

politics and humanities ep 4

[00:00:00.09] TOM MERRILL: Hello. And welcome to another episode of Politics and The Humanities. I'm Tom Merrill. I'm a professor at American University. I'm here with my colleague, Sarah Marsh, who is also a professor at American University. Hello, Sarah.

[00:00:13.20] SARAH MARSH: Hello, folks. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:15.76] TOM MERRILL: And we have a special guest today, who is our friend Paul Ludwig, who is a tutor at ST. John's College. Tutor is a St. John's word that means professor anywhere else. So it's important to make that clear.

[00:00:31.53] Paul is a classicist and an expert on ancient political thought. And he has a new book out which-- let me see if I can pull it up here-- it's called, *Recovering*. Paul tell us the title of your book.

[00:00:47.16] PAUL LUDWIG: *Rediscovering*--

[00:00:48.60] TOM MERRILL: *Rediscovering*--

[00:00:49.38] PAUL LUDWIG: *Political Friendship*.

[00:00:50.38] TOM MERRILL: I'm sorry. And the subtitle is?

[00:00:57.00] PAUL LUDWIG: What is the subtitle? *Aristotle and Modern Identity Community Inequality*.

[00:01:03.19] TOM MERRILL: Right. And it's just out from Cambridge. It's got a lot of blurbs from fancy people, including Harvey Mansfield and Daniel Allen, which is a pretty great set of blurbs. I must say that, as your friend, I'm envious of your fame and fortune. So we hope to have you on later to actually talk about your book on some future episode. But all we'll say for right now is that everyone in the audience, all five members of the audience should go out and buy multiple copies.

[00:01:35.76] PAUL LUDWIG: Thanks very much.

[00:01:36.93] TOM MERRILL: A fair statement. So we brought Paul on to talk about Aristophanes' *Clouds*, which, of course, is a play from 5th century Athens. And I guess since I'm the person who asked you guys to talk about this, I should explain why.

[00:01:52.98] I make my students read this play, oftentimes pairing it with Plato's *Apology*. And you know most of our students at least in the school of Public Affairs at American University, are not expecting this, I think it's fair to say. They're expecting a class where they're going to learn about the three branches of government, and how to be a lobbyist, and things like that. And here we are knee deep in fart jokes and, you know, lizards crapping on Socrates. And there's

always a little bit of difficulty trying to figure out what exactly is going on here, why are we doing it.

[00:02:29.01] So I thought we could have a conversation and just try to talk through, like, what are the serious things that might be of interest in this play. And I was thinking, it seems to me that there are two themes that are really of deep interest in the play, apart from all the inappropriate jokes, of which there are many. One is what does this tell us about Socrates? So for those of us who love Plato and study Plato, that's a big deal. And this is a very important text.

[00:02:56.34] And then the other-- but it may be more important for this conversation. This story really is kind of a parable about liberal education, about going to college, about how going to college can go wrong. And so I think it helps provide a kind of common counterpoint to a lot of the things that we often say about what we think we're doing in college. And I hope that by the end of the conversation, we'll be able to talk about both, or at least touch on both of those themes.

[00:03:24.72] But I thought what we would do is we'd start by rehearsing the story of the play, since not all the listeners will have read it, or read it recently. And then we'll read some passages. And then we'll open it up for a more broad, wide ranging discussion. Does that sound good, Paul?

[00:03:40.14] PAUL LUDWIG: Sounds great. Yeah.

[00:03:42.38] TOM MERRILL: OK. So let's start by just trying to walk through the play itself. The main character is this the fellow Strepsiades. Maybe we could start with the question, who is Strepsiades and what's his deal in this play?

[00:03:59.69] PAUL LUDWIG: Yes. Strepsiades is a man with depth. He was lower class and married a rich girl. As a result, his son is sort of in between the two of them and has the expensive tastes of the mom allegedly had inculcated him. So his son's name is Pheidippides.

[00:04:24.63] Words with "hippos" in them have horse-- you know, only rich people could have horses. They're very expensive. Pheidippides races horses all day.

[00:04:33.74] Strepsiades has a debt problem. And he's looking for a way to get out of his debts. And he's hoping that education will be his ticket not to a better job, to earn more money, but to legally-- or in law courts, at least-- to argue that the debtors have no merit, that he'll be able to use rhetoric that he'll learn at Socrates' school. That's his plan, to get out of his debts by using clever rhetoric to explain them away in court.

[00:05:15.03] TOM MERRILL: I mean, he's kind of a crook, isn't he?

[00:05:17.41] PAUL LUDWIG: Well, his name has twisted in it. And he twists and turns at night, attacked by his debts. Later, when he's learning with Socrates, he twists and turns in his sleeping bag full of fleas that Socrates gives him to increase his endurance. But he does seem to twist justice, or at least to want to. And that, yeah, that is sort of starting the plot of the play.

[00:05:48.82] I guess you could say that he is too stupid to learn a lot of the stuff going on at the school. Now a lot of the stuff going at the school seems pretty stupid, too, or at least so out there that no normal person would want to learn about it. So how many of a flea's own feet can a flea jump, the broad jump of a flea? Well, you know, so you'd have to measure the flea's foot and then see how many of those go into the-- you know, it's crazy stuff like that going on at the school.

[00:06:20.75] But anything the Socrates tries to teach him he understands in his own way and not usually very well. And so eventually, he flunks out of the school but with a lot of sort of dangerous knowledge it would be better if he had never learned, even in his own way. And he tries to get his son, then, to go to school.

[00:06:39.70] And his son being smarter than he, the son thinks it's a terrible idea. He doesn't want to lose his tan like those pale-- Socratic's are all nerds. And he doesn't want to be like that.

[00:06:51.89] TOM MERRILL: They're graduate students. The Socratic's are graduate students.

[00:06:54.49] PAUL LUDWIG: They really are. So true.

[00:06:56.78] SARAH MARSH: This door at The Thinkery opens. Socrates' school, The Thinkery opens. And everyone's in odd poses, the note says. And I thought, huh. That's grad school.

[00:07:09.26] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. No. It's really true.

[00:07:11.66] When I first went to the University of Chicago and walked into the Regenstein Library, there's a coffee shop with olive drab walls. And everyone was drinking coffee, facing a wall with their book. And I thought, these people are so odd. And you know, five years later, I was exactly like them.

[00:07:29.39] But yeah, when the door opens, all the students have their anuses pointed toward the sky, doing astronomy with one end and their eyes pointed down to fleas, doing entomology with their other end. So it's that kind of joking. But like you said, Sarah, it's also a little bit serious to all of us who've through liberal education.

[00:07:53.67] TOM MERRILL: Can we just go back to Strepsiades for a second? I always think of him as sort of like Homer Simpson. That he's a dope, but he's kind of a lovable dope. And it's hard not to, like, just take pleasure in his sheer idiocy.

[00:08:07.72] And I think about in various points when he's trying to figure out how to get out of his debts, and he's, like, well, I'll get a really big magnifying glass. And I'll burn the words off the page.

[00:08:16.81] [LAUGHTER]

[00:08:18.26] Or better yet, right before they catch me, I'll commit suicide. That'll show them.

[00:08:22.40] PAUL LUDWIG: Right. Right. Right. And he's lovable in other ways, too, that he truly loves his son and wants a relationship with his son. And he admits his own faults.

[00:08:33.77] At various points-- you know, when his son proves to him that he deserves a beating for being unwise, he actually agrees. Yeah, I guess I really do. It's a beautiful moment.

[00:08:45.44] TOM MERRILL: I think a lot of fathers know that.

[00:08:48.05] PAUL LUDWIG: But for this person, then, to turn against Socrates the way he does-- I should finish the plot. And you guys jump in with anything I'm missing. But Pheidippides does get converted by Socrates. But he becomes somebody that his father can't love as much.

[00:09:04.85] TOM MERRILL: He becomes a sociopath, doesn't he?

