

## WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE RHAPSODE?

### THE ROLE OF INSPIRATION IN PLATO'S *THE ION*

TILMANN KOEPPE

GEORG-AUGUST-UNIVERSITÄT GÖTTINGEN

#### I.

In Plato's *Ion* we find Socrates engaged in a conversation with the rhapsode Ion. During the course of the dialogue, Socrates gives a critical account of the nature of the rhapsode's profession. But what exactly is it that Socrates criticises? And is his account entirely critical or does he, in the end, attach some positive value to the rhapsode's profession in virtue of its being a 'divinely inspired' activity?<sup>1</sup> In this essay I shall argue that Socrates does in fact give an entirely critical account of the rhapsode's profession. Thus I agree with Nickolas Pappas, who says that "the claim of poetic madness is as derogatory as any other imputation of insanity."<sup>2</sup> According to Pappas, however, the rhapsode's flaw does not *consist* in his being inspired, but in his choice of the 'wrong kind of knowledge'; Ion fails to differentiate between knowledge of Homer's opinion that *p* and knowledge that *p*:

Ion not only possesses no general knowledge, but rejects it. On every important issue he turns his back on a search for the truth, preferring to know only what Homer thinks about the issue. He will not aim separately at the truth of the matter. From Socrates' point of view, Ion's attitude is thus a perverse choice of ignorance over knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The latter view has been attributed to Percy B. Shelley, see Pappas (1989), p. 381, n.1. 'Poetry,' Shelley says in his *A Defence of Poetry*, 'redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in Man.' See Shelley (1891), p. 41. See also Partee (1970), p. 209, and Fendt (1997), pp. 23-50.

<sup>2</sup> Pappas (1989), p. 381.

<sup>3</sup> Pappas (1989), p. 385.

In what follows, I shall argue that this account does not acknowledge the full force of Socrates' criticism of the rhapsode's profession, for it does not account for what Socrates says about the rhapsode's being inspired. Socrates' criticism has its *ground* in the rhapsode's being inspired; the rhapsode, in other words, lacks knowledge *because* he is inspired.<sup>4</sup> Thus Socrates' repeated claim that rhapsodes are "possessed" when declaiming a poet's works can be seen as constituting the centre of an argument to the effect that the rhapsode's profession is deeply dubious. In order to substantiate this claim I shall start with an outline of the account of the rhapsode's profession as it is given by Socrates.

## II.

According to Socrates, the poet is inspired by the Muses, and so is the rhapsode, whose task it is not only to declaim the poet's works but also to interpret them. Socrates explains the rhapsode's profession to Ion as follows:

...it's a divine power that moves you, as a "Magnetic" stone moves iron rings. ... This stone not only pulls those rings, if they're iron, it also puts power *in* the rings, so that they in turn can do just what the stone does – pull other rings – so that there's sometimes a very long chain of iron pieces and rings hanging from one another. And the power in all of them depends on this stone. In the same way, the Muse makes some people inspired herself, and then through those who are inspired a chain of other enthusiasts is suspended. 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.<sup>5</sup>

So what is wrong with being inspired? As I noted earlier, some commentators have held that there is nothing wrong with it, but, to the contrary, divine inspiration is to be considered good and indeed constitutes Ion's last stronghold against Socrates' criticism.<sup>6</sup> And there are admittedly some passages in *Ion* which seem to support this reading. For instance, Socrates praises poems as "beautiful" and "divine and from

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<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I assume that one should see Ion as representative of rhapsodes in general. Cf. Dorter (1973), p. 66.

<sup>5</sup> Plato (1931), §533d-e / Plato (1995), p. 10. Quotations are taken from Plato, (1995); all page numbers refer to this edition. The additional section numbers are taken from the Greek text of Plato (1931).

