

Plato's *Ion* as an Ethical Performance

Abstract: Plato's *Ion* is primarily ethical rather than epistemological, investigating the implications of transgressing one's own epistemic limits. The figures of Socrates and Ion are juxtaposed in the dialogue, Ion being a laughable, comic, ethically inferior character who cannot recognize his own epistemic limits, Socrates being an elevated, serious, ethically superior character who exhibits disciplined epistemic restraint. The point of the dialogue is to contrast Ion's laughable state with the serious state of Socrates. In this sense, the dialogue's central argument is performative rather than demonstrative.

Plato's *Ion* seems to be a commentary on what the poet or rhapsode knows in relation to poetic work, the answer being "nothing." Having demonstrated that the rhapsode, Ion, cannot give a satisfactory account of what he knows in the Homeric poetry he recites, Socrates suggests that poets and rhapsodes, lacking both art and knowledge, produce or recite poetry only through "divine dispensation." For this reading, the matter is purely theoretical and epistemological, the sole points at issue being the knowledge and skill of poets and rhapsodes. This paper, however, reads the *Ion* as primarily ethical rather than epistemological. Accordingly, the dialogue is not about what poets and rhapsodes know in the process of making, reciting, or commenting about poetry, but rather about the ethical implications of transgressing one's own epistemic limits. The characters of Socrates and Ion assume great importance in this interpretation. These two figures are juxtaposed in the dialogue, Ion being a laughable, comic, ethically inferior character who cannot recognize his own epistemic limits, Socrates being an elevated, serious, ethically superior character who exhibits disciplined epistemic restraint. This contrast turns on Delphic

self-knowledge, which is profoundly ethical. Ion, lacking self-knowledge and hence unaware of his own epistemic limits, repeatedly makes excessive and absurd claims, such as that rhapsodes make the best generals. The point of the dialogue is to contrast this laughable state with the serious state of Socrates, who always respects his epistemic limits and hence avoids being laughable.

This being the case, the “argument” of the *Ion* is not demonstrative but performative. I treat Socrates’ apparent thesis as an ironical tool for engaging Ion rather than as a serious, final position. Rather than arguing that poetry is a matter of divine inspiration and that poets and rhapsodes lack art and knowledge, the dialogue dramatizes the encounter of two very different sorts of ethical being. It displays the laughable and the serious, the low and the elevated, the ethically inferior and the ethically superior in conversation, trusting that the reader will concur with Socrates that the latter is preferable to the former. While the epistemological readings of the *Ion* remain coherent and respectable, this alternative, ethical reading may offer better avenues for engaging the dramatic spirit of this dialogue. I show that this interpretation coheres well with important passages from three other dialogues: 1) the preference for tragedy over comedy in the *Laws*, 2) the contrast between the laughable person and the serious person in the *Philebus*, and 3) the importance of self-knowledge and wisdom in the *Apology*.

Gerald Else follows the conventional reading of the *Ion* insofar as he views Socrates as denying any knowledge or art on the part of poets, suggesting as an alternative that poets are divinely inspired. However, Else notes that this “defense” of divine inspiration is highly ironical. He sees Plato as a “preacher of reason” whose goal is to unmask poets and their expositors as “wholly irrational, subrational creatures, not knowing anything of what they do.”¹ The

¹ Gerald E. Else, *Plato and Aristotle on Poetry*, ed. Peter Burian (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 8.

hypothesis of divine dispensation is simply an under-handed, sarcastic way of mocking the poets and their thorough ignorance. At the close of the dialogue, Ion naively says it is better to be divine than artistic (542a), unaware that Socrates is employing divine appellations solely to belittle him. On Else's reading, this only underlines Plato's ironical disdain for poets and rhapsodes, who are too ignorant to recognize their own naïveté. However, Else criticizes this irony for being "premature." Referring to 533c-535a, in which Socrates offers an extended defense of divine dispensation as the source of Ion's recital of Homer, Else says, "It is not Sokrates' way to launch into a ten-minute discourse when the conversation has barely begun, or to explain to people why they do what they do before he has even asked them why they do it." He proceeds to note that the hypothesis of divine dispensation is merely "negatively inferred" from Ion's failure to account for his ability to recite and discuss Homer. According to Else, "This is not Sokrates speaking, it is the young Plato, pricking up his ears and charging into battle before he has even heard the trumpet."²