[00:09:06.80] PAUL LUDWIG: Say that again?

[00:09:07.73] TOM MERRILL: He becomes a sociopath.

[00:09:10.85] PAUL LUDWIG: One could say, yeah, yeah. Education goes awry twice in this play, once for the father, once for the son. The son obviously is converted more to Socrates' way.

[00:09:22.40] But somehow, he just can't stop talking. You know, I've proven that I should be allowed to beat you, my father. Now I'll prove to you that I should be allowed to beat my mother, too. And Strepsiades just snaps. The father snaps and says, well, I can't countenance that.

[00:09:39.80] So he turns on Socrates. So for somebody as lovable as Homer Simpson to turn on Socrates is kind of a big deal. That shows there's something wrong with Socrates.

[00:09:49.91] Socrates hasn't seen this yet. And Aristophanes may be even sort of doing him a favor. Well, let's let all this play out in drama so you can change your ways and it won't play out in real life, something along those lines.

[00:10:02.70] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. And so we should say that the action of the play clearly mirrors what is actually going to happen in The Apology, or at least the way that Plato presents what happens in The Apology. But there's a big time difference, right? So it's about 25 years earlier, before the events that we see in The Apology. So Socrates is going to be put to death.

[00:10:22.64] And all that is, in some way, foreshadowed here. So I just want to go back to that moment that Strepsiades finds it completely understandable that his son would want to beat him, from a certain point of view. If you think about it, every sitcom has got this sort of stupid dad at the center. And so that's a very familiar theme.

[00:10:42.35] And remember that Strepsiades is also sort of a crook, right? He's trying to break the law and get out of his debts. But he has this line that if the son is going to beat the mother,

then that's not OK. And suddenly he goes from everything's cool to this Incredible Hulk moment in which he's, like, [GROWLING] what's wrong?

[00:11:04.43] And then the play ends very quickly. Because all he does is he goes and he burns Socrates' Thinkery. You, Socrates! You did this to me!

[00:11:13.10] But it seems to illustrate that that even crooks have a sacred line that they can't countenance even in sort of thinking about it. Like, well, that would be OK for that to happen.

[00:11:25.73] PAUL LUDWIG: Right. And for Strepsiades, it was his family. He really did love his family. And he wouldn't have married that rich girl if he hadn't loved her. Come on. You know, he's sentimental.

[00:11:35.84] And somehow that that mother beating is, I don't know if you'd say it's not chivalrous. Some interpretations said, well, if you can beat your mother, then you can sleep with her. So that it's ultimately incest that's at the bottom of this. And that would be the line that can't be crossed.

[00:11:54.05] Obviously, if Pheidippides slept with his mother, then his relationship with his father would change. That's the relation that he really wanted to preserve, I think. So in some regard, he has some legitimate beef with Socrates. But it's all overblown. I don't think Socrates really deserves to have his school burnt down.

[00:12:17.30] It seems like at the end that the scholars and Socrates are not burnt in the school. There's a little foreshadowing of that at the beginning, that there might be coals burnt alive. Because that's their view of the universe. It's an oven. And we're the coals.

[00:12:33.85] But they seem to rush out and be chased away. And he said, beat them, beat them, hit them, hit them. Throw stuff at them.

[00:12:41.37] And in some versions, a god, Hermes himself, whom he's just prayed to, that little statue up on a stick, comes to life and says those lines. Modern editors usually don't think that's the right way to do it. But some manuscripts actually have that. So it might be that the gods actually are on Strepsiades' side, in some weird sense.

[00:13:06.03] So we haven't said anything about the clouds themselves, yet. So it's kind of a new god that's introduced into the city in this play.

[00:13:12.63] TOM MERRILL: Right. I mean, the play clearly-- I mean, if you think about the charges against Socrates in The Apology, that he's corrupting the youth. And we see that with Pheidippides. And you know, so Pheidippides is going to beat his father.

[00:13:23.15] But he's also introducing the gods. And Socrates is clearly introducing, like, he has these characters, the clouds. And there are lots of funny scenes in which Strepsiades has a hard time imagining that the clouds are gods.

[00:13:34.85] And he's, like, well, but that one has a nose, right? That's the thing that he really cares about. Yeah, so what should we say about the clouds?

[00:13:44.21] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. So comedies have a chorus. It's a group. I think it might have been as many as 24 actors who sing as a whole. There are songs, lots of songs in this play. And they're usually sung by the chorus.

[00:13:58.73] And at a certain point while Strepsiades is trying to learn at the school, Socrates says, well, I'll initiate you into the religion of the clouds. And he prays for them to appear. And they actually do. They come on stage.

[00:14:14.94] They're cloudy. And they look a little bit like human women. But they're also sort of misty. And they sing these religious songs.

[00:14:23.66] And Strepsiades, like you said, initially has trouble believing. First of all, he has trouble believing that the traditional gods don't exist. Socrates authority-- and even his students have already said that to him, which is probably not the move. But they told him, yeah, Zeus doesn't exist.

[00:14:42.23] And Strepsiades has trouble even understanding what that would mean. He thinks that Zeus has been deposed. Well, Zeus was always there. He's still around. But somebody else is king in his place.

[00:14:53.84] TOM MERRILL: Well. But it's so beautiful, right? Because if Zeus doesn't exist, there's only vortex. And if you think about as a image-- so I spent a lot of time studying late moderns where the problem of nihilists was a big thing.

[00:15:10.31] There's no god. All there is in the universe is this sucking hole at the center, right, the abyss.

[00:15:16.25] PAUL LUDWIG: Yes. Literally, Descartes, Principles of Physics, explained everything by the vortex. This happens later, you know, hundreds of years later it happens. This is like a prophecy of the modern project. It's quite remarkable.

[00:15:30.11] TOM MERRILL: But Strepsiades can't understand. He doesn't really understand. As you say, he thinks that Zeus used to be around. He's been deposed. And there's this guy Vortex, who he probably imagines as having, like, a big handlebar mustache and tattoos.

[00:15:46.58] PAUL LUDWIG: He personifies everything. Yeah.

[00:15:49.06] TOM MERRILL: Right. Right.

[00:15:51.16] SARAH MARSH: When Socrates talks about the ethereal vortex, what kind of thinking is he doing? Is he talking about natural phenomena? What's the method that leads him to that particular conclusion?

[00:16:05.87] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. It does seem like it's natural phenomena. You know, it's some kind of materialism along the lines of an [INAUDIBLE] or other. You know, there was one thinker that got in trouble in the Periclean age for saying that the sun was a burning hunk of metal about the size of the [? Peloponnesian ?] [INAUDIBLE] a certain number of leagues off the surface of the Earth. [INAUDIBLE] no. [INAUDIBLE]. You know, this is crazy or wrong, one or the other. We're going to prosecute you.

[00:16:44.68] But he was a teacher of Pericles. And it does seem that it's the kind of thing that Aristophanes is attributing to Socrates, which I believe Socrates in the *Phaedo* does say I went through this youthful phase in which I looked for material causes, efficient causes for everything. And I graduated out of that.

[00:17:08.62] So it's hard to say whether we might not be in-- maybe some of the reason he graduated out of it is because he learned something from this play. The legend is that, at the play, people wanted to see whether the mask of Socrates, the actor playing Socrates was good enough. So they asked the real Socrates to stand up near the front row or something so they could compare the ugly physiognomy of Socrates, the goat like or satyr-like features with the mask. OK. You can sit down now. Let's go on with the play.

[00:17:44.51] TOM MERRILL: But isn't it the case that Strepsiades gets something right from the point of view of the play? That's part of the comedy, that Socrates is such a smart guy, but he fails to understand some completely obvious things to all normal human beings.

[00:18:01.30] So that Strepsiades, he is a dope. And he misunderstands everything. And we laugh at him. But at the end of the day, in certain human ways, he's smarter than Socrates is.

