chapter 1

interpreting socrates

What does it take properly to interpret Socrates? A conversation that Socrates has at age 56 tells us. The conversation is with Ion, a professional *rhapsode*, that is, one who recites and interprets poetic texts. With Ion, Socrates reaches a surprising conclusion: the best interpreter of Homer is not a Homer specialist like Ion, but an expert in human well-being. The same expert, it turns out, will also be the best interpreter of Socrates.

Homer

After getting Ion to recite a passage on chariot racing, Socrates asks a question that is easy for Ion to answer:

SOCRATES: Tell me what Nestor says to his son Antilochus, when he advises him how to take the turn well in the chariot race honoring Patroclus.

ION: (reciting Homer's *Iliad*, 23.335–40): *Lean*, he says:

> Lean in the smooth chariot, just to the left of the pair.
> Then goad the right-hand horse
> As you shout him on and give him free rein.
> Let the left-hand horse skin by the turning post,
> So the hub built into your wheel seems to touch the edge
> – But keep from striking that stone!

SOCRATES: Enough. Now who would know better, Ion, whether or not Homer speaks correctly with these words, a doctor or a charioteer?

ION: A charioteer, of course.

537a5–c3

Socrates and Ion leave unspecified what it is for Homer to "speak correctly" in these lines. There are many possible standards by which to judge the correctness of these lines. Was Homer speaking correctly in *reporting Nestor's words*? – such a question calls for the expertise of

a historian or biographer. Neither a charioteer nor a doctor can answer such a question. Again, if someone wanted to know if Homer was speaking correctly in his *use of poetic form* (for instance, whether the Greek is in proper dactylic hexameter), we would need expertise in poetic grammar to answer. Ion might even have replied to Socrates' question as follows: "A doctor – since it is by expertise in *medical risk* of chariot injuries that we know whether Homer speaks correctly about permitting one's son to participate in chariot racing."

As it happens, Ion evidently takes the words *speaking correctly* to mean speaking correctly about *how to win a chariot race*, not about *whether there is acceptable medical risk in chariot racing.* If we interpret Socrates' words *speaking correctly* the same way as Ion, then we will approve Ion's answer. Ion correctly states that an expert charioteer is a better judge than an expert doctor whether Homer in this passage speaks correctly about how to race a chariot.

Ion goes on to agree to Socrates' generalization from charioteering to any expertise: "Then he who lacks any expertise will not be able to discern well either the words or actions of that expertise?" – "True" (538a5–b1). When it comes to judging good and bad speech about chariot racing, not only is a doctor inferior to a charioteer, so is a rhapsode – even when the speeches are in Homer and the rhapsode is a specialist in Homer. The same is true for judging good and bad speeches about fishing, medicine, and reading omens about the future. The rhapsode will be inferior to the respective experts at assessing the value of the speeches for achieving goals in the spheres of the respective expertises. Ion is right to agree with Socrates.

Now Socrates challenges Ion. As Socrates has pointed out passages in Homer that belong to other expertises, he asks Ion to identify the speeches in Homer that belong to the expertise of the rhapsode, passages which the rhapsode *by his expertise* is able to consider and evaluate better than non-experts. Ion tries to say this is true of *all* the passages in Homer (539e6). After Socrates reminds him that by Ion's own admission "the rhapsode's expertise cannot know everything" (540a5–6), Ion gives a more promising answer. The rhapsode's expertise includes "what's proper for a man to say, or a woman, and a slave or freeman; and a ruler or his subject" (540b3–5).

I judge Ion's answer more promising because it comes close to what Socrates himself stated earlier in the dialogue as the topic of "the most divine of poets," Homer (530b10). According to Socrates, such poetry deals with "*war*, mainly, as well as *social* relationships of human beings with each other, both good and bad, lay and professional, and the relationships of the gods both with each other and with humans, and events in the heavens and in the underworld, and the genesis of gods and heroes" (531c4–d1). Socrates' statement separates poetry from charioteering,

fishing, prophecy, and other such arts. Charioteering expertise knows the relations between humans and *chariots* in *racing*. Fishing expertise knows the relations between humans and *fish* in *catching*. Expertise in prophecy knows the relations between humans and *the future* in *reading omens*. By contrast, the main topics of poetry are, first, the relations between humans and *humans* – be they good or bad, lay or professional – in both *war* and *society*; second, the relations between humans and *the gods*; third, the relations between *gods* and *gods*, including supernatural events (that is, events "in the heavens and in the underworld"). Finally, just as the expert at charioteering knows the origin of an expert charioteer – how to make a *hero* or *god* of chariot racing, as it were – so likewise does the expert at the main topic of poetry know how a hero and even a god come to be.

