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To cite this article: Ira Avneri (2024) The vertical axis and the *agôn* between theatre and philosophy, Journal of Aesthetics & Culture, 16:1, 2359728, DOI: 10.1080/20004214.2024.2359728

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2024.2359728>



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Published online: 19 Jun 2024.



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## The vertical axis and the *agôn* between theatre and philosophy

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the controversy between ancient Greek dramatists and their fellow philosophers over the vertical axis, with special reference to Socrates. I begin with a discussion of the vertical axis in Greek theatre, and turn to Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* to discuss the vertical as a manifestation of the tragic preference ascribed to our "divine" upper body over our "bestial" lower body. Then, I discuss the *deus ex machina* as an image of divine vertical intervention in the horizontal human plot, and claim that Plato's and Aristotle's philosophical critique of this theatrical convention fails to notice that the dramatists made a subversive use of the illogicality of this convention. The second part of the article is dedicated to the vertical as an expression of man's desire to transcend the boundaries of the human sphere. I discuss the negative treatment of this desire by Greek dramatists, who regard it as an unworthy aspiration, compared to its positive treatment by Greek philosophers, who presents it as a worthy aspiration, since it is only through such an ascent that one can get a glimpse of the eternal. In this context, I examine two representations of Socrates: his *deus ex machina* appearance in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, implying the hubristic stance of philosophers; and his habit of long immobile standings as introduced in Plato's *Symposium*, implying the philosophers' superiority over the dramatists. However, the publicly-visible nature of Socrates' standstills also turns them into a display of philosophizing, meaning that Socrates of the *Symposium* is a philosopher who (perhaps unfairly) theatricalizes his verticality so as to challenge the art of theatre.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 April 2023  
Accepted 21 May 2024

### KEYWORDS

Vertical; *deus ex machina*; Greek theatre; Greek philosophy; Socrates; Oedipus

### Introduction

This article aims to shed light on the controversy between Greek dramatists and their fellow philosophers over the vertical axis and its meanings. This is a less-known aspect of the well-known "ancient quarrel," as Plato called it, between dramatic poetry and philosophy (*Republic*, 607b; Plato 2012c, 559)—two discursive practices that had emerged more or less simultaneously and conducted a complex dialogical relationship that included mutual border-crossings and even an explicit *agôn* (contest).<sup>1</sup>

My first major study case is Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, whose hero is "the prototypical figure of the philosopher, the one who challenges sacred enigmas in order to establish the perspective of man and self," as Jean-Joseph Goux writes (Goux 1993, 3). As I claim, Oedipus' tragic mixture of sight and blindness, knowledge and ignorance—having solved the riddle of the universal identity of Man, while failing to solve the riddle of his own particular identity—is essentially bound with the philosophical preference for the upper body over the lower body; or in Oedipus' case, for his brilliant brain over his injured feet.

My second study case involves several scenes of *deus ex machina* – the theatrical convention marking a divine vertical intervention in the horizontal human

plot. After discussing various modes of such intervention (a dynamic appearance wherein an actor playing a deity is floating above the stage on a crane, a static appearance on an elevated platform, and the "descent" of a deity to the stage floor), I discuss Plato's and Aristotle's critique of the *deus ex machina* as an illogical resolution (*lusis*) of a dramatic complication. As I claim, their philosophical assessment is afflicted by short-sightedness, for it fails to notice that the dramatists (and particularly Euripides, the tragedian most identified with the *deus ex machina*) often made deliberate use of the illogical nature of this convention.

In both drama and philosophy, the vertical axis epitomizes man's desire to transcend the boundaries of the human sphere. Whereas Greek dramatists regard this desire as an unworthy hubristic aspiration to be warned against, Greek philosophers (and particularly Plato) present it as a worthy aspiration to be encouraged. To establish this point, I examine two representations of Socrates—from drama and philosophy—that revolve around his association with the vertical. Hence, my third study case is Aristophanes' *Clouds*, where Socrates' *deus ex machina* appearance is a comic image of the hubristic stance of philosophers, who allegedly claim a superhuman position and scorn both humans and gods.

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My fourth and last study case is the *Symposium*, the only text in the entire corpus of Plato's dialogues to mention Socrates' habit of standing immobile, for an unspecified period of time, immersed in thought. Contextualizing this gesture as an outer expression of the philosopher's inner journey up the ladder of love to gaze at the pure Form of Beauty, Plato presents Socrates' standstill outside Agathon's house—delaying his entrance into a banquet where the beauty of theatre is celebrated—as an image of philosophers' superiority over dramatists. However, as I claim, Socrates' critique of the dramatists in the *Symposium* is afflicted by double-standards: the publicly-visible nature of his standstill implies that it is an intended display of philosophizing. By showing how Socrates theatricalizes his verticality so as to challenge the art of theatre, Plato implicitly offers his critique of Socrates' performativity, even as he explicitly extols Socrates' philosophical virtues.

### Human verticality

The theatre stage is an intersection of two axes: the horizontal, marking the set of relationships within the human realm, and the vertical, marking the set of relationships between the human and the supernatural realms. These axes epitomize conflicts that are at the core of human existence: by and large, the horizontal embodies the tension between culture and nature, whereas the vertical embodies the tension between human finitude and thirst for the infinite. This mapping was an essential factor of Classical Greek theatre,<sup>2</sup> but its influence has lasted through the history of drama and theatre.

In Greek theatre, the vertical axis was manifested by the situating of the human plot on the stage floor and in the *skênê* (stage building), as if located in-between the Olympus and Hades, that is, in-between the upper realm of the immortal gods and the lower realm of the dead. In Athens, the home of Greek tragedy, this mythical meaning was intensified by the very location of the Theatre of Dionysus: on the south slope of the Acropolis hill, just below the Parthenon, the temple dedicated to *Athena Parthenos* ("Athena the Virgin")—which offered a visual representation of the gods' presence "above" the stage.<sup>3</sup>

In supernatural terms, the vertical symbolizes the way metaphysical presence is represented on stage. This was stressed by the very status of Greek *theatron* as a sacred space—a site for religious worship.<sup>4</sup> In human terms, on the other hand, the vertical symbolizes the way metaphysical aspiration is represented on stage, often as a tragic scenario: man's desire for ascending his mortal existence towards the immortal, and the dire consequences of this desire. Bound with hierarchal conceptualization,<sup>5</sup> the vertical manifests a fundamental aspect of human culture: the precedence

ascribed to the upper body, associated with the "divine" in us (intellect, rationality), over the lower body, associated with the "bestial" in us (instincts, corporeality).

The tragic implications of this hierarchy are best seen in Sophocles' 429 BCE *Oedipus Tyrannus*, whose hero praises his brilliant brain with which he solved the leg-riddle of the Sphinx (396–399; Sophocles 2013, 90), while almost ignoring his injured legs, marking what he has failed to solve: the riddle of his own identity. The pelvis, a "gathering point" of the upper and the lower bodies, marks the incest of Oedipus, who slept with the woman who bore him.

The riddle of the Sphinx (the content of which is not included in Sophocles' play) asks about a being with a single voice (name) and many shifting legs; or, as Jean-Pierre Vernant suggests, many shifting ways of moving on the ground: it crawls on four in the morning, walks on two in the afternoon, and drags itself with three legs in the evening (Vernant 1988, 214). According to the Greek author Pseudo-Apollodorus, Oedipus' answer to the riddle was *anthrôpos*: "human being."<sup>6</sup> If *anthrôpos* is its (only) right answer, then this riddle deals with a defining feature of Man in general, and so addresses one of the core philosophical questions: "What is Man?"<sup>7</sup> Hence, by defeating the Sphinx, Oedipus has proven himself a philosopher. However, his solution leads to his downfall: as a prize for solving the riddle, he marries the widow queen, his mother, thus fulfilling the second part of the Delphic prophecy (Rokem 2010, 7, 41, 45–47).