[00:18:13.93] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. It just when we were talking before the podcast started, I mean, I thought Sarah had a really great idea that I'll take credit for now. It seemed to me that there's something about today's progressives that just don't want to understand the Trump voter. They just want to make them deplorables, right?

[00:18:38.71] And yet you need the Trump-- you need a few of the Trump voters, right? Otherwise, you can't have your progressive agenda. So there has to be-- Socrates needs to at least take into account that there are people like Strepsiades and understand the Strepsiades of the world.

[00:18:57.57] You know, when they're talking about poetry, Strepsiades is the one who quotes a bunch of lines. He sings a bunch of lines. He's got a kind of poetic soul.

[00:19:05.53] Socrates doesn't seem to have that. He breaks everything down into the smallest unit. What's the gender of that word. You know, who cares about the gender of that word?

[00:19:15.39] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. He's very academic, right? I mean, Socrates in this play is very academic in the normal kind of pejorative sense of that word. It's that he seems to be concerned with things that are completely trivial or seem completely trivial.

[00:19:28.52] PAUL LUDWIG: To a normal human being.

[00:19:30.06] TOM MERRILL: Yeah.

[00:19:30.26] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah.

[00:19:30.44] TOM MERRILL: Yeah.

[00:19:32.36] SARAH MARSH: Paul, can you talk with us a little bit about the role of those linguistic ideas, so the rhythms of the speech in the play that Aristophanes is using and the genders of the words? How would his audience have understood that play between Strepsiades and Socrates?

[00:19:58.37] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. So one of Socrates' things is he wants to rationalize language. Language can't be what it sort of grew up as. It needs to be smarter than that.

[00:20:08.90] So it doesn't make sense to have one word for both a male chicken and a female chicken, or a male, you know? So he wants to say, well, there's a fowl and a foulette, or a chicker and a chickensness. You know?

[00:20:25.54] [LAUGHTER]

[00:20:26.85] I think you can kind of see, yeah, of course, it would be better if language were perfectly rational. But it's not. And we're not going to change it to make--

[00:20:39.75] TOM MERRILL: A little bit like Esperanto.

[00:20:41.88] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. Esperanto, yeah, yeah, exactly.

[00:20:44.39] TOM MERRILL: [INAUDIBLE] the perfectly rational language that was all planned out.

[00:20:47.32] PAUL LUDWIG: Right. Right. And I think that we can see a little bit of that. It feels like newspeak, right, 1984? You can see a little bit of that.

[00:20:55.11] There was the initial resistance to Ms., right? You've got Miss and Mrs. What's wrong with that?

[00:21:00.37] But Ms. is not a word. It's like a new thing they made up. It doesn't even stand for anything, right?

[00:21:04.83] SARAH MARSH: Right.

[00:21:05.39] TOM MERRILL: Yeah.

[00:21:06.21] PAUL LUDWIG: So I think people go through these phases when you try to change the language, rationalize language. The French academy has always tried to do this. The French language needs to be kept pure. Don't let it evolve. Whatever you do, don't let it evolve naturally.

[00:21:25.56] So kind of while this is all going on, in Greek at least, and in a few of the translations, the Penguin translations would be the most recent of the metrical ones, all this is being done in meter. So the very things that they're talking about are, in some ways, there in the language itself that they're using. And some of those effects, I think, are probably translatable. I think you guys mentioned one earlier, before we started, again, from the West translation.

[00:22:02.71] SARAH MARSH: The dactyls?

[00:22:03.68] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah.

[00:22:05.24] SARAH MARSH: Yeah. There's all this play on dactyls. And everyone's speaking in dactyls. And there's pleasure in recognizing what the text is doing and how you're being involved. And I was wondering if, historically, that was part of the point for Aristophanes?

[00:22:20.30] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. I think for sure. And it's a kind of metalevel, too, if you're talking about dactyls and you realize you're in actual dactyls. That's a kind of pleasure that's a little bit outside the play.

[00:22:32.74] Remember, the characters in the play themselves aren't having that particular pleasure. We the audience are. So it creates another layer.

[00:22:41.96] TOM MERRILL: That probably the audience would have picked up on that.

[00:22:44.54] PAUL LUDWIG: For sure. Yeah. Oh, yeah.

[00:22:46.94] TOM MERRILL: I mean, it's hard for us. Because most of us are not educated to think about it in those terms.

[00:22:51.71] PAUL LUDWIG: Right. Most of these audience members had sung songs in various meters. And they knew how to-- this was part of the education.

[00:22:58.17] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. So I want to mention one other thing about the poetry and the clouds, and then move on a little bit. But Aristophanes himself appears and is one of the clouds. Right?

[00:23:10.53] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. So there's these strange moments in comedy. We might call it breaking the fourth wall, or self-reflexive moments where, literally, in each of the 11-- I think in most of the 11 comedies-- the chorus at some point steps forward. They call it the parabasis, the walking near.

[00:23:31.72] They come closer to the footlights, so to speak, to the edge of the stage. Sometimes, they may have thrown off their masks or costumes. And they start talking as actors, hired actors instead of as the characters they're supposed to be.

[00:23:45.43] And they say, you know, you judges in the audience, you should really like this play the best. Because frankly, it is the best. And you know, they say stuff that would be outrageously arrogant, and you know, cheating. And because these plays were performed in a contest. You had competitors. And you want first prize.

[00:24:02.03] TOM MERRILL: [INAUDIBLE]

[00:24:04.21] PAUL LUDWIG: And in this one, The Clouds speak in Aristophanes' own voice, which is rare, even among the-- I think there might be one or two other instances of it among the 11 plays. But it's a very big deal for them to say.

[00:24:19.63] And he starts out with this wonderful metaphor, you know? I was an unwed mother. And I gave birth to this play. And I didn't want people to know whose it was, because I wasn't allowed to have a child yet.

[00:24:33.91] And they nourished it as their own. And it was great. And you guys were so smart. But then I wrote this Clouds, and you guys didn't like it. So this is obviously a rewrite. What we have is an attempt to pick a first version, which failed and didn't get first prize and maybe represent it.

[00:24:50.71] TOM MERRILL: Do we know anything about the first version?

[00:24:52.41] PAUL LUDWIG: I think it never actually did compete again. But you can see in the parabasis, its second edition. And he says, you know, you just didn't understand how wise it was. And now I'm going to explain to you how it was wise.

[00:25:05.24] TOM MERRILL: Right. He says it's the wisest of his comedies.

[00:25:07.66] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah.

[00:25:08.45] TOM MERRILL: Yeah.

[00:25:09.13] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah.

[00:25:09.60] TOM MERRILL: Yeah.

[00:25:10.96] SARAH MARSH: Well, he likens the first edition to a child that's exposed [INAUDIBLE] mother and doesn't survive because of the exposure, which is a really kind of fascinating metaphor for the creative life.

[00:25:25.06] PAUL LUDWIG: It really is. It shows how harsh it is and how competitive. He's dealing with a people, a bunch of Homer Simpson's, and smarter people, too, that Socrates never had to deal with. He has to win this applause somehow, by hook or by crook, or he'll fail.

[00:25:46.88] TOM MERRILL: He understands them in a way that Socrates doesn't.

[00:25:51.23] PAUL LUDWIG: In order to be successful, he has to have that deeper knowledge. Right.

[00:25:58.22] TOM MERRILL: I mean, just in the way that anytime that you're trying to sell something, or you know, Steven Spielberg understands something about the American psyche that the Faulkner scholar does not.

[00:26:07.22] PAUL LUDWIG: Right.

[00:26:07.83] TOM MERRILL: I guess would be the [INAUDIBLE].

[00:26:09.14] PAUL LUDWIG: Exactly.

[00:26:11.51] TOM MERRILL: The Socrates Thinkery is a version of the academy, even today, right? That we study things because we think that they're really cool, even though they look trivial and gross, like, you know, gnats farting, which is something that comes up a lot.

