Introduction

Homer plays an important but overlooked role in the history of political philosophy. Plato identifies Homer not only as a poet – "the best and most divine of the poets" and the first "teacher" and "leader" of the tragic poets – but also as the educator of Greece concerning the gods and human excellence and as the "general [στρατηγὸν]" or leader of "all" the pre-Socratic philosophers except for Parmenides.[1] Plato suggests that Homer offers through his poetry a philosophic education, one that seeks specifically to liberate his audience from a pious reverence for the gods and to encourage them instead to rely on human reason.[2] Nevertheless, Plato attacks that education as ineffective – as inadvertently harmful to both political society and philosophy – and seeks to replace it with a new, philosophic, Platonic education. Machiavelli and Nietzsche, two leading philosophic critics of Plato, both invoke Homer in their arguments against Plato and his legacy. Machiavelli suggests that, in contrast with Plato, whose teachings concerning imaginary republics and principalities

[1] *Ion* 530b9–10; *Republic* 595b9–c2, 598d7–e2, 599c6–d2; *Theatetus* 152c8–153a2. All translations from Greek texts are my own.

[2] Consider as well the statements of Montaigne that Homer "laid the foundations equally for all schools of philosophy" (1976, 377) and of Vico that all philosophers up to his own time viewed Homer as "the source of all Greek philosophies" (1999, 386; see 355–356). Consider also Kurt Riezler's essays, "Homer's Contribution to the Meaning of Truth" (1943) and "Das Homerische Gleichniss und der Anfang der Philosophie [The Homeric Simile and the Beginning of Philosophy]" (1968; originally published in 1936). For the identification of Homer with the origin of the idea of enlightenment, see Horkheimer and Adorno (1972, xvi, 13–20, 32–36, 43–80). Richard Ruderman notes that Homer "may have been the first thinker to conceive of the possibility of enlightenment" (1999, 139). See also Lukàcs 1977, 30; Bolotin 1995, 92–93; Hall 2008, 147–159; Burns 2015, 334–337.

render his followers deluded and weak by insisting on the goodness of human beings and ignoring their actual wickedness, Homer is a truthful and effective teacher of princes. Nietzsche contends that, in contrast with Plato, whose Platonic education – or Platonism –paved the way for a Christian culture that warred against human nature, stifled human nobility, and obscured the true nature of philosophy, Homer founded the greatest culture humanity has ever known, one that allowed human nature to flourish, celebrated human nobility, and paved the way for philosophic greatness. In this book, I examine what light Homer sheds on the thought of these philosophers and what light these philosophers shed on the thought of Homer.[3]

When Plato founded the philosophic tradition that has lasted down to our own day, he did so, in large part, through his poetry. It was through his dialogues that Plato first presented to the world a literary portrayal of the philosopher as a distinctively heroic type of human being, a portrayal so powerful that the philosopher Socrates was to be compared repeatedly with such heroic figures as Alexander, Cato, and Jesus,[4] and was to inspire a long line of philosophic followers and admirers.[5] It was

[3] For a critical analysis of the view, originated by the political philosopher Giambattista Vico, that Homer, either as a primitive poet or as the fictitious name of a tradition of primitive bards, merely reflected the culture in which he lived, see Ahrensdorf 2014, 1–19.

[4] For the comparison between Socrates and Alexander the Great, see, for example, the Emperor Julian *Letter to Themistius the Philosopher* 264b–d; Montaigne 1976, 614; Jonathan Swift, "Of Mean and Great Figures, Made by Several Persons" (1772) in *Miscellaneous and Autobiographical Pieces*, 83–84, in Spiegelberg 1964, 72; Voltaire, "Socrate," in *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, in Spiegelberg 1964, 181; Frederick the Great, Letter to Voltaire (February 16, 1774), in Spiegelberg 1964, 219. For the comparison between Socrates and Cato, see, for example, Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* 1.74; Montaigne 1976, 308–310, 793; Swift, "On the Excellency of Christianity" (1765), in *Irish Tracts and Sermons*, 249, in Spiegelberg 1964, 72; Rousseau 1979b, 219. See also Plutarch *Cato* 68–70. For the comparison between Socrates and Jesus, see, for example, Justin Martyr II *Apology* 10; Origen *Contra Celsium* 7.56; Erasmus, in Spiegelberg 1964, 60–62; John Calvin *Epistula Pauli ad Timotheum*, Bks. 1, 6, in Spiegelberg 1964, 66; Rousseau 1979a, 307–308; Goethe 1974, 236; John Stuart Mill 1975, 32–34.

