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The Other of the Other: Seth Benardete's View of Socrates

DAVID JANSSENS, Department of Philosophy/University College Tilburg, School of Humanities and Digital Sciences, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands

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Following in the footsteps of his teacher Leo Strauss, Seth Benardete devoted his life to understanding "the problem of Socrates": Plato's complex and enigmatic portrayal of the ironic Socrates' embodiment of the philosophic life. This paper introduces Benardete's rich and dense interpretive work by focusing on his understanding of two of Socrates' most distinctive characteristics: his *daimonion* and his *eros*. Like Strauss, Benardete reads Plato's dialogues as a response to Aristophanes' fundamental but friendly critique of Socrates in the *Clouds*. In this context, the *daimonion* and *eros* emerge as the manifestation of Socrates' self-knowledge, and thus of political philosophy as the "eccentric core" of philosophy. Guided by Plato, Benardete subsequently moves beyond the "quarrel between poetry and philosophy" to trace the Socratic turn and the origins of political philosophy all the way back to Homer.

Keywords: Socrates – Seth Benardete – Leo Strauss – daimonion – eros

The Graces, looking for an imperishable shrine,
found the soul of Aristophanes.
Epitaph attributed to Plato

In a memorial speech for Leo Strauss, Seth Benardete (1930 – 2001) characterized his teacher's work as follows:

> [Strauss] was guided throughout by a thought much older than modernity. Averroism saw the political-theological issue as the philosophical issue, since the problem of the human good is grounded in the city, and the problem of being in god. Political philosophy was therefore the eccentric

> core of philosophy, and the problem of Socrates the problem of philosophy itself (Benardete 2012, 375).

In many respects, this capsule applies no less to the path of the speaker, who also devoted his life to recovering pre-modern thought. With extraordinary philosophical and philological acumen, he studied ancient Greek and Roman authors, adopting and extending Strauss's key insight that they practice an art of writing that puts the fraught relationship between philosophy and the city front and center. For Benardete as for Strauss, recovering the ancient understanding of the city and the gods was a key to articulating the twin philosophic questions of the good and being. Moreover, in this endeavor "the problem of Socrates" looms as large as it did in Strauss's. Throughout a career spanning half a century, Benardete published commentaries on at least eighteen of the thirty-six extant Platonic dialogues. And most of his interpretations of other authors such as Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Herodotus, Euripides, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Cicero, Vergil, and Apuleius are "Platonic readings" that frequently circle back to Plato's enigmatic portrayal of the enigmatic Socrates.[1]

In this paper I attempt to present Benardete's view of Socrates to readers unfamiliar with his work. Given the exceptional range and complexity of his writings – not to mention those of the writings he interprets – this is not an easy task. For this reason, I propose to focus on what is generally regarded as Socrates's most distinctive feature: his *daimonion* or "demonic thing." In his defense speech, Socrates famously refers to the *daimonion* as follows: "This is something that started for me from childhood, coming as some kind of voice and which, when it comes, always turns me away from that which I am on the point of doing, but never turns me towards anything" (Plato *Apology*, 31d). Benardete's earliest known work is devoted to the *Theages*, a Platonic dialogue in which the *daimonion* plays a key role. A few years before his death in 2001, he published a summative account of his explorations of Plato that once again highlighted the *daimonion*. I shall focus on these writings as a key to entering the labyrinth of Benardete's thought. It is useful, prior to this discussion, to briefly sketch the trailblazing work done by his teacher Leo Strauss, who developed a perspective on Socrates and Plato that is distinctive within twentieth-century philosophy. This will allow us to more adequately gauge, not only where Benardete was coming from, but also how he

[1] See the list of works in Burger – Goodin (2018, 317 – 323).

subsequently went on carve his own path, which led him beyond Strauss in some respects.

I. Strauss and the *Problem* of Socrates

In 1958, Strauss gave six public lectures on "The Origins of Political Science and the Problem of Socrates" at the University of Chicago (Strauss 1996). In these lectures, he presented interpretations of the principal contemporary sources on Socrates: Aristophanes, Xenophon, and Plato. Throughout the lectures, Strauss emphasizes the literary and rhetorical aspects of the sources, in keeping with his rediscovery of the art of writing between the lines.[2]

Virtually alone among twentieth-century philosophers, Strauss pays serious and sustained attention to the fact that the earliest source on Socrates is Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a comedy that criticizes the philosopher. In the play, Socrates appears as a single-minded teacher of natural inquiry and the art of rhetoric, who is as much at odds with as oblivious of the societal conventions of his time: he appears aloof and more concerned with what is in the heavens and under the earth than with his fellow human beings, he is willing to teach injustice, he openly denies the existence of Zeus and worships the Clouds instead of the Olympian gods. This arouses the anger of the father of one of his pupils, who ends up burning down Socrates's dwelling.