[00:26:29.54] But there's also what seems to be the more important thing for Strepsiades is the moral teaching, the moral question that comes up. And so as the play goes, he comes because he thinks he's going to learn how to get rich quick or get out of his debts. It doesn't work because he's too dumb. He's too literal to understand what's going on.

[00:26:47.99] And then Pheidippides goes. And once Pheidippides goes, there's this famous scene, the sort of, like, dance off between Just Speech-- at least, in my edition, it's called Just Speech and Unjust Speech. I guess some additions call it Stronger Speech and Weaker Speech.

[00:27:03.58] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. The Better Argument, the Weaker Argument. Yeah.

[00:27:06.38] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. Of which, the upshot is that justice is only by convention and that nature is really the thing. I guess you were going to summarize it. Shall we go through some of those passages?

[00:27:21.29] PAUL LUDWIG: Absolutely. And so I have warn our viewers. I'm hoping that we're going to get an explicit content marker on this episode. So that [INAUDIBLE] in the 1990s. Like, now it will go viral. But we'll have to see about that.

[00:27:41.04] Can we start with when Just Speech and Unjust Speech come out and start talking to each other?

[00:27:49.91] SARAH MARSH: Right. Let's maybe, for folks who haven't read in a while, maybe frame it up. So at this point, Pheidippides has come to The Thinkery in his father's place. And he is being taught by Socrates.

[00:28:07.13] And then finally Socrates says, I'll just let Just Speech and Unjust Speech speak for themselves. And then these two figures come out of The Thinkery. And Just Speech is dressed in these older, threadbare clothes. And Unjust Speech is dressed as a dandy [INAUDIBLE] feather in his hat. And [INAUDIBLE] Thinkery. And then they have this rap battle between--

[00:28:32.51] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah, exactly.

[00:28:33.68] SARAH MARSH: --which tradition of ideas or which methodology is the one that Pheidippides ought to subscribe to. Is that the frame, generally?

[00:28:42.42] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah.

[00:28:43.07] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. No. That helps. And Just Speech is the older, traditional, very buttoned down sort of presentation. Whereas Unjust Speech is-- he's hip, right? And he understands himself to be hip, what we would call hip.

[00:29:02.93] Should we start from around-- so I have the West translation. But around 889, Just Speech comes out. And this is their first exchange. Does one of you want to be Just Speech and the other-- which one of you is Unjust Speech? This is the real question I'm asking here?

[00:29:21.17] PAUL LUDWIG: Why don't you go? Because I'm looking at the Greek. And then I have this really archaic translation called up on Perseus.

[00:29:28.80] TOM MERRILL: OK.

[00:29:30.05] SARAH MARSH: Tom, I'll be Unjust Speech.

[00:29:33.14] TOM MERRILL: OK. All right.

[00:29:34.12] SARAH MARSH: And you can be Just Speech.

[00:29:35.54] TOM MERRILL: OK. So this is Just Speech. Come out here. Show yourself to the spectators. You're so bold.

[00:29:41.90] SARAH MARSH: Go wherever you want, for I'll destroy you much more by speaking among the many.

[00:29:47.09] TOM MERRILL: You'll destroy me? Who are you?

[00:29:50.15] SARAH MARSH: A speech.

[00:29:51.15] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. A weaker one.

[00:29:52.25] SARAH MARSH: [INAUDIBLE] you, who claim to be stronger than I.

[00:29:56.03] TOM MERRILL: By doing what wise things?

[00:29:57.77] SARAH MARSH: By discovering novel notions.

[00:30:00.98] TOM MERRILL: Yes. These things are flourishing because of these mindless ones here.

[00:30:04.34] Pointing to the audience.

[00:30:05.78] SARAH MARSH: No. They're wise.

[00:30:07.74] TOM MERRILL: I will destroy you badly.

[00:30:09.53] SARAH MARSH: Tell me by doing what?

[00:30:11.93] TOM MERRILL: By speaking the just things.

[00:30:14.03] SARAH MARSH: I'll overturn them by speaking against them. For I quite deny that justice even exists.

[00:30:20.06] TOM MERRILL: You deny that it exists?

[00:30:21.89] SARAH MARSH: Yes. [INAUDIBLE] where is it?

[00:30:24.71] TOM MERRILL: With the gods!

[00:30:26.18] SARAH MARSH: If justice exists, then why didn't Zeus perish when he bound his father?

[00:30:31.44] TOM MERRILL: Oh. This is the evil that's spreading around. Give me a basin.

[00:30:35.60] He's going to throw up. Nauseous.

[00:30:38.42] SARAH MARSH: You're an old fogey and out of tune.

[00:30:40.76] TOM MERRILL: You're a pederast and shameless.

[00:30:42.83] SARAH MARSH: You've spoken roses of me.

[00:30:44.78] TOM MERRILL: You're ribald.

[00:30:45.89] SARAH MARSH: You crowned me with lilies.

[00:30:48.05] TOM MERRILL: And a parricide.

[00:30:49.61] SARAH MARSH: You don't recognize that you're sprinkling me with gold.

[00:30:53.72] TOM MERRILL: Before this wasn't gold, but lead.

[00:30:56.24] SARAH MARSH: But as it is now, this is adornment for me.

[00:31:00.63] TOM MERRILL: You're too bold.

[00:31:01.65] SARAH MARSH: And you are ancient.

[00:31:04.20] TOM MERRILL: Maybe we should stop there. What's going on here, Paul?

[00:31:09.18] PAUL LUDWIG: Well, so far, it's a lot like today's politics, right? Just casting insults back and forth.

[00:31:16.35] [LAUGHTER]

[00:31:19.20] Yeah, I mean, I think it's crucial that Socrates doesn't have a hand in this. He's going to let the traditional just argument get deconstructed kind of by its own weight, by just what unjust people would say about it. And somehow that's supposed to be a stage.

[00:31:45.04] And I think we see this in liberal education, too. Maybe it's a little old-fashioned now. But a lot of professors used to want to read their students of prejudice when they came for-- it's the first day, freshman, maybe history or psychology or something. And you want to find out where your students' conservative prejudices are and cut them down to size. And instead of Socrates doing this himself, he has this sort of real demonstration of just what's said out there in society that will do the job for him.

[00:32:23.84] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. Socrates himself seems to be neutral. He doesn't make the unjust speech himself. Although it's pretty clear that he is adjacent to unjust speech. Right? I mean, he doesn't think that Zeus is a thing that will punish unjust people.

[00:32:38.52] PAUL LUDWIG: Right. He doesn't seem to believe in justice. On the other hand, he's very ascetic. He doesn't do this for his own pleasure. All he does is think all day, whereas the Unjust Speech doesn't seem to be a thinker. But he's going to get more girls or whatever, guys even, if he has no morals.

[00:33:01.29] TOM MERRILL: Right.

[00:33:02.79] SARAH MARSH: So the center of this to me seems, Paul, the line where Unjust Speech says, I quite deny that justice even exists. And can you situate that for us in terms of what Just Speech is thinking and then what Socrates is trying to teach Pheidippides?

[00:33:22.76] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. So just in the broadest context, in [INAUDIBLE] and in many of the fragments of sophist, so pre-Socratics that we have, the whole appreciation of nature and natural necessity, we were talking about before a kind of materialist argument, had forced them into a thesis where justice is just a convention among whatever people are in the group that you're in. They notice this, that Persians are just among themselves. But they're not just to Greeks.

[00:34:07.52] Vice versa, just the same way, Greeks might be just among themselves, but not to Persians. Whereas fire burns the same, both in Persia and Greece.

[00:34:16.81] So to say that justice doesn't even exist, it's not conservative. It's not normal. It's not what the majority say.

[00:34:28.90] But it is out there as an important idea in the sort of sophisticated discourse. And of course, it just makes the better argument, who's a traditionalist that might want to throw up. That's just the kind of talk that, you know, et cetera, we've heard that kind of thing before.