[5] Consider the statement of Seneca (*Epistulae Morales* 6.6): "Plato, Aristotle, and the whole host of sages who were to go each his different way derived more benefit from the character of Socrates than from his words." See also Mill's remark: "The same inspiring effect which so many benefactors of mankind have left on record that they experienced from Plutarch's *Lives*, was produced on me by Plato's pictures of Socrates . . ." (1957, 31). See as well, for example, Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* 1.29.70–71; Seneca *Epistulae Morales* 6.6, 54.10; *De Providentia* 3.4; *De Tranquilitate Animi* 5.2–3; Epictetus *Discourses* 2.99; Boethius *De Consolatione Philosophiae* 1.3; Goethe, Letter to Herder (early 1772), in Spiegelberg 1964, 228; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Plato, or the Philosopher" in *Representative Men* (1850), in Spiegelberg 1964, 131–134.

especially through his *Apology*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* that the "divine" Plato effectively replaced the image of the philosopher as a disreputable moral and religious skeptic with the new image of a sage who propounded such morally edifying and pious doctrines as those of the separate Forms and the Immortality of the Soul.[6] So successful was Plato's poetic transfiguration of the reputation of philosophy that, even though the Athenians had persecuted philosophers as a whole[7] and had convicted, condemned to death, and executed Socrates in particular for injustice and impiety, Plato was allowed by the Athenians to found a school of philosophy, the Academy, that drew students from all over the classical world and that lasted for over eight hundred years and hence endured past the end of the classical world and well into the postclassical, Christian, medieval era.[8] What is more, impressed by the moral and pious image of the philosopher created by Plato's writings, the early Christians, St. Augustine, and the Catholic Church as a whole embraced and celebrated Plato and Socrates.[9] In the words of St. Augustine, if Plato and his followers were somehow to come back to life after the coming of Jesus, "with the change of a few words and opinions [*verbis atque sententiis*] they would become Christians."[10] Over a thousand years later, Erasmus, the philosophic defender of the Catholic Church, appeared to sanctify the figure of Socrates within the Church by declaring in his *Convivium Religiosum*, "*Sancte Socrates, ora pro nobis*."[11] It was especially through his poetic presentation of the philosopher, then, that Plato established the hitherto persecuted philosopher as a revered figure within society and

[6] See Cicero *De Legibus* 3.1; *De Natura Deorum* 2.32; and especially Plutarch *Nicias* 23.

[7] See Derenne 1976; Ahrensdorf 1995, 9–15.

[8] See Friedlander 1969, 1:91–92; Grote 1888, 1:254–256, 261, 265–267; Burnet 1962, 213–214; Taylor 1924, 6–7; Plutarch *Phocion* 4, 5.2, 38.2; *Dion* 1–2, 4, 10–11, 17–18.1, 22; *Cicero* 3–4, 32.6; *Brutus* 2, 24.1–2.

