PHAEDRUS, ION, AND THE LURE OF INSPIRATION

Introduction

One of the most recognisable aspects of Plato’s richly designed characterisation of Socrates is undoubtedly his use of irony and the ironic argument. Not only does this feature help paint the many colours of Socrates’ persona, it also acts as a highly operative part of his dialectical methodology. Although Socrates’ confession of ignorance in Plato’s earlier works is generally held to be one aspect of Socratic irony, it is not the whole story. Other features, such as the blatant use of sarcasm (as seen, for example, in Socrates’ greeting of Agathon at Symposium 175e), are just as important in Plato’s detailed portrayal of Socratic irony. Yet, undoubtedly the most difficult element of Socratic irony from a contemporary, interpretive position, is when Socrates propounds a position that he is intending to argue against, showing, through question and answer, the position’s ultimate fallibility. Perhaps the most paradigmatic and, indeed, prolonged example of this method can be seen in the Hippias Minor. For this whole dialogue is an ironic lampoon of the use of Homer to suit any ethical outlook or position, a damaging type of sophism which was prevalent in Plato’s time. This can be seen in the work’s concluding lines, which are uncharacteristically conclusive.

Therefore, Hippias, the person, if he exists, who deliberately makes mistakes and acts contemptibly and criminally, can only be the good person. Hippias Minor, 376b

Of course, it is quite easy to spot the irony in this case, given how utterly foreign its message is to what we may call a ‘regular’ Platonic position. In other cases, however, this distinction is not always so clear cut. In these cases a danger arises that an argument that was meant ironically is taken literally. The esoteric route of such discussions can invariably lead to misrepresentations of Platonic philosophy. One such misrepresentation is prevalent, I believe, in the case of Plato’s apparent