[00:34:47.08] TOM MERRILL: But that's not a rational response. That's not a counter argument. That's just, you know, you disgust me. And you know, if you want reasons, that's like saying I have no reasons. It's a taste, you know?

[00:35:00.13] PAUL LUDWIG: Right. And I guess people listening can probably tell from where we're going that better argument is going to lose this.

[00:35:07.84] TOM MERRILL: Right.

[00:35:08.50] PAUL LUDWIG: It's not really a stronger argument. And it's funny that they do. You know, he brings them on stage.

[00:35:13.43] What are you? I'm an argument. It's hilarious, so literal.

[00:35:18.13] But basically, the better argument becomes worse, or defeated, in the course of this. And comes to agree with the so-called-- the worse argument, or Unjust Speech. And really ceases to be an argument, and I guess that shows all along that what he was arguing for was not really logical, exactly.

[00:35:42.82] He had a set of beliefs. So there was a kind of faith there. Where the rationalism, and I would say it's probably a shallow rational, but it's more rational, more logical. That's all on the side of the Unjust Speech, or the so-called weaker argument.

[00:35:57.77] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. I mean, part of the difficulty of interpreting the play is just trying to figure out what does Aristophanes think about this exchange. But clearly, the exchange, as you say, Paul, is something that's going on in Greek culture. And you see it all the way through Plato. You see it in the Melian Dialogue in Thucydides. Right?

[00:36:15.04] And we see it today. It's a question. And when we bring students into the university and we say your job is to question everything.

[00:36:24.67] Well, really? Question everything? How far does that go? And so for Unjust Speech, that's going to mean conventional morality, it's nothing. You shouldn't obey it.

[00:36:38.53] SARAH MARSH: So I have a question about the history. It's clear from Strepsiades' motivations that this is a very litigious society. Everyone's just suing everyone else and that's the recourse people have for disagreements, at least in the marketplace. There's all this talk about creditors and debtors and that sort of thing. Is the justice that is coming out here between Just and Unjust Speech, is that the same thing that can be achieved in a court of law? Or is that more of, like, an equity concept than a concept of justice?

[00:37:19.89] PAUL LUDWIG: Tom, you might have a better sense than I. I would say they're blended. In the normal mind, in the kind of Strepsiades' mind, or Better Argument's mind, traditional conservative mind, it all should be one thing.

[00:37:34.54] SARAH MARSH: Mhm.

[00:37:36.53] PAUL LUDWIG: So maybe the distinction, you know, Aristotle-- the distinction you make, Sarah, goes back as far as Aristotle, but gets transformed in liberalism. It seems like that's already got a lot of thought behind it. That we want to carefully distinguish these different spheres, which I think maybe traditionally were all blended together, and make a kind of potent cocktail that the Sophists wanted to kind of tease apart.

[00:38:08.91] Usually, I think, most of them were hoping for the betterment of society. I don't think they wanted to destroy things necessarily. But they might have unwittingly done so in some way.

[00:38:20.34] SARAH MARSH: I mean, in Aristophanes, it's really interesting, at least in *The Clouds*. Because by the end of the play, everything is destroyed. Right?

[00:38:28.32] PAUL LUDWIG: Right.

[00:38:28.52] SARAH MARSH: Strepsiade's home is broken. The Thinkery has been burned. And sort of that's the scene that the play leaves us with when it opens, with those two things, I imagine, being both on stage.

[00:38:42.42] And both these sort of, like, structures that are in a kind of balance with one another. And then everything is sort of broken down by the end. And it strikes me that this tableau with Just Speech and Unjust Speech is part of what does the destruction.

[00:39:02.73] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. That's very nice.

[00:39:03.93] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. I think that's really right. I mean, I guess your question, Sarah, is how does Just Speech understand himself? And there seems to be both-- like, just an attachment.

[00:39:16.51] You should be a good person, because that's the way that you should be. But there's also sort of a principle that's there that can be teased apart and, in a way, is teased apart. I mean, I think that the comedy here, Aristophanes' comedy is, in some ways, much more damning about Just Speech than it is about Unjust Speech.

[00:39:31.11] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:39:32.18] TOM MERRILL: So shall we read a little bit more so we can get more of the dramatic momentum in our minds? Do you want to--

[00:39:41.01] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. Yeah. A little bit further down in the speech, they stop this back and forth and then each one goes and each dog has his day.

[00:39:52.74] TOM MERRILL: Right.

[00:39:53.19] PAUL LUDWIG: And the Just Speech has a moment where he ceases to seem like a bigoted, prejudiced, illogical crank.

[00:40:05.91] TOM MERRILL: He's kind of like a dirty old man.

[00:40:08.13] PAUL LUDWIG: Well, that's his real Achilles heel, I'd guess you say. To compare great things [INAUDIBLE]. Homosexuality was part of the kind of traditional view, although they didn't want to admit it. And they wanted it to be chaste.

[00:40:30.02] Now it couldn't have always been chaste, right? But maybe sometimes it was chaste. And it was certainly an aspiration that it was kind of chaste and what we would call sublimated.

[00:40:38.43] But just the law of averages [INAUDIBLE] that they had to consummate it sometimes. And it wasn't same age homosexuality. It was pederasty. It was older men with younger boys. And in fact, the more the beard grew, the less the boy was considered attractive.

[00:40:58.71] So this old man, this Just Speech is very concerned about education, liberal education in a sense. Not the kind that Socrates offers, but what boys traditionally get. So he's thinking about boys all the time.

[00:41:16.17] He's thinking about how they can be the best and how they can be the most beautiful. And oh, wouldn't I kind of like them too? So that's his Achilles heel.

[00:41:25.86] And there's a moment where you get a kind of beautiful vision that he has for these boys. And I think you'll see that it collapses very quickly. So this is around line 1005. And the way it collapses, I think, is funny and in keeping with the comedy.

[00:41:47.79] He's talking about what he envisions for a young man who takes part in his traditional education, which has a lot of music in it, poetry, dance, and a whole lot of physical education. Music and gymnastics, that's what Plato would say in The Symposium, not intellectual stuff. That's for later or maybe never at all. Build your body and build your soul.

[00:42:13.82] He says, going down to Academe Park, you'll run away under the sacred olive trees, crowned with a white reed, along with a chaste companion your own age, smelling of morning glory. And this is [INAUDIBLE]. Minding your business. I think the register breaks a little bit there.

[00:42:32.29] Smelling of morning glory and minding your business in the white, leaf casting poplar, in springtime, rejoicing when the plane tree whispers to the elm. If you do these things I'm showing you and pay attention to them, you'll always have a glossy chest, shiny skin, broad shoulders, small tongue, big buttocks. And it gets worse and worse. And finally, he says even you'll have a small penis. Because, you know, obviously, if you do. [INAUDIBLE]. Just Speech said that you're going to have a bigger one, you know, uncontrolled.

[00:43:05.95] So it's just hilarious. You can kind of see how he has these beautiful visions for how he wants the boys to be chaste and virtuous and strong.

[00:43:17.38] TOM MERRILL: But he ends up talking about their penises.

[00:43:18.71] PAUL LUDWIG: And then he can't resist talking about-- so this is what eventually will, I think, do him in when the Unjust Speech has his day in the sun.

[00:43:28.45] TOM MERRILL: And Aristophanes wants you to notice this, that every time he starts with these beautiful speeches, they always end up, basically, like soft porn descriptions of the various body parts.

[00:43:40.84] PAUL LUDWIG: Right.

[00:43:41.33] [LAUGHTER]

[00:43:42.33] SARAH MARSH: And I mean, this is a really important counterpoint to the way Strepsiades feels about Pheidippides, his son. Right? Because he does regard his son as someone who is worth educating, someone whose-- I mean, it's a father and son relationship, so maybe not something we would expect to be sexualized. But this is--

[00:44:05.83] TOM MERRILL: Sarah, can I just say that you've put an unpleasant image in my mind?

[00:44:10.40] SARAH MARSH: But I mean, isn't that part of the point of the play?