Oedipus is *oida-pous*, "know-foot," indicating his ability to solve the leg-riddle of the Sphinx, which concerns the universal identity of humans. But he is also *oidos-pous*, "swollen-foot," indicating his injured ankles, pinned together by his parents before abandoning him on Mount Cithaeron—the act that shaped the riddle of his own identity. However, Oedipus cannot or does not want to see the connection between the two riddles—a tragedy inscribed into his name from the outset. His *oida* ("I know," or "I have seen") exists only in the sense of abstract knowledge of the legs of Man, and is coupled with a lack of knowledge concerning his concrete *pous* ("foot").<sup>8</sup>

Oedipus' life trajectory, Charles Segal claims, oscillates between two heights: Mount Cithaeron, which is "connected with all the dark, irrational perversity of Oedipus' fate," and Mount Olympus, which is "associated with a rationally intelligible universe" (Segal 1981, 227–228). It is no coincidence that the human whose verticality is a weird mixture of beastlike damaged feet and godlike perfect brain is associated with mountains, that, according to Mircea Eliade, have always been conceived as the place where sky and earth meet, "a spot where one can pass from one

cosmic zone to another” (Eliade 1958, 99–101). And yet, the swollen-foot Oedipus’ desire for a philosophical ascent to the realm of Zeus’ “high-footed” laws (865–866) is presented by Sophocles as hubristic pretense, as evident in the warning voiced by the chorus: “Insolence breeds the tyrant, insolence/If it is glutted with a surfeit, unseasonable, unprofitable/Climbs to the rooftop and plunges/Sheers down to the ruin that must be/And there its feet are no service” (873–879; Sophocles 2013, 112, my emphasis).

Oedipus’ disregard of his feet implies a psychological hindrance, as can be inferred from his first reference to his ankle-joints, very late in the plot, defining them as “old pain” and “rare disgrace” (1033–1036; Sophocles 2013, 120).<sup>9</sup> However, it also derives from Oedipus’ commitment to the upward gaze advanced by philosophy. This shows that the philosophical mapping of the human body is different than the mapping practiced by drama, and bounded with blindness, for Oedipus’ feet are hardly an “old pain”: they have shaped his fate and identity throughout his life. Moreover, his “third leg” plays a major role in his fulfillment of both parts of the Delphic prophecy: from the report of the incident where the three roads meet, we learn that Oedipus had probably used a walking stick (as in the third phase of human life, according to Sphinx), with which he killed his father (810–11); and “third leg” (and foot in general) has been read as a symbol of the phallus,<sup>10</sup> implying his incest with his mother.

Oedipus’ name “empowers” him to stand in for his father in the symbolic order of his family. As “swell-foot” for whom legs are far more salient than for most people, he was particularly suited to solve the leg-riddle of the Sphinx, thereby gaining the dead king’s place in the royal bed—the bed on which Oedipus himself was conceived (Avneri 2022, 325; Catenaccio 2012, 105; Chase 1986, 184–186).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in the dramatic chronology of the play, the philosophizing with the Sphinx occurred only after Oedipus had killed the king with a stick marking his swollen feet. The fact that Oedipus is both a cure and cause of troubles—by taking Laius’ place he had averted a political crisis in Thebes, yet eventually incited a plague—suggests that his deformity is a mixture of constructive and destructive elements.

### Divine verticality

The principal superiority of the gods, man’s inconsequentiality in relation to them, and their way of using humans as pawns in the Olympian family’s internal struggles—were all illustrated on stage by means of the *deus ex machina*, the common Latin name for the Greek *theos apo mêchanês*, “god from the machine.” The name is derived from a specific

execution of this convention: the use of a crane with counterweights for lifting actors playing characters of gods from behind the *skênê* so as to suddenly appear up in the air, floating above the stage. However, alongside this dynamic version, the *deus ex machina* also had a static version: the stationary appearance of a deity on an elevated platform, above human movement. This would either be a dais on the left of the stage, accessible to the actors by steps, or more probably the flat roof of the wooden single-story *skênê*, accessible to them by ladder from within or behind the building. This roof—the *theologeion* (“place where the gods speak”)—was apparently sturdy enough to carry at least two or three actors (Taplin 1977, 440–441). The texts themselves often make it hard to distinguish which of the two versions—the dynamic or the static—was actually used, although in Greek tragedies the crane was probably introduced on stage only in the latter decades of the fifth-century BCE or even later. Finally, Pietro Pucci is right to claim that “the question of how and where the gods appear in these scenes rests largely on hypothetical grounds” (Pucci 1994, 22n15).

Both the *mêchanê* and the *theologeion* served to vertically distance gods from humans.<sup>12</sup> However, in Greek tragedy there were apparently cases where gods also appeared on the stage floor. In Aeschylus’ plays, gods probably share the stage with humans, directly interacting with them. Contrarily, in the extant plays of Euripides, the separation between gods and mortals is preserved even when a deity appears on the stage floor—the horizontal human plane—rather than aloft. This always takes place in the prologue and never in the full presence of human characters (Mastrorarde 1990, 274; Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 459ff.).<sup>13</sup>

At times, Euripides designs the appearance of a deity on the stage floor in the prologue so as to create—in retrospect—visual as well as dramatic tension with another divine appearance later in that play, on the *theologeion* or on a crane. For example, in the *Bacchae*, Dionysus’ appearance on the stage floor in the beginning of the play, disguised as a human, is juxtaposed with his elevated appearance near the end of the play in his divine form. Standing on the *theologeion*, Dionysus confronts Cadmus and his daughter Agave whom Dionysus had struck mad, causing her to kill her son Pentheus for his rejecting the god. Standing on the stage floor next to Pentheus’ dismembered body, Cadmus protests to Dionysus: “Gods ought not to be like mortals in their tempers.” To this Dionysus replies, pointing at the human-like nature of the gods: “Long ago Zeus my father ordained this” (1346–1349; Euripides 2000a, 151).<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, in the *Hippolytus* Aphrodite’s prologue appearance, probably on the stage floor—where she presents a summary of the plot that is about to

unfold<sup>15</sup> – is juxtaposed with the appearance of her rival, the virgin goddess Artemis, on the *skênê* roof near the end of the play.<sup>16</sup> Situating Aphrodite on the stage floor might imply that she is more “human” than Artemis—not necessarily in a positive manner, given her association with unrestrained erotic desire (the victim of which is Phaedra, who was innocently sacrificed as part of Aphrodite’s revenge against Hippolytus for his hubristic rejection of the goddess). However, here Artemis’ elevated position denotes neither omnipotent power nor resolution of the human complication: due to the separation of powers within the Olympian family, forbidding a deity to interfere with an action of another deity, Artemis could not prevent the death of Hippolytus, her protégé. All she could do is to disclose to Hippolytus and his father Theseus the reason for their tragedy (in this respect, her position on the *theologeion* marks divine knowledge, and their position on the stage floor marks human ignorance); to blame Theseus for the hasty judgment of his son; to assure them vaguely that Aphrodite would pay for her deed; and to console the dying Hippolytus with the promise that a female cult will be established in his honor (1283–1439; Euripides 2013, 244–250).

### Tragic verticality

The gods’ vertical intervention in the horizontal human drama creates a sudden interruption of the sequence, surprising the characters and the audience alike. When taking place near the end of the play, it usually fulfills several functions, similar to those of Artemis’ appearance just described: summing up what has happened so far; exposure of information that the humans cannot otherwise know about the gods’ involvement in the drama and their motives; prophecy of what lies ahead; and an etiology for the foundation of a future cult related to the fictional plot and known to the dramatist’s contemporary audience.<sup>17</sup> Whenever Athena is the deity interfering with the plot, this casting obviously adds a self-reflective aspect to the drama, since this goddess is the patron of the city wherein the tragedies known to us were staged.

