



The Chinese room argument in Plato's *Ion*

HIPPOKRATIS KIARIS

University of South Carolina

Abstract

Ion, one of the earliest of Plato's dialogues, is also considered as one of the philosopher's less important philosophical works. It is also viewed as one of the earliest texts on the philosophy of art that distinguishes between *techne* and artistic creation, with the latter representing a form of divine inspiration which occurs outside the awareness of its creator. Here I will offer an alternative interpretation that is based on the dissociation of the poet from his reciter. The latter, by operating as a medium, functions similarly to the ignorant in Chinese but possessor and user of a perfect manual, in Searle's Chinese room. Furthermore, I propose that art, in Plato's view, may represent a form of creative achievement with significance that exceeds the sum of the specific disciplines it deals with.

Keywords: ancient philosophy, image, art, cognition, dialogue

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Several interpretations of *Ion* have been provided, occasionally controversial, that nevertheless, in their majority focus on dismantling the notion that art can be mastered by the plain acquisition and development of skill, like the other crafts do.¹ As LaDriere (1951, p. 26) posed, in the *Ion*, Plato formulates “... *the question whether a scientific method is available for criticism of the poetic art*”. This probably sets a foundation for Plato's subsequent works that express his suspicion on artists, particularly the poets, in conveying true knowledge.² Through a series of examples reciting Homer, in this particular dialogue, Socrates makes the point that reductivism does not apply in poetry. In the relevant passages that he is referring to, it is argued that it is not the reciter (rhapsodist) but rather the experts in these disciplines that are able to provide an informed opinion regarding specialized knowledge.³ This is used as an argument that the “skill” of reciting, the one that *Ion* masterfully possesses, is of lesser significance compared to that of other skills at which the exercise of *techne* is directly applicable. The relationship between *techne* and divination has been discussed explicitly by Landry (2015). In following the magnets paradigm, Plato through Socrates, makes the point that Gods and the Muses transmit this divine inspiration by “possessing” initially the poet, then the reciters (rhapsodists), and ultimately the audience that becomes captivated by a poetic creation that is not rationally comprehended.⁴ Thus, a divine power is transmitted by induction towards the audience.

1 Numerous interpretations on Plato's *Ion* are available. For some of them see Svoboda 2021, Glucker 2019, Landry 2015, Hunter 2011, Dorter 1973, Pappas 1989, Ladrilre 1951. The common theme in all is the dismantling of the value of the artistic creation that is “reduced” to a divine inspiration that operates beyond the reciter's self-awareness and comprehension.

2 The suspicion of Plato against artists is expressed explicitly in his subsequent dialogues at which artists, through their creations corrupt, as they mislead from the real world.

3 Through a series of well-articulated questions, Socrates receives from *Ion* answers that are consistent with his [*Ion*] inability to offer informed opinion regarding specific topics on the poems he recites.

4 In his paradigm, a magnet stone magnetizes a series of iron rings that form a chain. The attachment of each to the previous one relies ultimately on the magnetic power of the original magnet.

The conventional interpretation of Socrates' powerful criticism to Ion suffers in my opinion from some caveats. Plato's (through Socrates) critique applies directly to the skills of the rhapsodist Ion.⁵ Repeatedly, by using different examples, he focuses on topics covered in Homer's poems and shows that Ion, as a reciter, cannot possess the specific knowledge in the topics that Homer's poems deal with. Therefore, he is not capable of expressing an informed opinion on the different topics dealt with in Homer's poems, albeit being the best rhapsodist of his times. In that case of course, the designation as being the best rhapsodist refers to the peoples' opinion which is not shared by Socrates who progressively, through the dialogue's unfolding, dismantles this notion. Moreover, he does not just dismantle the specific opinion on Ion being the best, but rather, whether conceptually a rhapsodist can be the best on any poet and his [poet's] artistic creations. The argumentation he follows is briefly the following: Ion admits that he is not able to interpret better the passage on the chariot than a charioteer, the passage on fishing than a fisherman, or the passage on medicinal preparations than a doctor. By lacking a distinct subject matter, a specific domain of expertise, poetry is not a *techné* like the others.⁶ Yet, Ion remains unarguably, through the end of the dialogue, the best rhapsodist, which implies that a certain noetic domain exists that is pertinent to Ion's skills.⁷ The resolution to this controversy comes from the introduction of an analogy between seers and rhapsodists that without self-awareness produce their products, prophecies, and recitation of poems, respectively.