[00:44:13.84] TOM MERRILL: I mean, the play does end up talking about brother-sister incest--

[00:44:16.53] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:44:18.57] PAUL LUDWIG: Right.

[00:44:18.91] TOM MERRILL: Yeah.

[00:44:19.36] SARAH MARSH: And I mean, the home sort of falls apart by the end of it [INAUDIBLE] the beatings. But this is the sort of, like, sexual chaos is--

[00:44:31.08] PAUL LUDWIG: Right.

[00:44:31.33] SARAH MARSH: --part of it. It's part of why--

[00:44:34.32] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. Right. Yeah.

[00:44:35.65] SARAH MARSH: --the home is no longer stable at the end of the play.

[00:44:41.31] TOM MERRILL: Well, Sarah, the home, you know, family life may be conventional. It may not be natural.

[00:44:46.61] SARAH MARSH: Right.

[00:44:47.68] TOM MERRILL: I don't want to make any news flashes here.

[00:44:50.96] SARAH MARSH: I'm sorry. What?

[00:44:51.77] TOM MERRILL: I don't want to make any--

[00:44:52.24] [LAUGHTER]

[00:44:54.28] I don't want to give anybody any [INAUDIBLE].

[00:44:55.89] SARAH MARSH: Let me write this down. I need to write this down.

[00:44:58.87] PAUL LUDWIG: Some conventions may be more natural than others. Fire burns the same here and in Persia. And none of them allow the parent-child incest to go on.

[00:45:10.43] TOM MERRILL: Right.

[00:45:11.05] PAUL LUDWIG: It does seem like some people, if you're only smart enough, you could handle it. But most of us just aren't smart enough and we couldn't handle it. I don't know.

[00:45:19.13] TOM MERRILL: I guess-- do you think that's Aristophanes' position?

[00:45:22.87] PAUL LUDWIG: Definitely that most of us aren't smart enough. Whether he thinks some people would be smart enough, I don't know. That's interesting.

[00:45:29.23] He seems to think that he is smarter than Socrates. And smart enough to do almost anything, get away with almost anything, even things that Socrates can't get away with. Because he beat Cleon, right?

[00:45:39.82] Cleon was this very powerful politician. And he said, well, I took him down when he was at his peak. That's not exactly true.

[00:45:47.98] Cleon prosecuted Aristophanes in court and Aristophanes got off. That's not quite the same as taking down a politician. But he does seem to think that he has these powers of intellect and practical abilities that would save him in the city, where Socrates might run afoul of the legal system and eventually be destroyed by it.

[00:46:11.23] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. Well, that's for sure. Right? Is that Socrates is going to end up getting killed and Aristophanes is not. Right?

[00:46:17.54] PAUL LUDWIG: And we should point out that Socrates, in his defense speech, actually mentions The Clouds.

[00:46:22.16] TOM MERRILL: Right. Yes.

[00:46:23.49] PAUL LUDWIG: You know, I have these new accusers. But there's also this old accuser. This is what really put stuff back in people's minds way back when.

[00:46:30.81] TOM MERRILL: Well, I just think that there's so much in Plato that once you know this play well, like, you see it all over the place. And that Plato was really in dialogue with Aristophanes from the get go.

[00:46:40.41] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah.

[00:46:40.90] TOM MERRILL: So that's a big reason to pay attention to it. Shall we read the Unjust Speech? Because we need the-- right. So Just Speech is, as it were, repressed. And Unjust Speech [INAUDIBLE] to express all the things that had been repressed in Just Speech.

[00:46:57.34] And we should say, for our listeners, that he is going to say things that are shocking and morally anarchic. And that we [INAUDIBLE] we do not endorse. This is not investment advice. Is that the appropriate disclaimer [INAUDIBLE].

[00:47:13.45] And Unjust Speech makes his case by showing that all the people that Just Speech looks up to, i.e., all the gods, are themselves do horrible things, right? You know, raping, adultery, I mean, all kinds of horrible things.

[00:47:28.78] So maybe I'll just read at about 1070. And so this is, I think, sort of the culmination of the whole argument. So he turns to Pheidippides and he says, For consider, lad, all that moderation involves and how many pleasures you're going to be deprived of, boys, women, [INAUDIBLE], relishes, drinking, boisterous laughter.

[00:47:51.73] Well then, from here, I go on to the necessities of nature. You've done some wrong. You've fallen in love, committed some adultery. And then you've been caught. You're ruined.

[00:48:01.45] For you're unable to speak, you can't defend yourself. But if you consort with me, if you come and hang out with me, then use your nature. Leap. Laugh. Believe that nothing is shameful.

[00:48:13.48] For if you happen to be caught as an adulterer, you'll reply to him that you've done him no injustice. Then you'll refer him to Zeus. Even he was worsened by love and women. Yet how could you, a mortal, be greater than a god? I mean, Paul, you have children. Have you heard this argument [INAUDIBLE]?

[00:48:33.43] PAUL LUDWIG: Well. Yeah. [INAUDIBLE] logic, right? Or maybe a fortiori, arguing from the greater to the lesser point. Yeah. And of course, the Greek gods were exceptionally vulnerable to this.

[00:48:53.88] I suppose you could find places in the Old Testament where the god of the Hebrews seems to be unjust. And you could make some kind of case. But the Greek gods, the myths have them-- Zeus disguises himself as a bull to carry away a mortal woman and to have sex with her.

[00:49:18.40] So it seems like the traditions itself have plenty of fodder for the Unjust Speech to use against it. So it becomes a kind of self-- we would call it a deconstruction, a self-immolation of tradition rather than really needing to pull it apart from outside.

[00:49:41.00] TOM MERRILL: But the action of the play is really to show what happens if you take that seriously. That really does undermine, at least, Strepsiades' understanding of what society is and how it exists. So the father beating is, I think, meant to be an image of the principle of authority itself has been undermined. And once there are no rules, then anything goes. Right?

[00:50:05.67] And you know, the serious message is, well, we can't live like that. We can't have a society in which there are no rules.

[00:50:13.56] PAUL LUDWIG: Right. Right.

[00:50:17.05] TOM MERRILL: And one reason why I like doing this play is because when we talk about liberal education, we often start with John Stuart Mill, On Liberty. And John Stuart Mill makes the distinction between nature and convention. He calls it social tyranny of the majority.

[00:50:31.00] And the principle there seems to be, well, question everything. And Mill basically thinks, well, we're going to question everything. And the process is going to be self-regulating in such a way that we're all going to end up at basically decent results. That the marketplace of ideas, the best ideas will come out, and those ideals will support a decent society.

[00:50:51.23] But Aristophanes is much, much darker than that. You start questioning everything and, like, literally everything goes to hell. And like Sarah said, both the household and The Thinkery are destroyed at the end of the play.

[00:51:08.63] PAUL LUDWIG: Right. And just to take the opposite tack for a moment, you could see how someone younger, inexperienced, might want to say, well, every rule is unfair. You know, every rule fails to capture some exception. So if people would only behave well enough, or if they were only smart enough, each person could make the right decision in the moment. And you wouldn't even need rules.

[00:51:37.85] TOM MERRILL: If we were purely rational actors.

[00:51:39.87] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:51:41.33] TOM MERRILL: Yeah.

[00:51:41.81] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. So you can see how our passions could get behind either or both of those theses, alternately.

[00:51:52.71] TOM MERRILL: But the Unjust Speech is right about some things, right? And he's right that the conventions are not, somehow-- at least so far as we can tell from Aristophanes, they didn't come straight from Zeus, that they seem to be there for particular reasons and are what we would call social constructions.

[00:52:11.40] PAUL LUDWIG: Right. Justifying the rule of the fathers, for example.

[00:52:16.13] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:52:19.28] SARAH MARSH: I have another question about the Just Speech and Unjust Speech back and forth. If The Clouds was used in Socrates' trial much later on, is there a way that we can compare what Socrates is trying to teach Pheidippides by trotting out these two figures, and then maybe what Aristophanes is trying to say to the audience about Socrates? Because these ideas are getting out.