In texts composed decades after the golden age of Greek tragedy, both Plato and Aristotle have criticized the *deus ex machina* as an external and illogical solution to a dramatic impasse. In Plato’s *Cratylus*, sensing that the discussion of the source and status of names has reached a dead-end, Socrates stings Hermogenes: “Unless you want us to behave like tragic poets, who introduce a *deus ex machina* whenever they’re perplexed. For we, too, could escape our difficulties by saying that the primary names are correct because they were given by the gods. But is that the best account we can give?” (425d; Plato

1997b, 142). More famously, in the *Poetics*, probably the earliest philosophical text devoted in its entirety to the art of theatre, Aristotle states that *deus ex machina* is an inadequate resolution of a dramatic complication, since the solution it imposes is not a necessary or probable consequence of preceding events in the plot. As such, it violates the logical beginning-middle-end structure of dramatic action (Belfiore 1992, 130–131). The resolution of a complication, he claims, “should arise out of the plot itself, and not depend on a stage-artifice.” However, immediately afterwards Aristotle clarifies that he does not totally dismiss the use of this apparatus, but only wishes to limit it to epistemic matters outside the plot: “Past event beyond human knowledge, or events yet to come, which require to be foretold or announced; since it is the privilege of the gods to know everything” (1454a-b; Aristotle 1984, 2327). The *deus ex machina*, Aristotle claims, is logical so far as it is employed for disclosing divine knowledge, and not for resolving human complications (which often result, in fact, from lack of knowledge).

Aristotle’s only example in the *Poetics* for a problematic *deus ex machina* – the use of a *mechane*, as he claims, for solving the heroine’s complication in Euripides’ *Medea*<sup>18</sup> – is in itself historically problematic. Apart from the fact that there is no clear evidence in the text to support the claim that Medea speaks from an elevated position (Mastronarde 1990, 264), this play, staged in 431 BCE, predates the establishment of the *deus ex machina* as a standard scene-type in Euripides’ plays.<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding, the resolution of the complication by evoking Medea’s superhuman origins is the most controversial ending in Greek tragedy. Hence, from the perspective of play-as-text (contrasted to play-as-performance), Aristotle is apparently right to claim that here the resolution is not a logical outcome of preceding events in the plot, even if Medea’s magical powers are stated throughout the play. Still, Aristotle’s (and Plato’s) critique of the implausibility of the *deus ex machina* scenes does not only subject drama to how a philosopher would have composed it,<sup>20</sup> but also fails to notice that the tragedians often made captious use of the illogicality and artificiality of this apparatus.

This is mainly true of Euripides: more than half of his extant tragedies feature a farfetched ending, through which he criticizes not only the gods (for their harmful interference with human affairs, their initial responsibility for the tragedy which they try to solve artificially, and their helplessness), but also his contemporary Athenian society. With the *deus ex machina*, Euripides stirs not only theological questions—as for example in the *Hippolytus*, the *Bacchae*, and the *Ion*<sup>21</sup> – but also political issues. It often seems

that he purposely designs the divine epiphany as a flimsy ending, as if to imply that the *condicio humana* is in such dire straits that even a miraculous occurrence would not save it. Such, for example, is the happy ending of the *Iphigenia at Aulis*, with the account of Artemis' rescue of Iphigeneia at the very moment of her sacrifice—an off-stage *deus ex machina* reported by a messenger. Although this ending is probably a later addition to the play, the interpolator (possibly the tragedian's son or nephew, also named Euripides) was well acquainted with the Euripidean logic, for in this scene he has Clytemnestra voice the suspicion that the messenger's report of the miraculous occurrences is nothing but a fiction born of Agamemnon's command: "My Daughter, [...] / How shall I not maintain that these are false/consoling tales to make me cease from my keen grief for you?" (1615–1618; Euripides 2000b, 341).<sup>22</sup>

The absurd nature of Euripides' endings is even more striking in the *Orestes*, his version of the occurrences of Orestes after murdering his mother, Clytemnestra, as revenge for her murdering his father, Agamemnon. Near the end of the play, Orestes barricades himself in the palace, taking hostage of his cousin Hermione, daughter of Menelaus and Helen. Just as Menelaus is about to break into the palace, Orestes appears on the *skênê* roof, holding a sword to Hermione's throat, accompanied by his sister Electra and his friend Pylades, both holding torches. Orestes, who tried to kill Helen earlier in the plot, now threatens to harm her daughter, throw a coping stone at Menelaus, and burn the palace. Suddenly, Apollo appears above the humans standing aloft on the *theologeion*, with Helen at his side (1625). Declaring that he has saved Helen, Apollo announces that she will be immortal and seated as a goddess in the halls of Zeus, her father—and hence Menelaus must take another wife. As for Orestes, Apollo orders him to, literally, get off the ledge: go into exile for a year, be judged in Athens (where he will be acquitted from the charge of matricide), and only then return to Argos, where he will be crowned as the new ruler after marrying Hermione—just as Pylades would marry Electra (1629–1665; Euripides 2002, 599–601).<sup>23</sup>

Of all extant Greek tragedies, Apollo's epiphany in the *Orestes* – the only play in which Euripides includes him in an epilogue—is the most radical divine intervention in a human plot, in terms of its effect on the characters' actions. Apollo's arrival at the end of the play, finally taking responsibility for Orestes' troubles (1664–1667), is a belated response to his much-felt absence up to that point.<sup>24</sup> However, his resolution—immediate reconciliation between Orestes and Menelaus, immortalization of Helen, and a double marriage—is forced to the point of

ridicule. It seems unlikely that this *deus ex machina* was introduced to imply that only deities appearing "in the sky," and not mortals who claim *deus*-like powers through their very appearance on the *theologeion*, can resolve such a human complication. Quite the opposite: the happy ending imposed by Apollo stands in such contrast with the manner in which things have occurred on the human level, that it could just as well be read as a parody.<sup>25</sup>

The *Orestes* actually ends in a disturbing way, not only because of Helen's silence throughout Apollo's account of how she was rescued and crowned as a goddess,<sup>26</sup> but also because it indicates that the gods cannot really "undo the social and ethical decay portrayed in the mortal world of the play," as Donald J. Mastronarde writes (Mastronarde 2010, 195).<sup>27</sup> All this exposes Euripides' pessimism concerning the moral: Athens of 408 BCE—the year the play was composed—which he would soon leave for Macedonia. Through the flimsy ending, Euripides seems to imply that in this polis—subjected to war from the outside and to political struggles from within—man cannot be redeemed. This Athens differs totally from the one praised by Aeschylus exactly fifty years earlier in the *Eumenides*, his version of Orestes' events.

### Comic verticality

In Greek drama, the philosophical desire for transcending the boundaries of the human sphere is associated with hubris and seemingly conceived as violating the Apollonian dictum "know thyself" (*gnôthi seauton*), which means, among other things: know your limits and limitations as a human being. One of the most stinging theatrical critiques of this hubris is found in Aristophanes' *Clouds* – not only the earliest extant account of Socrates but also a text which was composed during his lifetime and not posthumously (like Plato's dialogues). The *Clouds* was staged in Athens in 423 BCE, earning only third place in the comic poets' competition at the City Dionysia. Frustrated, Aristophanes revised the play. Its second version (ca. 419–417 BCE) is the one that survived to this day, although apparently never staged in Aristophanes' lifetime.