<sup>6</sup> For references see footnote 1.

gods”.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, there is evidence that these passages are to be taken as ironical and that the ‘inspiration theory’<sup>8</sup> should be understood as critical of the rhapsode’s profession. In order to see what is wrong with inspiration according to Socrates, we must look at his account of inspiration in greater detail. For Socrates, inspiration involves being “not in one’s right mind”, and he expends considerable effort attempting to convince Ion that this applies not only to the poets, but also to rhapsodes, who declaim their works.<sup>9</sup> When poets and, it is implied, rhapsodes speak, the god “takes their intellect away from them”;<sup>10</sup> they are “nothing but representatives of the gods, possessed by whoever possesses them”.<sup>11</sup> Now what does this amount to? Socrates certainly does not say that the rhapsode is wholly senseless when declaiming; after all, he is able to utter meaningful sentences, which surely requires a conscious effort. The point is rather that the rhapsode’s utterances are, in a sense still to be explained, not *his* utterances. Two misleading interpretations of this can be dismissed right away. Firstly, the point is not that the *content* of the utterances is not contributed by the rhapsode, since he is not the poem’s author anyway. Most of us frequently utter things we have taken from others, and (normally) there is nothing wrong with acquiring information from other people and passing it on. Secondly, the point is not that poets are *caused* by Muses to utter something. Conceivably, all of our utterances are caused in one way or another, and there is nothing wrong with that either.<sup>12</sup> But what then *is* the problem with being inspired?

According to an ‘hierarchical’ picture of mental activity, it is distinctive of some species that they have the capacity to take an attitude of approval or disapproval towards their own thoughts, wishes, beliefs etc.<sup>13</sup> I believe that being “out of one’s mind” or “possessed” implies that one is not in a position to take (the full range of)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Plato (1931), §534d / Plato (1995), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> For the sake of brevity, that is what I shall call Socrates’ account of the nature of the rhapsode’s profession in what follows.

<sup>9</sup> Socrates dedicates most of his speeches in Plato (1931), §533d-536d / Plato (1995), pp. 10-12 to this.

<sup>10</sup> Plato (1995), p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Plato (1995), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> There could, I suppose, be a moral problem if poets or rhapsodes were *forced* by gods to utter something. But I shall not pursue this any further here.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Frankfurt (1971), pp. 5-20. Frankfurt elaborates on this in several later essays; see Frankfurt (1988), especially pp. 80-94, and pp. 159-176.

<sup>14</sup> This qualification is significant, for a person being out of her mind may for example *enjoy* whatever goes on in her mind, which may count as a second-order attitude.

‘higher-order’ attitudes towards one’s own mental states.<sup>15</sup> Ion surely has lots of first-order attitudes while reciting Homer’s works. The utterance of a sentence is an action, which in turn is commonly explained with regard to beliefs and desires. Nevertheless the magnetism analogy given by Socrates to explicate divine inspiration suggests that the inspired subject is in some sense utterly passive with regard to his utterances. According to Socrates, the inspired subject is “held” and the god “pulls [the inspired] people’s souls ... wherever he wants”.<sup>16</sup> Now, how can these two apparently contradictory claims go together: that Ion is performing genuine actions and that he is passive with regard to them? I think one way to reconcile these claims is by granting that Ion does perform genuine actions,<sup>17</sup> but that in some sense he is not in a position to behave towards his beliefs and desires. What he seems to be lacking is the ability to *evaluate* his beliefs and desires in certain ways still to be explained. If this is true, it has a number of consequences some of which belong to a broader ethical context, while others belong to an epistemological context. The latter fit best into the whole of Socrates’ argument in the *Ion*, and I shall turn to them at a later point of this essay. But first, I shall offer a brief (and rather tentative) outline of the former.