[00:52:55.80] I mean, the battle between Just Speech and Unjust Speech is the innermost frame of the play. And it's still getting staged for the audience, albeit in a bunch of frames that the place sets up as it unfolds. And so is Aristophanes doing something maybe more sophisticated here in giving that battle between Just Speech and Unjust Speech a frame, part of which is Socrates who will ultimately be tried?

[00:53:36.39] TOM MERRILL: Presumably if Aristophanes thought that showing Just Speech and Unjust Speech was simply corrupting, then he himself should be punished for revealing it. Because he is, in a way, doing what Socrates does.

[00:53:47.31] Like, look at this. Here's this neat debate. But I mean, I guess he must think that by showing it to us, we can learn something about the world that that would be useful and not destructive to society.

[00:54:01.21] SARAH MARSH: Right. But it has to be framed, either in The Thinkery, it has to be positioned outside of the-- what our students call the real world.

[00:54:15.95] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. It has to be swiftly punished. I mean, that happens in the play, right?

[00:54:19.15] SARAH MARSH: Right. Right. But it also has to happen. Which, I mean, there wouldn't be a play if it didn't happen. So I was just thinking about that, the tension and the way that might have played into this becoming evidence in a real world trial of Socrates.

[00:54:43.88] TOM MERRILL: Paul, do you think that Socrates learned anything from this?

[00:54:48.14] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. So some sort of cognoscente actually think he probably was a lot like this at the time and changed. There's a image in Xenophon's Anabasis where Xenophon, who was a student of Socrates who went on this trip to fight with mercenaries against the Persians-- well, it was for a Persian pretender who was hiring Greek mercenaries-- they get in trouble. Their leader is killed. And they are trapped in the middle of Persia.

[00:55:23.91] And he has this dream of his father's house burning down. And people have actually said that, well, that's the think tank burning down right there. And his father is Socrates.

[00:55:34.41] And this is what was going on back at Athens when he was trapped in Persia. I find that, you know, that's an interesting speculation. But maybe it's going too far.

[00:55:46.74] On the other hand, a lot of people think, oh, no, Socrates never had a school. This is just taking a bunch of traits from other thinkers and putting them all together and calling it Socrates because maybe Socrates was one of the most interesting. He was certainly a character.

[00:56:03.06] People knew that he was physically strong. He had endurance, incredibly ugly, and maybe could do anything he wanted with you in argument, right? That's a big rep to be carrying around.

[00:56:13.83] So that I don't know if he actually had a school. But I feel like this probably did change his behavior. Certainly it would have changed the way Plato and Xenophon depicted him. So if he was like Aristophanes says, to make a cultural icon, they would need to make a new Socrates who is pretty much the opposite of all those things.

[00:56:39.88] TOM MERRILL: Right. So in The Republic, you get a kind of stand in for Unjust Speech in the character of Thrasymachus or the Glaucon speech at the beginning of Book II. Socrates is going to spend nine books of The Republic trying to--

[00:56:52.02] PAUL LUDWIG: Charm that out of them.

[00:56:53.21] TOM MERRILL: --right, show them that he's not-- you know, that he has an answer to Unjust Speech.

[00:56:57.81] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah.

[00:56:58.35] TOM MERRILL: So there's a lot of reenacting of this sort of primal scene.

[00:57:01.92] PAUL LUDWIG: And Socrates becomes civically responsible in the Platonic corpus, right? He dies. He could easily have gotten out of that charge. And he could have easily left after he was convicted and just continue to be irresponsible.

[00:57:19.62] But instead, he died as a martyr for philosophy. Because it was good for Athens to have philosophers around. That's a big deal. That's a big change from what we see this guy here.

[00:57:30.98] TOM MERRILL: Right.

[00:57:31.24] PAUL LUDWIG: Right?

[00:57:31.82] TOM MERRILL: Right. [INAUDIBLE] this feeling that he's a little bit like somebody who had a wild past and is now restrained. He was a hippie in his youth. But now he's, you know, a sober-- [INAUDIBLE] a sober St. John's tutor?

[00:57:49.75] PAUL LUDWIG: He's a lot smarter than St. John's tutors, that's the only difference.

[00:57:53.46] [LAUGHTER]

[00:57:55.28] TOM MERRILL: [INAUDIBLE]

[00:57:55.99] PAUL LUDWIG: I wish I could argue like this.

[00:57:57.61] TOM MERRILL: Just to think about the bigger context here, because there is real praise in Aristophanes, and even in this play of Socrates, right? There's something about wanting to the world the way that it is that Aristophanes looks up to.

[00:58:12.20] And so that's why it's so funny. You think you're so smart. And in a way, you're the smartest guy out there. But you just don't understand human beings at all. And you know, how many professors do we know who've been varieties of this exact thing?

[00:58:29.22] But I just wonder if it's-- even in the contemporary academy, that we also have-- the intellectual life requires questioning things and being aware of the distinction between-- we don't call it nature versus convention. But we talk about social constructions and things like that. And that the life of the mind requires that kind of radicalness which implies some quite scary things about society. But trying to think about how we relate to the rest of the world, that's what this play is really about in some way.

[00:59:05.04] I'll give you an example. After I came to the University, we pick a book for all the freshmen to read every year. And the book is always some sort of lefty book that is sort of interesting, but not ultimately that interesting.

[00:59:22.63] But one year they picked a book in which the thesis of the book was we live in an unjust economic order. And that given the fact that the economic order is unjust, people who steal from their bosses should not be seen as criminals, but should be seen as heroes. That should be seen as a form of economic civil disobedience. And it was really things like falsifying time cards is something that should be praised.

[00:59:46.47] Now, on one level, you know, I teach Marx every term. For heaven's sake, I mean, Plato's Republic says sort of the same thing, right? That you're living in an unjust social order that distorts your soul in horrific ways.

[01:00:01.73] So you know you can't deny that that's part of what we need to be talking about in a university. But just the lack of self-knowledge-- so you go to a housekeeper on campus. And you say, are you really going to say, it's OK for you to steal things from the president's office when you're [INAUDIBLE], right?

[01:00:19.96] I mean, is this the University's message that that would be OK? Because I'm pretty sure that the University would fire any housekeeper who stole in less than a second, right? That there would be no mercy whatsoever. And so it just struck me as such an oblivious, unself-knowing thing to propose something that we should think about as though it were like a practical thing that you could put into [INAUDIBLE] right this second.

[01:00:49.69] SARAH MARSH: And in addition to that, that if, let's say, if the faculty would start shirking their responsibilities to students as a way of pushing back against--

[01:01:01.41] [LAUGHTER]

[01:01:02.89] TOM MERRILL: [INAUDIBLE]

[01:01:07.75] SARAH MARSH: --all the names have been changed to protect the identities of-- no, but if people stopped holding their office hours, or stopped writing letters of recommendation for students, it wouldn't lessen the amount of work that has to be done by the professoriate. There would still be students who want to go to graduate school or to law school. There would still be students who have questions about how to write a thesis statement.

[01:01:35.06] And so that work has to be done by someone. And the idea that if one person just backed off, some other colleague is going to have to pick up that work. And so that argument that it's just, you know, some sort of individual act of economic disobedience disregards the idea that there are networks and very complicated ecosystems of labor and that has to be part of the math problem.

[01:02:05.59] TOM MERRILL: But also, that we're dependent on students buying our product, right? That however much we want to think that we're pure thinkers and that the message that we

send to them, I mean, literally, so the message of The Clouds that they get from Socrates is don't respect your parents. In fact, you might even beat your parents, metaphorically or non-metaphorically. And that might be a foolish message. Or you might want to present that in a delicate way, I guess you might say.

[01:02:36.39] PAUL LUDWIG: So liberal education implies this distinction between theory and practice, which is an artificial distinction. Right? It invites us to go think as radically as we can while inviting us not to put [INAUDIBLE] in practice, which-- you can see the hypocrisy in that.

