Inspiration and \textit{Téχνη}: Divination in Plato’s \textit{Ion}

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ABSTRACT

In Plato’s \textit{Ion}, inspiration functions in contradistinction to \textit{technē}. Yet, paradoxically, in both cases, there is an appeal to divination. I interrogate this in order to show how these two disparate accounts can be accommodated. Specifically, I argue that Socrates’ appeal to Theoclymenus at \textit{Ion} 539a-b demonstrates that Plato recognizes the existence of intuitive seers who defy his own distinction between possession and technical divination. Such seers provide an epistemic model for Ion; that he does not notice this confirms he is not an exemplary rhapsode.

Keywords: Ancient Philosophy; Plato; \textit{Ion}.

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INTRODUCTION

In Plato’s \textit{Ion}, inspiration functions in contradistinction to \textit{technē}.\footnote{In \textit{Plato’s Ion}, inspiration functions in contradistinction to \textit{technē}. Since \textit{Ion’s} rhapsodic expertise does not stand up to Socrates’ epistemological critique, his performances of Homer cannot stem from knowledge, but from elsewhere, from divine inspiration. The two are presented as a strict disjunction. Yet in both cases there is an appeal to divination. If rhapsody, and poetry by extension, cannot synthesize the two, why does Socrates seem to think that divination can? This puzzle has caused quite a bit of consternation about the value and subject matter of the dialogue. In particular, it is unclear what Socrates thinks about the nature of poetic and rhapsodic inspiration. In this essay, I will argue that divination constitutes an alternate, and improved, framework for \textit{Ion} to model his expertise on. By clarifying the role and scope of divination in the \textit{Ion}, I aim to show that Socrates’ disjunctive account – inspiration or \textit{technē} – can actually be integrated. In so doing, I argue that there are in fact positive philosophical theses latent in the dialogue.}

In part I, I rehearse the contrasting accounts of divination in the dialogue. In the first argumentative exchange, divination is referenced as a paradigmatic \textit{technē}. The seer is best equipped to speak about the contrasting depictions of divination given by Homer and Hesiod. When \textit{Ion} fails to meet Socrates’ questioning, the argument changes direction. \textit{Ion’s} ability is now the result of divine inspiration; again, Socrates cites divination as akin to what \textit{Ion} purportedly experiences.

In part II, I interrogate the final reference to divination, which occurs when Socrates appeals to the Homeric Epics. Ostensibly, Socrates is trying to show \textit{Ion} that the best person to judge literary depictions of a \textit{technē} is a practitioner.