

Introduction

Human Excellence in Homer

There are many questions about politics that Homer does not answer. At the end of his epics, he has not set forth a comprehensive theory of justice, nor does he purport to have offered a satisfactory basis for justice. Life, liberty, and property are not buried within his stories; much less are positive human rights hiding in plain sight at the origins of Western civilization. Nonetheless, Homer continues to resonate with readers and to elicit scholarly study. Although he provides no blueprint for politics, justice, or rights, his epics continue to captivate our imaginations and enrich our knowledge of the human experience because he offers us an enduring portrait of human excellence that is no less instructive than it is beautiful.

To understand the portrait of human excellence found in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* requires reading each epic in light of the other. Through the heroes, who differ from one another in both degree and kind of excellence, Homer provides a portrait of different kinds, degrees, and mixtures of excellence. But over the course of his epics—through the development of individual heroes and through their interactions with one another—his narrative reveals how different human desires cause the growth of some virtues and undermine others. He thus provides exemplars of the quality of human excellence and through his narratives illustrates why individuals differ in their degrees and kinds of virtue. Homer's account of human virtue, embedded as it is within epic stories of war and of homecoming, ultimately reveals the consequences of desire and excellence for happiness and for the prospects for a stable, just politics. Rather than a plan for a satisfactory polis, Homer offers an illustration of two divergent paths toward human happiness and politics.

In his poetic narrative Homer illustrates how two distinct desires—the desire for public honor and the desire to preserve and be with that which is one's own—result in differing sets of virtues. As the brilliant battlefield exploits of the *Iliad* show, love of public honor—or glory—produces courage but is also associated with failures in both moderation and intellect. Homer juxtaposes the passionate pursuit of honor with the preference for that which is one's own—survival and physical comforts but also family, intimate friends, and the private household. As the *Iliad* hints and the *Odyssey* confirms, devotion to that which is one's own produces courage but also nurtures intelligence and moderation. Moderation and intelligence prove to be prerequisites to the restraint of one's impulses, to deliberate choice, and to the use of speech rather than violence to resolve conflict. From the outset of the *Iliad*, the Achaian hero least likely to rush forward in pursuit of glory proves preeminent in moderation and intelligence. By the end of the *Odyssey*, having overcome his intermittent love of glory and learned to be more wary of threats to his self-restraint, Odysseus emerges as a man who demonstrably prefers that which is his own—his own wife, family, home, dog, and even his own bed. Through the virtue that they exhibit and the friendship that they maintain, Odysseus and Penelope ultimately emerge as Homer's highest and best—if flawed—heroes.

The desires of Homer's heroes and their corresponding excellence remain relevant because the loves and virtues at the heart of Homer's story remain central to the human experience. Homer's characters thereby retain their political salience, and his epics are rightfully the subject of more than mere literary or historic interest. Two of the reigning interpretations of human excellence in Homer, to the contrary, argue that disjunctions between Homeric culture and modern life preclude application of the hero's excellence to contemporary life.¹ The usual reading of heroic excellence, most famously articulated by Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, collapses the hero's social role and his virtue.² Within this reading Homeric virtue equates to success in a culturally and historically specific social role.³ Hence, for example, the warrior-king's virtue depends on his success as warrior-king.⁴ Because the king holds the social role most useful to the society as a whole, the qualities of a successful warrior-king—physical prowess, courage, and intelligence—are the highest virtues.⁵ In this account any hero's virtue is synonymous with the successful performance of social function, whether the hero be king, warrior,

wife, or slave. But if successful completion of one's specific social role amounts to nothing less than human excellence within Homer's epics, then the excellence of his heroes died with their culture—before even the Attic Greeks came to admire and emulate them. By this account Achilles, Odysseus, and even Penelope display virtue, but they cannot speak to modern choices, help us to understand the excellence possible within modern life, or illuminate contemporary relationships between desire and politics.

Another of the twentieth century's most influential interpretations of heroic culture, put forth by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*, has also concluded that a rift in understanding between ancient Greek and modern understanding prevents contemporary access to the excellence of Homer's heroes.⁶ Arendt argues that moderns have lost any conception of the true character of politics and public action and thereby lost the ability to understand the meaning of ancient Greek excellence. Both Arendt and MacIntyre argue that the excellence of Homeric heroes has no bearing on contemporary life, and MacIntyre effectively relegates Homer to history. Arendt urges instead that Homer offers us something exemplary that we should—but do not—aspire to emulate. Unlike MacIntyre, she bemoans the loss of Homeric excellence, and she urges us to adopt her understanding of it as our own vision of human excellence.