My reading of the *Ion* concurs with Else that Socrates' defense of divine dispensation is deeply ironical, but I see the irony operating in a different way and for a different purpose. Whereas Else treats it as an over-wrought, juvenile attack by Plato upon poets and their "subrational" ways, my reading treats this irony as a gentler, pedagogical tool that highlights the difference between Socrates and Ion as ethical beings. On this view, Socrates is not concerned with the correctness of any theory of how poetry is produced so much as he is concerned with the well-being of the soul. Divine dispensation is a provisional, ironical hypothesis that progresses the dialogue and better exhibits the contrast between the serious and the laughable. When Ion enthusiastically agrees with Socrates that he recites Homer through inspiration, despite his having previously agreed with equal enthusiasm that he recites Homer according to an art, his

² Ibid., 7.

laughable nature is made apparent. According to my reading, Plato has Socrates ironically endorse divine dispensation in order to draw Ion's absurdity and lack of self-knowledge to the fore, but Plato's goal in doing this is to educate the reader rather than to disparage the rhapsode. The reader is confronted by a dramatic presentation of the laughable figure, one who lacks self-knowledge and foolishly makes absurd claims with naïve enthusiasm. One *could* see this as an attack on poets and rhapsodes for being epistemologically inadequate. But my reading sees it as a warning against the ethical problems that ensue from disdain the Delphic imperative, know thyself. The problem with Ion is not simply that he fails to explain how he recites and discusses Homer. The problem is rather that he fails to know himself and consequently maintains an unhealthy soul rife with inconsistency, laughableness, and ignorance.

The laughable is directly broached in the *Philebus*. Socrates says the "ridiculous" is "a kind of vice which gives its name to a condition; and it is that part of vice in general which involves the opposite of the condition mentioned in the inscription at Delphi," know thyself (48c).³ One is ridiculous because one is ignorant of oneself. Socrates maintains that there are three types of such ignorance. The first two are ignorance of one's wealth and ignorance of one's physical qualities: some tend to think themselves richer and some more beautiful than they really are. More prevalent and dangerous is the third type, ignorance of the qualities of one's soul, according to which one views oneself as having more virtue than one really does. This is especially true of the virtue of wisdom (48e-49a). This condition, which is no doubt an evil one, can occur in both weak and powerful individuals. Only the former is properly ridiculous or laughable, because when laughed at he is powerless to exact revenge, but the latter is "powerful, terrible, and hateful, for ignorance in the powerful is hateful and infamous..." (49c). The

³ Plato, *The Statesman, Philebus, Ion*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1925).

powerful person who lacks Delphic self-knowledge is like a tyrant whose excesses and absurdities are dangerous and destructive. The weak person who lacks Delphic self-knowledge is relatively harmless, and one may laugh at him without having to fear reprisal. Such a person is laughable and ridiculous.

I argue below that one important element of self-knowledge is awareness of one's own epistemic limits, the boundaries beyond which one makes only unjustified claims. Such claims are absurd. Whether this absurdity is laughable or dangerous depends on the person whose absurdity is in question. As Socrates says, a self-ignorant tyrant is "hateful and infamous," not because he is mistaken about this or that matter, but because his ignorance issues in gross injustice. There is little to laugh at here. The self-ignorant weakling, however, is laughable, because his ignorance is not harmful in the same way as the tyrant's. Neither tyrant nor weakling knows himself—each is ignorant of his epistemic limits, and each proceeds to make absurd claims. But only the latter is properly ridiculous. Hence, Socrates' definition of the laughable individual: a weak person who lacks Delphic self-knowledge.

