

# Socrates and aristophanes



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Aristophanes' play, *The Clouds*, is a social commentary condemning the ways in which the rise of sophistry, philosophy, and new science in Athens led to a degradation of traditional Athenian customs. Aristophanes casts Socrates as a personified synthesis of several of the prominent imaginative thinkers in his day, many of which Socrates actually detested. However, due to the fact that Socrates was an infamous public figure, purposefully living in squalor, and lacking any political influence, casting him as the figurehead of the anti-traditionalist movement was effortless.

Through Socrates, Aristophanes satirizes the entire sophist movement in education. Within *The Clouds*, Aristophanes, a staunch traditionalist, uses Socrates as a scapegoat, criticizing him for demanding large sums of money in exchange for sophistic and scientific lessons that engendered this anti-traditional intellectual movement. Aristophanes argues that these new intellectual movements serve to destroy the traditional customs of Athenian life, corrupting the youth and subverting the honest and just nature of Athenian democracy, and encouraging the idolization of natural causes over godly explanations.

Sophists were foreigners who came to Athens promising young men an avenue to quickly and effortlessly obtain political power through the manipulation of justice and truth, making the weaker arguments the stronger. Sophists held that truth and justice, the guiding principles of society, were relative concepts that could, and should, be adapted to the needs of each man given his particular circumstance. Aristophanes asserts that the aforementioned system of beliefs endangers the very foundation of Athenian democracy, enabling corrupt and dishonest men to wrongfully sway

the public will for personal gain. He satirically accuses Socrates of charging money for lessons that taught young men to cheat the system, glorifying the combination of dishonesty and beautiful speech over justice and truth, compromising the very moral fabric of Athenian democracy. Strepsiades was a corrupt man who sought out Socrates' wisdom in order to escape creditors after the debt his son, Pheidippides, incurred with his extravagant equestrian lifestyle. Prior to enrolling in The Thinkery, Pheidippides was a respectable Athenian citizen, and Socrates' teachings corrupted him to the point of beating his own father, an unimaginable disrespect of one's elders.

Socrates is portrayed as a poor man who pompously placed himself above other, while preaching nonsense he knows nothing about, excessively analyzing trivial matters, holding the clouds to be the only divine beings in existence, and employing rhetorical devices to unjustly win arguments. The students in the Thinkery are pale imbeciles, more akin to Spartan POW's at Pylos than respectable Athenian intellectuals. The Thinkery is the antithesis of the traditional educational system Aristophanes holds in such high regard, where men dishonestly and excessively analyze circumstances wholly removed from the concerns and workings of the real world. Socrates' lessons are founded in his belief that the only real source of authority was science, moreover that we are simply things in motion that have necessary, uncontrollable responses to certain stimuli. Aristophanes' Socrates subscribes solely to scientific explanations for day to day occurrences typically attributed to the Gods. Aristophanes urges him to take more notice of the gods, if for no other reason than the fact that Atheism was a capital crime in Athens.

While Aristophanes understood and respected Socrates' aversion to holding beliefs unconsciously without thoughtful questioning, he contended that sophistry and new science undermined the moral foundations of a just and fair society. He argued against the newly popularized corrupt method of power acquisition, urging for a return to the traditional power distribution, that is the men in power earning their titles with allegiance to the inseparable concepts of justice and the Gods. The assertion that the Gods did not exist, or even that the universe was created by a sole intelligent being, was a blasphemous belief and dangerous to make public in a vigorously pious society. A mutual respect for religion and tradition ensured that Athens ran smoothly, and Aristophanes criticizes Socrates and other philosophers for providing the necessary means to disintegrate the greatness that the older generation achieved. Aristophanes denounces wholly a practice he believes corrupts the youth by coaching them to lie, leads to impiety and sexual vice, encourages wasting time contemplating trivial matters, and interacting with their equals and superiors alike in an arrogantly antagonistic manner.

Aristophanes' ultimate goal was to make the audience recognize that sophistry was a real danger to society, advocating self-promotion, hedonism, and moral relativism. Aristophanes accomplishes this feat through the personified debate of the Just and Unjust argument, which monetary compensation is required to learn. The Just Argument represents the traditional conservative education system that Aristophanes endorses, emulating obedience and traditional customs, marked by a careful study of classical literature working in tandem with an adequate amount of physical

education. The Unjust Argument, on the other hand, advocates a philosophical and sophistic education system, analyzing the world objectively, suspending human judgment and the ability for any underserving man to consolidate political power through the use of rhetorical devices.

The Just Argument maintains that justice exists with the Gods, and that injustice is inherently wrong. Moreover, moderation and justice come to fruition via the mechanisms of self-restraint, representing Aristophanes' longing for the return to greatest generation, those brave men who fought at Marathon, when children were seen and not heard. The Unjust Argument systematically breaks down the Just Argument, asserting that justice does not exist by nature, or necessity, but by manmade custom. The core of the Unjust Argument is that denying pleasure to stay in line with justice destroys happiness, the end that the Just Argument indicates justice achieves. Rather, men exist in the grip of passions that are naturally occurring and uncontrollable, citing how even Zeus cannot even conquer the force of love, constantly committing adultery. Sophists held that what was right and just in Athens could be seen as inherently wrong in another society, that one man's virtue could be another man's vice. Aristophanes criticized the spread of these dangerous ideas amongst the youth, corrupting the future leaders of society and destabilizing the nature of Athenian democracy.

Aristophanes demonstrates the dangers of corrupting the youth after Pheidippides completes his schooling at The Thinkery and he returns home. Pheidippides mastered the manipulation of debate so well that he convinces his father that a son possesses the right to beat his own father if it is well

intentioned. A man who beats his father in Ancient Greece is a man who has entirely thrown away convention and would stoop to any level no matter how base. Pheidippides explains how his father beat him when he was a boy because Strepsiades knew better than Pheidippides in his naivete. However, now that Pheidippides has more knowledge than his father, knowledge his father tried and failed to master, Pheidippides possesses the power to rule over his father because nature dictates this power structure. With that title to rule, justice enables Pheidippides to beat his own father. Though Pheidippides artfully dupes his father, when he says that he would beat his own mother, Strepsiades immediately reverts back to the Gods of Athens and wishes to harm Socrates and destroy the Thinkery. Though Pheidippides refuses to hurt his own teachers, Strepsiades burns down The Thinkery and beats Socrates and his students at Hermes demand. The moral of the play being that the anti-traditional, anti-religious, and amoral values that Socrates and the sophists embody are extremely harmful.

Though Socrates is thought to be an extremely wise and influential philosopher in modernity, in Ancient Greece he was a radical. He undeniably is not guilty of all that Aristophanes charged him with, but due to the massive influence Aristophanes was capable of achieving, his portrayal of Socrates was taken as a literal, personal attack, providing ammunition for the assembly when eventually hearing Socrates' case. Ironically, Aristophanes proved his own point, demonstrating how dangerous the ability to manipulate the will of the people can be, resulting in the execution of a man who is viewed to be entirely innocent by modern standards.