

Plato's Ion: An Interpretation with a Sociopolitical Perspective

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Abstract

Ion is probably the most underappreciated dialogue of Plato. Its conventional interpretation focuses on his criticism of artistic creation, that is viewed as the result of divine inspiration and occurs outside the artist's awareness. I propose that Ion possesses an additional important value, as a form of social criticism: By disengaging the poet from the reciter, Plato targets specifically the latter, and his position in the society, but not the former that is spared from the philosopher's criticism. Poet's divine inspiration is just a metaphor for exceptional creativity which is used by the reciter for his personal benefits.

Keywords

Plato, Art, Dialogues, Hierarchy, Forms, Artist, Philosophy of Art, Reciter, Rhapsodist

1. Introduction

Plato's dialogues admittedly provide the foundation for virtually all points that concern modern philosophy¹. Philosophy of art does not escape this classification, essentially through the *Republic*, but also in other dialogues such as *Ion*. *Ion* is one of Plato's earlier period's dialogues that is conventionally interpreted through the lens of the deconstruction of artistic creativity and represents probably the earlier text in the philosophy of art. According to Plato, contrary to other crafts and skills that can be mastered through practice, art does not possess distinct subject matter and cannot be used to convey true knowledge². The dialogue unfolds between Socrates and Ion. Ion is a famous rhapsodist (reciter) of

¹Whitehead's quote that European philosophical traditions consist of footnotes to Plato has been widely quoted (Whitehead, 1929).

²Plato is suspicious about artists as they mislead and corrupt people. Such notions have been expressed in detail, subsequently in the *Republic*.

his times and expert in Homer as he sees himself, and the contemporary society recognizes him as such^{3,4}. As the dialogue unfolds, Socrates asks Ion a series of questions referring to the interpretation of specific passages. These passages fall into the subject matter of specific areas of expertise, such as charioteering, medicine, or fishing. For each one of them, Ion admits that the experts in these disciplines, namely charioteers, physicians, and fishermen, can “...*be the better judges of the propriety of these lines*”. The depth of their [experts in the subject matter] specific knowledge applies to both their own domains as compared to that of the others, and against Ion all together. This forms the basis of an argumentation at which the artistic creation, the poem for example, and by extrapolation its reciter, is incapable of conveying specific knowledge since others, possess such knowledge at higher depth.

Another important point of the dialogue is the introduction of the magnet paradigm which operates as follows: The artistic creation originates from Gods that through an inductive process “possesses” the poet, subsequently the reciter, and ultimately the audience. This functions as a magnetic stone (Gods) that magnetizes a series of iron rings, each of which cannot magnetize others unless it has been already magnetized by the original and self-sufficient magnetic stone. Self-sufficiency here is equivalent to self-awareness, and the intermediate rings can function as such but are not aware of their state which is induced by the divine inspiration, when and at the extent that the Gods decide to do so⁵.

Various interpretations have been offered for Ion which consistently with Plato’s views that have been expressed more explicitly in his subsequent dialogues, culminate into reducing the role and aspired impact of artists in the society (Svoboda, 2021; Glucker, 2019; Landry, 2015; Hunter, 2011; Dorter, 1973; Pappas, 1989; Ladrilre, 1951). I will attempt here to provide an alternative interpretation that aims to raise the significance of this dialogue and treat it as a political critique that bears sociocultural ramifications. I will present an interpretation that relies on two pillars: the dissociation of the reciter from the poet, and the metaphorical significance of divine inspiration in artistic creation. Together they initiate a criticism of the society of ancient Athens and its predominant values that eventually, through Plato’s subsequent works, have been recognized as corroding.

2. Dissociation of the Poet from the Reciter

I propose that Plato, through Socrates, does not intend to target art in general in

³Ion claims for himself that “[*he is*]...*able to speak about Homer better than any man; and that neither Metrodorus of Lampsacus, nor Stesimbrotus of Thasos, nor Glaucon, nor any one else who ever was, had as good ideas about Homer as I have, or as many*”. This is not apparently only his personal opinion. As a winner of festivals, his expertise on Homer was well appreciated by the society as well: “...*I obtained the first prize of all, Socrates*”.

⁴Excerpts are taken by <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/ion.html>. Translated by Benjamin Jowett from The Internet Classics Archive by Daniel C. Stevenson, Web Atomics.

⁵It is mentioned that: “(*...the God would seem to indicate to us and not allow us to doubt that these beautiful poems are not human, or the work of man, but divine and the work of God; and that the poets are only the interpreters of the Gods by whom they are severally possessed.*)

this dialogue but the reciter specifically⁶. He does not even target the poet himself. I base this argument on that it is Ion and not Homer that was selected by Plato for his dialogue. This was done in purpose, in an effort to spare Homer from Plato's criticism⁷. It is conceivable that if Plato wanted to criticize the poet, he would have easily selected an actual artistic creator, a poet in that case, for the dialogue. In that case it is plausible to speculate that Homer would be able to provide some expert opinions regarding the specific topics he refers to, in *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. Yet, Plato selects to develop his dialogue with Ion which is presented as a "...*laughable, comic, ethically inferior character...*" (Svoboda, 2021). Ion, not only does not understand the content of the poems that he recites, but he stays indifferent to their effects, when he elicits emotional responses to his audience⁸. The cries of his audience, a direct indication of the poems' impact, are only perceived by Ion as an indication of a better payment for his recitation, which will eventually make him laugh from joy for his accomplishment. On the other hand, if the audience laughs with his performance, this is what will make him cry because it will imply that he is unsuccessful and therefore will not receive payments. Thus, the audience's response appears to be aligned with the true content, which is the truth value, of the poem, but that of the medium (the rhapsodist-reciter) becomes irrelevant⁹.

By this, Plato makes a strong point regarding the social reality of ancient Athens. Certain individuals acquire fame, that is translated into financial benefits, without deserving it. This "not deserving" argument relates to that they [the reciters] remain both ignorant about the content of their service, and indifferent to the emotions they trigger to the audience¹⁰. They just use it for fame and riches. This is the reason that Plato diminishes their value, presenting Ion as an intellectually insignificant figure. By that, Plato instigates social criticism that develops much better subsequently, when he deals with the negative impact of δόξα (opinion) in the society, and its dangers that are associated with the democratic processes.

3. The General in Plato's Ion

Speaking about the different skills and domains of expertise, Plato makes one important exception, that further supports the aforementioned argument. While none of those experts selected can be matched by Ion's expertise as a reciter (fishermen, charioteers, doctors, or horsemen to name some of those used in the dialogue), one can: It is the general, that according to Ion can be substituted by

⁶At the beginning of the dialogue other arts are also mentioned, such as sculpture and painting. Nevertheless, the dialogue proceeds by engaging arguments and examples for poetry specifically.

⁷It is of note that Plato refers to Homer the teacher of all Hellenes in other dialogues.

⁸Jansen (2015) discusses the contribution of the audience's to spectatorship.

⁹Ion says "...for if I make them cry I myself shall laugh, and if I make them laugh I myself shall cry when the time of payment arrives".

¹⁰One should consider here the point Plato makes, on wealth distribution that happens in an unjust manner now in Athens, and consider it in relation to his view that in his Kallipolis, wealth in the ruling class should be minimal and evenly distributed.

the reciter in his skills, expertise, and impact. Ion explicitly mentions that “...*To me there appears to be no difference between them [the art of the general and a rhapsodist]*”. This is an interesting inference because it applies to the function of the generals, not as strategists but rather as those that could effectively encourage people and lead them into battle. As such, the good rhapsodist that can make people cry at his will, can very effectively replace the general and motivate people accordingly. This may also represent a form of social and political criticism by Plato, considering that in ancient Athens, the generals were elected by the assembly, which again bears elements of his criticism against the democratic processes and their outcomes¹¹.

4. Divine Inspiration as a Metaphor

In view of these arguments, the impact of the poet versus that of the reciter remains to be discussed. Both of them, in Ion, are referred to as interpreters. Homer is the interpreter of Gods and Ion is the interpreter of Homer, therefore an interpreter of an interpreter. In Greek, the term poet is derived by the word ποιησις which means creation. Furthermore, the term interpreter is related to the word “ἑρμηνῆς” which is used interchangeably both for the interpreter and for the translator. I argue that Ion is translator of Homer, who as a poet is interpreter of the Gods. As such, Homer is not devoid of creativity (as opposed to Ion) because the truth of Gods is formulated and expressed by Homer. Here another point emerges that merits discussion. I propose that the divine inspiration is used by Plato (Socrates) only metaphorically. My reasoning is that if indeed Plato wanted to diminish, in Ion dialogue, the value of poetry, he wouldn't attribute it a divine origin. In Platonian cosmology, Gods (and Seers) do not have a role in interfering with peoples' lives, but poetry apparently has. To that end, its argued origin from Gods is used just to underscore the intensity of this creative activity. By accepting this metaphorical meaning in divine inspiration, Plato dissociates the poet from his reciter, and in the dialogue, he targets his criticism specifically to the latter.

5. Conclusion

Taken together, the metaphor of the divine inspiration, along with the dissociation of the poet from his reciter, emphasizes the sociopolitical implications of Plato's Ion dialogue at which the reciters exemplify a group of people that can personalize creative achievements of others and use them to accumulate fame and wealth. This exactly constitutes the corruptive component that Plato continuously battles in his later dialogues. As such, the seeds of Plato's political criticism and theory can be identified in Ion. To that end, Ion may be a vastly underappreciated dialogue with value surpassing the one that was originally attributed to it.

¹¹Ion was written following a period of political turbulence in Athens at which the role of elected official was continuously criticized.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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