The laughable is implicitly contrasted with the elevated or serious in the seventh book of the *Laws*, where the Athenian Stranger distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable forms of "choristry," or performing arts, within the ideal city (816d).⁴ He concludes that laughable versions of these should have no place within a good city. The Stranger proceeds to note that even the work of tragic poets might be antithetical to the serious work of philosophy and politics. He imagines a troupe of tragedians approaching the city and asking permission to perform within, and he suggests that the city's philosopher-legislators should give the following answer: "we ourselves, to the best of our ability, are the authors of a tragedy at once superlatively fair and good; at least, all our polity is framed as a representation of the fairest and best life, which is...

⁴ Plato, *Laws*, volume 2, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1926).

the truest tragedy” (817a-b). These “tragedians” of the “fairest and best life” are suspicious of traditional tragedians. The latter may be permitted to perform only if their work proves to be complementary or superior to that of the former. The Athenian imagines making the following reply to them: “first display your chants side by side with ours before the rulers; and if your utterances seem to be the same as ours or better, then we will grant you a chorus, but if not, my friends, we can never do so” (817d-e).

In the city recommended by the Athenian, the only type of “tragedy” permitted is that highly unconventional sort that either complements the philosophers’ “representation of the fairest and best life” or is itself such a representation. Of course, this is a strange use of the word “tragedy.” Richard Patterson recognizes that this new, “Platonic tragedy” is quite different from traditional Athenian tragedy, but he claims that there is nonetheless an important trait that they share: “tragedy is that branch of drama which is important, elevated, and serious; it is, if nothing else, *spoudaios* [serious], because it treats important matters in an elevated manner.”⁵ Like traditional tragedy, the work of dramatizing “the fairest and best life” in the city purports to be serious, elevated, and superior to those pursuits it deems laughable. It is precisely because traditional tragedy is not serious *enough* that the Athenian is skeptical of its deserving a place within the well-ordered city. Put another way, traditional tragedy is not *tragic* enough to be really counted as tragedy. This is why the Stranger insists it must satisfy the magistrates before being made available to the public.

As Patterson notes, the Athenian considers himself an author of the “truest tragedy” because the task of forming perfect, noble citizens is the most serious task of all. In this sense, Socrates is the tragic figure *par excellence*, because he was “the most just and wisest man of his

⁵ Richard Patterson, “The Platonic Art of Comedy and Tragedy,” *Philosophy and Literature* 6 (1982), 79.

day”⁶—i.e., he was the most serious person of his day. Patterson rightly stresses that Socrates is not a tragic figure in the traditional sense, but only in the sense promulgated in the *Laws*. His death in the *Phaedo*, for example, is not a traditionally tragic moment, because death is not a misfortune to him: “separation of the soul from the body is a welcome release from earthly impediments to true wisdom.”⁷ The *Phaedo* is tragic only in the sense that it displays a serious person carrying out the serious, elevated work of philosophy.

Whatever the exact place of traditional tragedy in the *Laws*, one appreciates that the contrast here between high and low, serious and laughable is a very important one. It is interesting, however, that the Athenian identifies an acceptable form of tragedy but not an acceptable form of comedy, which is dismissed out of hand as unbecoming of a superior person. He is willing to rehabilitate the word “tragedy” but not the word “comedy.” This seems to be because the Stranger privileges the serious over the laughable. Traditional tragedy purports to be serious, and although the Stranger judges it to be *insufficiently* serious and elevated, he at least recognizes that its goal is honorable. Hence, it is fitting to treat the philosophical “representation of the fairest and best life” as succeeding where traditional tragedy fails, and so the name “tragedy” is appropriate for it. But since comedy attempts to display the laughable, its very purpose is dishonorable, so there can be no acceptable form of it. Indeed, a comedy that succeeds may be more harmful than one that fails, since the former recommends the laughable more strongly than the latter.

But the matter is not so simple. The Athenian Stranger distinguishes learning the laughable from putting it into practice. The relevant passage deserves to be quoted in full:

⁶ Ibid., 80.

⁷ Ibid., 79. Else concurs that the *Phaedo* is not tragic: 186.