Contending that Homeric excellence remains admirable, Arendt argues that our changed understanding of politics—or rather, our loss of the political in exchange for the social—has cut us off from the opportunity to exhibit the excellence of the Homeric heroes. Arendt paints in vivid colors a world in which pursuit of public honor is esteemed as the exclusive path to human excellence and private life is altogether contemptible. The result of this reading of the ancient Greeks is twofold: she dismisses more than half the excellence in Homer—the excellence linked to private life—and simultaneously contends that the remaining excellence of the ancient Greek world is all but unobtainable to modern readers. The details in her brilliant landscape of the honor-loving polis are harsh indeed, but they thereby reveal what is ultimately at stake in the debate over the cause, content, and consequences of human excellence—the meaning of human life. Because she argues that we ought to import her understanding of Homeric excellence into our own lives and politics, Arendt's misreading of Homer is more dangerous than MacIntyre's and thus requires more extensive attention.

Arendt: Human Excellence in Public Pursuit of Honor

At the heart of Arendt's analysis lies a particular reading of Aristotle that she rapidly identifies with the sum total of ancient Greek thought. This reading results in a division of mankind, a portion of which Arendt claims the ancient Greeks denied consideration as human due to their confinement to private life. Arendt argues that private life and the labor taking place within the private sphere were not "considered to possess sufficient dignity to constitute a *bios* at all, an autonomous and authentically human life; since they served and produced what was necessary and useful, they could not be free, independent of human needs and wants."⁷ Political—and therefore public—life offered the only route to individuality and excellence "due to the Greek understanding of *polis* life, which to them denoted a very special and freely chosen form of political organization and by no means just any form of action necessary to keep men together in an orderly fashion."⁸

According to Arendt the ancient Greeks believed that the distinction between a private life dominated by labor and a public, political life corresponded to the distinction between the purely animal and the divine aspects of the human condition. In their political and public aspect human beings joined the ranks of the gods: "By their capacity for the immortal deed, by their ability to leave non-perishable traces behind, men, their individual mortality notwithstanding, attain an immortality of their own and prove themselves to be of a 'divine' nature."⁹ But human beings teeter between the world of gods and the world of animals, Arendt asserts: only the godlike portion—thus denoted by winning a perpetuation of the memory of their names and deeds that extends beyond animal existence—deserves the title of human. By this logic only those who perform in the public arena can possess *human* excellence. Thus, Arendt claims that "only the best (*aristoi*), who constantly prove themselves to be the best (*aristeuein*) . . . and who 'prefer immortal fame to mortal things,' are really human."¹⁰

The godlike, human side of existence occurs in public where honor can be won, but the animal side is hidden in a private life that is neither human nor, therefore, capable of human excellence. Arendt contends that the ancient Greeks viewed the "natural, merely social companionship of the human species" that takes place in private as "a limitation imposed by the needs of biological life, which are the same for the human animal as for other forms of life."¹¹ Any aspect of existence common to human

and animal life, including the perpetuation of the species, care for the body, and domestic relationships, for the very reason of that commonality with animal life, “could not be fundamentally human.”¹² Hence, everything that ties people firmly to their families and is often hidden in the *oikos*, or household, is subhuman. Body, children, marriage, family, home, household, and the entire domestic sphere cannot be worthy objects of love. Drawing on the *Odyssey*, Arendt quotes Odysseus’s slave Eumaios, who states that a man loses half his virtue on the day of his enslavement, as evidence that “a slave lost excellence because he lost admission to the public realm where excellence can show.”¹³

Ultimately, private life is futile. Lacking the conditions for both excellence and permanence, there is nothing within the household that is worthy of love. That which remains private, however difficult, can be neither heroic nor worthy of praise or love: “The daily fight in which the human body is engaged to keep the world clean and prevent its decay bears little resemblance to heroic deeds; the endurance it needs to repair every day anew the waste of yesterday is not courage, and what makes the effort painful is not danger but its relentless repetition.”¹⁴ The promise of family and fertility, of children, and of one’s children’s children dooms human beings to existence without permanence. Indeed, as Arendt describes private life, the best that can be hoped for within it is escape from pain, and true escape is only possible by abandoning this subhuman existence for the sake of action in the public and therefore potentially permanent stage of humanity.¹⁵