Socrates' statement of the topic of poetry makes it a matter of universal and ultimate human concern. For example, the Bible is ultimately concerned with humanity and divinity as opposed to, say, chariot racing or fishing. We might read the Ten Commandments as giving us a list of religious duties to God ("Remember the Sabbath!") and moral duties to other humans ("Thou shalt not murder!"). Confucius is a second example, from an independent cultural tradition of equal authority. Of ultimate concern to Confucius is *rén* 仁, that is, *the proper way to live among human beings*. In many ways Confucius is as unconcerned with the gods as any atheist. Yet according to Confucius perfect human life will be lived entirely as *lǐ* 禮, that is, as an act of religious devotion in the presence of the divine.[1]

Socrates' account of poetry explains the ultimate benefit and exalted transcendence poetry and great literature in general have. And just as Ion and Socrates understand the chariot speech in Homer not as mere description or history but rather as words advising *how to attain a goal*, likewise we should understand Socrates' statement of the topic of poetry to include words that advise us *how to attain our ultimate goals* as human beings with other human beings and before the gods.

I readily admit that not all poetry aims to help one comprehend and achieve the ultimate aims of human life. Some write poetry simply to communicate an emotion, experience, or point of view. Often we choose literature for entertainment rather than edification. Nonetheless, I say, Socrates' account is correct. For he and Ion agreed upon the scope of their discussion of poetry at the beginning of their conversation: they were concerned with "the best and most divine of poets" (530b10), the most notable of whom in their time was Homer. I cannot conceive a better or more divine topic for any poetry than what Socrates himself stated.

Ion, therefore, is giving a promising answer to Socrates' question – *What parts of Homer are in the scope of the rhapsode's expertise?* – when he says, "what's proper for a man to say, or a woman, and a slave

or freeman; and a ruler or his subject." But when Socrates tests Ion's answer, Ion fails to distinguish what a man ought to say as a ruler of *men* from what a man ought to say as a ruler of *soldiers* or *sailors*.

SOCRATES: Are you saying that the rhapsode will know better than the pilot the sort of thing to say when you're ruling a ship at sea and get hit by a storm?
ION: No, the pilot knows better in that case . . .
SOCRATES: Well, will he know what's proper for a man to say, when he is a general advising soldiers?
ION: Yes, that sort of thing the rhapsode will know.
SOCRATES: What? The expertise of the rhapsode is the expertise of the *general*?

540b6–d4

Although Ion fails, there is a successful answer to Socrates' question. I take it that Socrates would agree that a terrorist, for example, might be ever so successful as a ruler of soldiers, or a pirate as a ruler of sailors, yet at the same time they might be failures both as human beings and as rulers of human beings, reckoning that failure in terms of personal depravity or wretchedness. Likewise it is possible to be an excellent doctor, cowherd, or weaver but at the same time be defective as a human being.

Socrates in fact makes this very distinction near the end of the *Charmides*, using nearly the same set of examples of other kinds of expertise in contrast to the expertise at doing well *as a human being*.

SOCRATES: Knowledgeable living does not make us do well and be happy, not even living according to all the other branches of knowledge together, but only according to this single knowledge of good and bad. For, Critias, if you choose to take away this knowledge from all the others, will medicine any the less give us health, or shoemaking give us shoes, or weaving give us clothes, or will the pilot's expertise any the less prevent us dying at sea, or the general's in war?
CRITIAS: None the less.
SOCRATES: But, my dear Critias, if this knowledge is missing, none of these things are well and beneficially given.

174b12–d1

Socrates goes on to describe *this single knowledge of good and bad* as the expertise "whose business is to benefit *us*" (174d3–4), that is, *us ourselves* as opposed to benefiting our health, shoes, clothes, or wars.