For it is impossible to learn the serious without the comic, or any one of a pair of contraries without the other, if one is to be a wise man; but to put both into practice is equally impossible, if one is to share in even a small measure of virtue; in fact, it is precisely for this reason that one should learn them—in order to avoid ever doing or saying anything ludicrous, through ignorance, when one ought not (816d-e).

In order to be a wise person, one must be serious. But to be serious, one must know what constitutes a serious person, and this can only be known in conjunction with knowledge of its contrary, the laughable. Hence, to be wise, one must know the laughable without being laughable.⁸ Such a person recognizes the laughable and knows not to take it seriously. To complicate matters further, the serious and elevated are indeed privileged over the comic and laughable, but the latter are not censored and driven out of the city completely. The Stranger says that “slaves and foreign hirelings” can be employed to perform comedies, but honorable citizens should never do so. Moreover, there ought always to be “a novel feature in their mimic shows” (816e). In other words, the same comic spectacle should not be performed repeatedly, since this might numb the spectators and cause them to forget just how laughable these performances are. The laughable should be learned from in such a way that one fortifies oneself in her seriousness. Despite all this, comedy *is* granted a place in the Stranger’s city, even if a subordinate, highly regulated one. Its position seems less tenuous than that granted traditional

⁸ Might this be a clue to understanding Socrates’ claim in the *Symposium* that the accomplished dramatist should be able to compose both comedy and tragedy? This passage may be read as saying not that such a dramatist *should* compose both, but only that she *could*. Is the accomplished dramatist one who represents only the serious despite knowing the laughable as well? Or perhaps this dramatist displays the laughable in her work, but only for the sake of contrasting it with, and thereby recommending, the serious life. I argue below that the *Ion* is of the latter sort. See *Symposium* 223d.

tragedy. As discussed above, “non-Platonic tragedians” must satisfy the city’s magistrates that their drama is serious and elevated in the same way as that drama which constructs “the fairest and best life.” If their drama is neither complementary nor superior to this “Platonic tragedy,” then they will not be permitted entrance to the city. The matter is different with “comic-acting.” Free citizens are barred from such acting, and they must avoid seeing repeat performances, but otherwise comedians need not justify themselves to the magistrates. Hence, the Stranger seems to hold that rightly regulated traditional comedy is less harmful to the city than traditional tragedy.⁹

In my reading of the *Ion*, I suggest that Socrates is presented as the “wise man” who knows the laughable without himself being such. If the Stranger is right that one cannot know one member of a pair without knowing its contrary, then Socrates must know the laughable, since Socrates is represented as serious, and knowing the serious as well as its contrary is a necessary condition for being a serious and elevated person. The character of Ion, on the other hand, is represented as thoroughly laughable, since he lacks knowledge of the serious. By the Stranger’s logic, he also lacks knowledge of the laughable, and the dialogue seems to illustrate this. Lacking knowledge of either the serious or the laughable, Ion makes every manner of ridiculous and absurd comment, betraying himself as a deeply laughable figure. Since this ignorance of the serious and the laughable has to do with his own character, the issue of self-knowledge is quite important. As already discussed, the Socrates of the *Philebus* says that the laughable results from lacking Delphic self-knowledge (48c). By failing to satisfy the maxim inscribed at Delphi, Ion remains completely ignorant of himself. According to the *Philebus*, this is what makes him laughable, i.e. unaware of his own epistemic limits and unable to recognize his own ridiculousness. Socrates, on the other hand, is the perfect opposite of Ion. He is serious

⁹ See Else, 62, 63.

in virtue of his honoring the Delphic inscription, because this self-knowledge lets him recognize his own epistemic limits and hence acknowledge the true extent of his ignorance. He is aware that transgressing these limits is laughable. He abstains from making absurd claims, nor does he engage in laughable self-praise. Knowing what the laughable person would be in himself were it present, he must also know what its contrary, the serious person, would be in himself. Staying within the epistemic bounds delineated by his self-knowledge, Socrates is able to be serious at least insofar as abstaining from absurd claims is an elevated and serious business.

