Knowledge or Inspiration? Plato's *Ion*

Background — Socrates' Method

Plato (428-348 BC) portrays Socrates (c. 469-399 BC) as a philosopher who seeks knowledge and wisdom. Socrates' general strategy involves questioning individuals who are assumed to have specialized knowledge of a subject or discipline. Once the discussion is underway, it often turns out that Socrates is disappointed in the account offered by the "expert", who seems to lack the knowledge Socrates is seeking.

What are we to make of this? If the so-called expert does not succeed by means of knowledge, then how does he do it?

The answer Socrates seems to reach in questioning Ion is that he accomplishes his task by means of **inspiration**, not knowledge. What's the difference?

Socrates typically assumes that

> (R) knowledge is the ability to operate according to **rules** and principles of some sort that govern the subject or art in question.

He further assumes that

> (A) experts in the art must be **aware** of the rules they're using.

For Socrates, knowledge is "virtue" (*technē*) — "the professional knowledge of a master craftsman".

These rough assumptions about knowledge set the background for Socrates' discussion with the artist, "poet", performer and interpreter of poetry, which is to say the **rhapsode** known as Ion.

So, Socrates' questioning of Ion is shaped by four crucial propositions:

1. Skill as an artist requires **knowledge** of a particular domain or practice.
2. Knowledge presupposes the existence of **rules** governing the domain of knowledge.
3. To have expert knowledge of the subject in question one must **know** the rules governing the domain.
4. To know a rule is to be able to **state** and **apply** the rule.

Socrates also makes use of three general distinctions and assumptions about the **hierarchy of knowledge**:

- **Science** is the theoretical knowledge of the principles and causes of a thing or event.
- **Practical wisdom** is the ability to recognize that which is **good** and to rank things according to a hierarchy of goods.
- **Craft knowledge** (*technē*) is the capacity to make or do something which is good for something else, together with an understanding of the principles involved. This entails being able to distinguish, within a particular line of work (because *technē* is always **relative** to a **kind** of activity), that which is good and always directed toward some goal or end. Thus, a *technē* is never good for its own sake but good relative to the **end** that it serves.

But now we see that a tension emerges between

- Socrates' **epistemology** — his philosophical understanding of expert knowledge — and
- the **generally accepted view of knowledge**.

In **traditional** Greek thinking, all good things are accomplished by means of **inspiration**, by means of the intercession and help of the gods. This is neither extraordinary nor does it preclude human agency or action.

But, in the Socrates of Plato's dialogues we see a very different view of inspiration, namely as a form of **madness** whereby one becomes at best a passive medium of the gods. This is a radically new idea in Greek thinking which was very likely introduced by Plato.[1]

What are the implications of these differences and how do they affect Plato's philosophical analysis of art?

Poetry and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece

In ancient Greek society, there was a distinction between the **poet**, who **composes**, and the **rhapsode** who **performs** or recites poetry. This distinction was not always sharply defined, nor was the difference between the writer, the performer, and the one who **interprets** the work. As we'll see, Ion claims to both perform and interpret the epic poems of Homer, by far the most influential poet in ancient Greece.

Here's a brief excerpt to illistrate the traditional Greek understanding of inspiration. These are the opening lines of Homer's *Odyssey*, in which the poet calls upon the Muse, daughter of Zeus, for inspiration.

> *Odyssey*, "Book One"
>
> Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
> driven time and again off course, once he had plundered
> the hallowed heights of Troy.
> Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,
> many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,
> fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.
> But he could not save them from disaster, hard as he strove—
> the recklessness of their own ways destroyed them all,
> the blind fools, they devoured the cattle of the Sun
> and the Sungod blotted out the day of their return.
> Launch out on his story, Muse, daughter of Zeus,
> from where you will—sing for our time too.[2]

In Plato's most famous dialogue, *The Republic*, Socrates comments on the role of poets and "those who praise Homer and say that he's the poet who educated Greece, that it's worth taking up his works in order to learn how to manage and educate people, and that one should arrange one's whole life in accordance with his teachings". [606e][3] He goes on to say that "Homer is the most poetic of the tragedians and the first among them". [607a] But this way of putting it may conceal the "ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry".