1 Criticism I-The poet and the reciter

My first counterargument is that all this argumentation in Plato's dialogue targets the rhapsodist (Ion) but not the poet (Homer).⁸ Early on

⁵ The initial premise is on speaking on Homer, or, about Homer in general, and collectively. Subsequently though the criticism is directed not to Homer but to specific topics that are mentioned in *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, and in Ion's interpretation.

⁶ Especially at the beginning of the dialogue, other arts are mentioned such as painting and sculpture, but the subsequent argumentation unfolds specifically in relation to poetry. The difference of these arts from poetry is that the latter requires a reciter (a medium) while the former do not, and thus, the particular argumentation used, can only develop specifically for poetry.

⁷ This is a notion that progressively is being deconstructed in the dialogue.

⁸ There is some controversy in this, because Plato uses extensively the term poet (that in Greek

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in the dialogue, Ion states “... *and I believe myself able to speak about Homer better than any man...*” identifying himself as a protagonist, instead of Plato in absentia.⁹ Furthermore, he declares at the very beginning that he “...*obtained the first prize of all...*” implying that this is not just his personal opinion but rather the one of the public.

Purposely I believe, Plato chose not to develop a dialogue with a poet but rather with his reciter. It is conceivable that if Homer was present in the dialogue, he would be able to answer the specific questions on the chariots, the medicinal preparations, and fishing, otherwise he wouldn't include them in his poems. For example, Socrates asks “... [Will] the art of the fisherman or of the rhapsode be better able to judge whether these lines are rightly expressed or not?”, and Ion answers “Clearly, Socrates, the art of the fisherman” leaving no doubt regarding who the true expert on the subject is. This goes on at various different passages and on different subjects.

At least, Homer himself would be able to provide an answer that could justify his claims in the corresponding passages. Therefore, Plato's specific critique does not apply to the actual creator of the poem but rather to its reciters. The latter, skillfully may be able to elicit strong emotional reactions to their audience but even this, does not presuppose full comprehension of the relevant works. Ion claims regarding the effects of his recitation “... 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”. To that end Socrates' argumentation dissociates the effect of the poems to the audience from the actual causes that rendered the poems' production. It is a valid speculation to assume that if the audience cried upon listening to specific passages, the poet that wrote them would also be under a similar emotional state. This further reduces the role of the reciter to that of a medium that lacks the awareness of the process he is participating in, since Ion was presumably untouched when reciting the corresponding passages. It is arguable that since the audience is eventually moved and becomes responsive to the poem, but not the actual reciter

is derivative of creation (ποίησις), nevertheless in his argumentation he primarily refers to the reciter.

⁹ Taken from <http://classics.mit.edu//Plato/ion.html>, Translated by Benjamin Jowett from The Internet Classics Archive by Daniel C. Stevenson, Web Atomics.

who plausibly just narrates convincingly but does not cry when the audience does so, it [the audience] eventually becomes more receptive and involved with the topic than the rhapsodist.¹⁰ The latter operates as an effective medium that narrates without comprehending but establishes an effective connection between the poet and the audience.

This relates to the Chinese room of Searle who devised a thought experiment at which a person with a detailed manual on Chinese language in his possession, can successfully “pass” a test for Chinese language comprehension, without the slightest knowledge of Chinese language.¹¹ Ion, like the handler of the Chinese manual that does not know Chinese, can elicit emotional responses to the audience without being aware of their meaning and content. Yet, he passes as an expert in Homer and his poems, and he is acknowledged as such. This function reduces the role of Ion to just that of an interpreter of an interpreter [translator of an interpreter] as it is mentioned in the dialogue, without necessitating comprehension of the actual meaning of the corresponding poem he recites, reducing even more their value in the whole process.¹² In analogy to the function of a mere translator, the reciter does not necessarily understand and appreciates the true value of the pieces he recites. In that case, more accurate translation of the original document would be “translator of an interpreter” instead of “interpreter of an interpreter”. The corresponding passage is as follows:

Socrates: “... For in this way, 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. Was not this the lesson which the God intended to teach when by the mouth of the worst of poets he sang the best of songs? Am I not right, Ion?”