I now proceed to a closer examination of the *Ion*. Throughout this reading, I keep in mind the following question: in what sense is the *Ion* a comic dialogue? Else claims that “Plato’s own genius was comic rather than tragic,” and he mentions the *Ion* as one of his “comic masterpieces.”¹⁰ If my reading of the *Ion* is appropriate, however, it is comic only insofar as it represents a laughable figure who is ironized by a thoroughly serious figure who also knows the laughable. In keeping with the Stranger’s insight at *Laws* 816d-e, Socrates cannot *be* laughable, since then he would not be serious and elevated. However, he can *know* the laughable, indeed he must if he also knows the serious, and this knowledge permits him to detect the laughable in *Ion* and subject it to an ironical critique. Hence, Socrates has a great *sense* of the comic, but I argue that he is not himself comic.

One must agree with Else that the irony of the *Ion* is thick, even if one does not see it operating in the same manner as he does.¹¹ The dialogue wastes no time in establishing the ironical orientation of Socrates to the naïve arrogance of *Ion*. It opens with Socrates greeting *Ion* and hearing how the rhapsode has just won first prize in a contest, whereupon Socrates says, “I

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

have often envied you rhapsodes, Ion, for your art” (530b).¹² Socrates explains his “jealousy.” Not only should the rhapsode be well-adorned and handsome, but he should also be able to understand the meaning of a number of good poets, since otherwise he could not interpret these poets to his audience (530b-c). Socrates envies this understanding of poetry, which he ironically declares to be no less important than the rhapsode’s physical appearance. Ion, oblivious to Socrates’ game from the very start, agrees that his “art” of understanding great poets is enviable, and he buffoonishly proclaims himself the best Homeric commentator who ever lived (530c-d). Socrates feigns delight at this, since Ion should therefore be able to provide an “exhibition” or display of this commentary. Ion offers to perform a recitation of Homer, but Socrates makes clear that the exhibition he is interested in is not a rhapsodic performance but rather a conceptual account of the rhapsode’s art. Socrates asks whether Ion is “skilled” in Homer only or in other poets as well. The rhapsode claims competence in Homer only, and the elenchus begins in earnest.

Via a quick bout of dialectic, Socrates shows that Ion must be equally skilled in all poets, since they all treat the same subject matter, and hence an art that understands one should also be able to understand the others (532b). Confused, the naïve rhapsode asks why, if this is the case, he is not capable of listening to discussions of poets other than Homer, nor of offering any valuable comment about them. Indeed, he nearly falls asleep when the topic is not Homer (532b-c). Socrates suggests that this is because Ion lacks “art and knowledge” with regard to the poets. Shortly thereafter, Socrates adds that Ion speaks about Homer according to a “divine power,” which he also calls “divine dispensation.” Socrates illustrates this by the simile of the magnet, which can both attract and magnetize an iron ring, causing it to attract other rings and

¹² Plato, *The Statesman, Philebus, Ion*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1925).

thereby create an extensive chain. In the same way, the muse inspires Homer, who in turn inspires Ion (533d – 534c). So Ion lacks any knowledge or art about Homer—he is only the conduit of some divine force. While this view contradicts Ion’s earlier agreement with Socrates that the rhapsode possesses art and knowledge, he nonetheless endorses it enthusiastically, proclaiming that Socrates has touched his soul with his words (535a).

While Socrates’ irony in professing envy of rhapsodes and their art is unmistakable, the buffoonery of Ion is no less obvious. Originally boasting about his first-place finish and proclaiming himself the greatest commentator on Homer, the rhapsode is afterward easily led to two contradictory views about his own profession. First, he agrees with Socrates that the rhapsode has an art. Soon after, he fervently concurs that the rhapsode performs via divine dispensation. The important point is not that Ion simultaneously holds contradictory views—actually, he relinquishes the former upon adopting the latter—but rather that he exhibits excessive naïveté in transferring so quickly and enthusiastically from one to the other. His is the part of a fool rather than of someone aware of his own epistemic limits. When Socrates asks whether he needs an explanation as to why the same “principle of inquiry” is present in all the arts, Ion replies that he does, “for I enjoy listening to you wise men” (532d). Of course, this misses Socrates’ point altogether. He asks Ion not whether he would *enjoy* listening to more words he happens to find pleasant, but whether he requires more elucidation in order to understand the point at issue. But Ion does not understand the argument. He simply throws his approval at Socrates, evidently for no other reason than that he enjoys having his soul touched.