However one chooses to denote that which is one’s own and the private realm that surrounds it, by Arendt’s account only a dog, a fool, or a madman could bear any love for it. This bifurcation of life between public and private results, of course, in the banishment of slaves and women not only from all political consequence but also from excellence, individuality, and humanity.¹⁶ There is no avenue for satisfying the love of honor in private because it has by definition no witness, no reality, no action, and hence no memory. In the end, the private realm functions to hide from view “the biological life processes of the family” and to permit men to emerge into public reality.¹⁷

Arendt distinguishes a public, political realm of action in contrast to the private, necessary realm of labor.¹⁸ This distinction correlates with the distinction “between what is one’s own (*idion*) and what is common (*koimon*).”¹⁹ Within the common realm exist the “action” and “speech” that by definition are only possible in public, political life.²⁰ Within the

realm of the subhuman, “labor” exists in the private, necessary life.²¹ The polis, she argues, was ruled with persuasive speech, but the household was ruled despotically with raw power and thus was antithetical to politics.²² Private life enslaved men and women in the domestic labors necessary for survival.²³ But public life, which by definition could not be entered because of the demands of necessity, was associated with courage because embarking on “glorious enterprise and later simply to devote one’s life to the affairs of the city” required the willingness to risk one’s life.²⁴ Courage became the “political virtue par excellence,” and those men admitted to the public fellowship with which it was associated thereby transcended into a world where action, speech, excellence, and even godlike immortality made possible by the memory of one’s action constituted the human experience.²⁵

The risks inherent in politics were worth the gamble to the ancient Greeks because they made space for “individuality” and provided “the only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were.”²⁶ According to Arendt, showing oneself in comparison to others permits the individuality requisite for human excellence and is likewise a necessary condition of human “action.”²⁷ Action requires public viewing because it is linked to the possibility of being remembered past the lifespan of an individual man. The public view that permits memory explains the link between the public, political life that Arendt describes and the love of honor: “It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time.”²⁸ According to Arendt, what human beings want to save from natural ruin is the memory of the names and actions with which they are associated. The love of honor—of the glory given one’s name by peers in the public sphere—is the desire for a degree of immortality or permanence.²⁹

Through word and deed human beings express their individuality in the sight of other humans on the public stage and hence qualify in the competition for a place in memory that will outlive their biological selves. Speech in particular, Arendt argues, has a special association with the public realm in which individuality, humanity, and excellence become possible.³⁰ Through speech and action individuals driven by their love of honor “reveal” themselves to one another.³¹ The result can be immortality because this can produce stories that will be preserved.³² When heroes step into the public arena, they step into the story in which they have earned a place by virtue of their courage.

Ultimately, only public view can translate—through speech—into story, which for Arendt is linked to the fulfillment of love of honor. Thus the existence of the public sphere is not just important because it excludes the household and domestic matters: a person who is alone and a person surrounded by family are both equally “isolated” because they are equally excluded from view, excellence, and memory.³³ No story, she argues, is possible for either one. “Human essence,” she explains, “can come into being only when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story.”³⁴ The paradigmatic example of the fulfillment of love of honor and embodiment of human essence is Achilles. In conjunction with Achilles’s life and story, his death ensures that his continued animal existence cannot undermine the excellence of his death and therefore the meaning of his life.

However human and brilliant, Achilles cannot emerge independently. He is dependent on those who share his public arena and on Homer for the fulfillment of the meaning of his life and death.³⁵ Achilles’s passion for honor and the resulting story give rise to politics but only because those who followed him, according to Arendt, were not content with Achilles’s dependence on the poet. They sought a different vehicle for immortality: “the *polis* was supposed to multiply the occasions to win ‘immortal fame.’”³⁶ Love of honor thus resulted in politics and ultimately freed men from dependence upon the poet for the memory of their excellence. Despite the development of the polis, Achilles remained the “paradigmatic” case of human excellence for ancient Greeks. Achilles “became the prototype of action for Greek antiquity and influential in the form of the so-called agonal spirit, the passionate drive to show one’s self in measuring up against others that underlies the concept of politics prevalent in the city-states.”³⁷