[01:03:01.47] TOM MERRILL: Well, and you might think of the separation of the academy from regular politics as a way of defending ourselves. You know, we're not trying to overthrow the regime because we've got more important things to do.

[01:03:15.42] PAUL LUDWIG: Right. Right.

[01:03:17.26] TOM MERRILL: But the line has gotten blurrier and blurrier, I think. But the danger is people--

[01:03:22.94] PAUL LUDWIG: Politics will push back against us. Yeah, for sure.

[01:03:26.60] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. So maybe Sarah's thought that, you know, Strepsiades is a version of the Trump voter is not entirely insane.

[01:03:35.01] SARAH MARSH: Well, the question this raises for me is whether or not Socrates and the methods of The Thinkery succeed in changing who Strepsiades is or who Pheidippides is. Does any meaningful change happen in result of The Thinkery's methods?

[01:03:57.41] PAUL LUDWIG: Well, Pheidippides , goes from a guy who's worried about his tan and his horses and winning horse races-- chariot races, I guess, I don't know exactly what they're doing. And--

[01:04:11.43] TOM MERRILL: Drag racing.

[01:04:12.10] PAUL LUDWIG: --spending all the money requisite to that and being a cool guy, probably with the kind of a traditional morality, too, although with this hypocrisies that we've seen traditional morality had, he goes from that to this follower of Socrates. So there's a big conversion there, I think.

[01:04:33.43] Strepsiades didn't undergo that conversion, but Pheidippides did. And he argues like Socrates now. And it's interesting that these new gods, The Clouds, kind of fall out of the picture. Pheidippides doesn't refer to them, doesn't pray to them, not interested in them.

[01:04:55.89] Nature is big. Nature and natural necessity, compulsion, the way things have to be, that's really big on his agenda, but not the new religion. Yeah, I think that's a success of Socrates, maybe a bad success. But he really converted a guy who didn't want to have anything to do with these pale faces. And now he's just totally one of them.

[01:05:24.16] SARAH MARSH: Right. And so now I have another question about the clouds. So when Socrates is introducing the clouds, he talks about how they go everywhere on the globe. And they sort of they reflect their mimetic. And they turn into a centaur or a wolf, depending on what they're hanging over or looking at.

[01:05:45.04] TOM MERRILL: They're poetry.

[01:05:45.80] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah.

[01:05:46.05] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[01:05:46.57] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah.

[01:05:47.14] SARAH MARSH: And so do they have capacity to intervene in the history of the play itself? I mean, do they have-- are they agents of change?

[01:06:00.60] TOM MERRILL: Well, they claim to be, don't they? They sort of say, well, if you sacrifice to us, we'll make it rain at the right time. And if you think about it, that's sort of the most primordial thing that you need from the gods is to make it rain at the right time.

[01:06:12.08] SARAH MARSH: Right. And yet The Thinkery burns down because the clouds don't.

[01:06:15.69] PAUL LUDWIG: They could have rained on it, right? They could have saved it. So they've turned against Socrates by that time, if they exist at all. Right? But we've sort of seen them and heard them sing, right? So they seem to exist.

[01:06:30.17] And everybody knows that clouds exist, right? We just didn't know they were gods. And that they're mimetic? It's just a wonderful creation of his to start us thinking, well, OK. Maybe they do change.

[01:06:47.22] TOM MERRILL: By the end, Zeus wins, right? I mean, this is the story of every tragedy is that you fight against Zeus. And then Zeus wins. And Strepsiades has his own version of that, that if he can get out of his debts, he's willing to believe that Zeus doesn't exist.

[01:07:02.68] But then once the mother is attacked, I mean, that's the big, the last thing. That he's, like, Zeus does exist! Dammit!

[01:07:11.37] [LAUGHTER]

[01:07:13.29] That's why I need to burn these books. And you know.

[01:07:16.82] PAUL LUDWIG: And the clouds have told him by that time, you know, we led you to this doom where you've lost your son. You guys can't love each other anymore, because he's so changed. Because we saw that you had a lust for wickedness.

[01:07:32.34] And so we kind of did what gods always do, you know? We're just sort of the normal old thing and nobody knew about us until now. But I feel like, in some ways, the clouds come out the best of everybody in the play. Like Sarah said, the two principal-- the houses, it's the destruction of two houses, the two houses that you first see on the stage.

[01:07:57.07] But the clouds come out with this sort of sterling reputation as new gods who fit in and help the old gods and see that justice is done. What more do you want? Their reputation went from nobody knew they existed to, at the end of this play, they're, like, wow, these are cool new gods.

[01:08:21.89] TOM MERRILL: So you think it's all scheme for the clouds to go viral?

[01:08:27.28] PAUL LUDWIG: Well, or that that's part of the drama or something, why Aristophanes would want us to think along those lines.

[01:08:34.39] TOM MERRILL: Yeah.

[01:08:36.13] PAUL LUDWIG: He's not he's not happy with the old pantheon, either. In some ways, he's just as radical as Socrates.

[01:08:42.54] TOM MERRILL: Right.

[01:08:43.26] PAUL LUDWIG: But his innovation is-- it's innovation. It's not a revolution.

[01:08:50.05] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[01:08:50.60] TOM MERRILL: But he also understands how to present things, how to speak to people in a way that Socrates just doesn't. Right? But I wonder if the deepest theme isn't that, even for Aristophanes, is that he does really respect with Socrates is doing, like, the inquiry into nature. But the inquiry into nature leads in certain directions that's in tension with what Strepsiades and what society needs.

[01:09:13.27] We need, and this is to me is a profound truth, right, that when we do free speech in class and students are, like, well, we can't have complete free speech because then people will use the n-word. And that's completely true, right? Aristophanes is showing you that even as an academic community, we need rules. We need values.

[01:09:29.83] We need norms. We need gods. Right? Isn't that the sort of amazing thing about the play?

[01:09:37.05] PAUL LUDWIG: Yeah. That's very interesting. Because even nature, which was supposed to substitute for God, right, Vortex is the new king. Zeus is out.

[01:09:48.00] The Homer Simpson is going to defy that nature. It's going to make him into Mr. vortex, right? Sir Vortex, whatever, Lord Vortex, Lord Voldemort-- so in a kind of similar way, the new gods that Aristophanes has introduced to the city are nature goddesses.

[01:10:08.13] They're stuff we knew about. They're wispy, airy, misty things we always knew. We just didn't know that they were goddesses, that they were mimetic, and they're muses.

[01:10:19.64] And in a way, I'm one of them, right? They speak for me. So somehow, my poetry is looking at nature but personifying it in a way that the rank and file are going to do anyway.

[01:10:35.58] TOM MERRILL: Right. He understands that somehow better than Socrates does.

[01:10:40.59] Well. So I think we're out of time. Paul, it's been great. Aristophanes is always fun. But I learned a lot from listening to you and Sarah talk. So thank you for coming. We look forward to talking about your book as soon as we finish reading it, which will be next week.

[01:10:58.89] PAUL LUDWIG: I think it will take a lot longer than a week, unfortunately.

[01:11:00.89] [LAUGHTER]

[01:11:01.75] But I really appreciate you guys taking the time to do this. You've got a really great thing going, Tom. Obviously, you're to be commended for the Lincoln Scholars, which a lot of it is your idea. And that's fantastic.

[01:11:16.89] People are being educated liberally at American University, with all the tensions and the difficulties that entails. Both in our day and way back in fifth century Athens. Still, nevertheless, it can be done. And you're proving that it can be done.

[01:11:33.67] TOM MERRILL: Well, thank you, Paul. And thank you, Sarah. It's been great. We'll look forward to talking to you next episode.

[01:11:38.36] SARAH MARSH: Paul, Tom, thank you. This was really fun.

[01:11:41.82] PAUL LUDWIG: Thanks a lot.