The contrast between Ion and Socrates is already great, but it grows at this point. Socrates declines the depiction of himself as wise, reserving that title only for the rhapsodes and the poets. He claims to “speak but the plain truth, as a simple layman might” (532d). Socrates’

insistence that the poets and rhapsodes are wise is ironical, but his refusal of the moniker “wise” for himself and his claim to speak only the plain truth are not ironical. I read this commitment to plain truth as a corollary of Delphic self-knowledge. Socrates knows himself, and hence he is aware of his own epistemic limits. Following the *Philebus*, to know oneself is to be serious and to be ignorant of oneself is to be laughable. The *Ion*, therefore, presents a juxtaposition of the serious and the laughable in the figures of Socrates and Ion respectively, because the former possesses self-knowledge and the latter lacks it. But whereas the *Philebus* offers only a quick commentary on the differences between the serious and the laughable, the *Ion* stages an intricate illustration of them, depicting the two side-by-side and thereby making a non-demonstrative, performative argument in favor of the serious. For this reason, Else’s dismissal of the *Ion* as “a youthful effort, not very carefully designed, not very coherently executed” is too quick.¹³ The irony of the dialogue may be “premature” in some ways, but it is much more than merely a disorganized attempt to discredit poetry.¹⁴ Below, I defend the interpretation that Socrates only ironically employs the hypothesis of divine dispensation. Far from committing himself to the view that poets and rhapsodes are divinely inspired, Socrates playfully suggests divine dispensation in order bait Ion into fully disclosing himself as laughable. By taking the bait with such naïve enthusiasm, Ion highlights the difference between himself and Socrates, and the reader can see for herself which of the two figures is ethically preferable.

Suzanne Stern-Gillet criticizes those who take at face value Socrates’ claim that rhapsodes and poets work according to divine dispensation. According to her, the dialogue “features Socrates in his usual sarcastic mood, yet the sarcasm, as often as not, has gone unnoticed.”¹⁵ She suggests one should take Socrates’ endorsement of divine dispensation “[o]nly

¹³ Else, 9.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁵ Suzanne Stern-Gillet, “On (mis)interpreting Plato’s *Ion*,” *Phronesis* 49:2 (2004): 169.

half seriously.”¹⁶ There is reason to believe that Plato does not “invariably dismiss as noxious the manifestations of the non-rational soul in the lives of human beings.”¹⁷ Nonetheless, Stern-Gillet recognizes that Socrates is making fun of Ion when he proposes that the rhapsode is divinely inspired: “once it is realised that Socrates’ tactics consist in taking away with one hand the compliments that he dishes out with the other, the sarcasm becomes apparent.”¹⁸ Socrates effectively says that Ion knows nothing of poetry and does not deserve to be praised for his performances, since the gods are ultimately responsible for his inspiration. Ion is too simple to recognize that this is no compliment, and he eagerly endorses whatever Socrates says. Indeed, the dialogue closes with Socrates asking whether Ion wishes to be called “dishonest or divine.” If Ion recites and expounds Homer according to an art, then he is dishonest, because such an artist must know the skill by which he works, and yet Ion claims to be unable to explain his art to Socrates. If, however, Ion works according to divine dispensation, then his inability to explain his recitation and exposition of Homer is to be expected, since he would simply be an ignorant and talentless individual who happened to be a conduit for the gods. Hence, the appellation “divine” is no compliment, yet Ion welcomes it, since it is “far nobler to be called divine” than dishonest. Socrates assures the rhapsode that he deserves this “nobler” title, since he is merely “divine” and not “artistic” (542a-b). This irony-charged reference to the divine suggests nothing more than ignorance, confusion, naïveté, and foolishness on the part of Ion.