Arendt argues that modern human beings have lost the desire to emulate Achilles’s excellence and, no longer desiring public honor, do not partake in significant public lives. Hence, Arendt describes what she perceives as the “disappearance of the gulf that ancients had to cross daily to transcend the narrow realm of the household and ‘rise’ into the realm of politics.”³⁸ Especially since it is contrary to contemporary ways of considering the choice of how to devote one’s life, it is necessary to underscore that Arendt is arguing for a distinction between types of lives that are not only mutually exclusive but also have incommensurate values. More than a matter of individual taste, capacity, or even (as the United States Supreme Court might describe such a choice) personal

pursuit of happiness, the distinction between public and private life distinguishes human from animal and excellence from subservience. As Arendt describes it, the courageous, political life was “‘good’ to the extent that by having mastered the necessities of sheer life, by being freed from labor and work, by overcoming the innate urge of all living creatures for their own survival, it was no longer bound to the biological life processes.”³⁹ Politics thus understood does not serve mere survival or private life. Rather, the domestic, private world of caring for and perpetuating individual and family life exists to make the excellence of politics possible.⁴⁰

The difficulty of understanding the dichotomy thus embedded in ancient Greek thought is further heightened by subsequent developments in the perception of the value of private life.⁴¹ We cannot grasp the full idiocy of private life to ancient Greeks, Arendt argues, because our lives are spent in *social* rather than *political* venues: “The decisive historical fact is that modern privacy in its most relevant function, to shelter the intimate, was discovered as the opposite not of the political sphere but of the social, to which it is therefore more closely and authentically related.”⁴² Arendt links Rousseau’s “discovery”—as she terms it—of intimacy (and the social world from which intimacy needs protection) to the rise of the novel and the decline of “public art.”⁴³ “Society” has transformed politics into a large household.⁴⁴ According to Arendt, moderns live in a world in which society and the retreat from society into our intimate lives precludes the “possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household.”⁴⁵

This dramatic shift in the estimation of private life, coupled with an understanding of public life as the exclusive realm of human action, individuality, and excellence, bar the modern approach to ancient Greece and Homer. Arendt describes an ancient Greece in which human beings relied on private life for survival but could not praise either desire for private life or private life itself. No being could conceive of behavior hidden in the home or occurring alone as human, let alone excellent. By her account, the private realm was subhuman, incompatible with excellence, and valuable only insofar as it remained necessary to enable the fathers and sons of households to emerge into the public and political world where honor could be won. Whether taking place at home caring for one’s family or alone striving for survival, the private life was worthy of neither human desire nor individual account because it altogether failed to register as human or individual.

Arendt is not the first or the only influential political philosopher to focus on the political significance of the distinction between the private and the public, although many contemporary scholars point instead to the advent of liberalism as the source of this bifurcation.⁴⁶ Even if the distinction between public and private is not novel, however, Arendt's claim that the private is *subhuman* remains startling. Some have argued that her conclusions about ancient Greece rest on a distortion of history and historical theory.⁴⁷ Salkever and Swanson have both contributed detailed readings of Aristotle demonstrating the existence of private humanity, excellence, and friendship within his texts.⁴⁸ Notwithstanding these critiques of Arendt's portrait of ancient Greece, her conclusions continue to carry significant weight. Perhaps this is because, as Salkever seems to concede, scholars refuting Arendt's position have often portrayed their own arguments as merely underscoring a minority view in opposition to Arendt's otherwise accurate claims about the ancient Greek perspective.⁴⁹

Whatever the reason, the sharpness of her distinction has remained attractive, with consequences for policy debate and study of ancient texts. In scholarly policy debate, Arendt's conclusions about the requisite nature of public life for human life and excellence have provided a standard by which to make normative arguments for contemporary policy.⁵⁰ In scholarship on the ancient world, Arendt's definitions are reimported as analytical tools for the study of the very texts in which she grounded their meaning and consequences. Particularly clear examples have occurred in the debate over whether Homer's epics occur in a "prepolitical" period. For example, relying on Arendt's framework, Hammer finds politics in Homer insofar as decisions and relationships conducted in public space take a prominent place in the *Iliad*.⁵¹ This approach is circular, adjudicating the existence of Homeric politics based on a definition of politics derived—by Arendt—from her reading of Homer. The conclusions of Hammer and others who rely on Arendt for their analysis of ancient texts on the human condition are ultimately dependent on the accuracy of her underlying reading.