[9] See, for example, Justin Martyr I *Apology* 46.3 – "And these men who lived together with the word [μετὰ λόγου] are Christians, even if they were believed to be atheists, as, among the Greeks, Socrates, Heraclitus, and those similar to them"; I *Apology* 59 – "So that both Plato and they who agree with him, and we ourselves, have learned, and you also can be convinced, that by the word [λόγῳ] of God the whole world [τὸν πάντα κόσμον] came into being out of the substance spoken of before by Moses"; II *Apology* 10.8 – "Christ, who was known in part even by Socrates, for word [or reason – λόγος] was and is what is in everyone"; Clement *Stromata* 1.22 – "And Numenius, the Pythagorean philosopher, expressly writes: 'For what is Plato, but Moses speaking in Attic Greek?'" (see also Origen *Contra Celsium* 4.51); Origen *Contra Celsium* 3.66–68, 4.39, 4.97, 7.56, 7.58, 7.61, 8.8; St. Augustine *City of God* 8.1, 8.3–8, 8.11, 10.1–2, 11.21, 12.25, 12.28; *Confessions* 7.9–10, 7.20. Consider also Gilson 1944, 93–94; Ahrensdorf 1995, 203–205, 227–229.

[10] *De Vera Religione* 4.7. [11] Erasmus 1986, 158.

thereby realized his intention that "through me philosophy would be honored even among the multitude" (*Second Letter* 311e5–312a2). In this way, as Plutarch suggests, Plato effectively opened up "a path" to philosophy for "all men" (*Nicias* 23).

Yet, as Plato himself acknowledges, there was a venerable philosophic tradition prior to his, a tradition founded by Homer. Even though Plato criticizes Homer sharply, he does not criticize Homer for being intentionally hostile to philosophy. Indeed, Plato's Socrates presents Homer as friendly to philosophy and even as a philosophic thinker himself. In the *Republic* he speaks of Homer as a wise man comparable to such philosophers and sophists as Thales, Pythagoras, Protagoras, and Prodicus (600a4–d4). In the *Theatetus*, Socrates identifies Homer as the forerunner, "general," and apparent inspiration for such Greek philosophers and sophists as Protagoras, Heraclitus, and Empedocles, indeed, for "all ... the wise ones" except the philosopher Parmenides.[12] Socrates suggests there as well that, by stating, through the mouth of Hera, that Oceanus was the "origin [γένεσιν] of the gods," Homer covertly set forth his own thesis that "all things ... are offspring of flowing and motion" – that is, that all things are products of natural rather than supernatural forces – and thereby founded the philosophic tradition of skepticism concerning the gods exemplified later by Heraclitus, Empedocles, Protagoras, and others.[13] As Leo Strauss noted, it is in Homer's poems that the foundational philosophical term "nature [φύσιν]" first appears in extant Greek literature, in the *Odyssey*, where the god Hermes reveals to Odysseus that there is a certain fixed order of the world – a natural order – that limits the power of the gods.[14] Homer's recognition of a natural order apart from

[12] *Theatetus* 152c8–153a2; see 153c6–d7, 160d5–e2; *Cratylus* 401e1–402c3. See also Aristotle *Metaphysics* 983b7–34, 1009a39–1010a15. Christopher Bruell notes that Aristotle includes Homer "among the natural scientists" and that Aristotle "regarded it as possible that a natural scientist might choose, on occasion, to speak as a theologian" (2014, 73–74, 117). It is also worth noting that such pre-Socratic philosophers as Xenophanes, as well as Parmenides and Empedocles, composed their works in verse. Consider Most 2011, 4–5; Wright 1998; Osborne 1998.

[13] *Theatetus* 152e5–9; see as a whole 152e1–153a7 and 160d5–e2; *Cratylus* 401e1–402c3; Homer *Iliad* 14.201, 302; see also 3.5, 16.40, 19.1, 14.246. For the religious skepticism of Protagoras, see fragments 1, 4 (Diels 5th edition); Cicero *De Natura Deorum* 1.2, 63, 117–119; Sextus Empiricus *Against the Physicists* 1.55–57; Diogenes Laertius 9.51–52. For that of Heraclitus, see fragments 5, 14–15, 27, 30, 32, 40–42, 80, 96, 102, 132. For that of Empedocles, see fragments 17, 21, 28, 131–134D.