In many ways, Aristophanes' censure of Socrates foreshadows the eventual censure by the city of Athens: at the age of seventy-one, he was tried, found guilty of and executed for corrupting the youth, not believing in the gods of the city, and introducing new divinities. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates explicitly names Aristophanes as one of his "first accusers" (Plato *Apology*, 19c). As a result, he is often viewed as an early antagonist of Socrates, a pious and politically conservative Athenian opposed to the impious and subversive philosopher.

Strauss challenges this view on several counts. First, he points out that the picture of Socrates as a natural philosopher is not an Aristophanic invention: it is attested by Plato and Xenophon, both of whom allude to a time in Socrates' life when he was passionately engaged in natural inquiry in the pre-Socratic sense, only to turn away from it subsequently. Moreover, to the extent that philosophy is premised on the distinction between *nomos* and *physis*, or convention and nature, all of Aristophanes' comedies prove to be profoundly philosophical.[3] Each play depicts the clash between the natural ties and desires

[2] Strauss (1952); cf. Melzer (2014).

[3] For his interpretation of the entire *corpus Aristophanicum*, see Strauss (1966).

that emerge in the private sphere on the one hand, and the demands and burdens of public propriety on the other:

> In the background of the Aristophanean comedy we discern the distinction between *nomos* and *physis*.…if *nomos* is viewed in the light of nature, the Aristophanean comedy is based on knowledge of nature and therefore on consciousness of the sublime pleasures accompanying knowledge of nature (Strauss 1996, 149).

As a result, the image of Aristophanes as a conservative critic of Socrates needs to be qualified. In the first place, he is no simple conservative: "Aristophanes may have been an unqualified reactionary in political things; as a comic poet he was compelled to be a revolutionary" (Strauss, 1996, 144). While many characters in his plays appear to identify the just and the good with tradition, the plays themselves question that identification. Second, as a philosophically minded playwright, Aristophanes does not so much criticize Socrates' philosophic acumen: indeed, there are indications that he rather admires and even envies Socrates for his independence and freedom of spirit. Rather, he criticizes Socrates' *practical* ineptitude. His lack of interest in human affairs and his lack of awareness of the power of human needs, fears and desires, point to a flaw that is dangerous, both to himself and to his environment, as his indiscriminate dissemination of philosophy generates anger, incomprehension and confusion among his fellow citizens. For all his rhetorical skill, he proves to be unable to protect himself against public ire. Even more important, however, is that Socrates' a-political, a-music and unerotic attitude compromises his own philosophizing: his profound lack of self-knowledge as a philosopher among non-philosophers is a blind spot in his dogged pursuit of knowledge of nature. Precisely as a philosopher, he must recognize "…that the political things, the merely human things, are of decisive importance for understanding nature as a whole" (Strauss 1996, 158).

Just this kind of self-knowledge informs the plays of Aristophanes: no less a devoted student of nature than Socrates, he is also a prudent poet who heeds the human things and makes them the starting point for his understanding of nature. By this token, Strauss argues, he is anything but the enemy of Socrates: "…it is no more plausible to say that the *Clouds* are an accusation of Socrates than to say that they are a friendly warning addressed to Socrates – a warning informed by a mixture of admiration and envy of Socrates" (Strauss 1996, 141). By the same token, Aristophanes shows that the knowledge and wisdom

underlying his self-aware comic poetry are superior to those exhibited by Socrates' philosophy.

This groundbreaking understanding of Aristophanes is the backdrop for Strauss' no less pioneering understanding of Plato's Socrates. According to Strauss, Plato heeded Aristophanes' friendly warning and responded in kind, by creating a philosophic poetry that claims to surpass the poetry of Aristophanes in wisdom, self-knowledge and prudence. Most of the Platonic dialogues are dramas of subtle comedy that resonate in many ways with Aristophanes' comedies. Moreover, they present a Socrates who seems to be the direct opposite of the manic Aristophanic. Instead of "walking on the air and observing the sun" while "looking down on the gods" (Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 225 – 227), his feet are planted firmly on the ground in the streets of Athens: he relentlessly engages with other human beings to investigate their opinions concerning virtue, justice, the good and the noble, while being acutely aware of human affairs.