Socrates: Human Excellence in the Preference for Private Life

Taken as the sum total of ancient Greek thought about private life (give or take a philosopher or two), Arendt's conclusions obscure contemporary access to and application of all ancient Greek accounts of human

excellence. She rejects the existence of ancient Greek private excellence and finds modern existence incapable—or all but incapable—of exhibiting public excellence. Indeed, finding esteem for private life altogether absent in the ancient Greeks, Arendt goes so far as to accuse Christianity of being the original source of the view that “everybody should mind his own business and that political responsibility constituted first of all a burden.”⁵²

Aside from Aristotle, Arendt overlooks at least one important, pre-Christian articulation of this viewpoint. On the very last page of Plato's *Republic*, at the conclusion of a work that has gone to great lengths to describe and praise a life devoid of all private attachment for the guardians of the best city in speech, Socrates concludes by praising the preference for private life over the pursuit of honor. Within his Myth of Er, Socrates describes the process by which souls of the deceased choose their next lives. Among the souls described, Odysseus appears to make the best choice. Facing an overwhelming range of possibilities and having recovered “from memory of its former labors” from “the love of honor,” Odysseus's soul “went around for a long time looking for the life of a private man who minds his own business.”⁵³ Once he finds and chooses this life, Odysseus expresses pleasure at his choice: could he have had any life he wished, the life of a private man who minds his own business is the one he would most have preferred.

Within the myth as a whole, both Socrates's explanation of the best manner of choosing one's next life and his narration of other individual choices reinforce the excellence and in particular the *human* excellence of Odysseus's choice. In the afterlife described in the Myth of Er, the souls of deceased humans and animals make a thousand-year journey (pleasant for those who have lived justly and painful for those who have lived unjustly) and then must choose their next lives. Power, health, beauty, various skills, and variations in degree and duration of each quality are intermixed in different proportions in the lives waiting to be selected. Lots determine the order in which souls select their new lives so that some will have a much greater range of possibilities than others. Not everyone will be able to find his or her first choice, but the range of lives is so great that there will be a reasonably good choice available to each. In his description of the souls' manner of choosing, Socrates emphasizes that the most urgent matter in human life is to be able to make well this choice for one's next life. One's ability to choose well results from a combination of factors, including the past life, labors,

and loves of the chooser and the resulting deliberation exercised by the chooser. To be clear, a good choice requires being able to discern the outcome in terms of justice of the different combinations of qualities in the various lives, and—because this calculation is complex—the choice requires that great care and self-restraint be exercised in the choosing.

Of the five Homeric characters that Socrates includes in the Myth of Er, only Odysseus takes the time to select his life carefully, and only Odysseus selects the life of a human man. Epeius, an obscure Greek warrior who built the wooden horse, chooses the life of an artisan woman, but the more prominent Homeric characters make evidently subhuman choices. Ajax, receiving an early lot but still suffering from anger over losing a contest for public honor, specifically shuns human life and selects life as a lion. Agamemnon, choosing next, also hates “humankind because of his sufferings” and determines to become an eagle.⁵⁴ Achilles, perhaps because of his close connection to the gods, remains conspicuously absent.⁵⁵ Choosing nearly last, “the buffoon Thersites” decides to become an ape.⁵⁶

Of the named non-Homeric characters described by Socrates, two select human lives. Both of these choices are, by Socrates’s own standards, noticeably marred by the failure to exercise the self-restraint and deliberation that the decision demands. The poor soul who receives the first lot, having known neither philosophy nor labor in his prior life, rushes forward to claim the life of a man who appears to enjoy every felicity—the life of a tyrant. Upon examination, however, he discovers that his life will include great unhappiness, including eating his own children. After the tyrant, Atlanta makes the next-least deliberate choice. Spying the life of a male athlete, she cannot pass up the opportunity to pursue honor and chooses without further thought.

Odysseus’s choice, a deliberate and painstaking determination to live as a private human man who minds his own business, is clearly superior to most of the choices depicted. On the basis of its humanity alone, it surpasses the choices of his fellow Homeric leaders (Ajax and Agamemnon) and all save the few named figures who choose human lives—the tyrant, Epeius, and Atlanta. The tyrant’s choice, both for its lack of deliberation and its substance, proves the worst. Epeius’s selection of life as an artisan woman, perhaps the most ambiguous of the selections described, is suspect—at least considering cultural context—on the grounds of both gender and occupation. Atlanta’s determination to pursue honor as a male athlete appears more promising, but her method

of choosing reflects poorly on her choice by the standards that Socrates has described. Thus, Odysseus's deliberate choice of private life emerges as the most unambiguously positive of the choices portrayed.⁵⁷ More to the point, Odysseus's choice is clearly superior to the choices of the Homeric leaders with whom Socrates juxtaposes his decision.