Socrates of the *Clouds* is the head of *phrontistêrion* ("Thinkery," as it is often translated), a school of sophistry where students learn "how to successfully argue any case, right or wrong" (99), alongside conducting absurd scientific missions (Aristophanes 1998, 15).<sup>28</sup> The farmer Strepsiades is eager to send his son Pheidippides to this school, to learn how to make a weak argument strong—and thereby to assist Strepsiades in fending off his creditors and escape paying his debts (112–118), caused by Pheidippides' own squandering lifestyle. When Pheidippides

refuses, Strepsiades decides to enroll in the school himself. Arriving there and asking to see Socrates, he expects Socrates to step out of the *skênê* (marking the Thinkery's facade) and meet him face-to-face on the horizontal human level. Socrates, however, appears suspended in air, elevated and insulated, inside a basket propped by a crane (218)—a satirical *deus ex machina* scene.<sup>29</sup>

Socrates' performance of divinity is amplified by his first words, responding to Strepsiades, who had twice called him from the stage floor: "Why do you call me, ephemeral creature?" (223; Aristophanes 1998, 24).<sup>30</sup> By having Socrates voice from above such a response, Aristophanes portrays him as one who not only distances himself from human affairs but also claims a superhuman position. "Socrates is looking down at Strepsiades as a god might look down from the Olympus on a mortal," Kenneth J. Dover writes (Dover 1968, 125).<sup>31</sup> Socrates himself explains that his floating in the air derives from intellectual-scientific motives: as he claims, the thin air above improves the quality of his thought, and the elevated position enables him "[to] make exact discoveries of the highest nature! [...] to create only elevated notions" (228–231; Aristophanes 1998, 25). However, his *deus ex machina* position is clearly an image of the false pretense of philosophers.

A little later in the plot, as part of the *mysteria* (ritual initiations into a cult) performed at his school, Socrates, who by then has already stepped down to the stage floor, summons the Clouds (268–274). As he tells Strepsiades, these supernatural entities, serving as the chorus of this play,<sup>32</sup> are the only true gods, and "everything else is utter nonsense. [...] Zeus doesn't exist!" (364–367; Aristophanes 1998, 34). This statement—which falls on open ears (earlier in the plot, Strepsiades blamed Zeus' brother Poseidon for his debts; 83–85)<sup>33</sup> – is only one of Socrates' repeated rejections of the existing order of the gods. Already when asked by Strepsiades what he is doing up high, on the *mechane*, he states that he traverses the air and scrutinizes (*periphronô*) the sun (225).<sup>34</sup> *Periphronô* means "to contemplate," but can also be read as "to hold in contempt" – which is indeed how Strepsiades interprets Socrates' attitude, without the latter protesting against this note (226). The sun is the physical manifestation of Helios, and hence the image of Socrates looking down on it implies that he scorns the gods.<sup>35</sup>

In the *Symposium*, Plato's only dialogue wherein Aristophanes is cast as a character, Alcibiades tells the symposiasts about the bravery of his ex-lover Socrates during the Athenian retreat in the Battle of Delium in 424 BCE—a year prior to the staging of the *Clouds*,<sup>36</sup> and eight years prior to the alleged date of Agathon's banquet. As Alcibiades recounts, while he himself withdrew on horseback, Socrates withdrew on foot,

and even helped the Athenian general Laches to get across in these lethal circumstances (220e–221b; Plato 2008, 60).<sup>37</sup> Socrates' calm behavior during that event was no different from his daily manner, Alcibiades claims, and to illustrate this point he quotes a line from the *Clouds* – in the presence of both Socrates and Aristophanes—parodying Socrates' typical behavior in Athens. In the *Clouds*, this line is voiced by the chorus, addressing Socrates: "The way you strut around like a grand gander" (362; Aristophanes 1998, 33). In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades addresses Aristophanes, the "owner" of the line to be quoted, while referring to Socrates in the third person: "[...] How he was proceeding on his way just as he does here in Athens, exemplifying that line of yours, Aristophanes, 'swaggering and casting sidelong glances,' calmly looking sideways as he does at friends and enemies alike" (221b; Plato 2008, 60–61).<sup>38</sup> This phrasing captures the logic of Alcibiades' speech in the *Symposium*, mixing praise and blame of Socrates. It reveals Alcibiades' view that Socrates' behavior is praiseworthy, but is also an arrogant display of skills—here shown on the horizontal level.<sup>39</sup> No reaction from Aristophanes to the quote is recorded in the dialogue, yet his depiction of Socrates' hubris in the *Clouds* suggests that he shares this view.

In the *Clouds*, Socrates' hubris is a double-edged sword. At the end of the play, frustrated with the fact that he himself was expelled from the Thinkery (781–790); with the fact that Pheidippides, who he had eventually enrolled in this school, targets him violently with the skills he has learned there (1321ff.); and with the fact that he has denied the Olympian gods under Socrates' instruction (818–835, 1470–1479)—Strepsiades decides to take revenge. He orders his slave to climb to the *theologeion* and to break the roof of Socrates' school. Then, he climbs there himself and sets fire to the Thinkery (1483–1492)—"his sole successful action in the play," as John Given nicely puts it (Given 2009, 116). This scene, probably added only in the second version of the play,<sup>40</sup> anticipates the finale of the *Orestes*: these are the only two passages in extant Greek drama in which a character climbs to the top of the *skênê* at the end of the play, challenges someone down below, and threatens to burn down a building with the intention of harming those inside (Jendza 2020, 207–208).

Still, there is one crucial difference: in Euripides' play the image of characters mounting the *skênê* roof holding torches marks human pretension of divine powers, whereas in Aristophanes' play it marks revenge against such human pretension. The fact that in the *Clouds* the revenge is carried out under Hermes' patronage (1478–1483), against an institute where the Olympian gods are disparaged, turns Strepsiades' occupation of the *theologeion* into a "[restoration of] the appropriate reverence for the

gods through destructive popular justice,” as Criag Jendza writes (Jendza 2020, 208–209). In ironic reversal to his own *deus ex machina* position, it is now Socrates who calls from below to Strepsiades who appears up high: “You up there, whatever do you think you are doing?” To which Strepsiades replies by quoting Socrates’ words from their first encounter: “I am ‘walking the air to look down on the sun!’” (1502–1503; Aristophanes 1998, 105).<sup>41</sup> Such a reward casts tragic light on Socrates’ comic representation.

The third-century CE Roman author Claudius Aelian points out in his *Varia Historia* that although Socrates rarely visited the theatre, he did attend the premiere of the *Clouds*, having heard that this play deals with his character, and even purposefully sat in a prominent seat in the theatre. According to Aelian, foreigners who were at the theatre, and had never heard of Socrates, asked who was the person being satirized. To put an end to their questions, Socrates stood up and remained standing, silent and in full view, throughout the entire performance (2:13; Aelian 1997, 83–85). It is as if by this gesture he wanted to express his contempt for this representation of him and to show that he, and not his stage “copy”, is the real Socrates.<sup>42</sup> Regardless of its veracity, this story draws attention to a feature of Socrates to be discussed later in my reading of the *Symposium*: Socrates’ awareness of his theatricality and his way of employing it for a philosophical purpose. For Socrates’ standing visible-to-all can be read a theatrical demonstration, in the theatre, of the core theme of Plato’s Theory of Forms: the precedence of the pure Form over its perceptible manifestations. In Plato, this precedence is both ontological and epistemological: only to the Forms can one ascribe full existence, and only in relation to the Forms is real knowledge possible.

At the same time, stories of such sort, much like Alcibiades’ account, mirror the suspicion around Socrates and his philosophical activity, which eventually amounted to legal charges. In his trial, Socrates was charged both with corrupting the youth and with impiety (*Apology*, 24b), an attitude associated with introducing new divinities and new rites into the religious cults. Just as the corrupt behavior of Socrates’ students in the fictional world of the *Clouds* sets up the stage for the first charge, so his summoning of the Clouds at the expense of the Olympian gods sets up the stage for the second.