### III.

If Ion can be said to be incapable of second order-attitudes altogether while being inspired, then in an important sense neither his thoughts nor his desires (etc.) are *his* thoughts or desires. According to Harry Frankfurt, this affects a human being’s status as a *person* as well as this human being’s *freedom of the will*. The idea behind this is, firstly, that being a person essentially involves the capacity of reflective self-evaluation with regard to one’s own desires. More precisely, it involves the capacity to want a certain desire to be one’s *will*.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, a person enjoys freedom of the will (“roughly”) if “he is free to will what he wants to will, or to have the will he wants.”<sup>19</sup> Now these are complicated philosophical issues which I shall not pursue any

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<sup>15</sup> I should emphasize that I do not attempt to give a complete account of what is involved in being ‘out of one’s mind’, and certainly more needs to be said for instance about the question *which* ‘higher-order’ attitudes may be involved in ‘being out of one’s mind’ and which may be not.

<sup>16</sup> Plato (1931), §536a / Plato (1995), p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Note that Ion deliberately starts and stops reciting, that he does so for reasons, and, finally, that he utters meaningful sentences, see for instance 537a-b / p. 13. These facts are explained best by the assumption that Ion performs actions.

<sup>18</sup> See Frankfurt (1971), pp. 10-11.

<sup>19</sup> Frankfurt (1971), p. 15.

further here.<sup>20</sup> Instead, I shall assume that there possibly could be a reconstruction of Socrates' criticism along these lines. Such an account would take the inspiration theory as its main clue and give an explanation of its critical potential in terms of a lack of personal autonomy or freedom of the will.

However, before turning to the epistemological consequences of the 'inspiration theory' I shall give a brief sketch of another interpretation, which too is inspired by Frankfurt. It can be brought out best by a quick consideration of the example of an unwilling drug addict. This person has strong first-order desires to take drugs but at the same time she doesn't want these desires to determine her actions,<sup>21</sup> perhaps because she is certain that taking drugs is bad for her health. I assume that it is natural to think of this person as suffering from a flaw. But what exactly does this flaw consist in? A plausible answer is implicit in the description already given: what is wrong is that within this person *evaluation* and *motivation* clash. The person in question considers certain motives bad and nevertheless she sees her actions determined by the very same motives. I take it that this picture of the unwilling addict's situation is not entirely descriptive but comprises some normative elements. We tend to consider it a goal in a person's life if she is motivated by what she wants to be her motives, and consider it bad if evaluation and motivation clash.<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that this does not mean that it is bad to *adopt* another person's motives, because to adopt a motive means to want it to be one's own motive. And it does not mean that every motive must be chosen as a result of a preceding evaluation. What it does mean is that a person's motives should be *consistent* with his/her actual or possible evaluations.<sup>23</sup> Now in order to evaluate one's motives, one must be in a *position* to do that; that is, one must be able to adopt a higher-order attitude towards one's own motives. The ability to adopt such a position is a presupposition of

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<sup>20</sup> Above all I shall not discuss the question whether Frankfurt's model really captures the 'essence' of 'practical autonomy' (that being the label of an ongoing discussion Frankfurt initiated), which has been disputed *inter alia* by John Christman; see Christman (1991), pp. 1-24. However, even if Christman's criticism is sound, Frankfurt nevertheless could be said to have identified a necessary condition of practical autonomy, albeit not a sufficient one.

<sup>21</sup> This is an example Frankfurt gives, see Frankfurt, (1971), p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> However, this evaluative standard is defeasible and may be overruled by, for example, moral considerations. In some sense we may regard a wholehearted criminal (whose first-order and second-order attitudes harmonize well) worse than a half-hearted criminal. Unfortunately, I cannot discuss these matters here. Neither can I deal here with the related question *why* we consider a clash of evaluation and motivation bad, but I assume the reason for this evaluation traces back to the fact that some of a person's second-order *desires* are not fulfilled. See Frankfurt (1971), p. 17, for a related view.

<sup>23</sup> A possible evaluation can be described by a counterfactual conditional of the sort "If *S* were to evaluate her motives now, *S* would approve of them."

evaluating one's desires. For this reason I assume that the notion of 'being in a position to evaluate one's motives' is 'normatively charged' as well. Being in a position to evaluate one's motives is good, whereas not being in such a position is bad. If a person is deprived of the capacity to evaluate her motives, this, consequently, amounts to a flaw. So what about Ion? If his being inspired deprives him of being in a position to evaluate his desires, this amounts to a flaw. According to this interpretation, Socrates criticises Ion, for while being inspired the latter fails to meet a certain standard which we consider a goal in a person's life.