Ion’s absurdity reaches its peak when he claims to be the best general in Greece. To be fair, Ion is led to this claim by some dialectical maneuvering on the part of Socrates, but his being so easily led to such an excessive declaration further indicates Ion’s lack of self-knowledge. The matter begins when Ion says the rhapsode’s art consists in knowing what is

¹⁶ Ibid., 178.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 180.

fitting for each person to say (540b). Ion softens this claim when Socrates asks whether the rhapsode knows better than the pilot and the doctor what the latter two should say, but he insists his claim is valid for the general, at least insofar as he himself knows what a general should say (540c-d). Socrates slyly consents that Ion is no doubt an excellent general, but this must be on account of his having the art of generalship rather than the art of poetry. Here Ion becomes stubborn. He maintains that the arts of generalship and rhapsody are one and the same (541a). Nonetheless, he contradicts himself upon admitting that a good rhapsode is a good general but not vice versa. Not noticing this contradiction, Ion claims to be the best rhapsode in Greece. When Socrates asks if he is not also the best general in Greece, Ion magnificently proclaims, “Be sure of it, Socrates; and that I owe to my study of Homer” (541b), thus capping his steadily-built absurdity with a final flourish of the laughable.

This is a chronic case of self-ignorance. For one example, Ion does not see that the same logic applies in the instance of the general as in those of the pilot and doctor. He evidently has no reason for opposing Socrates’ claim that the general speaks better about military issues than the rhapsode, since he grants Socrates this same point in the cases of the doctor and pilot. Nor does he recognize that he contradicts himself when he admits that generals do not make the best rhapsodes, despite having just asserted that the art of the rhapsode and the general is identical. Finally, his declarations to be the best rhapsode and best general show that he has learned nothing from the dialectic, which should have demonstrated to him that he is not currently justified in making either of those claims. This particular rhapsode is ignorant of his own epistemic limits, naively unaware that each of his assertions is unjustified, and ridiculously committed to a view of himself that is completely unsupported by any good reason. It is difficult to imagine a worse case of self-ignorance.

Awareness of one's epistemic limits may not be the whole of Delphic self-knowledge, but it is certainly an important component. In the *Apology*, Socrates famously accounts for his wisdom: "what I do not know I do not think I know either" (21d)¹⁹. Having been pronounced the wisest of all persons by the oracle at Delphi, Socrates claims to have been initially troubled, since he was aware of being ignorant in many areas in which others claimed knowledge and wisdom. Upon investigating these purportedly wise people, however, Socrates soon discovered their fraudulence, eventually concluding that his own wisdom must simply be awareness of his own ignorance and respect for the limits of his knowledge. To be wise, one must abstain from making unjustified claims, and this is only possible if one knows oneself and one's epistemic limits. Like Ion, the poets in the *Apology* cannot give an adequate account of the "fine things" they say in their poetry, but they nonetheless considered themselves "the wisest of men in other things as well, in which they were not." This leads Socrates to suggest the same ironical explanation as he does in the case of Ion, namely that the poets compose their poetry according to inspiration rather than knowledge, remaining ignorant of their own work (22b-c). Recalling that the *Philebus* treats naïve over-estimation of one's own wisdom as the worst and hence most laughable kind of self-ignorance (48e-49a), one sees why Ion and the poets are laughable.

The self-knowledge that is lauded in the *Apology*, as in the *Philebus*, is not purely an epistemological matter. Socrates defends awareness of and respect for one's own epistemic limits because of its ethical significance, not just because he is a pedant for exactitude and correctness. This, of course, is why he proclaims that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (*Apology*, 38a). Given that the serious person and the laughable person are intimately connected to self-knowledge and self-ignorance respectively, one sees why the serious and the laughable

¹⁹ Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1966).

are matters of considerable ethical importance. Since to be laughable is to be ethically deficient, and since to be serious is to be ethically advanced, the position of Ion is a deeply troubling one. It is in this way the *Ion* provides a non-demonstrative, performative argument favoring the serious and elevated over the low and laughable. By presenting two characters who exemplify the laughable and the serious, and by putting them into conversation, the dialogue makes a powerful appeal to the reader. Witnessing the severe dissonance of the serious and the laughable, observing their respective natures, and seeing how ethically problematic the laughable person is, the reader cannot help but prefer being serious to being laughable. Following the advice of the Athenian Stranger, the *Ion* assists the reader in being serious, because it helps one know both the laughable and the serious, knowledge of both being necessary in order to live in the latter fashion.