In contradistinction to Aristophanes' Socrates, his Platonic counterpart acknowledges "that the political is irreducible to the non-political, that the political is *sui generis*" (Strauss 1996, 172). For Strauss, this recognition is premised on a more general and more fundamental philosophic recognition. It means, to begin with, that nature, the whole pursued by the philosopher, is necessarily heterogeneous: it consists of a finite number of unchangeable beings or classes of things that cannot be reduced to a unity. They are what Socrates is after when he raises his characteristic question: "What is…?." Second, these beings or classes cannot be perceived with the senses, which perceive an infinite multiplicity of things, but only with the mind. Underlying the Platonic Socrates' attention to the political is thus his discovery of "noetic heterogeneity":

> Only if there is essential heterogeneity can there be an essential difference between political things, and things which are not political. The discovery of noetic heterogeneity permits one to let things be what they are, and takes away the compulsion to reduce essential differences to something common. The discovery of noetic heterogeneity means the vindication of what one could call common sense (Strauss 1996, 171).

According to Strauss, the discovery of noetic heterogeneity also informs Plato's dialogues: "Plato's work consists of many dialogues because it imitates the manyness, the variety, the heterogeneity of being" (Strauss 1996, 182). In the dialogues, we encounter a "new" Socrates: prudent, self-aware, self-possessed and ironic, he is the founder of "political philosophy," philosophy that recognizes the

primacy of human affairs for any pursuit of knowledge, both as to substance and to form, and thus the importance of self-knowledge for the philosopher:

> The human or political things are indeed the clue to all things, to the whole of nature, since they are the link or bond between the highest and the lowest, or since man is a microcosm, or since the human or political things, and their corollaries are the form in which the highest principles first come to sight, or, since the false estimate of human things is a fundamental and primary error. Philosophy is primarily political philosophy because philosophy is the ascent from the obvious, the most massive, the most urgent, to what is highest in dignity. Philosophy is primarily political philosophy because political philosophy is required for protecting the inner sanctum of philosophy (Strauss 1996, 177 – 178).

This double character of political philosophy – it is at once the protective face or façade of philosophy turned towards the polis *and* the "eccentric core" of philosophy proper – is perhaps the most salient characteristic of Strauss' overall approach. A radical reappraisal of the ancient philosophic distinction between what is first for us and what is first by nature, it permeates both his attentive readings of pre-modern philosophical writings and his understanding of philosophy as such. In the same year that Strauss lectured on the problem of Socrates, he expressed this crucial insight as follows: "The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things" (Strauss 1958, 13).

II. The True Apology of Socrates

For Benardete, Strauss' "golden sentence" proved to be nothing short of programmatic (Benardete 2012, 359). In his interpretations of Platonic dialogues, he devotes painstaking attention to the problems inherent in the surface of the text. Moreover, Aristophanes' warning and challenge to Socrates and philosophy, as well as Plato's response, are a constant background presence. In fact, his first known academic performance addresses the issue head-on: in 1953, Benardete submitted a master's thesis at the University of Chicago devoted to Plato's *Theages*.[4] As Benardete observes, in many respects the setting and characters of this dialogue are a response to the *Clouds*: Demodocus, a farmer looking to associate his eager son Theages with one of the sophists but apprehensive of their power to corrupt the young, approaches

[4] The thesis remained unpublished but is widely available online, e.g.: https://archive.org/details/seth-benardete-the-daimonion-of-socrates-an-interpretive-study-of-platos-theages-1953.

Socrates for advice. When during the conversation father and son together suggest that Socrates himself take on Theages as a student, Socrates demurs, saying that the decision will depend on the dispensation of his *daimonion*. In and through the dialogue, Plato thus refutes the charges of impiety and corrupting the youth: Socrates respects and is respected by the father Demodocus, he does not corrupt the son Theages but shows concern for his education, and his "divine thing," the *daimonion*, reveals his piety. This, Benardete observes, makes the *Theages* "the true apology of Socrates" (Benardete 1953, 2).

In his analysis, Benardete attends closely to the way in which Socrates introduces the *daimonion*. He notes that Socrates initially says that it only has a negative, restrictive power, much like in the *Apology*: "This is a voice which, when it comes, always signals me to turn away from what I am going to do but never urges on" (Plato, *Theages* 128d). Later, however, he intimates in passing that it also has a *positive* power: "the power of this demonic thing is also all-powerful when it comes to the intercourse of those who spend time with me" (*Theages* 129e – 130a). In the dialogue, nonetheless, he systematically inflates the negative power as a superhuman power, to impress and intimidate Demodocus and Theages into acquiescing, while drawing attention away from its positive power, as well as from himself. The positive power of the *daimonion* becomes apparent right before Socrates starts to highlight its negative power, when he asserts that

> I happen to know so to speak nothing, except a certain small subject of knowledge: what pertains to erotic love. As regards this subject, to be sure, I rank myself clever beyond anyone, whether human beings of the past or of the present (*Theages* 128b).

It is only when Theages doesn't take Socrates seriously on this point that the latter has recourse to the exclusively negative power of the *daimonion*.

As Benardete points out, both the *daimonion* and knowledge of *eros* are things Socrates claims are unique to him among human beings. This leads him to suggest that they are identical or two sides of the same coin, to wit: Socrates' uncanny capacity to distinguish between souls that are beautiful, harmoniously ordered and philosophically inclined and ugly, disordered souls without philosophical promise, and to attract the former while repelling the latter. "To distinguish between good and bad natures of youths, which repelled them from or attracted them toward philosophy, would seem to have been the particular province of Socrates' *daimonion*" (Benardete 1953, 31). By virtue of his demonic *eros*, or erotic *daimôn*, Socrates is able to 'read' people who

approach him, to immediately 'see' the invisible type and condition of their souls, to be attracted or repelled by them, and to guide them towards or away from philosophy. This distinguishes him from the sophist, who is subject to the laws of the market and must accept anyone willing to pay. In the *Theages*, as in many other Platonic dialogues, Socrates' questions show that, even before he has spoken to him, he has already divined what it is that the youngster really wants and needs.

According to Benardete, the doubleness of *eros*/*daimonion* – as the hidden positive and the overt negative side of the same phenomenon – is reflected in other paradoxical Socratic characteristics, such as his profession of ignorance *and* his claim to erotic knowledge. It also characterizes his famous maieutics: like a midwife who helps others to deliver children while being barren herself, Socrates, barren of wisdom, claims to help the souls of others give birth to thoughts, a painful and perplexing process (Plato, *Theaetetus* 149a – 151d). However, as Socrates also briefly mentions in the same context, midwives acted not only as deliverers – openly – but also as matchmakers – covertly, to avoid accusations of pimping. Likewise, Socrates advertises his capacity to deliver thoughts from the souls of his interlocutors while hiding his matchmaking skills. Moreover, inasmuch as Socrates is avowedly able to match beautiful souls to himself, it also shows "that he is not barren; for he is as necessary to his companions as a man to a woman. Though Socrates may be sterile without them, they certainly would be barren without him. Thus his sterility is as much a pretense as his ignorance; and his Eros as much the truth as his knowledge" (Benardete 1953, 40; cf. Benardete 2000, 304).

The doubleness of *daimonion*/*eros* also explains why Socrates is at once political *and* apolitical, *contra* Aristophanes' depiction. In its negative dimension the *daimonion* justifies his turn away from the city, its ambitions, its passions and its demands on the body, in order to devote himself entirely to the mind in the private sphere, where *nomos* yields to *phusis* (Benardete 1953, 36). In its positive dimension, his *eros* draws him towards the city, to the *agora* and to the young, whom he expertly engages in discussions about political matters like justice and virtue. However, his aim in doing so is to attract those among them with harmonious and gifted souls and to lead them *beyond* the city, towards philosophy: "Though he instructed his pupils in the ways of the city, in politics, above all else, this study was but the means employed to transcend them. Thus by a curious paradox the way to the marketplace led beyond it: his Eros shares with his daimonion its non-political character" (Benardete 1953, 37). By the

same token, the way towards philosophy necessarily leads through the city as much as it leads beyond it.

Finally, the doubleness of Socrates' *daimonion/eros* leads Benardete to raise the question as to their origin: are they divine and hence supernatural, or rather natural? Invoking Aristotle's observation that "nature is demonic, not divine" (Aristotle, *On Divination by Dreams* 463b), he infers that the demonic is entirely natural: "[Socrates'] daimonion was in need of no other power than nature. Hovering between the human and the super-human, neither so defective as the one nor so perfect as the other, it represented that super-abundance of nature which distinguished Socrates" (Benardete 1953, 37 – 38). This superabundance of nature befell Socrates entirely by chance or luck, not by any necessity or divine dispensation. Even though it may appear to us as something divine, it is "a divinity that was natural even though it was rare" (Benardete 1953, 41).

At the end of his interpretation of Plato's *Republic*, Benardete comments on the myth of Er, which depicts an afterlife in which the Fates, who weave together the cosmos, allow the souls of the dead to choose a new life. As Socrates describes the scene, none of the souls is able to shake off the habits they acquired in their former lives, and this prevents them from choosing a just and philosophic life. Only the latter, which consists of freeing oneself of habits inculcated by *nomos*, in pursuit of the knowledge of *physis* and of the best life, would seem to offer a way out. But to choose such a life would then seem to be available only to a soul that arrives in the afterlife with no habits at all: "Perhaps then, philosophy is a rare strand in the bond of the cosmos, and when babies who die at birth choose a life at random, they sometimes get lucky" (Benardete 1989, 229). One such baby, it seems, was Socrates. As a manifestation of this rare strand in the bond of the cosmos, he cannot but appear as a problem to the rest of us.

Benardete concludes his dissertation with the suggestion that Socrates' *daimonion/eros* in its double aspect is somehow reflected in Plato's literary skill. The "logographic necessity" (Plato, *Phaedrus* 264b) that informs his choice of the setting, the speeches and deeds, the argument and the action as well as the argument of the action of the dialogues, points to a similar natural capacity of seeing, reading and responding to different types of soul. As a result, the experience of reading a Platonic dialogue would seem to reproduce the experience of encountering the demonic-erotic Socrates, forbidding and attractive at the same time. In this respect, the problem inherent in the surface of a Platonic dialogue would point us to the problem of Socrates.

III. The Double Vision

In 1999, Benardete presented a paper entitled "Socrates and Plato: The Dialectics of Eros," in which he focuses on the central place of *eros* in Plato's thought.[5] Ranging across many dialogues and drawing on a daunting store of interpretive work, the paper also revisits and elaborates on some of the key points raised in his dissertation and discussed above. To begin with, he again points to the intimate connection between Socrates' *eros* and the *daimonion*, his extraordinary talent to read human souls, and his rhetorical skill at guiding the talented ones towards philosophy through carefully tailored speeches. His erotic art "consists in the uncanny capacity to figure out the nature of the soul of his interlocutor and contrive in accordance with it that form that completes it as it turns the soul to the desire to understand what is truly intelligible" (Benardete 2012, 259). Whether it's a perplexing question, a questionable analogy or a full-fledged myth, the myriad devices Socrates designs are attuned to satisfy the needs of his interlocutor's soul in such a way that, at the same time, they awaken a desire for wisdom.

Moreover, Benardete reiterates his view that Socrates' *eros*/*daimonion*, though unique, is a *natural* and not a supernatural phenomenon. This is borne out by his interpretation of Plato's *Symposium*, a dialogue in which Socrates and several other speakers – including Aristophanes – give speeches about *eros*. Following his teacher Leo Strauss, Benardete points out that, whereas all other speakers praise the god Eros, the speech of Socrates *denies* the divinity of *eros* (Strauss 2001, 187 – 188). As Socrates relates, he was taught the erotic things by Diotima, a seeress from Mantineia. According to Diotima – whom Socrates never contradicts – the gods possess the beautiful and the good things, whereas *eros*, the *desire* for the good and the beautiful, possesses neither and thus cannot be a god. Instead, she argues, *eros* is "a great *daimôn*, Socrates. For the *daimonion* is in its entirety between god and mortal" (Plato, *Symposium* 202d-e). This revelation, Benardete points out, constitutes the real profanation of mysteries to which the *Symposium* alludes by way of the appearance of Alcibiades, who crashes the drinking party and brings it to a conclusion by delivering an impromptu speech praising Socrates. As in the *Theages*, in one and the same movement *eros* is naturalized and Socrates is singled out as an example of the superabundance of nature: "The god Eros is nothing but the manifold of human erotic natures insofar as they are severally idealized by the lover and foisted onto the beloved, but Socrates himself, with his Protean nature, does

[5] Reprinted in Benardete (2012, 244 – 260).

not fit into any single type" (Benardete 2012, 259). While consummately adept at perplexing his interlocutors by confronting them with otherness, he himself constantly eludes the distinctions he makes: "Socrates is always the other of the other" (Benardete 2012, 259).[6]

Like the *Theages*, the *Symposium* responds to Aristophanes' challenge by highlighting Socrates' erotic and demonic singularity as self-knowledge. As Diotima explains, *eros* is the offspring of Resourcefulness (*Poros*) and Poverty (*Penia*), and thus, in Benardete's words, "self-aware desire," the Socratic knowledge of ignorance situated between wisdom and ignorance (Benardete 2000, 180). Not surprisingly, the description of Eros that Diotima subsequently provides almost amounts to a sketch of Socrates: a resilient, shoeless vagabond, he is "completely at home in his homelessness. He is ever at home with neediness" (Benardete 2000, 180). Here again, the paradoxical quality of Socrates is reflected in the way Plato dramatizes the coincidence of the universal and the particular: "To have the erotic art is to have the capacity to get absorbed in the question at hand and never forget oneself. Plato's way of representing this to us is to raise the most difficult of questions while making Socrates the most vividly conceived of individuals. The anonymity of mind has the most distinctive of human faces" (Benardete 2012, 252). Like Socrates' speeches, it seems that the dramas of his friend and pupil are powered by a *daimonion,* and hence by a keen awareness of the doubleness of *eros*:

> [T]he occasion and the question cannot be separated even while they are being separated. What keeps them together is the philosopher's self-knowledge, which essentially depends on maintaining a double vision: What is it? and What good is it? Eros is the name for this double vision. It is the bond between what is to be known and what it means to know it. It consists in the acknowledgement that the need for separation, which makes understanding possible, and the desire for union, which would make satisfaction possible, cannot be naturally overcome (Benardete 2012, 252; cf, Benardete 1997, 99 – 100).

In keeping the problem of the good and the problem of being together in their apartness, *eros* as self-knowledge points to political philosophy as the eccentric core of philosophy.

As a response to Aristophanes, the *Symposium* goes beyond the *Theages*, as Plato upstages and outperforms the comic playwright. When his turn to praise

[6] Consider also Benardete (2012, 247 – 248): "For Plato, however, negation is always the other of the other."

Eros comes, Aristophanes is prevented from speaking by hiccups, and it takes him some time – and a range of comically noisy remedies – to recover. The speech Plato has him deliver is a masterful pastiche: an origin myth of rebellious spherical people who are cut in two by Zeus, after which each half is driven by erotic longing for the other half. Although its comical surface is worthy of Aristophanes himself, Plato provides the myth with a deeply tragic undercurrent, as *eros* turns out to be divorced from rationality (Benardete 2000, 175). In his account of the teaching of Diotima, Socrates not only corrects this flaw, but his account of *eros* is able to explain and correct both tragedy *and* comedy, thus surpassing both. At the end of the *Symposium*, Socrates has the comedian Aristophanes and the tragedian Agathon "agree that the same man should know how to make comedy and tragedy; and that he who is by art a tragic poet is also a comic poet" (Plato, *Symposium*, 223d). When both playwrights fall asleep, Socrates alone remains awake and puts them to bed. The reader is invited to remain awake with him and to ponder this unique individual and the philosophic life he stands for. As Benardete puts it, in a nod to his teacher Strauss's "golden sentence": "Like Eros, Socrates is not a solution wrapped in an enigma. The enigmatic wrapping is the solution" (Benardete 2000, 181).

IV. On the Way from Homer

With Plato's philosophic poetry and poetic philosophy, the challenge leveled by Aristophanes on behalf of poetry seems to have been met with resounding success. In the Platonic dialogues, philosophy adopts the self-awareness and self-knowledge of the poets to become political philosophy, which by this token is superior to pre-Platonic philosophy and poetry alike. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates famously banishes the poets from the best city he is constructing, referring to "some old quarrel between poetry and philosophy" (Plato, *Republic*, 607b).

In his later work, however, Benardete came to question this conclusion. As he explains, he discovered both that Plato is a guide to understanding many earlier poets – epic, tragic, comic, as well as lyric – as political philosophers in their own right, *and* that this understanding reveals that Plato has learned from them in forging his own political philosophy:

> Without Plato, the tragedies of Sophocles, to say nothing of Aristophanes, are almost lost to us. Their understanding of the city, particularly of its subpolitical foundations, and of the law, particularly the sacred law, would remain in darkness were it not for the light that Plato brings to them.

> The logos of Plato unveils the muthos of poetry for the logos that it is. Once, however, this is acknowledged, the Socratic revolution in philosophy seems to be coeval with Greek poetry, which had realized from the start, with its principle of telling lies like the truth, the relation of argument and action. Homer and Hesiod, then would have to be recognized as already within the orbit of philosophy (Benardete 2000, 415 – 416).[7]

As the boundary between poetry and philosophy dissolved, Benardete came to see Plato as part of a long line of political philosopher-poets reaching all the way back to Heraclitus and Parmenides, and beyond that to Hesiod and Homer. Thus, in his "Platonic" reading of Homer's *Odyssey*, he points out that several elements of the "Socratic revolution" are prefigured in the epic. The "second sailing" to which Socrates refers in the *Phaedo*, his turning away from the direct study of nature – lambasted in Aristophanes' *Clouds* – towards the study of speeches (Plato, *Phaedo*, 96a – 100a) echoes the voyage Odysseus is forced to undertake after he has lost the support of the gods and must rely on his own wits (Homer, *Odyssey*, X.78 – 80). Right before this episode, Odysseus has discovered the anonymity of mind, its capacity to bracket and transcend the particular towards the universal: to escape from the cave of the cyclops Polyphemus, he shows his cunning or wisdom (*mètis*) by identifying himself as "No-one" (*outis*) (Homer, *Odyssey*, IX, 408 – 414). Subsequently, he discovers that things have natures (*physis*) that are unchangeable even for the gods, and that he as a human being has a nature, which consists of an irreducible duality: a mind (*nous*) he shares with the gods, and a shape (*demas*) he shares with the animals (Homer, *Odyssey*, X, 286 – 329). This duality, which constitutes human nature, cannot be perceived with the senses, but only with the mind. As Benardete explains, this discovery connects Odysseus and Socrates: "this knowledge [*sc*. of *physis*] alone kept [Odysseus's] mind together with his human shape.… Odysseus was the first to discover the indissoluble duality of man. Socrates' account of that duality [*sc*. in the *Phaedrus*] is a reflection on Odysseus' discovery" (Benardete 1991, 196). Accordingly, tied to the mast in his encounter with the Sirens, Odysseus learns that his thirst for understanding can never be satisfied (Homer, *Odyssey*, XII, 177 – 200).

The discovery of nature, which marks the beginning of philosophy, thus goes hand in hand with the discovery of human nature as an irresolvable two-

[7] Cf. Benardete (1997, xi – xiv); "Plato would have recovered a way of thinking that is not on the way to philosophy but is philosophy, and the apparent tension between Plato the poet and Plato the philosopher would disappear."

ness, as distinguished from both divine and animal nature. As Benardete suggests, the constant awareness of this duality, and the conscious effort to understand it without reducing it, also underlies the duality of Socrates' *eros*/*daimonion* as it appears in Plato's *Phaedrus*: "The daimonion, whose essence according to Diotima is to be an intermediate, has not been part of Socrates' concern with his own self-knowledge, but insofar as Socrates saw himself as intelligible only in terms of the bestial or the divine, the intervention of the daimonion at this point seems to be nothing but the recalling of Socrates to himself" (Benardete 1991, 127). The duality of good and being thus seems to point to the duality of human nature itself.

That philosophy as knowledge of nature involves political philosophy as self-knowledge and moderation is also borne out by the end of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus, Benardete observes, never disseminates his momentous discovery of *physis*: instead, he is destined to become a missionary for the Olympic religion in uncharted territory. His fate – "to establish belief and not knowledge" (Benardete 1997, 152) – is no less that of the Platonic Socrates, whose doctrine of Ideas emerges as a new religion designed to protect and foster the anonymous and erotic mind, so that it can remain the other of the other. By identifying Homer as the founder of political philosophy, the eccentric core of philosophy, Benardete vindicated his teacher Strauss, who wrote to him in 1958: "Some day my belief that Homer started it all and that there was a continuous tradition from Homer until the end of the 18th century will be vindicated."[8] It is our good fortune that nature loves to hide in the cosmic fabric spanning Homeric epic and Platonic tragicomedy.

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[8] Quoted in Burger – Goodin (2018, 18).

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David Janssens
Department of Philosophy/University College Tilburg
School of Humanities and Digital Sciences
Tilburg University Warandelaan 2
5037 AB Tilburg
The Netherlands
e-mail: D.Janssens@tilburguniversity.edu
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3633-2971