It's important to note that the nature and role of poetry in the "popular culture" of ancient Greece is **not** analogous to poetry as we understand it today. As Charles Griswold points out,

> Plato was not (or, not primarily) thinking of poetry as a written text read in silence; he had in mind recitations or performances, often experienced in the context of theater. Still further, when Socrates and Plato conducted their inquiries, poetry was far more influential than what Plato calls "philosophy". Given the resounding success of Plato's advocacy of "philosophy", it is very easy to forget that at the time he was advocating a (historically)

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[1] See Paul Woodruff, *Plato: Two Comic Dialogues*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983, 8.
[2] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles, introduction and notes by Bernard Knox, New York: Penguin, 1996, 77.
[3] Quotes from the *Republic* are taken from Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (revised by C.D.C. Reeve), Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992. The numbers above in square brackets are the line numbers in the *Republic*.

new project in a context swirling with controversy about the relative value of such projects (and indeed about what "philosophy" means).[4]

Ion is a popular **rhapsode** who specializes in Homer's epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. He recites these works in a way that brings them to life. Note also that Ion is not an **actor**, and Homer's poems were not plays, so Ion, when performing, does not **mimic** the characters' words.

Yet, he says, "when *I* tell a sad story, my eyes are full of tears; and when I tell a story that's frightening or awful, my hair stands on end with fear and my heart jumps". [535c] This is Ion's response when Socrates asks about the state of his "soul" — his *enthousiasmos* — when reciting Homer's poems. "[D]oesn't your soul, in its enthusiasm, believe that it is present at the actions you describe, whether they're in Ithaca or in Troy or wherever the epic actually takes place?" [535c]

Ion claims not only to be a great reciter of Homer, but a great **interpreter** (*exēgētēs*, from *exēgeisthai*, to interpret). [531a7]

Now we should also note that there are at least two ways to understand the word "interpretation". To interpret a work of art may be

1. to determine the **meaning** or meanings of the work, or
2. to **perform** or "realize" the work.

Ion uses the word "interpretation" in **both** senses.

In their discussion, rather than asking Ion to **demonstrate** his *technē* so that he might **show** what he can do, Socrates **questions** Ion about his knowledge and skill. This is significant and extremely important for us. Why? Because Socrates assumes that true knowledge lies not just in

- the performative **skill** of a craftsman — his "knowing **how"** — but in
- the ability to **identify** and **state** the principles behind the skill — his "knowing **what"**.

[**Note**: We can find analogs to this today in the arts. So, for example, classical pianist Andras Schiff's recent performances of, and lectures on, Beethoven's piano sonatas make Schiff an interpreter in **both** senses. See http://music.guardian.co.uk/classical/page/0,,1943867,00.html]

Examples, Illustrations, and Excerpts from *Ion*

The propositions, assumptions, and arguments that emerge from Socrates' discussion with Ion are, due to the casual and nonlinear nature of the dialogue format, not always explicit or obvious. But with careful rearranging and summary, it's not too difficult to tease them out of the text. The following are some key examples.

Socrates' Argument for the Interpreter's Relation to the Poet [530b-c]

The Expert Interpreter Must Have Expert Knowledge

1. To interpret Homer, we have to understand what Homer said.
2. To understand and interpret well what Homer said, we have to understand the **subject matter** discussed in Homer's poems.
3. We also assume that Homer understood those things about which he speaks in his poems.
4. To offer expert interpretations of the meanings of Homer's poems, we must also be able to assess the knowledge contained in the poems.
5. Thus, the expert interpreter must be capable of judging the **truth** of Homer's poems.

First Examination of Ion [531a-535a]

Ion's Claims Concerning His Idiosyncratic Relation to Homer

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[4] Griswold, Charles, "Plato on Rhetoric and Poetry", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/plato-rhetoric/>.

1. He **understands** Homer's **poems**.
2. He is an excellent **interpreter** of Homer's **poems**.
3. He **understands** Homer's **ideas**.
4. He is an excellent **interpreter** of Homer's **ideas**.
5. He is an excellent interpreter of Homer **alone** and no other poets, such as Hesiod. [531a, 532b-c, 533c]

Propositions Asserted by Socrates

1. Knowledge and understanding of **Homer** amounts to knowledge and understanding of **the thoughts and ideas of Homer**—what the poems **mean**. [530c]
2. One cannot **know** what is **good** in a thing without also **knowing** what is **bad** in that thing. (The *techne* of something includes the **whole** thing, i.e. as a unity.) [531e-532a]
3. Poetry is a whole, i.e. **one** thing—a **unity**. [532c]

Notice that Socrates gives an argument for (2), but not for (1) and (3), which are stated more or less as self-evident propositions.

Argument From Expert Knowledge [531a-532a]
Citing several examples of expert knowledge, Socrates draws the following conclusion: With regard to a **particular** subject matter, an expert on the matter is able to distinguish the **better** from the **worse** and the **good** from the **bad**. [531e-532a]

An obvious question for Socrates, which we'll set aside for the moment, is the following: **How** does the expert form valid judgments concerning the **quality** (or goodness) of a thing or activity?