With this distinction between expertise at human benefit and the other forms of expertise, we can reinstate Ion's retracted claim (at 539e6) that the rhapsode is the best person to evaluate *every* passage in Homer,

from the first page to the last. At the beginning of the *Iliad* (1.10–32), for example, Agamemnon, from desire to keep a young captive as his slave-wife, fails to conform to ritual propriety and disrespects the captive's father, a suppliant priest bearing ransom. The disrespect was evidently a strategic error for Agamemnon *as a general* to make, leading to disastrous dissension in his ranks. But the poet's topic is not military strategy but human strategy, and the passage shows us how Agamemnon fails *as a human being*, regardless of his generalship. It belongs to the expertise of the rhapsode to judge whether Homer speaks correctly not in advising about generalship in war but in advising about humanity in war (and society). At the end of the *Iliad* (24.507–676), to take another example, the poet describes how Achilles, despite blood-lust to defile a corpse, manages to conform to ritual propriety and feel sympathy with the father of the dead victim. Achilles produces financial benefit for himself as a corpse barterer in this passage. But Homer's topic here is not how to make a profit in corpse bartering but how in such a case to produce human well-being through propriety and sympathy.

Likewise we can reclaim the passages Socrates himself mentions. For example, the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter, where Nestor advises his son Antilochus, certainly is an account of charioteering technique. But Nestor introduces this advice with the following praise of all forms of expertise.

> Dear son, be sure to store in mind all forms of craft,
> So that victory's prizes do not slip out of your hands.
> Craft makes a woodcutter far better than strength.
> It is craft that lets a pilot on the wine-dark sea
> Keep a swift ship on course when a gale strikes.
> And craft makes one charioteer better than another.
> 23.313–318

Nestor's aim in this speech is to advise his son about charioteering, but only because he judges that successful charioteering contributes to his son's successful life as a human being. Given Nestor's subordination of chariot racing to success in human life, the poet's topic likewise is successful chariot racing only insofar as it promotes successful human life. And it belongs to the expertise of the rhapsode to judge whether Nestor advises well to make it one's goal in human life to "store in mind all forms of craft" rather than, as Socrates concluded above with Critias, to aim only at the expertise of knowledge of human well-being, *not* expertise even of "all the other branches of knowledge together." The rhapsode may take the very words that Ion recited from Nestor's speech as a metaphor for expert *human* advice: "Let the left-hand horse skin by the turning post, so the hub built into your wheel seems to touch the

edge – but keep from striking that stone!" As the chariot must follow the most direct line best to win the prize, likewise human life must subordinate all else to the most direct line producing well-being, and not be the foolish charioteer, who, "trusting in horses and car, thoughtlessly curves wide to this side and that, and his horses veer up the track uncontrolled" (*Iliad* 23.319–321).

Facing Socrates' challenge, I take myself to have successfully defended Ion's claim that the rhapsode is the best person to evaluate nearly every passage in Homer. The starting point of my defense was Socrates' own premise about poetry's topic: *The best and most divine poets, such as Homer, write mainly on the topic of ultimate concern to human beings, namely, how to live as a human being among human beings and before the gods*. There are objections to this premise. Some will find the reference to *gods* unnecessary. Some will deplore the omission of a reference to *the natural world* apart from humanity. I respond to these objections by interpreting *the gods* as ancient Greeks did: I leave open whether the gods must be supernatural beings or might include those aspects of nature that call for our reverence. Interpreted this way, Socrates' premise is true, as it seems to me and I suppose to most people.

Although nothing I have said so far is wild, there is a wild conclusion to draw. Socrates was no poet, yet his topic in discussion was the poet's topic, namely, ultimate human well-being. Not just Socrates but anyone who discusses ethics discusses that same topic. It follows almost at once that it is one and the same expertise that evaluates both Socrates and Homer, that evaluates both poetry and ethics. I say *almost* because there is one more premise about expertise needed to draw this conclusion: *One expertise differs from another if and only if they are about different topics*. It is no coincidence that Socrates establishes this same premise about expertise in the *Ion:*

> SOCRATES: Then tell me now . . . whether you think this rule holds for all expertise – that by the same expertise we must know the same things, and by a different expertise things that are not the same; but if the expertise is different, the things we know by it must be different also.
>
> ION: I think it is so, Socrates.
>
> 538a1–5

It is wild to say that one and the same expertise evaluates both poetry and ethics. It is bad enough to conclude, as Socrates does with Ion, that anyone who is expert at Homer is also expert at any and every other poet who ever wrote: "We shall not be wrong in saying that Ion is equally skilled in Homer and in the other poets, since Ion agrees that the same man will be a competent judge of all who speak on the same things, and

that practically all the poets treat of the same things" (532b3–7). Are literature departments wrong-headed to look for different credentials for expertise at Homer and, say, Emily Dickenson? – and likewise philosophy departments to think there are different branches of expertise for say, Socrates and Confucius? And are universities wrong-headed to house literature and ethics in different departments as if they were two different fields of expertise with different methods?