Ion: “Yes, indeed, Socrates, I feel that you are; for your words

10 The audience’s contribution to spectatorship has been discussed by Jansen 2015.

11 This thought experiment by Searle (1980) is used extensively as a proof that artificial intelligence will not be able to reach the intellectual capabilities of the human mind.

12 In ancient Greek the term “ἑρμηνεύς” refers interchangeably to both interpreter and translator. Probably, in this dialogue the role of Ion is keener to that of a translator.

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touch my soul, and I am persuaded that good poets by a divine inspiration interpret the things of the Gods to us.”

Socrates: “And you rhapsodists are the interpreters of the poets?”

Ion: “There again you are right.”

Socrates: “Then you are the translators of interpreters?”

Ion: “Precisely.”

(Plato, *Ion*, 534e-535a)

In turn this raises another question that relates to the actual role of the poet-interpreter and differentiates it from that of the reciter-translator: What about the actual poet that wrote the poem? Is he also a medium, maybe of different magnitude, like the reciter is? Why the poet is an interpreter, but the reciter is a translator?

The conventional interpretation of Plato’s *Ion* regards this creativity as the outcome of a divine possession. This is indicated directly by Socrates when he states that poets create, when the Gods decide for them to do so. Socrates says: “... *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.*”

I suggest that Plato, in purpose selected a reciter and not a poet for his dialogue to avoid expressing opinion on this, at least in this earlier stage of his philosophical career (see also footnote 2).¹³ His whole argumentation applies effectively to the reciter, leaving the actual creator of the poem untouched. It must be taken into consideration that all Plato’s philosophy ultimately aimed to dissociate the divine from the human, and to preclude the divine interference in his explanations for the earthly life.¹⁴ Thus, considering the lack of explicitly expressed theological be-

13 Subsequent works of Plato do not differentiate between poets and reciters and his criticism of poets is harsh. In *Apology* (22c) for example he states that “...they [poets], on account of their poetry, thought that they were the wisest of men in other things as well, in which they were not.” He likely though refers to popular contemporary poets and not to Homer, pointing to a form of social criticism according to which popularity is not based on virtue.

14 Plato’s theological views are complex. The recognition of god’s goodness is essential for human virtue. At the same time, in contrast with his teacher, Socrates, and in alignment with Aristotle, his student, he does not consider the divine intervention in human lives (Sadley 2019). With that perspective, Plato would not encourage religious worship as a means to attain virtue, and therefore, divine interference

liefs from Plato, such divine inspiration in the production of poetry may well be just metaphorical, aiming to emphasize the surge in creativity when the relevant works are produced. The same applies to the seers that he mentions in analogy to the reciter, that are used as an example in the *Ion* dialogue, albeit they [seers] also do not have a place in the Platonian cosmology.¹⁵ In similarity with the reciters, the seers also operate as a medium of some knowledge that they cannot comprehend. This may bear elements of the notion of “recollection” of a pre-existing knowledge that becomes evident from experiential clues and is up to the individual to develop the skills and the mental discipline to decipher and own it.¹⁶ In the - presumably metaphorical - case of the seers, in this dialogue, it is the Gods, and in the case of the reciters it is the poets that bear the true knowledge. The receptiveness of the audience and its cultivation will eventually determine the extent by which the poem will augment acquisition of knowledge that may be, more or less, true. Thus, in *Ion*, Plato may not argue directly against the value of the artistic creation, especially of poetry as typically thought, but rather against the acclaimed role that the rhapsodists possessed in the classical world and that they were rewarded for a process that they did not truly comprehend but enjoyed an esteemed position. To that end, *Ion* may not be a dialogue with primarily philosophical ramifications but rather with sociological ones. This dimension is further emphasized by that *Ion* indicates that his success as a rhapsodist is directly translated, and motivated by, the money he will receive from the audience after a successful performance. Svoboda (2021, p. ??), sees *Ion* as “... primarily ethical rather than epistemological” and recognizes that *Ion* is presented as a “...laughable, comic, ethically inferior character...”.

and inspiration, would not entail reciprocity.