Socrates' Assumption: To know what makes something a good painting, poem, sculpture, etc., or what makes one a good painter, poet, or sculptor, is to know what it takes to make, that is, **to know the principle behind**, good painting, poetry, sculpture, etc.

Ion Lacks Whatever Knowledge Homer May Have [532a-532c]

1. Since all poets speak of the same subjects, viz. military matters, and
2. since Ion claims to know Homer is the best of all the poets, then,
3. in order to make such a judgment, Ion must be "equally clever about Homer and the other poets". [532b] (Supported by assumption that poetry is a whole.)
4. But, by his own admission, Ion is not so skilled.
5. Thus, it follows from Ion's admission that he does **not** have knowledge of Homer and military matters. [532c]

Ion's Particular Ability is not a Form of Knowledge [532c-533c]

1. Mastery of a subject (*technē*) gives mastery of the **whole** of the subject.
2. Since Ion's ability, by his own admission, is limited to the works of Homer,
3. his ability is not a *techne* and,
4. thus, not a form of knowledge.

All Poets (Including Homer) Lack Knowledge

1. Every *techne* belongs to a unique category of knowledge.
2. As a rhapsode interested only in the poetry of Homer, Ion's familiarity is limited to those subjects discussed by Homer.
3. These subjects cover a wide variety of fields that are too diverse to be included within one category of knowledge.
4. Therefore, Ion cannot claim to have mastered any subject that would include them all.
5. Thus, as a rhapsode Ion cannot claim to have the knowledge appropriate to all the subjects contained in the poetry of Homer.

Art as Inspiration

At this stage of the discussion, Socrates argues that Ion is able to do what he does well by means of **inspiration.**

> If art is not a form of knowledge, what is it? To better understand the phenomenon, Socrates invokes a poetic analogy.

> **Analogy of the Magnetic Rings** [533e-534a]
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> The magnet is analogous to the Muse, whose originating charismatic power passes through the poet, through the rhapsode, and to the audience. Thus, the poet and the rhapsode are "mediums" through which the power of the gods is felt. It also follows from this analogy that the rhapsode is the **interpreter of an interpreter**.
>
> Socrates distinguishes between **art**, which depends on one's own knowledge, and **inspiration**, which does not. To be inspired in this sense is to be "filled with the gods". The Greek concept here is *enthusiasmos*.

> **Socrates Extends the Argument From Inspiration to All Poets**
> "You know, none of the epic poets, if they're good, are masters of their subject; they are inspired, possessed, and that is how they utter all those beautiful poems." [533e]

Notes on the Excerpt from *Phaedrus* on Erōs and the Nature of the Soul

It is customary to think that madness (*mania*) proceeds either from a god or "from man" as a kind of disease or irrational disfunction of the soul. Madness it is not necessarily or even typically considered an evil by the Greeks. In fact, of the forms of madness discussed by Socrates, three are widely acknowledged as divine and therefore good. Socrates will try to prove that even the madness of love is bestowed by the gods. [*Phaedrus* 244-245]

> **Four Forms of Madness**
> 1. prophetic (gift from the gods through oracles)
> 2. religious (Dionysian rites of purification and escape from plagues and troubles)
> 3. poetic inspiration from the Muses
> 4. erotic (the madness of love)

Socrates tells a story of the soul's journey in a non-physical world in which it gazes directly on the Forms (247). Having been exposed to this realm of pure Beauty and the Good, the soul, reborn in a physical body, is better able to see and be moved by beauty.

> Accordingly it happens that a beautiful sight, like that of a lovely human form, inspires the turn toward philosophical contemplation as a just law or a self-controlled act do not. And in this arousal one grows attached to the beloved not as a unique particular but to the Form of beauty instantiated in the loved one.[5]

Note however that when Socrates goes on to rank souls according to their connection to the Forms, poets end up close to the bottom. [248] The only really good poetry, it seems, is that which praises ancient heroes and educates the people.

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[5] Pappas, Nickolas, "Plato's Aesthetics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/plato-aesthetics/>.

The Poets' Options in Response to Socrates

1. Stick to the assertion that Homer, and by extension Ion, have expert knowledge of the things about which they speak.

2. Admit that Homer and Ion do not have expert knowledge.
   - But they do have **other** valuable knowledge about human nature and the good, or skill in rhetoric.
   - Or, alternatively, they have no knowledge but do have **divine inspiration**. [534b, 535e (magnetic rings); cf. *Phaedrus*]

Rather than acknowledging that he lacks knowledge of any importance in his profession, Ion accepts the explanation that he is a medium for divine inspiration.

In retrospect, one might ask if Ion's attachment to Homer alone is analogous to the lover's lowest level of attachment to a particular individual, rather than to the highest beauty and good.

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