosmology, entomology, linguistics (see
244b6-d1), myth-rectification, and helping people attain self-knowledge. Plato’s rectification of

67 Burnyeat 1977, 12, in the context of the *Theaetetus*, describes self-knowledge in a similar way: 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.
the Socrates myth limited 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.

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