#### IV.

In this section I shall turn to the epistemological implications of the 'inspiration theory'. Here I differentiate between two different (albeit interrelated) aspects. Firstly, I shall ask whether inspiration could be said to affect a person's stock of knowledge. Secondly, I shall briefly ask whether inspiration affects a person's aptitude as an informant.

According to a widely held view, it is a necessary condition for the truth of the sentence "*S* knows that *p*" that the sentence "*S* is justified in believing that *p*" is also true.<sup>24</sup> Briefly stated, this view amounts to the claim that there is no knowledge without epistemic justification. There has been much discussion among philosophers what kind of formulation the justification-condition for knowledge should be given. Luckily, this discussion need not be rehearsed here. For the present point to be made, it will be sufficient to mention some characteristics of the structure of epistemic justification. First, let us assume that a person's belief that *p* can be justified only by another belief that *q* that she holds.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, we may state a justification-condition as follows:

(J) *S*'s belief that *p* is justified if *S* has at least one more belief that *q* which supports *p*.

But this is not enough, for *S* may hold both *p* and *q* without believing that there is a supporting relation between them.<sup>26</sup> Suppose for example that *S* believes that a reactor

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<sup>24</sup> Against this view cf. Sartwell (1991), pp. 157-165.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Davidson (1986), p. 310.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Baumann (2002), p. 184.

accident has emitted some radioactivity. Suppose that *S* also believes that a Geiger counter in his hand is striking wildly. Unfortunately, *S* has no clue as to the relationship between the striking of a Geiger counter and radioactivity. If *S* lacks this further belief he may be said to fail to be justified in believing that *p*.<sup>27</sup> We may therefore need to specify the justification-condition:

(J)\* *S*'s belief that *p* is justified if *S* has at least one more belief that *q* which supports *p*, and *S* is aware of this supporting relation.

One may (and, indeed, should) doubt whether (J)\* is an ultimately satisfying account of epistemic justification. But again, we needn't pursue these doubts any further here. It will be sufficient if we grant that epistemic justification is a *complex* mental activity which involves certain higher-order attitudes, the awareness of a supporting relation between two beliefs being one of them. By now we can combine this result with what was said in section 3: If among the higher-order attitudes which Ion is assumed to lack while being inspired are the ones that are involved in epistemic justification, then Ion can be denied knowledge.<sup>28</sup> To be more precise, one can deny that Homer's works amount to a source of knowledge for Ion, if the following conditions are conjunctively satisfied:

- (i) Ion is inspired whenever he encounters Homer's works;
- (ii) Ion lacks the higher-order mental states needed for epistemic-justification while being inspired;<sup>29</sup>
- (iii) Ion has no other relevant source of justification besides Homer's works.<sup>30</sup>

I shall not discuss the question whether these claims are plausible. Instead, I shall consider whether they are a plausible interpretation of what Socrates argues in the *Ion*.

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<sup>27</sup> At least 'internalists' with regard to epistemic justification, who hold that *S* must have some kind of access to what makes them justified in believing that *p*, would say so.

<sup>28</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I shall ignore the distinction between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how', for Socrates seems to ignore it as well. Cf. Dorter, (1973), p. 65, n. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Additionally, we must assume here that epistemic justification is indeed necessary for knowledge. Plato is said to consider such a view in his *Theaetetus* 201 and *Meno* 98. Cf. Gettier (1963), p. 121, n. 1.

<sup>30</sup> This last qualification is needed because if Ion had any Homer-independent sources of justification for the beliefs he gains from Homer (i.e. if the process of epistemic justification would take place without the inspiration's harmful influence) the argument would be doomed to fail.