This elevation—as it seems it must be—of Odysseus over Ajax and Agamemnon contrasts starkly with Socrates's description of the lives and motivating passions in the best city in speech proposed in the *Republic*. As Socrates has discussed at length, the guardians in the best city have no individual families and, like Ajax and Agamemnon, are motivated to courageous acts in war through the love of honor. Nonetheless, within the Myth of Er, Socrates describes Odysseus as specifically overcoming the love of honor in favor of private life, and within Homer's epics Odysseus is the most notoriously devoted of the Achaians to his private life. Within the *Republic*'s plans for the city in speech, notwithstanding the elimination of private life, Socrates describes minding one's own business as benefiting the city's virtue as much as wisdom, moderation, and courage combined. Thus, not only the Myth of Er but rather the *Republic* taken as a whole underscores the tension between the love of honor and the desire to lead a private life of minding one's own business. By bringing this tension to the fore and dramatically emphasizing its importance to individuals and politics alike with Homeric characters, Socrates implicitly refers his audience to Homer's epics and more specifically to the loves of three characters: Odysseus, Ajax, and Agamemnon.

Socrates uses Odysseus as an example of the preference for private life, specifically explaining that this is made possible by overcoming the love of honor and exercising self-restraint in deliberation. For Arendt, if Odysseus is thus understood, he cannot be fully human or excellent. In Socrates's account, of all the choices for reincarnation, Odysseus makes the only choice—barring Atlanta and the tyrant—to be a human man. Agamemnon and Ajax are examples, in Arendt's terms, of human excellence that few save Achilles can rival. But in Socrates's myth, both having experienced "human" life devoted to the search for honor, they opt instead for animal existence. The contrast between the Myth of Er and Arendt's understanding could hardly be clearer.

Perceiving the entirety of Homer, to say nothing of ancient Greece, as driven by love of public honor, Arendt cannot account for the existence or the relevance of the preference for private life that sometimes drives and sometimes divides Homeric characters. Much less can she trace the effect of this love in their actions, in the virtues they display, in the

friendships they enjoy, and in the effect that it has on their potential for justice. Nor can Arendt see the critique of the pursuit of honor to be found within the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Yet it must be admitted that, by pointing to the connection between desire and human excellence, Arendt's portrait of ancient Greece does underscore one essential dynamic of Homer's portrait of the hero. To say that Arendt has not captured the sum total of human excellence as presented by Homer is thus not the same as accusing her of failing altogether to capture any genuine Homeric element.

MacIntyre's focus on successful completion of social functions provides a theoretical basis for appreciating much of what Arendt overlooks in Homer: the potential for excellence within private life. Insofar as women are successful in their roles as defenders of the home, within his reading women are excellent—although less excellent because less useful to society as a whole.⁵⁸ In other words, where Arendt has no room for the possibility of virtue within the private sphere, MacIntyre thinks that Homer presents faithful Penelope and Andromache as excellent women insofar as they display the virtue appropriate to their social role, namely, fidelity. Hence, MacIntyre argues that Penelope and Odysseus are friends—surely unthinkable from within Arendt's framework—insofar as Penelope successfully exemplifies the excellence of a noble wife through her fidelity to Odysseus.⁵⁹ Although Odysseus and Penelope, placed in different social roles, have different kinds and different degrees of excellence, they are each excellent relative to their functions and hence stand in relation to one another as friends.

And yet MacIntyre altogether rejects what Arendt captures so clearly—the importance of desire. MacIntyre argues that the intentions and emotions of Homeric characters are irrelevant to considerations of virtue: the only consideration is success.⁶⁰ MacIntyre is not shy on this point: “moral and social structure are in fact one and the same in heroic society.”⁶¹ Thus, a dead hero is not excellent; a victorious hero—because he has successfully fulfilled his social function—is the pinnacle of virtue. Penelope's virtue depends not on her desire for Odysseus or her decision to attempt to keep the suitors at bay but solely on her success in remaining unmarried until Odysseus returns. Homeric virtue, according to this account, is not only relative to one's social role but also dependent on success and divorced from the desires of the individual.

Both approaches—Arendt's and MacIntyre's—reach conclusions that run contrary to the implications of the Myth of Er. Within his story Socrates indicates through his description of Odysseus's choice for

reincarnation that *both private life and desire* are linked to the potential for a good human life, but Arendt dismisses private life and MacIntyre dismisses desire.