15 The metaphorical assumption is based on that Plato, in his argumentation, uses entities that presumably are invalid as such (seers and Gods). If he accepted that indeed poems are produced per God’s instructions, then he wouldn’t be suspicious about the messages that the poets convey with their creations. In a world that poetry originates from the Gods (divine), then poets shouldn’t be corruptive for the society as explicitly argued in his subsequent works.

16 Ανάμνησις (recollection), a fundamental notion in Plato’s thought.

2 Criticism II-Poetry as a multidisciplinary creation

Another point that merits additional discussion, is related to the contextualization of the artistic creation. It is conventionally interpreted that Socrates' deconstructive critique of the artistic creation is based on his argumentation that different passages could be evaluated more appropriately by the experts in the corresponding topics, being charioteers, doctors, or fishermen in this dialogue.¹⁷ The notion relates to the Doctrine of Uniqueness of Domains and is discussed by Aikin (2017) who also recognizes inconsistencies in the dialogue. The reciter, that lacks expertise in these specific topics is incapable of expressing reliable opinion on the corresponding subject matters. It is possible though that Plato, by this inference, desires to emphasize that artistic creation – which should be seen as distinct from the recitation - may possess superior value than that of the specific disciplines, and that such superiority exceeds the sum of its independent units. In other words, having a charioteer, a doctor, and a fisherman together, would not be sufficient to collectively criticize the corresponding passages as a whole, to the extent and depth that the poet can. A certain degree of synergy should be acknowledged between the different components of a poetic creation that supersedes their arithmetic sum. This again, operates beyond the intellectual qualities or the degree of comprehension of the specific reciter, but may very well be dependent on those qualities that the poet, who produced the poem, likely possesses. In line with this thought is the notion that poetry, in Plato's expressed opinion, is a unique entity that can be appreciated by a single individual that can judge both the best and the worse artist.¹⁸ This person must be an artist, and thus capable of possessing the relevant skill. Such artistic creations are also admirable since repeatedly Socrates attributes to the best of them a divine origin.¹⁹ Furthermore, they are composed by different elements, that each one of them falls into the territory of different, distinct disciplines, but each one independently, is insufficient in justifying the outcome

17 These are the specific examples referred to by Plato, in *Ion*. Interestingly, the one that could be performed efficiently by the rhapsodist is that of the general, from the perspective that his essential role it seems, that is not that of strategist but rather that of someone that is capable of inspiring and motivating people.

18 Besides poetry, Plato uses similar examples in topics relevant to arithmetic and nutrition.

19 The metaphor in divine inspiration circles back.

to its true magnitude. That outcome is reflected to the impact it has to the audience, that can elicit responses that simulate the emotional state of the creator of the poems. That the reciter is incapable of doing so is irrelevant since he, is just a medium and a translator. By accepting this, we should also accept that in *Ion*, Plato introduces the concept of complexity in noetic structures and creations, that acquire value that exceeds their specific constituents.

3 Conclusion

Ion is a vastly underappreciated dialogue of Plato. Not only it sets the foundation for the subsequent Platonic philosophy but also maintains direct relevance to contemporary questions beyond the domain of art philosophy. For example, it renders the dissociation of the medium (reciter) from the creator (poet) towards the receptor (audience), and argues, years before Searle's Chinese room, that skillful, technical, and practicable knowledge of a topic, to the degree of a perfect manual or a recitation that elicits cries to the audience, does not necessitate comprehension of the relevant subject matter. These notions contrast conventional interpretations of *Ion* as they emphasize the dissociation of the reciter from the poet. They also attribute a wholistic value to the artistic creation, at which the significance of the poem is far beyond the sum of the values of its independent passages.

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