As to (i), there is broad textual evidence that Socrates does indeed hold such a view, for he integrates Ion into the ‘magnetism analogy’:

The middle ring is you, the rhapsode or actor, and the first one is the poet himself. The god pulls people’s souls through all these wherever he wants, looping the power down from one to another. ... You are one of *them*, Ion, and you are possessed from Homer.<sup>31</sup>

Socrates doesn’t explicitly state that Ion is inspired *whenever* he engages professionally with Homer’s works, but there is no indication that he thinks otherwise.<sup>32</sup> Sentence (ii) is, as I have argued in section 3, an account of what is involved in being “inspired” or “possessed” (these being the notions used by Socrates). Finally, sentence (iii) can be supported by Socrates’ repeated attempts to convince Ion that the rhapsode’s profession is not to be equated with the profession of, for example, a doctor or a charioteer.<sup>33</sup> Although Socrates doesn’t say what it is that makes a doctor a master of his profession, we may assume that it is the doctor’s medical education along with some practical know-how.<sup>34</sup> These are proper sources of justification involved in the kind of expert knowledge a doctor is supposed to have. Socrates makes the point that if Ion had some sort of expert knowledge – and, as is implied by this, if he had access to the relevant sources of justification – he would certainly practise it in ‘real life’.<sup>35</sup>

My interpretation so far has brought out two critical claims, both of which are in a way ‘person-centred’. The first one amounts to the claim that Ion, while being inspired, fails to be in a position to evaluate his motives and therefore can be said to fail to achieve a goal in a person’s life (and maybe he also, at least temporarily, lacks the status of a person and freedom of the will). The second denies that Ion’s commitment to Homer yields any proper knowledge. I call these criticisms ‘person-centred’, for they amount to a flaw in the individual. The account given so far doesn’t consider the individual’s relation to others. Now we might take into account that Socrates seems to have as a target of his critique not only the individual Ion but the rhapsode’s *profession*, which consists in declaiming and explaining a poet’s works to

<sup>31</sup> Plato (1931), §535e / Plato (1995), p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> If there were exceptions, we would have to alter (i) which in turn would amount to a constraint of the scope of Socrates’ criticism.

<sup>33</sup> Plato (1931), §536d-542b / Plato (1995), pp. 13-17.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Dorter (1973), p. 71.

<sup>35</sup> Plato (1931), §541d-542a / Plato (1995), pp. 16-17.

the crowd, and we may ask whether there is anything wrong with that too. I shall close with some brief remarks on this.

At first sight it seems there are reasons to believe that Ion is not a good informant. A good informant, as I will use this notion here, is someone you can turn to in order to acquire knowledge.<sup>36</sup> Since Ion himself has no knowledge, one may be tempted to infer that he cannot transmit any knowledge. But maybe that is too hasty. Let us assume that *S*'s belief that *p* counts as knowledge if *p* is true and *S* is justified in believing that *p*. Further, suppose that the sentences Ion utters while being inspired are all true (because the gods are the authors and gods can neither err nor lie)<sup>37</sup> and that *S* knows that rhapsodes are only “representatives of representatives”,<sup>38</sup> that is, that they give an undistorted ‘playback’ of the truths they have received. It seems, then, that we must assume that *S* can acquire knowledge from the rhapsodes, for the beliefs *S* gains are true and *S* knows that they are. However, it should be noted that the assumptions this conclusion is based on cannot be said to be actually well-founded, for, firstly, it is unclear whether the gods can neither err nor lie and, secondly, it seems rather unlikely that each single member of the audience holds the required beliefs.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> For an extended discussion of the notion of an informant, see Edward Craig, *Was wir wissen können: Pragmatische Untersuchungen zum Wissensbegriff*, ed. W. Vossenkuhl (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), ch. 2.

<sup>37</sup> There are some passages in the *Republic* where Socrates can be said to hold such a view, see especially Book II, 381, 382.

<sup>38</sup> Plato (1931), §535a / Plato (1995), p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> I thank Peter Winslow and especially Dr Alex Neill for various comments on previous drafts of this paper.

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