Homeric Excellence

The Myth of Er, although presented as a story of the soul's selection for reincarnation, speaks to every individual's need to select among the possible lives available. It speaks to the pursuit of happiness and the qualities that are necessary to make wise choices in pursuit of an excellent human life. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the foundation of Greek literature and the richest literary resources of the Attic Greeks, contain complex portraits of various selections for how to live one's life. As Socrates indicates and a close reading of Homer confirms, the excellence of a life is closely linked to that which an individual desires or loves. Given Socrates's parting reference to Odysseus's preference for private life, it is not surprising that Homer does prove illuminating on the subject of the individual and the political consequences of the love of honor and the desire for a private life.

Consistent with Socrates's indication, Odysseus's character proves the exemplar of the highest virtue in Homer's epics. Through Odysseus's development, his virtues, and his friendship with his virtuous wife, Penelope, Homer reveals that pursuit of virtue and excellence within private life have a salutary effect on the prospects for happiness and stable politics precisely because they escape the relentless competitiveness (and resulting lack of moderation) inculcated by the public sphere. Within a private life dominated by the love of that housed within the private sphere, competition does not determine excellence. Excellence within this realm relates to how well matched the individuals at the heart of the family are and to how well they are able to inculcate virtue in one another, in their offspring, and in those around them. In Odysseus's words, "sweet agreement in all things" between husband and wife is the greatest of goods, "for nothing is better than this, more steadfast than when two people, a man and his wife, keep a harmonious household" (6.181–84).⁶²

Although Arendt and many others have been understandably impressed by the degree of nigh-immortal honor won by Achilles, in their praise of his accomplishment, they have failed to note that Achilles himself was not finally or primarily motivated by love of honor. Thus,

despite the fact that he won perhaps the greatest honors ever accorded within our cultural memory and serves as arguably the best “how-to” model for achieving honor, he is not the best exemplar for the study of the effects of the *love* of honor. Conflicted and ever-changing Achilles—who takes no part in the Myth of Er but otherwise looms large among those devoted to Homer—instead illustrates disillusionment with the life of honor and the power of grief over the loss of a particular friend.

In contrast to Achilles, Ajax and Agamemnon provide examples of public action driven by love of honor—examples of that which Arendt extols in *The Human Condition* and Socrates questions in the Myth of Er. Pursuing public honor with little or no heed to private attachments, they reveal politically problematic flaws of this passion that Arendt does not prepare her readers to find in the context of ancient Greece’s greatest war poem. Agamemnon and Ajax are, if not villains, heroes whose single-minded love of honor limits their potential for virtue and justice.

By asking why Socrates elevates Odysseus in contrast to his honoring peers, this Plato-inspired reading offers a new understanding of the Homeric hero that directly engages with the dominant understanding of human excellence articulated by Arendt and MacIntyre. No less, this reading engages with the often-quiet conclusion that Odysseus is the hero of mediocrity and of petty bourgeois preferences for comfort and life over excellence and truth. A bourgeois Odysseus, sellout to the potential for human excellence, lurks in Ahrens Dorf’s recent interpretation of Odysseus as narrowly self-interested and friendless, lacking “the lion heart, the single-minded passion and courage of Achilles.”⁶³ In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno similarly present Odysseus as a traitor to truth and human desire who “survives only at the cost of his own dream, which he forfeits by disintegrating his own magic.”⁶⁴ I argue that, far from presenting private life as unworthy of desire and obtainable only at the cost of renouncing excellence, truth, and humanity, Homer elevates private life as the locus of true friendship and excellence—as the object of Odysseus’s ultimate desire and the source of his unique excellence.

Although four recent books turn specifically to Odysseus with related questions about his strongest desires and their consequences, they have neither reached a consensus on Odysseus’s preference for private life nor focused on the ramifications for the relationship between private life and politics. Seth Benardete’s *The Bow and the Lyre* finds in Odysseus a proto-Socrates: Benardete argues that, far from coming to prefer

private life, Odysseus ultimately ascends from love of honor to desire for knowledge.⁶⁵ Patrick Deneen's *The Odyssey of Political Theory*, which has points of commonality with Benardete's interpretation, presents Odysseus as fundamentally and perpetually torn between private life and longing for transcendence.⁶⁶ Both Benardete's and Deneen's readings, however, discount Odysseus's passionate desire for his homecoming, overlook extensive textual evidence illustrating both the excellence of Odysseus's home and the hero's happiness in his private relationships, and fail to take into account Odysseus's own dismay at the need to leave Ithaka at the end of the *Odyssey*.