In his defense speech, as recorded by Plato, Socrates not only states explicitly that he does not possess superhuman wisdom (20d-e), but also claims that Aristophanes’ depiction of him as occupied with sophist argumentation, as well as with the vertical activity of “investigating the things beneath the earth and in the heavens,” had intensified prejudice

against him (18b-d, 19c; Plato 2012a, 23). Indeed, the historical Socrates’ interest in meteorology and cosmology was probably far more limited, but it is also worth noting that the *Clouds* was staged many years prior to Socrates’ trial,<sup>43</sup> so Plato’s judgement of it might be too harsh. Plato himself has Socrates claim in the *Sophist* that true philosophers look down from aloft on the life (*bios*) of those beneath them (216c), but it might be that here Socrates practices his irony, especially given the fact that it is said in response to Theodorus’ claim that philosophers are not gods but are still divine.<sup>44</sup>

### Philosophical verticality

Unlike Greek dramatists, their fellow philosophers regarded the desire for transcending the boundaries of the human sphere (and the phenomenal realm in general) as the worthy path for man. This is most clearly evident in the dialogues of Plato, who depicts the realm of unity (the pure Forms) as situated “above” and “beyond” the realm of multiplicity (their perceptible manifestations), and the philosophical journey as an upward movement towards the true home of the eternal soul, where it had dwelt before “falling” into the mortal body.<sup>45</sup> In the *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates claim that when the soul withdraws from the senses to inquire by itself, it sights the invisible and intelligible (83a–b) and ascends to the realm of the immortal and unchangeable. There, imitating the pure Forms, it ceases to stray and remains stable. This experience is what is called “wisdom” (79c-d; Plato 2012b, 119). A similar yet more colorful image is introduced by Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, in his myth about the ascent of the gods to the very edge of the world, to feast and to behold the pure Forms. This procession, Socrates narrates, is followed by human souls who wish to imitate the divine contemplating. Whereas the gods perform the ascent easily, using their well-controlled winged chariots, for the souls it is difficult—their chariots trample one another, stumble, each trying to take the lead, and some getting out of control—but those that do complete the journey stand on the outer surface of the heavens and gaze upon the pure Forms while being moved by the circular motion of the cosmos (247b-c).

One of Plato’s striking examples of a philosophical ascent is introduced in the *Symposium*, which narrates the occurrences of the banquet held by Agathon in honor of his victory in the tragic poets’ competition at the festival of *Lenaea*, presumably in 416 BCE. In this banquet, Agathon and his guests celebrate his victory by staging a contest of speeches in praise of Eros, the divine personification of the human *erôs*. The unofficial winner of this contest is Socrates, whose speech, as he himself says, actually “belongs”



to Diotima, his legendary teacher—literally speaking—in erotic matters (*deinos ta erôtika*, 198d). In this speech, allegedly based on what he had learned from Diotima many years prior to Agathon’s banquet (201d), Socrates depicts the journey of the philosophical lover towards the proper object of desire as an upward movement of climbing the ladder of love to gaze at the pure form of Beauty.<sup>46</sup> Since the beautiful (*ta kala*) and the good (*ta agatha*) are mutually connected (204e), when reaching the upper rung the lover will “give birth not to mere images of virtue but to true virtue, because it is not an image that he is grasping but the truth. *When he has given birth to and nurtured true virtue it is possible for him to be loved by the gods and to become, if any human can, immortal himself*” (212a; Plato 2008, 50, my emphasis).

Earlier that evening, in his encomium of Eros, Aristophanes introduced a myth on the “evolution” of humankind, claiming that the human race originally consisted of three kinds of rounded four-legged creatures: male, female, and androgynous (189d–190a). These creatures, Aristophanes narrates, were split in two by Zeus as punishment for their attempt “to make an ascent to heaven in order to attack the gods” (190b; Plato 2008, 23, my emphasis). In their newly two-legged condition, the halved parts longed for each other and tried to come together again (191a–b).<sup>47</sup> *Erôs*, accordingly, is one’s desire to reunite with one’s missing half, and thereby to reconstitute their four-legged wholeness: “Ever since that far-off time, love of one person for another has been inborn in human beings, and its role is to restore us to our ancient state by trying to make unity out of duality and to heal our human condition” (191d; Plato 2008, 24). Socrates’ speech is a retort to this myth:<sup>48</sup> whereas Aristophanes claims that *erôs* operates at ground level—moving the vertically-split lovers toward each other for an encounter on the horizontal axis—Socrates claims that *erôs* directs the lover upward and beyond, toward the pure Forms (211a–c). It reattaches one not to one’s missing half, but rather to the realm of the eternal. What has begun with a desire for uniting with one particular beautiful body, mortal and transient, eventually leads—by force of ascent to the divine realm of the Ideas—to “unification” with the eternal, pure Form of Beauty.<sup>49</sup>

In the *Symposium*, Socrates insists that the ascent can be achieved only by proceeding properly (210a, 210e, 211b) through all the six rungs of the ladder: from the lower rung, a pursuit of the beauty of one particular body, to the upper rung, a gaze at the pure form of Beauty. In the *Theaetetus*, he returns to this issue by introducing an example of an improper philosophical journey. This is found in a story that Socrates tells about Thales—the “father” of Greek

philosophy—who had allegedly fallen into a well one night while gazing at the stars, and was then mockingly asked by a Thracian maidservant how he could expect to know the heavens when he cannot even see what lay right under his feet (174a–b; Plato 1997c, 193).<sup>50</sup> In terms of the vertical axis, Thales is the “intellectual” upward gaze, aiming at the transcendent, and the maid is the “corporeal” downward gaze, ingrained in the earthly.

This anecdote can be read as a funny comment on the absent-mindedness of philosophers (in this respect Thales recalls Socrates of the *Clouds*, who stood open-mouthed, investigating the lunar revolutions, and at that very moment a gecko defecated on him from the roof; 168–180; Aristophanes 1998, 20–21). It can also be read as a serious comment on the inability of common people to understand the philosophical ascent, which is manifested in one’s turning one’s gaze away from the transient and material, towards the eternal and intangible. Seen in this light, Thales’ “lowest” moment, falling into the well, is in fact the “highest” moment of the birth of philosophy, as if his inability to look at what lies at his feet is the very proof of his philosophical mission (Dolar 2009).<sup>51</sup> Still, judging from Socrates’ own commentary on the story, such virtue exposes a tragic aspect bound with the very practice of philosophy. As he states, the joke on Thales can be applied to anyone living their entire life in philosophy: such a person fails to see even his next-door neighbor, and hardly knows whether that neighbor is a human being or some other creature, but nevertheless takes pains to inquire what is Man, and what actions and passions belong to human nature and distinguish it from all other beings (174a–c).

This naturally recalls Sophocles’ observations on the blindness of philosophers, as phrased in his *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Like Thales, Oedipus fails to look down at his feet until it is too late. Only at the moment of their fall do they see the particularities: in Thales’ case, the well; in Oedipus’ case, his singular identity.<sup>52</sup> They are both, in fact, incompetent—not only on the horizontal but also on the vertical scale, since a full knowledge of the universal necessarily involves grasping of the particulars which partake in it. In this sense, Sophocles’ play criticizes philosophy as a form of thinking that—like the riddle of the Sphinx—engages with definitions that are universally valid exactly because they cancel the particularity of each human.<sup>53</sup>

Since Socrates’ example of philosophical blindness derives from human affairs, it is no coincidence that it is introduced in the *Theaetetus*, the internal plot of which is set shortly before his trial (210d). Socrates was anything but indifferent to his “neighbors”: he philosophized with any and all who would join him—a habit which had made him unpopular and led to

legal charges against him (*Apology*, 21e–23b).<sup>54</sup> His critique of philosophers is therefore not self-referential: Socrates excluded himself from philosophers like Thales and Oedipus. As he explains in his speech in the *Symposium*, the ascent to “encountering” the pure Form of Beauty must begin with an encounter with one particular beautiful body (210a). Thus, a proper turning of the gaze upwards cannot be done at the expense of what lies at our feet. Obviously, Thales’ falling is only a momentary stumble, which does not mark the failing of his philosophical endeavor, whereas Oedipus’ downfall is tragic. Nevertheless, is it only by chance that Thales allegedly stemmed from a family whose genealogy traces back to Cadmus, Oedipus’ forefather?<sup>55</sup>