[14] Strauss 1987, 2–3; Homer *Odyssey* 10.303. See also Strauss 2008, 582: Leo Strauss to Jacob Klein, October 10, 1939.

divine will and his consequent skepticism regarding the rule of the gods over humans would seem to identify Homer as a philosophic thinker.

Yet even if, as Plato intimates, Homer shares with philosophers a certain rationalist and humanist outlook, Homer clearly differs from such philosophers as Plato and those who followed him. Even though Homer alludes to the existence of a natural order, he does not present explicitly philosophic arguments concerning that order. Even though Homer's characters raise far-reaching questions concerning the relation between gods and humans – as well as concerning the goodness of virtue, the reasonableness of the life devoted to virtue, and the nature of death – Homer does not present explicitly philosophic characters in his poems, who speak of philosophy, argue for the philosophic life, and live that life. Indeed, the word "philosophy" never appears in his poems. One might therefore conclude that Homer is at most a proto-philosophic poet, who anticipates philosophic concerns without being fully aware of those concerns and who anticipates the philosophers' celebration of the life of the mind without being fully aware of, much less living, that life.[15]

However, Plato himself suggests an alternative view of Homer. For in addition to Plato's Socrates' suggestion that Homer is the forerunner of and inspiration for such philosophers as Heraclitus and Empedocles, Plato's Protagoras suggests that Homer lived the life of the mind but deliberately hid that way of life. As Plato's Protagoras observes, Homer was the first of a long line of cautious wise men or "sophists" – of men who both possessed and taught wisdom – who sought "to make a disguise for themselves and to cover themselves with it, some with poetry, as in the case of Homer and Hesiod and Simonides," in order, Protagoras claims, to avoid popular hostility (*Protagoras* 316d3–9).[16] What is more, Plato's Socrates notes in *The Sophist* (216c4–d2) – with a citation from the *Odyssey* (17.486) – that genuine philosophers hide themselves from all those around them by pretending to be something other than philosophers:

> For on account of the ignorance of the rest, these men – those who are not in a fabricated way but genuinely are philosophers – certainly take on all sorts of appearances and "range through the cities," looking down from on high on those

[15] Consider Cedric Whitman, who deems Homer's mind to be "the archaic mind, prephilosophic, primarily synthetic rather than analytical, whose content is myths, symbols, and paradigms" (1958, 13–14).

[16] See also *Republic* 378d3–e1; *Sophist* 216c4–d2; Xenophon *Symposium* 3.6; *Memorabilia* 1.2.58–59. Consider Plato *Alcibiades II* 147b7–c1.

below. And in the opinion of some they are worth nothing, and of some everything, and at times they take on the appearances of statesmen, and at times of sophists, and there are times when they give the impression that they are altogether mad.

Through these passages, Plato suggests that Homer is a philosophic thinker, who lives the life of the mind but deliberately hides it by pretending to be merely a poet or, more precisely, a divinely inspired singer. As Plato's Socrates remarks in the *Republic*, Homer's teaching is "composed among hidden thoughts" (378d3–e1). In this way, Plato anticipates the contention in the ancient *Life of Homer*, traditionally attributed to Plutarch, that Homer was "the first to philosophize in ethics and physics," that he offered an education in philosophy and thereby inspired all subsequent philosophers, but that he did so "through certain riddling and mythical speeches . . . so that the ones who love learning together with a certain taste for what the Muses inspire, being led in their souls, might more easily seek and discover the truth, while the unlearned may not look down on these things which they are not able to comprehend" (B 144, 92; see 92–160; see also Proclus *Republic* 1.44.14). Plato also foreshadows Vico's statement that all philosophers until his own day described Homer's wisdom as a "hidden wisdom [*sapienza riposta*]," one that can be discovered only with intelligence and effort by those who study his poems.[17] If one should object that it is unreasonable to describe as a philosophic thinker one who is so reticent in presenting himself as a philosophic thinker and his teachings as philosophic teachings, one might defend this description of Homer by citing the example and the words of Plato himself. For in his *Second Letter*, Plato states that "nor are there, nor will there ever be, writings of Plato, but those now spoken of are of a Socrates become beautiful and young" (314c2–4). And as Plato explains in the *Seventh Letter*, the goal of his writings is not to present his teachings openly and explicitly but rather to intimate the truth to those "few who are capable of discovering [it] for themselves by means of slight indication" (341d2–e3).