Unlike Benardete and Deneen, Jacob Howland's *The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy* and Jenny Strauss Clay's *The Wrath of Athena* conclude that Odysseus does ultimately come to prefer that which is his own.⁶⁷ Although Howland and Clay therefore conclude that Odysseus finds happiness in his homecoming, they largely omit the *Iliad* and leave the political ramifications of Odysseus's preference for his own mostly unexplored. Howland and Clay focus on Odysseus's journey home, concluding that Odysseus comes to prefer that which is his own as a result of his harrowing adventures. In the following study I show that, on the contrary, in the *Iliad* Homer presents an Odysseus who already differs meaningfully from his honor-loving peers. Within the *Odyssey*, moreover, Odysseus initially makes nearly superhuman efforts to arrive home after departing from Troy, almost giving up on life itself when his homecoming is snatched from him for the second time in the early months after sailing for Ithaka. Accordingly, the development of Odysseus's desires and virtues is far more subtle than either Howland or Clay allow, and Odysseus's character demands more attention during both the Trojan War and after his arrival home during the twelve books in which Homer's hero faces the difficulties of securing and rejoining his home. Only in the second half of the *Odyssey*, after the "adventures" are over, does Homer reveal that Odysseus's love of his private life and his friendship with his like-minded wife lead to the hero's greatest happiness and point to the necessity of politics. Private happiness needs protection, requiring emergence into the political.

Odysseus and Penelope, along with their household, emerge as the admittedly flawed heroes of this rereading of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. Their marriage is the locus of friendship and excellence, and politics reemerges at the end of the epic of homecoming as necessary to protect the value of that which private life nurtures. The politics, like the virtues

resulting from the preference for one's own, is flawed by an inadequate understanding of justice and corresponding failure to respect the value of the private lives of others. But Odysseus and Penelope exhibit virtues indicating that their capacity to serve as the foundation of a just, speech-based politics is at least superior to that of honor-motivated heroes. Unlike the honor-driven heroes, they have no inherent desire for conflict and violence. Also unlike honor-dominated heroes, Odysseus "like Zeus in counsel" and "circumspect" Penelope display wily intelligence, self-restraint, and a resulting skill in the use of persuasive speech that bode well for their ability to engage successfully in politics.

In part the importance of this study of Homer results from the finding that, contrary to Arendt's assertions, the virtues of women play a central role in human happiness and excellence. Homer recognizes and indeed celebrates virtue in female form, as demonstrated by the like-mindedness of the heroes at the heart of the happiest moment in his epics. More generally, Homer's portrait of human excellence and happiness reveals the connection between private life and politics: private life ultimately nurtures the growth of virtues—courage, intelligence, and moderation—necessary for development toward a just politics, and private life remains dependent on politics for the protection of the excellence and friendship found in private.

Reading "Homer's" Texts: The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*

Homer's epics have been studied for many reasons. Some have used the epics as a lens with which to look backward in time—seeking to discern through or behind the texts—to the history, mythology, and society they are thought to reflect. As Donlan characterized the poet's value to the search for history, Homer is our "sole 'native informant'" of his day.⁶⁸ Taking this facet of the epics into account, it is far from surprising that much careful scholarship has centered on determining the historical accuracy and implications of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.⁶⁹ Such research is inextricably bound to two related questions: Homer's identity and the method of composition. On these questions much ink has been spilled, and no end is in sight.⁷⁰

For the subset of scholars focused on the epics as a source of knowledge about oral poetry and mythmaking, the meaning of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* themselves is different from the meaning employed in

this book. Students of oral tradition and mythmaking use the names of the written poems to refer to something larger and more amorphous than the texts themselves. In their usage “Iliad” and “Odyssey” refer to the oral tradition of which the written poems are the single best—but not the only—piece of evidence. From this perspective, the texts that we refer to as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* captured in written form the final (but not necessarily the most authoritative) step in a formerly fluid process—a process through which a set of tales surrounding the Trojan War were told in many ways by many poets over generations.⁷¹

In contrast to the usage of students of the oral tradition, within this book the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* refer to the text of the two written poems. Plato and Aristotle read these poems, referring to their author as Homer, and it is in part a clearer comprehension of these Attic Greeks’ ubiquitous references to Homer that motivates this reading. A literary approach, nonetheless, need not mean an approach blind to the assistance offered by scholars of history or oral composition. