CHAPTER 5

The Aborted Object of Comedy and the Birth of the Subject: Socrates and Aristophanes' Alliance

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The familiar image of Socrates as a midwife presents the philosopher as the one who aids in the birth of truth in the presence of the Good and the Beautiful. In contrast to the figure of the philosopher-midwife, Aristophanes' *Clouds* depicts Socrates as the abortionist. In a moment of comic horror, a knock at the door disrupts the concentration of the philosopher-midwife, who accidentally performs an abortion on the verge of delivering a new concept (*Cl.* 130–40). The comic poet is often seen as mocking the philosopher with the dark, comic image of the midwife-abortionist. However, Plato himself shifts from presenting the philosopher as the midwife who delivers living truth into the world (*Symposium*) to the image of the abortionist who induces labor only to snuff out the life of the newly born concept (*Theaetetus*). I suggest that with the image of the midwife-abortionist an alliance is drawn between the comic poet and the philosopher, who self-consciously mimic one another in the act of aborting the very object of aesthetic or philosophical reflection.

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I set the stage for Socrates and Aristophanes' alliance by beginning with Hegel's question, what is the object of art?, in the context of his analysis of ancient Greek "art-religion." Hegel traces the shifting object of art through a variety of artistic practices before arriving at comedy, which he identifies as the last stage of Greek aesthetic life. He finally asks, what is the object of comedy? Unlike other artistic practices that are positively defined by their created object or creative activity, ancient comedy appears to be purely destructive, terminating anything that might be traditionally recognizable as an object of art. Hegel points to Aristophanes and Socrates as representing two sides of the defacement of the object of art-religion as such. We can easily identify this negative force in Aristophanes' plays in which the gods—the object of other forms of Greek art—evaporate into a puff of air. Negativity in comedy manifests itself in the determinate negation of this or that object of art, objects once celebrated or revered. Comic negativity expresses itself most powerfully, however, when comedy turns on itself, offering nothing that may be traditionally recognized as comedic (as I will explore through *Clouds*). The playwright himself sets fire to his stage to the horror of his audience. But is this aesthetic stage, which not only lacks but destroys its own object/objective, wholly negative? Hegel proposes that a shadowy figure can *almost* be detected lurking in the negative space left by the terminated object of art at the end of ancient Greek art-religion. He names this figure Subject. The object of art is aborted. A subject is born. This shadow, which is more similar to a phantom than a defined self or ego, does not resemble anything that will become traditionally recognizable as the modern subject. And yet, for Hegel, the birth of this phantom figure, which is attached to the aborted object, represents the first abstract conception of a self—not in the form of an artist or actor, but in the form of the Subject.[1]

Moving beyond Hegel, I turn to Aristophanes and Plato to consider how in the performative destruction of the object of aesthetic and philosophical reflection, something slips into being that may be identified as the phantom form of the Subject. Throughout the Socratic dialogues, we find suggestions of theories of subjectivity, not yet fully realized, but phantoms that are later taken up by modern philosophers to be raised into something concrete. In this sense, Socrates, in his role as a midwife, leaves behind orphan concepts that he neither affirms nor rejects. I claim that one of these orphan concepts is the unrealized form of the Subject. In my view, it is not accidental that the phantom-shadow of the Subject lurks in

[1] In Hegel's work, the first mention of the subject has a theatrical character, as if subjectivity were itself a comic trope. I capitalize Subject in this context to treat the concept as a proper name of a stage character.

places where Socrates takes on the contrary duties of the midwife-abortionist. One strange metaphor leads to another. I pay particular attention to the metaphor of "twin birth." Plato's repeated metaphor of twin birth suggests that the subject is not one but always already two: a double. Plato's myths and metaphors allow the double to be rendered differently. For example, the *Symposium*'s myth of the birth of the human being as a consequence of the circle people being sliced into two allows us to grasp the subject (1) as a composite of two positive halves joined and separated by a split (the subject as constituted by a split or *metaxu*); or (2) as a composite of a positive half and a negative half, a missing or fantastical double (the subject as constituted by an originary lack or *erōs*). By turning to the repeated theme of midwifery and twin birth in the *Theaetetus*, I locate a third formulation of the double: the subject as a composite of determinate negation (the aborted object) and a fantastical appearance (the birth of a phantom subject). The appearance of subjectivity is constituted by an objective side, which cannot be reached. The Socratic figure of the midwife-abortionist points to a double movement of coming-in to-being and coming-out-of-being. In this movement, I adopt a theory of subjectivity in the shape of the monstrous compound of the aborted object and its phantom double.