Over the course of the history of philosophy, two thinkers, Machiavelli and Nietzsche, have invoked the philosophic poet Homer in their critiques of the philosophic tradition founded by Plato. It was Homer, the successful teacher of princes, whose account of Achilles was imitated by such excellent men as Alexander the Great, and through him, Julius

[17] Vico 1999, 355–356; 1977, 543–545.

Caesar; who taught "covertly [*copertamente*]" such vital lessons as the importance for rulers of imitating the harsher qualities of beasts as well as the finer qualities of men; and whom Machiavelli invoked against the Plato "who imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth."[18] And it was Homer who founded the noble culture of the Greeks, the "highest culture" the world has ever seen, whom Nietzsche invoked against Plato, the man who destroyed that culture and thereby paved the way for the slave morality of Christianity, and subsequently the herd animal morality of the democratic world and "*the overall degeneration of man*": "Plato versus Homer: that is the complete, the genuine antagonism [*Plato gegen Homer: das ist der ganze, der ächte Antagonismus*]."[19]

What, then, is the relation between the philosophic thinker Homer and these three foundational philosophers? Are Homer and Plato, as Plato, Machiavelli, and Nietzsche suggest, fundamentally in opposition to one another? Are Machiavelli and Nietzsche genuine followers of Homer? Did Plato truly seek to replace the culture created by Homer? Did Machiavelli and Nietzsche truly attempt to restore that culture? Furthermore, and more substantively, what light do these philosophic educators shed on the question of the best education for human beings, an education that addresses both the need to cultivate the human mind and the need to maintain a stable and healthy political society?

In order to explore these questions, this book will examine, first, at some length, Homer's philosophic education of the Greeks, then Plato's critique of that education, and finally the role played by Homer in the critiques of Plato by Machiavelli and Nietzsche. Throughout, I will analyze, especially Plato's critique of Homer, but also the invocations of

[18] *Prince* 4.17, 14.60, 18.69, 15.61. All English quotations from *The Prince*, with a few slight alterations for greater literalness, are from the translation by Harvey C. Mansfield, 1998. Citations are by chapter and page numbers from this edition. Italian citations are from the Piero Gallardo edition, 1966.

[19] Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human* 1:262, 2:219; "Attempt at Self-Criticism" 1; *The Genealogy of Morality* 1.11, 3.25; *The Birth of Tragedy* 13; *Beyond Good and Evil*, Preface, 202–203. See also *Twilight of the Idols* 9.47, 10.2. Emphases in the text. Although I generally follow the translations of Kaufmann and the Cambridge University Press translations by Hollingdale, Nauckhoff, Diethe, and Norman, I do at times alter them to make them more literal and to follow a bit more faithfully the German text of Nietzsche's complete works (for example, the emphases), 1981, edited by Karl Schlechta. For the German text I have also consulted Nietzschesource.org, where one may find a digital version (edited by Paolo d'Iorio) of the critical edition of Nietzsche's works edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari.

Homer by Machiavelli and Nietzsche, on the basis of Homer's text. In this way, I hope to explain the fundamental agreements and disagreements between Homer and these philosophers, to clarify what is distinctive about Homer as a thinker, and to show what distinctive light a study of Homer can shed on the thought of Plato, Machiavelli, and Nietzsche. In my previous book on Homer (Ahrensdorf 2014), I analyzed Homer by focusing on his account of the gods and heroes. While the present study inevitably builds on my previous account of Homer, it focuses more directly on Homer as a philosophic thinker and teacher, in conjunction with – and in conversation with – those philosophic thinkers and teachers who discuss him most, especially Plato, but also Machiavelli and Nietzsche.