### Performative verticality

Plato’s aim in composing his dialogues was philosophical, but his means were those of a skilled playwright. He was very critical of dramatists, especially the tragedians, but his critique should be read not as that of an enemy of the theatre but of a reformist rival who seeks to create an alternative form of theatrical scripts in his dialogues. Plato, Martin Puchner points out, “writes with the theatre in mind” (Puchner 2010, 5).<sup>56</sup> Plato’s dialogues were not composed as plays for the stage,<sup>57</sup> but it is reasonable to assume that these texts were composed in implicit dialogue with Greek theatre and its stage conventions.<sup>58</sup>

In this context, I wish to draw attention to the role of vertical imagery in Plato’s two major critical engagements with the art of theatre. In the *Republic*, where Socrates is also the narrator, his first words inform of a descent: “I went down (*katebên*) to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon” (327a; Plato 2012c, 270).<sup>59</sup> He and Glaucon had visited the Piraeus—the area of Athens’ new harbor—to attend a festival in honor of the goddess Bendis, but were delayed by local acquaintances when making their way back, upward and beyond, to the *astu* (the urban area of Athens). “Forced” to remain in the lower shore to watch a torch-race on horseback followed by an all-night celebration (328a), Socrates eventually chooses a philosophical alternative to the theatrical spectacle, conducting a nocturnal discussion of Justice and the Ideal State. In that discussion, his two main images of a philosophical journey—the analogy of the divided line (509d–511e) and the allegory of the cave (514a–518c)—feature a terminology of ascent. In both cases, the ascent merges ontology and epistemology, embracing the increasing levels of reality traversed by the soul in its upward movement, as well as its increasing levels of understanding the intelligible. The journey up the divided line and out of the cave is also a movement from the “darkness” of the theatre

(associated with the shadows down below) to the light of philosophy (associated with the upper realm of the Ideas).<sup>60</sup>

Whereas in the *Republic* Socrates advises not to admit the dramatic poets into the Ideal State, in the *Symposium* he attends a celebration of their art: the banquet held by Agathon in honor of his victory. However, Socrates uses this opportunity to perform a display of verticality, thus implying philosophy’s supremacy over the theatre. Long before he theorizes the philosophical ascent in his speech, Socrates demonstrates it theatrically. When arriving at Agathon’s house with his admirer Aristodemus, he first remains outside—forcing Aristodemus to enter alone a party to which he was not originally invited. Although the door to the house stands open, awaiting the guests, and although the banquet has already begun (174d–e), Socrates delays his entrance in favor of standing immobile in a neighbor’s doorway, fixed to one spot for an unspecified period of time and immersed in thoughts (175a). As we have seen, immobile standing is associated by Plato with an ascent to contemplate the pure Forms (*Phaedrus*, 247b–c). Hence, it is only fitting that Plato attribute the gesture to Socrates (solely) in the *Symposium*, where the ascent is manifested as a journey up the ladder of love—an inner movement in a static position, featuring Socrates himself as the climbing lover.<sup>61</sup>

Since the plot of the *Symposium* has already moved inside Agathon’s house (as it is based on Aristodemus’ point of view), the “offstage” standstill is made present “onstage” through the report of one of the servants who was sent to bring Socrates in and returned empty-handed. Evidently, the outdoor gesture steals the focus from the indoor party, as can be inferred from Agathon’s reaction: when he hears that Socrates is standing still nearby, ignoring requests to enter, Agathon orders his servant to “call him again and keep on calling him.” At that point, Aristodemus interferes and urges them not to disturb (*kineite*, move) Socrates: “This is one of his habits. Sometimes he turns aside and stands still wherever he happens to be. He will come in very soon, I think” (174e–175b; Plato 2008, 5)—which indeed Socrates does, without any explanation, when the banquet-dinner is half over (175c).

Later in the plot, Alcibiades—arriving late at the banquet, drunk and without an invitation, and unaware of the standstill that took place earlier—speaks of another instance of this habit, which is said to have occurred sixteen years prior to the banquet, during the Athenian expedition to Potidaea, in which both of them took part as soldiers. As Alcibiades recounts, one day Socrates stood still at the Athenian camp for over twenty-four hours, immersed in thought—a spectacle that caused some the Ionian soldiers to

carry their beddings outside, to watch if he was going to stand there all night. “And he did stand there until it was dawn and the sun rose. Then he made a prayer to the Sun and off he went” (220c-d; Plato 2008, 60). Socrates’ acknowledgment of the sun’s divine status is more than Plato’s retort to the *Clouds*, where Socrates seems to deny its superiority. In the *Republic*, the sun is described as the offspring of the godlike Form of the Good (506e-509c). Hence, the fact that Socrates’ standstill at Potidaea ends with a prayer to the Sun suggests that here Plato evokes the state of mind reigning at the top of the ladder of love, where the lover gazes at the pure Form of Beauty—which is also the pure Form of the Good (Blondell 2006, 159). As in the standstill outside Agathon’s house, here too the gesture is seen as the outer-physical expression of the inner-mental journey up the ladder of love. No wonder that in both cases, the content of Socrates’ thoughts remains unknown to us.

The ascent to the realm of the intelligible can happen fully only after death releases the soul from the chains of corporeality (*Phaedo*, 66d-67a). However, philosophers can already exercise it partially in the course of their mortal life, by turning away (*aphestânai*) from the body towards the soul as far as they can (64e), like Socrates of the *Symposium* who turns away (*apostâs*) to stand immobile. Although the gesture most identified with Socrates’ philosophizing is his idle wandering, examining people while strolling around Athens in search of someone wiser than he,<sup>62</sup> the philosopher actually yearns for what is beyond movement, since according to Plato truth can be grasped only in a static position (Montiglio 2005, 176). With his body held tight while his soul climbs up the ladder of love, Socrates is the philosophical counterpart of Prometheus, whose body is chained to a rock while his rebellious mind “move[s] freely over lands both known and barely traveled” (Rehm 2002, 157).

This comparison points at the provocative aspect of Socrates’ standstills. His immobile standing in a neighbor’s doorway, outside the banquet, is a provocation of Agathon. Through his displays of verticality, Socrates exhibits not only the proper philosophical order of priorities, but also what he believes to be the proper theatrical order of priorities; that is, that the performance truly worth seeing is neither the show that Aristophanes has staged nor the banquet celebrating Agathon’s shows, but rather the philosophical spectacle of truth. This might reveal Plato’s view that the proper philosophical order of priorities cannot be established without creating a theatrical interruption in the inferior order of priorities practiced by the dramatists.

At the same time, Plato’s depiction of the publicly-visible nature of Socrates’ standstills implies that this seemingly-private contemplation is not a pure,

spontaneous display of commitment to philosophy, but rather a thought-of performance meant to arouse curiosity about the ritual of philosophizing. As such, it is an action taken on the horizontal no less than on the vertical axis. At first sight, Socrates’ displays are utterly different from the performances staged by the dramatists: he seems to have only little interest in those who have gathered to watch him (Agathon’s servant, the Ionian soldiers), and does not try to please them. However, even if Socrates’ theatricality poses as directed inward, the fact is that he plays to an audience no less than Agathon and Aristophanes, and carefully shapes his verticality to achieve the effect he seeks. Plato, it seems, exposes his ambiguity about, and even criticism of, Socrates’ performative strategies.