Hegel on the Terminated Object of Art-Religion

In the last two paragraphs of the "Art-Religion" of the Greeks in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1977, §§746–7), Hegel reflects on the merging of the spirit of ancient comedy with the spirit of Platonic skepticism. He identifies Plato's appropriation of the destructive power of Aristophanes' comedies as giving birth to the first concept of the subject. Hegel at last arrives at this conception of the subject by pursuing the question, what is the object of art? To answer this question, he also asks, what is the object of religion?, since art and religion in ancient Greek society are intertwined. Hegel traces the shifting object of art in Greek aesthetic and religious practice, beginning with the marble statue that depicts the idealized human form as a deity. The statue reflects none of the sculptor's own passions or angst. It is a product that conceals its maker along with the creative process that engendered it (§708). Hegel contrasts the marble statue to art in the form of spoken or sung words. Unlike the statue, which presents the object of art as a thing to be passively admired or worshiped, performed speech makes artistic practice itself the object of art. In singing a hymn, for example, a community is at

one with its art-object (and with the divine). In contrast to the statue, which outlasts and erases its origin, the hymn vanishes when its own production comes to an end (§714). The shift from the object of art as a product to the object of art as creative production is also expressed in the festivals of Dionysus and Demeter. At the festivals devoted to the gods, the festival goers reflect on their own activity, since each god represents a different aspect of human life (§ §722–3). The various activities and customs that comprise human life are each upheld as something sacred in itself. The aesthetic representation of the activity of the gods and the activity of human beings become indistinguishable, as reflected in the epic in which the gods and human heroes mirror each other's actions (§729). On the theatrical stage of tragedy, however, gods and human beings do not often intermingle. The object of tragedy is rather the individual human being who boldly steps forward before the audience. However, the object of tragedy is not only the human individual who is one with the immediacy of her action. The tragic object is also the reflective account of that action, which the tragic hero must provide in defense of her deed before the chorus. In the process of defending her action, the tragic subject fully identifies with her action, defending the absolute rightness of that action even at the cost of her own life. Art in the form of individual human activity becomes indifferent to the human agent. In this sense, tragic performance resembles the inanimate sculpture more than the performed hymn. The art-object—even in the form of action—becomes an impersonal maxim as the creative expression of the individual vanishes.

Art-religion begins with an art-object that is separate from the artist. The object of art is given to the audience as something to be passively admired; the art-object shifts to the immediacy of human activity, something transient that comes in and out of existence with the immediate expression of its makers; and finally, the art-object takes the form of a reflective account of human activity. And yet, in this moment of aesthetic reflection the individual is most alienated from the production of her art (that is, the action that she mistakenly identifies as most essentially her own). Indeed, the art-object, for which she sacrifices herself, will continue to be reproduced by new actors with the same conviction. This irony is not lost on comedy, which breaks with the progression by aborting the object of art-religion altogether (§745). Hegel's pursuit of the question, what is the object of art?, leads him to ancient comedy, which answers "Nothing."

Hegel identifies the art-religion of the Greeks as ending in comedy and connects what occurs on the theatrical stage to the philosophical stage of Platonic skepticism. In tragedy, the character who first steps forward before the audience is terminated, leaving the defense of her action as a placeholder for her missing individuality. Comedy looks with irony upon the tragic hero who sacrifices herself for the sake of an action that was given to her as an absolute imperative. But rather than opposing this self-destructive character of tragedy, comedy elevates it, bringing tragedy's vanishing act to completion. Aesthetic production turns on itself, destroying its final remaining object, its own reflective account of its activity. On the comic stage, the gods—each of which enforces a different aspect of social activities and customs—now dissolve into laughter. Hegel sees this destructive spirit of the comic toward the gods and the ethical ideals that they enforce as paralleled in philosophy by the forms of the Good and the Beautiful, which ultimately show themselves to be comic spectacles (§747). Plato's forms may at first seem like a strange place to locate comic destruction within philosophy. However, Hegel suggests that even a dogmatic reading of Plato—one that identifies a positive metaphysics in the theory of the forms—results in a kind of cultural or ethical skepticism. The forms, which are without determinate content, challenge the ethical maxims and customs of an earlier cultural stage. Because the forms are without determinate content, they may be continually reinterpreted to various ends without offering certain instructions concerning our daily ethical life.[2] We can thus say of the gods and the societal maxims that they enforce: "They are clouds" (§746). As comedy may be viewed as an aesthetic stage that betrays itself—destroying its own object—so might skepticism be viewed as a philosophical stage that betrays itself, extending its critical spirit to its own determinate contents. Despite the fully negative character of these movements, Hegel sees comedy and skepticism as producing a

[2] Certain strands of ancient skepticism attempt to avoid the disruption of skepticism on a social and political level by limiting the skeptic's mode on inquiry to a theoretical register. Sextus Empiricus notably argues that because philosophical inquiry cannot lead us to absolute ethical maxims, it is advisable to conform on a practical level to the laws and customs of one's society (*Outlines of Scepticism*). Tragedy, however, shows us that "going along" with the laws and customs of one's society is exactly what leads an individual into a practical epoché, caught between two ethical actions that are both demanded by one's society but in conflict with each other. Comedy exposes the underlying societal and political contradictions that placed the individual in conflict with herself and her community. The result is total upheaval of the political and ethical systems that structured the tragic stage.

pathos that is an expression of absolute certainty. In the process of overturning the values of a former stage, nothing could be more certain than negativity itself. The sun sets and darkness covers all that we once knew to be true. But this is not yet the midnight of consciousness.[3] Darkness, for the moment, is met by the skeptic's tranquility and the comic poet's detached laughter. As their vision adjusts to the darkness, they begin to sense with certainty "the coming-to-be of a shape whose existence does not go outside of the Self, but is purely a vanishing object" (§754).

Ancient comedy and skepticism abort their own objective contents, leaving nothing positive in its place. And yet the negative space of the object of art-religion is a clearing with which one (the artist, the audience, the philosopher) fully identifies. The vanishing object is at once the negative shape of a sense of self[4]:

> The individual self is the negative power through which and in which the gods [and all that they represent …] vanish. At the same time, the individual self is not the emptiness of this disappearance but, on the contrary, preserves itself in this very nothingness, abides with itself and is the sole actuality. In it the religion of Art is consummated and had completely returned into itself. (§747)

The birth of the subject comes at the price of the termination of an entire form of life (since the gods are not separate from us, but rather representations of different aspects of our experience of nature and culture). Thus, the subject is formed in the shadow of the aborted gods, a shadow she cannot shake. The negative space of the aborted gods, however, will not be completely filled by the new gods and new values and customs of the

[3] For Hegel, self-consciousness is the main stage character of art-religion. In other words, he is interested in how self-consciousness changes shape through different aesthetic, religious, and philosophical representations of human life. Through skepticism and comedy, self-consciousness grasps itself as a pure negativity and, for the moment, will have no sense of despair or nihilism, but will be perfectly at peace with its negative content.

[4] The skeptic's path of doubt leads her to absolute certainty in self. This narrative may sound vaguely Cartesian; however, this foundational self cannot even be counted as a thinking ego. As I will argue, the emergence of the subject out of skepticism takes the form of double negativity. In my framing, this double negativity will not take the form of a negation of a negation (that results in a new positive position), but rather takes the form of negativity redoubled or negative twins: the aborted object and the phantom appearance of the subject.

next stage of history. Instead, Hegel suggests the subject is necessarily constituted by a kind of negative concept, represented at the end of the ancient world by the comic abortion of the object of art-religion. Each new appearance of the subject will be sustained by the negative space of an aborted object.

In this brief but crucial passage at the end of "Art-Religion," we witness the emergence of a newly formed subject, who will develop into the leading role of "Revealed Religion." The strongest embodiment of our new protagonist is in the image of Christ, who embodies the new form of God-in-man, but also the vanishing form of God-as-Absolute (since God-in-man is characterized by division, one dividing into two).[5] At the end of "Art-Religion" passing into "Revealed Religion," Hegel tends to rush over what he sees as the embryo of the subject conceived between comedy and skepticism, only making indirect allusions to the specific crossings of Aristophanes and Socrates in his discussion of the forms as clouds. In the following, I leave Hegel aside and turn to *Clouds* and the *Theaetetus* to offer my own analysis of the subject that emerges as a result of the consummation of ancient comedy and Platonic skepticism. My first proposal is that the comic poet and philosopher come together in the figure of the midwife-abortionist. My second proposal is that the midwife-abortionist on the shared stage of comedy and skepticism delivers a phantom notion—the negative outline of the unrealized concept—of the subject as that which is necessarily conjoined with an aborted object of aesthetic and philosophical reflection.

[5] The comic compound of that which appears as subject and that which is aborted at birth is repeated in what Hegel calls "the divine drama" of Christianity. On this stage, God himself mimics the comic poet and skeptic philosopher. In ushering in the birth of the Son of Man, God terminates the object of religion in the form of an absolute One. Thus, the nativity causes even the skeptic to gasp: "Oh my God, what has God done" (Hegel 1977, §752). At the incarnation what occurs on the comic stage sinks in deeper.

Hegel refers to Christ as a "monstrous-compound" (Hegel 2007, 457): a compound of a new appearance of the divine human subject and a terminated object of religion as an undisturbed unity. At the crucifixion of Christ, we come to fully realize something that was conceived between the philosopher and the comic poet, when, in a moment of comic horror, we recognize that this "monstrous-compound" belongs equally to all.

Aristophanes' Intentional Flop in Honor of Socrates

Aristophanes' *Clouds* is by far his most celebrated play because of its connection to the historical life and death of Socrates. *Clouds* is often taught as a satire of Socrates that contributes to the negative public image of the philosopher, leading to his execution twenty-three years later. The first irony of *Clouds*' legacy is that it is built on a mischaracterization of both Aristophanes' framing of Socrates and of Socrates' framing of Aristophanes.[6] In my view, *Clouds* does not drag the great philosopher down from his high seat in the sky, but rather pays him homage. The second irony of *Clouds*' historical legacy is that its first performance in 422 at Dionysia was a flop—possibly Aristophanes' only flop. What is more, it appears to have been an intended flop. Following four consecutive wins for the category "best comedy" at the festivals, *Clouds* was likewise anticipated to be a great success. Aristophanes dashes his audience's expectations for the comedy on a number of levels. I see these two ironies as closely connected. Aristophanes pays tribute to Socrates, whom he portrays as an abortionist, by purposefully aborting his own comedy to the horror of his audience.

Clouds employs none of the usual comic conventions that Aristophanes' audience had come to expect of his drama. It is his only surviving play, for example, that does not end with resolution for the protagonist, or, if not for the protagonist, then for the communal whole. Instead, the play ends as it begins. It begins with an uneducated countryman, Strepsiades, who has accrued a great deal of debt due to his own arrogance and foolishness. He pretends to be a pious man so that the gods might come to his aid. When the gods fail to come to his aid he redirects his desperate plea to the philosophers, whom he naively imagines have special powers to bend the will of the gods and humans alike. Of course, this image of the philosopher has nothing to do with the philosopher, but is rather a product of Strepsiades' greedy fantasy of employing philosophy to cheat his way out of debt. The play's characterization of the philosopher highlights the paradox of Strepsiades' expectation for the philosopher, whom he imagines to be both lofty and removed while at the same time ready and able to serve the ambitions of corrupt men. The absurd depiction of the philosopher does

[6] Halliwell makes a similar case about the relationship between Socrates and Aristophanes in the introduction to his translation of *Clouds* (Halliwell 2015, 4–6).

not mock Socrates' view of himself or reflect Aristophanes' critical view of Socrates. The perspective belongs to Strepsiades, who might be seen as representing the average Athenian (although Aristophanes counts on the fact that his audience will not recognize themselves as the object of laughter).

Strepsiades bangs on the door of what he childishly refers to as "The Thinking Institute" and demands that Socrates take him on as a student. Although Socrates is mildly amused by the man's astonishing shallowness, he has no interest in coming to the aid of this despicable protagonist. Rather Socrates, in his usual way, plays along with his new interlocutor's assumptions, guiding them to their contradictory dead ends. Socrates responds to Strepsiades' feigned piety with a series of fart jokes that make up the majority of the dialogue. "Don't wait on the old gods to deliver you from your troubles. You'll have just as much luck praying to the thundering clouds, those billows of farts from the great anus in the sky" (*Cl.* 240–99, my paraphrase). This overt mockery is not intended to be clever. It might have provoked a more reflective man to blush, coming to terms with his hypocrisy. But the joke is lost on Strepsiades, who, to Socrates' astonishment, immediately redirects his prayers to the Clouds. When the Clouds do not come to his rescue, Strepsiades becomes like Alcibiades (*Symp.* 213b–222b). His childish admiration for Socrates turns sour. In one last pathetic attempt to overcome his impotency, Strepsiades sets fire to "The Thinking Institute." Not only does the play end as it begins, but there is no comic inversion of power dynamics. In *Frogs*, for example, Dionysus is dragged through the underworld and treated like a slave, while his human slave Xanthius is worshiped as a god. In *Clouds*, however, the poor uneducated fool remains just that, while Socrates and his students walk off the stage unharmed by the flames.

Twentieth-century comedy, taking place on the bleak historical stage of world wars, has made us accustomed to dark comedies that offer no relief from misfortune, which make us suffer the company of protagonists for whom we have little sympathy and tedious plots which lead us nowhere. But Aristophanes' audience was not at all prepared for a play that had no pay off. They hated *Clouds*. And, what is more, it seems that Aristophanes intended for them to hate it. At the parabasis—the monologue in which the chorus leader walks forward to explain the forthcoming moral of the

comedy—the head Cloud steps out. In a shocking moment, he leans in toward the audience and speaks in the voice of the playwright himself:

> Listen here. I'm going to give this to you straight. Your love for my comedies has made me famous, it's true. But you praise my work for all the wrong reasons. My cleverness is completely lost on you and I'm losing my mind. Each time one of my plays is performed, it's like I'm a virgin midwife about to deliver a firstborn. But you greedy bastards pluck the baby from between the mother's legs and raise the child to be as stupid as you. Well, this time you're not going to do that. This comedy is not for you but for the virgin midwife herself, Artemis, goddess of childbirth, goddess of the hunt. (Cl. 510–626, my paraphrase)

In the midst of a comedy of fart jokes, Aristophanes takes a dark turn, essentially promising to sacrifice his comedy before allowing his audience to appropriate it. He confesses that in his view it is his most successful work, although he knows that it will be misunderstood. The play seems to poke fun at Socrates by portraying him as mishandling fragile concepts, which he inevitably terminates—for example, when a gnat farts or a gecko shits (*Cl.* 161–77). This is often interpreted as a criticism of Socrates for failing to deliver his own positive concepts. But given the emphasis of the parabasis, we might conclude instead that Aristophanes admires the way Socrates refuses to give his followers what they want. If Socrates delivers anything at all—and is not simply full of gas—it is a hideous child resembling himself that no one would want to claim as their own (in truth, not even Plato will want to claim Socrates' concepts as his own).

Clouds makes an alliance between comedy and Socratic philosophy, mocking the Athenian attitude toward both. Aristophanes stresses the contradictory framing of the philosopher as one who is both too removed and too involved, too frivolous and too cunning. Such expectations will lead to bitter disillusionment when the philosopher, who claims to be neither a cosmologist nor a rhetorician, fails to offer solutions. The comedy is a prophecy. When the philosopher fails to deliver you from your misfortune, you will in turn identify him as the source of that misfortune. The farce that the Athenians have created for themselves will surely end in horror: the termination of one of Athens' greatest offspring by her own hand.

Theaetetus' Sextuplets

I suggest that as *Clouds* may be read as paying homage to Socrates, Plato's *Theaetetus* might be read as paying homage to *Clouds*. Or at the very least, the two works suggest that Aristophanes and Plato were aligned in their view of Socrates as the midwife-abortionist with one foot on the comic stage and one foot in horror. While *Clouds*, in my reading, defends philosophy against Athenian public opinion, the *Theaetetus* defends comedy, even when its laughter is at the expense of the philosopher. Plato's most explicit defense of Aristophanes is in the *Apology*, in which Socrates at his trial carefully distinguishes between those who attack him "with animus and malice" and the comic poet's harmless "nonsense" (*Ap.* 18d, 19c). The *Theaetetus* echoes this defense of comedy, offering a lengthy digression about self-deprecation and the virtue of being able to take a joke.[7] These passages about critical laugher (*katagelōs*) might seem out of place in a dialogue dedicated to epistemology rather than poetics.[8] Beyond the explicit discussions of humor, the *Theaetetus* takes the form of a joke book. Although Plato's humor is expressed throughout the Socratic dialogues, he chooses this work on the nature of true knowledge to be an explicit exercise in comic writing.[9] The *Theaetetus* mirrors *Clouds* in a number of ways: (1) in the tone of the dialogue, which borders on comic horror—after all, the book of fart jokes is dedicated to Theaetetus, who is dying of dysentery (*Tht.* 142b5); (2) in the explicit defense of joking and mockery; (3) in Socrates' portrayal of himself as the midwife whose primary function is to perform abortions; and (4) in presenting itself as a work of epistemology, but failing to deliver a single successful theory of knowledge: like *Clouds*, it strings the reader along and if it delivers anything at all in the end—and is not simply full of gas—it is something unrecognizable from what the reader had expected.

[7] The philosopher as the object of ridicule and laughter: *Tht.* 172c, 174a, 174c. The philosopher's own ridicule and laughter: *Tht.* 174d, 175b, 175d.

[8] As Halliwell argues (Halliwell 2008), the Athenians were deeply apprehensive concerning the volatile nature of mocking laughter. Given this cultural background, Socrates' defense of critical laughter, at least in the *Theaetetus*, is significant. Just as the philosopher needed a comic defender, so was the comic poet was in need of a philosophical defense.

[9] One of Socrates' standup routines rides on Protagoras. Socrates jokes that instead of calling man the measure, Protagoras might have chosen the pig, baboon, or tadpole (Tht. 161c–d). Socrates' ridicule in the *Theaetetus* always allows the joke to be turned back onto himself. If Protagoras is correct, Socrates continues, then all of his own philosophy is the laughing stock (Tht. 161–2a).

The *Theaetetus* extends *Clouds*' motif of the philosopher-abortionist by adding a twist to several concepts introduced in the *Symposium*, which is traditionally marked as an earlier dialogue. In the *Symposium*, Diotima presents the young Socrates with the inspirational vision of the philosopher-midwife who aids in the birth of new living concepts (*Symp.* 210a–12c). In the *Theaetetus*, the older Socrates likewise presents himself as a midwife to his new young friend, whom he declares to be pregnant with fledgling concepts of knowledge (*Tht.* 149a–51e5). Like *Clouds*, the dialogue opens with an evocation of Artemis: "Isn't it strange," Socrates notes, "that the skilled huntress, a virgin herself, is given the task of overseeing childbirth? But then again the farmer who plants a crop also tends to the harvest; the midwife too oversees the process of coming into being as much as the process of coming out of being, as in the case of miscarriages" (*Tht.* 149b10, my paraphrase). The peculiar tasks belonging to the midwife of concepts involve overseeing the fruitful birth of living concepts as well as phantom births. Socrates admits that it is often difficult to identify the phantom birth. In the case of the birth of living concepts, the midwife must help the mother decide whether the concept is worth raising into a mature theory or whether it should be disposed of immediately. Thus, there are four diagnoses that the midwife of concepts might arrive at: (1) the individual is not spiritually pregnant at all but full of gas; (2) the individual is pregnant but the concept should be terminated before coming to full term; (3) the concept is deserving of being raised into a developed theory, taking the risk that others will steal it and raise it as their own; or (4) the individual is pregnant but with a phantom, a sort of orphan concept that slips through the midwife's hands, so that it can neither be nurtured nor terminated.

The dialogue takes off as Socrates prods the young Theaetetus into labor, provoking him into conceiving a definition of true knowledge. As it turns out, Theaetetus is not suffering from gas but is pregnant with triplets. After much intellectual labor, he gives birth to three unique concepts of knowledge: knowledge as perception, knowledge as true belief, and knowledge as true belief with an account. In a rather perverse joke—which is explicitly delivered as a joke—Socrates snuffs out the life of each of Theaetetus' newborn concepts: "Okay, my boy, now that you're ready to give birth, let's see if it's worthy of seeing the light of day" (*Tht.* 160e5–61a5, my paraphrase).

And yet, although Socrates ultimately judges each newborn to be an unfit concept of knowledge, he never fully rejects the corresponding con-

cepts of perception, belief, and account. With each concept, which is terminated as a concept of knowledge, something slips by which Socrates neither affirms nor denies. From this we might further speculate that Theaetetus is not pregnant with triplets but rather sextuplets, in the form of three sets of twins.[10] One twin is terminated at birth. The other survives. What then is conceived in the failed concept of knowledge? The concept shows itself to be a monstrous compound of a terminated birth and a phantom birth. The surviving twin that escapes the judgment of the midwife-abortionist is shadowed by the negative outline of the terminated twin that attaches itself to its sibling.

The configuration of the twins—one of which is terminated and one of which survives by slipping past the midwife—structures the delivery of each of the three sections of the dialogue. The model of the twins is also explicitly taken up in the content of each of the three failed theories of knowledge: (1) in the theory of perception as a twin birth (*Tht.* 156a–8a); (2) in the metaphor of belief as a combination of two birds, one that takes flight as true judgment and one that is flightless and false (*Tht.* 198d1–200c1); and (3) in the analysis of an account as a compound, which Socrates illustrates with the example of a syllable (such as "Ba") that is composed of an unvoiced consonant (B) and a vowel (A) (*Tht.* 202d10–3e5). In each case, there is one side that represents the continual process of slipping out of being, retreating into the background. But the passive or failed side of the compound proves to be a necessary condition for the expression of the second twin's visibility (in the model of perception as twins), motion (in the model of belief as two birds), and voice (in the model of the account as a compound of consonant and vowel).

In the first of these three iterations, Socrates reveals that the "humble" position of the relativist—who only claims that x appears as F *for me*—houses stronger ontological claims that the relativist attempts to avoid. Protagoras' weak epistemology leads us to Heraclitus' metaphysics. It is not only the case that you and I perceive x differently, but it is also the case that I will experience x differently from one moment to the next: x appears to me as F at T1 but as Y at T2. The only thing that may be said to be true of the perceiver and the perceived is F, the place where the two both touch and fail to touch. But F itself is inconsistent from one moment to the next. Thus, every phenomenological observation involves a hidden implication

[10] Theaetetus's surprise birthing of sextuplets is replayed by Trudy Kockenlocker in Preston Sturges' comedy *The Miracle of Morgen's Creek* (Sturges 1944).

about time and change. The framing of (lower case *t*) truth in the claim—it is true that you perceive x one way and I perceive x another way—relies on a stronger truth claim about being in time as always in flux: Being as Becoming.

It only takes a tiny push for phenomenological description to yield its latent metaphysical contents. With this tiny push Socrates shows the impossibility of remaining both epistemologically and metaphysically neutral. The tiny push furthermore results in a provocative suggestion about the nature of the subject herself, as Socrates shifts the metaphor of the twins, originally introduced as a description of perception, to a metaphysical register.

In the beginning of his discussion of how Protagoras' measure doctrine immediately slips into Heraclitus' metaphysics, Socrates presents perception as the twin offspring of two kinds of change. Change itself takes the form of twins: in each instance, change in the form of some kind of activity is accompanied by change in the form of what is acted upon. Change is a kind of ontological double, opposite forces that always occur together. We might think of change as an "odd couple" that takes the appearance of identical twins; as Socrates later argues, in every instance it is impossible to show which twin acts upon which (*Tht.* 157a–b1). As we experience through the exercise of meditating on our own hands folded in prayer, we can focus on the right hand as grasping the left or the left grasping the right. But it is difficult to experience both sides as simultaneously grasping and being grasped at once.[11] Change as an ontological double gives birth to another double in the form of perception. A perception strikes us as such when something shifts in our horizon (what Socrates calls fast change). Perception is thus the twin experience of something that is perceived—coming-into-being as it shifts into the foreground—and something coming-out-of-being, as it slips into the background:

> From the coming together of these two motions [belonging to change], and the friction of one against the other, offspring come into being—unlimited in numbers of them—but twins in every case, one twin being what is perceived, the other a perception, emerging simultaneously with what is perceived and being generated along with it […] as for the kind of thing that is perceived, it shares its birth with the perception. (Plato and Rowe 2015, 156a–c5)

[11] See for example (Husserl 1989, §§36–7).

When Socrates discusses the "unlimited number" of perceptions within a relativist framework, he does not describe perception as infinite difference in flux. Instead the perception of change, of something new in my horizon or acting on my body, is always the product of the tension between two (a proposition that seems to lean into Heraclitus' theory of opposites over his theory of flux). The ontology, which Socrates identifies as attached to Theaetetus' first born, does not flow organically like a river, but rather in the process of doubles infinitely redoubling themselves without resolving the original tension between two: "kindred births in every case" (*Tht.* 156c5).

Relativism identifies conflict as arising between at least two inconsistent positions: either between two people who perceive "the same thing" differently at the same time; or between the contrasting perceptions of the same person concerning the "same thing" experienced at at least two different times. To avoid conflict, we agree only to make descriptive claims about our own perception rather than truth claims about the world or ourselves. But as Socrates follows relativism to what he sees as its own conclusions, we find that avoiding conflict is not so easy. Conflict also exists in what is typically identified as one: one perception, one stance, one belief, one body, one identity. As the skeptic shows us, if we dwell with any one (perception, stance, belief, body, identity) long enough, we will run into a paradox that was present in the one from the beginning. One is already divided into two. In shifting from a weak epistemology to metaphysics, Socrates extends the theory of perception as "co-generated" (*Tht.* 156e5) to all identities:

> The consequence of all of this, according to the theory, is that nothing—as we were saying at the being—is just one thing, itself by itself, but instead is always coming to be in relation to something. The verb "is" must be removed from every context […] we shouldn't consent to using something, or somebody's, or mine, or this, or that, or any other names that bring things to a standstill. Instead our utterances should conform to nature and have things "coming to be" [… and] "passing away" […] the rule applies to talk both about the individual case and about many collected together—the sort of collection for which people posit entities like human being. (Plato and Rowe 2015, 157b1–5)

The argument about the non-identity of things over time becomes an argument for the non-identity of things in a given moment. And this rule applies not only to objects, but to the human subject, in the form of both

the individual and the community (*Tht.* 157b1–c1). For each subject that comes into being there is also a disappearing object: something that comes out of being, an aborted twin who attaches itself to its sibling.

The *Theaetetus*' specific configuration of the twins—one of which appears as subject against the background of its terminated double—puts a twist on the *Symposium*'s myth of the origin of the human being. In the *Symposium*, Plato's Aristophanes offers the erotic (meaning a drive that is fueled by a lack) model of each individual as separated from her mirrored half (*Symp.* 189c–93e). This passage about the flayed circle people inspires Lacan's lamella myth in *Seminar XI* (Lacan 1998, 197–200). Earlier in this same lecture, Lacan makes the strange claim that the analyst performs the dangerous work of the abortionist, often failing to bring something not unreal but unrealized up from limbo to the surface (Lacan 1998, 23). And yet the myth of the twin birth and abortion in the *Theaetetus* appears much closer to Lacan's lamella: a sort of original skin shed at birth that continues to haunt us. Aristophanes' myth rests on the fantasy of recovering an original wholeness (the hope that the subject might be restored to her intended purpose and well-being). The first appearance of the subject in the *Theaetetus* rests on the fantasy and nightmare of the aborted fetus reattaching itself (the fear that the subject might be exposed as *nothing more* than a fantasy or the paradox of non-identity). Negativity in the first myth is in the symbolic split between two positive halves. Negativity in the second myth is not only in the split between the twins, but also in the position of one half, which is aborted from the beginning. The split in this case separates and holds together something not unreal but unrealized with the phantom appearance of the subject.

Conclusion: The Orphan Subject of Comedy

Socrates asks Theaetetus for his thoughts on the proposal that all perceptions—and indeed all entities—are expressions of twins coming in and out of being. Theaetetus responds for all of us: "I'm not sure, Socrates, and actually I can't make out where you stand on it, either," (Plato and Rowe 2015, 157c5). Socrates carefully dodges the question, avoiding taking his own stance on the matter: "You're forgetting, my friend, that I myself neither know anything of such things nor claim to know anything of them; none of them is my offspring. I'm acting as a midwife to you" (Plato and Rowe 2015, 157c5–d5). As a result of Socrates' concealment of

his own position (if he has one), the passage about Protagoras and Heraclitus has become one of the most influential and disputed passages in the history of philosophy. On the one hand, Socrates, in his role as the midwife, clearly terminates the concept of knowledge as perception, since the claim "everything is as it seems for me" leads us to the conclusion that "nothing is as it seems for anybody" (*Tht.* 158a). There is always something that fails to appear that conditions an appearance. On the other hand, in aborting the concept of knowledge, a concept of perception—which entails an ontology of the subject—slips by the judgment of the midwife. *The subject herself cannot be defined by a single identity or set of fixed properties, but is rather the expression of pairs brushing past one another. There is always something that fails to appear that allows the subject to appear as such.* Some scholars argue that Socrates embraces aspects of the ontology that unfolds from his framing of Protagoras. Others insist that Socrates thinks that all aspects of the argument about perception are absurd, leading to the impossibility of language.[12] As I see it, each definite termination of Theaetetus's three theories of knowledge leaves behind a philosophical orphan as the result of a secondary phantom twin birth. On one level, Socrates' role as the midwife in the *Theaetetus* is purely destructive, since he does not allow a single one of Theaetetus' theories of knowledge to survive. Like the comic stage that turns on itself, destroying its own object, this skeptical method induces a line of thinking only to bring it to its own destruction (the germ of which is in the beginning). And yet, this destruction leaves behind strays that may be adopted by future philosophers who will raise the orphan into their own developed theory or school of thought (which was indeed the destiny of several of Theaetetus' abandoned strays). These philosophical orphans sometimes take the form of philosophical fragments, underdeveloped concepts still in their infancy.

[12] In his commentary on the *Theaetus*, Burnyeat (1990) demonstrates that how one chooses to interpret Socrates' treatment of Protagoras in 151d–84a will determine one's overall approach to the entire text, which due to the ambiguity of this passage lends itself to very different readings. Burnyeat represents "Reading A" by George Berkeley, who argues that while Socrates embraces a Protagorean framing of perception, he denies perception as a definition of knowledge, since the object of knowledge for Socrates is imperceptible. Berkeley nevertheless identifies Socrates as cherry picking aspects of the philosophies of Theaetetus, Protagoras, and Heraclitus to arrive at his own theory of perception. Burnyeat represents "Reading B" with Richard Price, who argues that Socrates follows Theaetetus via Protagoras and Heraclitus to its own absurd conclusion that culminates in the impossibility of language (179c–83c).

But philosophical orphans also take a negative form. Hegel thinks that the negative space left in the aborted object of comedy and Socratic philosophy becomes the phantom form of the subject. The comic hero—including both the actor and spectator—leans into the space of its aborted twin and experiences tranquility in the negativity of its aborted essence, a negative space that gives rise to the sense of "pure certainty of self" (Hegel 1977, §754).

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