One might object that, even if they have the same goal, poetry and ethics use different means (say, emotionally charged imagery as opposed to prose argumentation). Dealing with different means, they require different skills and cannot be identified. We can easily broaden this objection from expertise at human well-being to other kinds of expertise. Surgery requires different skills from drug treatments, though both aim at the patient's health. Hiking a desert requires different skills than climbing a mountain, even if the two routes are alternatives to the same destination. In general, it is obvious that one can know one method or means to an end without knowing every other method and means.

But this objections fails. We expect an expert doctor to know the best treatment for our disease. I do not qualify as an expert if I know how to treat your illness with amputation but cannot tell you if amputation is better or worse than drug therapy. Likewise I am not an expert back-country guide if I can only tell you one route to take but cannot tell you if that route is safer or quicker than other routes. Just as we expect an expert pilot to know the *best* route to the goal and an expert doctor to know the *best* treatment plan, so also we expect the expert at human well-being to know the *best* life plan and therefore to know when emotionally charged images are better than prose argument at guiding a human being.

The Subjectivity Objection

Before agreeing to restructure the academy, we ought to consider a second objection. The *subjectivity objection* is that Socrates' argument ignores the subjectivity of poetry and perhaps ethics. Socrates might be right about the *topic* of ethics and even poetry. But the interpreter's expertise needs to know not *the truth* about that topic but *the subject's thoughts* about the topic. To take again the example of Nestor's advice to his son, the interpreter needs to know Nestor's thought as expressed in his words: "Dear son, be sure to store in mind all forms of craft, so that victory's prizes do not slip out of your hands." This advice is at odds with the advice Socrates gave to Critias: a human being ought to lay up in mind expertise at the "single knowledge of human good and bad," *not* expertise even at "all the other branches of knowledge together."

Since Nestor's advice differs from Socrates', it is possible to know one without knowing the other. Thus it is possible for an interpreter to know Nestor's (or Homer's) thought without knowing Socrates' thought. Our conventional academic distinctions are thereby preserved. If we are looking for a professor of Homer, we want someone who knows Homer's thought. An expert at Socrates' thought, or anyone else's subjective thought, need not apply. And suppose for the sake of argument that we found a scientist of objective human well-being with expert advice about the truth at issue between Nestor and Socrates, an expert who in fact knew whether human beings ought to aim only to learn the single knowledge of human well-being, or whether they ought to aim to learn expertise of every sort related to prize winning. The academy would not be interested in hiring such an expert for professorships either in Homeric or Socratic thought, on the grounds that such objective expertise would not establish one's expertise at knowing either Homer's or Socrates' subjective thoughts.

I recognize that many people are uneasy with the very idea that expertise about human well-being is *objective*. Such people find it incredible that some expert could objectively discover that someone else's subjective moral and religious values are *false*. On the other hand, there are undeniable analogies between the expertise of healing a defective body and that of healing a defective soul, and between navigating a sea voyage and navigating one's way through life. It is surely because of their analogous features that Socrates in his dialogues so often refers to healing and navigation.

But the subjectivity objection remains, even if Socrates is right and there is something objective about human well-being. Let me show how the subjectivity objection holds true even in the case of an objective expertise, like medicine. In that case, the objection would be that it is possible to be a specialist in Homeric medicine without knowing other traditions of healing. We would not expect an expert at healing – that is, the objective truth about healing – to know Homeric thoughts about healing. The academy marks this distinction in its division between the sciences and the humanities: medicine belongs to the sciences while the history of medicine, like the interpretation of poetry, belongs to the humanities. The subjectivity objection holds true for objective branches of expertise like medicine, and so, even if there is an objective science of human well-being – as opposed to it being mere subjective opinions – the objection still holds true.

There is, however, a price to pay to use the subjectivity objection. The objection distinguishes objective truth from subjective opinions about a topic, so that the expert on a subject's thought knows not the truth but mere opinions. The price is that this distinction makes it impossible for such expertise to evaluate how well the subject thinks or speaks about

their topic. Such expertise does not have the power to make comparisons of better and worse between poets. But Ion, like other interpreters and professors of poetry, wants to make such comparisons:

SOCRATES: You do say that Homer and the other poets, among whom are Hesiod and Archilochus, all speak about the same things but in different ways, since one does it well, and the rest worse?
ION: Yes, and what I say is true.