## Notes

1. This definition of the multilayered relationship between theatre and philosophy is the premise of Rokem (2010).
2. Hence, it is not surprising that phrasings of this map are most clearly introduced by scholars of Greek drama and theatre: Segal (1981, 227–228, 240), Wiles (1997, 175–186), Rehm (2002, 160, 229, 246, 295).
3. As for the dead “below,” their realm is not realized on stage in the tragedies known to us (unlike in comedies such as Aristophanes’ *Frogs*), but some plays do contain verbal, symbolic images of movement into and out of the underworld. For example, the ascent of the dead king Darius in Aeschylus’ *Persians*, and Prometheus’ descent to Hades at the end of the *Prometheus Bound*.
4. As Mircea Eliade claims, every sacred space is regarded as a center (as it signifies the Sacred Mountain situated at the center of the world), and every sacred center is regarded as *axis mundi* – the meeting point of heaven, earth, and hell. “It is only at a ‘center’ that a break-through can occur, a passing from one cosmic zone to another” (Eliade 1958, 111).
5. “Verticality and great height have ever been the spatial expression of potentially violent power,” Henri Lefebvre writes (Lefebvre 1991, 98).
6. Quoted in Renger (2013, 11).
7. In this regard, Oedipus’ cleverness can be read as that of a sophist more than as that of a philosopher, for he does not know how to translate his philosophical insights into ethical life. Here I allude to Pierre Hadot’s distinction: “Knowledge or *sophia* in the Greek tradition is less a purely theoretical wisdom than know-how, or knowing-how-to-live” (Hadot 2002, 44). I thank the anonymous reader who has suggested this point to me.
8. The central paradox of Oedipus’ story, Claire Catenaccio claims, is “the juxtaposition of great intelligence with equally great ignorance” (Catenaccio 2012, 104).
9. “For Oedipus to have recognized his abandonment, all he had to do was to look down,” Jonathan Lear writes. “[...] But the wounds [through his ankles] are too painful—

- psychologically, if not physically—to think about” (Lear 1998, 48–49).
10. In a letter to Carl Jung, dated November 2, 1909, Sigmund Freud writes that Oedipus’ name “means swollen foot, i.e. erected penis” (McGuire 1974, 266). See also Pucci (1992, 76).
  11. Cf. Lear, who claims that Oedipus fails to grasp that the riddle actually excludes him from its solution, for he himself is only a perversion of “human”: “Oedipus walked on three legs in the morning (because his legs were pinned together), limped in the afternoon, and walked on four legs in the evening (blind, he is led by his daughter Antigone)” (Lear 1998, 45).
  12. On the elevated position as marking the gods’ supremacy, see among others: Mastronarde (1990, 273, 278), Padel (1990, 342–343), Dunn (1996, 29–32), and Ashby (1999, 81–96).
  13. In the prologue to Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, Poseidon and later Athena appear—probably on the stage floor—in the presence of Hecuba, who is lying on the ground in front of the *skênê*. However, Hecuba is unaware of their presence, for she has either fallen asleep or fainted before their entrance. See Sourvinou-Inwood (2003, 470).
  14. As G.M.A Grube points out, Euripides’ gods “are depicted as they are, not as they would be if they conformed to man’s ethical requirements” (Grube 1935, 52). See also Rehm (1992, 70).
  15. It is as if here Aphrodite foretastes the Brechtian mechanism of shifting attention from what was going to happen to how it would happen. Still, in retrospect, at least on two issues the human plot contradicts this divine introductory account: Phaedra’s death precedes Hippolytus’, and it is Phaedra (rather than Aphrodite) who reveals Hippolytus’ “fault” to Theseus, in her suicide letter. See Segal (1992, 88–89).
  16. The supernatural framing narrative was added by Euripides in the second version of the play, the one which has survived to this day. The appearance of the two goddesses as characters stirs tension with their initial stage representation as cult statues. Artemis’ statue is probably situated in the *orchêstra* (the open, masculine space associated with Hippolytus), whereas Aphrodite’s statue is situated near the door to the *skênê* (the concealed, feminine space associated with Phaedra). See Wiles (1997, 79–80, 84) and Zeitlin (1996, 225–232, 238–239).
  17. See Dunn (1996, 45, 66), Rehm (1992, 69); Mastronarde (2010, 182–186).
  18. While her deserting husband Jason, standing on the stage floor, tries to open the barred-on-the-inside *skênê* door, Medea suddenly appears aloft. She is seated beside the corpses in a winged chariot which, as she states, was sent by her grandfather Helios, the god of sun (1317–1322).
  19. Although here Medea fulfills conventional functions ascribed to gods in *deus ex machina* scenes, Paul G. Johnston convincingly claims that this play’s ending does not adhere to the strict formal conventions that Euripides’ *deus ex machina* scenes are molded upon as a rule (Johnston 2019).
  20. To be fair, Aristotle also points a similar accusation against a “fellow” philosopher: in his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle blames Anaxagoras for using understanding (*nous*) as a *deus ex machina*: “When he is puzzled about what the cause is due to which something holds of necessity, he drags understanding in, but in other cases he makes anything rather than understanding the cause of things that come to be” (985a; Aristotle 2016, 10). Still, here Aristotle actually blames Anaxagoras of acting like an incompetent tragedian.
  21. Near the end of this play, just as Ion is about to enter the temple in Delphi to ask the oracle if Apollo is indeed his father, as his mother Creusa claims, a deity appears up high. We expect it to be Apollo himself, finally admitting accountability for having raped Creusa (881–912), or at least Hermes, who appeared in the prologue (probably on the stage floor) and who had assisted Apollo in saving the infant Ion’s life. However, the deity who appears is actually Athena, stating she was sent by Apollo who “did not think it right to come himself/Before you, lest he should be blamed for what/Has happened in the past” (1556–1558; Euripides 1959, 76). Here, divine indifference spills into narcissism: it is as if Apollo thought it is beneath his dignity to hear charges for his past behavior (Gilbert 2019, 345). Still, the god’s reluctance to face these humans in person can also be read as an acknowledgement of his failings, which could explain why Creusa eventually forgives him (Swift 2010, 98).
  22. “It implies either a complete *volte-face* on the part of Artemis or an elaborate con trick to keep both the army and Clytemnestra happy,” J. Michael Walton writes, adding: “In Euripides, especially late Euripides, we find ourselves in a world of sceptics” (Walton 2009, 36).
  23. On the stage realization of this image, see Mastronarde (1990, 262–263) and Rehm (1992, 70–71).
  24. Apollo, who now orders Orestes not to kill Hermione but to take her as a wife, is the same god who previously forced him to murder his mother—the act that has instigated Orestes’ nightmares which nourish his psychotic condition throughout the plot. In fact, Orestes accuses Apollo directly, in the god’s absence, for making him commit matricide (285–291).
  25. See for example Verrall (1905, 256–257) and Willink (1986, 357). Francis Dunn tries to solve the paradox of this ending by claiming that the *Orestes* “is at each moment both tragedy and comedy” (Dunn 1996, 158).
  26. See especially Vellacott (1975, 78–81).
  27. See also Lefkowitz (2016, 116–122) and Ringer (2020, 362, 372–374).
  28. To cast Socrates as the head of a school of sophistry is the worst insult one could heap on him. The sophists were proclaimed teachers who charged fees for their services and instructed the art of argumentation and persuasion, regardless of whether the cause was just or unjust—teachings that Socrates, who saw himself as obliged to the search for truth, regarded as an immoral act. In his defense speech, as recorded by Plato, Socrates rejected his association with the sophists and claimed that he had never seen himself as someone’s teacher, and that he neither taught knowledge nor charged a fee for his conversations and questionings (*Apology*, 33a-b; Plato 2012a, 33).
  29. Like the philosophers, Greek comic poets were critical of the tragic poets’ use of the *deus ex*