To preview the conclusion of my study, I show here that an examination of Homer as a philosophic thinker brings into sharp relief the revolution in human affairs brought about by Homer's great critic, Plato. For Homer established a way of philosophizing that was eminently discreet. The philosophic poet sought to foster a humanistic and tragic culture that pointed to the philosophic life as the best way of life but that did not openly celebrate that way of life lest its radical freedom of mind weaken the moral and religious underpinnings of society and provoke deadly persecution. This model of philosophizing, of composing works that present moral and political life in such a way that points to philosophy without explicitly praising philosophy, was followed by such figures as the tragic and comic poets and Thucydides down to the time of Plato. But Plato offered a powerful critique of Homer's poems as harmful both to political society and to philosophy; boldly departed from his model of discreet philosophizing; and openly celebrated the philosopher as the greatest of human beings, at the very least worthy of inclusion in the pantheon of civilizational heroes, along with the warrior, the prophet, and the statesman. Through his powerful, poetic presentation of Socrates in his dialogues – first and foremost in the *Apology of Socrates*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* – Plato effectively established the figure of the philosopher in the public mind as a hero comparable to – indeed, superior to – an Achilles or Antigone or Pericles. The key to Plato's success, and the price of his success, was his presentation of the philosopher as a defender of morality and religion rather than the skeptic he was hitherto suspected of being. Thanks to Plato, the philosopher was to be honored, not as a gadfly who questioned the sacred moral and religious beliefs of society, but as a sage who propounded edifying and congenial moral and religious teachings. In this way, Plato was able to implant firmly the image of the

philosopher as a singularly admirable and venerable human being in the public imagination.

This achievement of Plato's had a profound effect on politics, religion, and philosophy itself, a profoundly problematic effect in the eyes of Machiavelli and Nietzsche. For Machiavelli, Plato's public celebration of the life of philosophic contemplation over the active life of politics effectively deprived politics of dignity, vigor, and thoughtfulness and also deprived philosophy itself of sobriety and clarity. Accordingly, Machiavelli sought to counteract the problematic achievement of Plato by celebrating the political life – the life of Achilles – even more than Homer does, as by far the most fulfilling way of life for human beings, while withdrawing the philosophic life – Machiavelli's own philosophic life – far from the public eye, barely visible in his principal works. In this way, Machiavelli sought, in some measure, to return to the pre-Platonic, Homeric understanding of the proper relation between philosophy and politics, according to which the philosopher presents the political life in all its grandeur but indicates – in Machiavelli's case, very quietly – how the problems of that life point beyond it to the philosophic life.

Nietzsche too criticized Plato for having praised the philosophic life in such a way as to deprive the active political and military life of the honor and vitality it enjoyed in the Greek culture founded by Homer. In this respect, Nietzsche may appear to have hoped to reverse Plato's achievement by somehow restoring a Homeric culture. But Nietzsche ultimately criticized Plato more seriously, not for celebrating the philosophic life as the best way of life for a human being, but rather for presenting the philosopher as a champion of morality and religion and thereby obscuring the freeminded and skeptical nature of the philosopher. Rather than seek to reverse Plato's achievement in establishing the philosopher as admirable in the public mind, Nietzsche sought to revise that achievement by publicly celebrating the philosopher, like Plato and unlike Homer, but, unlike Plato, by presenting the philosopher as a moral and religious skeptic – not only as a gadfly but even as an immoralist and AntiChrist – in order to clarify especially for potential philosophers the truly radical nature of philosophy. Reflecting upon the philosophic thinking of Homer, then, can help us to recognize the full force of Plato's critique of Homer and the breathtaking boldness and tremendous significance of Plato's achievement in winning honor for philosophy, and also to appreciate the powerful concerns expressed by Machiavelli and Nietzsche regarding that achievement.