532a4–8

Indeed, if Homer or Socrates in truth had anything to teach us about what concerns us most, the expert on subjective thought would not know it.

The subjectivity objection saves for us an identifiable expertise at nothing but Homer's thought, but it does so at the price of making expertise at Homeric thought a thing of no *existential* value, that is, of no practical value for us as human beings. Expertise at Homeric thought would hold our interest only for, as they are called, *academic* reasons that are detached from human concerns.

The subjectivity objection lies behind many readers' reactions to the *Ion.* Most scholarship on the *Ion* falls into two camps. The first takes Socrates at face value and is appalled at his expectation that a truth-seeking expertise governs the topic of poetry. This camp faults Socrates for not recognizing what I have called the subjective nature of poetry. The second camp finds it wildly implausible that Socrates would honestly believe that a truth-seeking expertise governs poetry. This camp gives one or another ironic reading of the dialogue in order to construe the character Socrates as recognizing that absurdity.

Yet the subjectivity objection fails as soon as we interpret Socrates and Ion as themselves existential human beings. At the beginning of the dialogue Socrates says, "I judge rhapsodes worthy of emulation for their expertise . . . To apprehend the thought and not merely learn off the words is worthy of emulation," and Ion agrees (530b5–c1). Socrates and Ion esteem the expertise of the rhapsode not for academic reasons but precisely because it is *practical expertise at achieving the ultimate goals of human well-being*. Given their overriding concern for poetic interpretation as a guide to life, we can be sure that neither would buy the subjectivity objection at the price of making literary interpretation a thing of mere academic interest.

Socrates

Let me turn now to my project of interpreting not Homer but Socrates. It is possible that some study Socrates merely for academic reasons. It is

possible to earn money and enjoy a certain prestige, living as I do – a paid professor specializing in the study of Socrates. It is also possible to enjoy puzzling over Socratic texts for the same sort of pleasure one gets from crossword puzzles: an amusement, nothing more. In contrast to those who study Socrates merely to gain money and prestige or who find Socratic texts merely amusing are those readers who come to the texts with existential concerns, whose motive for reading Socrates is that they may gain some expertise how to live as human beings. My interpretation of Socrates is aimed at this *existential* reader, whose overriding concern with Socrates is as a guide to life and who wonders whether Socrates might be a wise guide. Like that reader, my interpretation aims not merely to know the words of the text, but to apprehend Socrates' thought so as to be able to evaluate it as better or worse than the alternatives. My evaluation of Socrates will thus require the very same expertise as needed to evaluate Homer or Confucius or anyone else who writes poetry or ethics, and my evaluation will be as severely limited as my own understanding of human well-being.

If we were able to challenge Socrates with the same question he put to Ion – *Where are the passages that use the rhapsode's expertise?* – what would his answer be? The bare text before us does not give an answer to that question. But the interpretive method I follow does determine an answer. In seeking some expertise for ourselves about human well-being, we do better, facing an interpretive choice about the text, always to make the most charitable assumption consistent with the text. Perhaps this charity is a duty we owe to the dead author, Plato, and his main character. But I have a more practical reason in mind. By seeking the wisest answer we can, consistent with the text, we maximize our own chances of learning something wise from the text.

When Ion agrees with Socrates that to have the expertise of the rhapsode is a condition worthy of emulation, he makes a further claim that distinguishes himself from Socrates: "I consider I speak about Homer better than anybody" (530c8–9). Although Ion appears to be in this happy condition, especially to himself, the course of the dialogue shows that, despite the appearance of this expertise, in reality Ion is unable even to say what this expertise *is*. Socrates' effort to show Ion his ignorance is an example of his divine mission, as the next chapter will show.

note

1 The character *rén* 仁 is composed of the character for *human being* (人) and the character for *two* (二), hence *the proper relationship between two people.* The character *lǐ* (禮) is a combination of two characters, the left depicting *revelation from heaven* and the right depicting *a bowl filled with offering*. Combined, the characters refer to *acts done in and for divine presence*.

further reading

George Rudebusch, "Plato on Knowing a Tradition," *Philosophy East & West* 38 (1988) 324–33. The article gives a further reply to the subjectivity objection.