- machina*, even if they themselves made use of this apparatus too and even introduced it on stage earlier than did the tragedians. According to the fourth-century BCE comic poet Antiphanes, “When [the tragedians] don’t know what to say,/ And have completely given up on a play,/Just like a finger they lift the machine,/And the spectators are satisfied;” Quoted in Dunn (1996, 27).
30. It is probably a quotation from the lyric poet Pindar, who ascribes these words to Silenus—with whom Socrates was more than once compared (including in Plato’s *Symposium*), sharing with this old satyr both wisdom and external ugliness. See Dover (1968, 126) and Capra (2018, 74–75).
  31. See also Revermann (2006, 196–197) and Given (2009, 117–118).
  32. The image of clouds mark Socrates’ obsessive interest in meteorology, as well as his obsessiveness for “airy” arguments. As Bernhard Zimmermann writes, they are “a visible embodiment of the nebulous, unstable, intangible nature of rhetoric and philosophy, which one cannot get a firm hold of” (Zimmermann 2014, 154).
  33. Poseidon was the god of horses, and Strepsiades’ debts—as he himself claims—were above all caused by his son’s passion for horses (21–24, 32–35). See Given (2009, 114 with n. 32).
  34. On the “mise-en-scène” of this *deus ex machina*, see Dover (1968, 124–126), Revermann (2006, 111–112), and Russo (1994, 117–118).
  35. See Aristophanes (1998, 24) and Strauss (1966, 15).
  36. Another comedy mocking Socrates was staged at the same 423 BCE City Dionysia: Ameipsias’ *Connus* – reaching the second place in the competition. Besides the obvious reasons for the comic poets’ interest in Socrates (his ugly appearance, eccentric personality, odd manners, and the fact that he was regarded a public nuisance, subjecting his interlocutors to tiresome conversations), S. Sara Monoson suggests that Socrates’ bravery in Delium had probably become a subject of public discussion in Athens, motivating the poets to deal with his character (Monoson 2014, 139–141, 156n27).
  37. Socrates’ bravery is also mentioned in the *Laches*, a dialogue devoted to Courage and to the *technè* (craft) of the soldier (181b).
  38. Actually, Alcibiades slightly misquotes Aristophanes’ line, but we do not know for sure whether it is Plato’s deliberate choice or an error in the extant version of the *Symposium*.
  39. In the *Symposium*, Socrates is charged several times with arrogant false pretenses. First, by Agathon (175e), and later by Alcibiades (215b, 219c, 221e, 222a), who had not yet been present there when Agathon voiced this claim. Both of them conceive Socrates’ indifference as a theatrical feature associated with hubris.
  40. The first version of the play may have ended only with Strepsiades threatening that he would burn the school, without actual realization of the threat on stage.
  41. Some scholars have claimed that Socrates is inside the school (that is, inside the *skênè*), shouting to Strepsiades through a window, and being burnt alive. However, it seems that Socrates is on the stage itself and escapes the theatre at the end of the performance.
  42. Therefore, Søren Kierkegaard’s claim that, by standing, Socrates meant to show the “fitting likeness” between him and his theatrical representation should be read as irony (Kierkegaard 1989, 129).
  43. David Konstan draws attention to the fact that Plato puts the blame solely on Aristophanes although in the very year that the *Clouds* was performed Ameipsias too staged a comedy that makes fun of Socrates (Konstan 2014, 279).
  44. Martin Heidegger, however, traces here a serious claim: as he states, *bios* denotes in this context life which is characterized by a determinate *telos* (purpose). Therefore, aloofness is the mode of existence guaranteeing the possibility of such a gaze, thereby making accessible to the philosopher “life and existence in general” (Heidegger 2003, 168). Nevertheless, see also Clitophon’s words to Socrates, in the dialogue generally ascribed to Plato: “You appeared to me to rise above all other men with your magnificent speeches when you reproached mankind and, like a god suspended above the tragic stage, chanted the following refrain: ‘O mortals, whither are you borne? Do you not realize that you are doing none of the things you should?’ (407a-b) (Plato 1997a, 966).
  45. On the soul’s ascent as a homeward journey, see Gordon (2012, 185–186, 217ff.)
  46. The ladder of love is a vertical image, but on at least two of its six rungs the lover’s ascent partially involves a horizontal dimension as well. Ruby Blondell suggests thinking here of a staircase rather than a ladder, pointing to the fact that an image of stairs is actually mentioned by Socrates (211b-c), allegedly through Diotima’s mouth (Blondell 2006, 147n2, 161).
  47. Freddie Rokem has pointed to the intertextual connection between this myth and the riddle of the Sphinx. In both texts, the transformation of the number of legs is presented as a defining feature of the question “What is Man?” (Rokem 2010, 7, 40–47).
  48. In fact, in his speech Socrates implicitly rejects the key point of Aristophanes’ myth. As he claims, in one of their conversations, Diotima told him: “You will hear it said that lovers are people who are looking for their own other half. But what I say, my friend, is that love is not directed towards a half, or a whole either, unless that half or whole is actually something good” (205e; Plato 2008, 43). On the deception involved in Socrates’ seemingly-innocent comment, see Rokem (2010, 53–56).
  49. See Vernant (1990, 471), Patterson (1991, 195), and Bloom (1993, 484).
  50. Here Plato transformed one of Aesop’s fables, about an unnamed astronomer, into a story about Thales. See Aesop (2002, 151).
  51. See also Cavarero (1995, 34–35).
  52. For an extended discussion of this issue, see Avneri (2022).
  53. *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Jean-Joseph Goux writes, is a tragedy which “unsettles the scene of philosophy, bringing to light what philosophy does not know about itself, what it cannot glimpse within the terms of its own language. Sophocles produces a critique in the strong sense, tracing the limits to which philosophy can only remain blind” (Goux 1993, 132–133).

54. See Nightingale (2004, 23–24).
55. See Diogenes Laertius (2018, 1:22, 13).
56. Nikos G. Charalabopoulos defines Plato's dialogues as "a fourth dramatic genre in fourth-century Athens that transcends its theatrical counterparts" (Charalabopoulos 2012, xi, 71–77).
57. Even if they were recited on competitive occasions, it was probably done in a manner of rhapsodic or oratorical presentation, and not of staging a play.
58. A clear example of this is the above-mentioned myth from the *Phaedrus*, about the ascent of the gods—followed by noble human souls—to the top edge of the world in order to feast and to contemplate the pure Forms. As Paul Woodruff convincingly shows, the imagery of this myth corresponds to, and actually inverts, the architectonical structure of Athens' Theatre of Dionysus (Woodruff 2019).
59. *Katabasis* is the common term for a protagonist's descent to the underworld, and as scholars have noted, the first word of the *Republic* is the same verb used by Odysseus when telling Penelope of his visit to Hades (*Odyssey*, 23:251–255). There are several allusions to Hades at the beginning of the *Republic*: for example, Socrates' and Glaucon's reason for visiting the Piraeus is the festival in honor of Bendis, a deity of the underworld. See Howland (1993, 43, 46).
60. This dialogue also ends with a vertical image—the Myth of Er—which unfolds Er's experience in the afterlife and his return to life to report it (614b–621b).
61. See Montiglio (2005, 172–176).
62. In his defense speech – as transmitted in Plato's *Apology* – Socrates claims that he was given a divine mission to examine himself and others (28e–29a, 33c), in order to show the Athenians their ignorance through his knowledge of his own ignorance (29d–30a).

## Acknowledgments

This article is a revised and extended version of an article published in Hebrew in the journal *Theatron*. I wish to thank the two anonymous readers for their excellent suggestions, as well as Freddie Rokem and Abigail Akavia for their helpful comments. I also thank Tal Haran for her assistance in preparing my manuscript.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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