Being committed to truth, Socrates declares that he is not one of the wise. Ignorant of himself, Ion cannot recognize his own epistemic limits, hence his excessive ignorance, naïveté, and ridiculousness. The point of the *Ion* is not to defend divine dispensation as the best explanation of poetry and rhapsody, but rather to illustrate that the life of Delphic self-knowledge is ethically better than the life of naïve self-ignorance. The discussion of art and divine dispensation is only the occasion for this more important issue to disclose itself. One must go to the *Philebus* and the *Laws* for an explicit discussion of the appropriate concepts, because the *Ion* performs rather than explains the laughable and the serious. The serious Socrates is dramatized as an exemplar of the serious life, and the laughable Ion serves only to reinforce this by way of contrast. Socrates also fits the Athenian Stranger's requirement that the serious person must know the laughable without being such. He is able to expose the ridiculousness of Ion because he knows the laughable as the contrary of the serious, and his being seriousness entails such

knowledge. Well aware of the absurdity and laughableness of Ion, Socrates displays an acute sense of the comic, yet he himself is never laughable. By the same token, one might say that the author of the *Ion* knew both the serious and the laughable, since he is able to represent them in such a way that the former is privileged and recommended to the latter as ethically better.

I close by considering now whether the *Ion* is a comic dialogue. William Desmond asks an intriguing question and provides an interesting answer: “Can *philosophers* laugh at themselves? Answer: Socrates? Very much so.”²⁰ While this contention deserves to be explored, it does not seem to be true of the Socrates of the *Ion*. In order to laugh at someone, that person must be laughable, and Ion’s interlocutor is certainly not this. Socrates is presented as thoroughly serious, knowledgeable of the laughable but totally unlike the laughable rhapsode. He does have a sense of the comic insofar as he employs ironical, humorous methods to unmask the ridiculousness of Ion. This humorous irony and the laughable character of the rhapsode might be sufficient grounds for treating the *Ion* as a comic work. But a reconsideration of the *Laws* suggests a more interesting and less obvious categorization of the dialogue. The Athenian Stranger treats comedy as nothing more than “laughable amusements” that should be closely monitored (816e). If one speaks of comedy in this sense, then the *Ion* is not chiefly a comic dialogue, because it is much more than mere amusement. On the contrary, its primary purpose is ethical instruction in the most serious of all matters, wisdom. Accordingly, the *Ion* seems much closer to that “truest tragedy,” which the Stranger defines as the “representation of the fairest and best life” (817b). Since the dialogue employs the laughable Ion not for the sake of entertainment but rather for the sake of ethical instruction, and since this ethical instruction concerns the

²⁰ William Desmond, *Beyond Hegel and Dialectic: Speculation, Cult, and Comedy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 341. The passage continues: “Aristotle? Not much. Descartes? Not at all. Kant? Not at all. Hegel? Now and then. Nietzsche? An astonishing buffoon—I repeat his own word, with some admiration. Husserl? Not at all. Heidegger? I cannot find it. Derrida? At others, yes. At himself? No, not at all.”

serious task of cultivating wisdom, it seems more appropriate to view the dialogue as tragic rather than comic. The Socrates of the *Philebus* insists that one cannot know the serious and elevated without knowing the laughable and low, so Ion plays an important role by exemplifying the latter pair. But the performance of the serious Socrates is central, and the purpose of the dialogue is to illustrate that the serious person is ethically superior to the laughable person. In this sense, the *Ion* is very much a tragic dialogue, “a representation of the fairest and best life.”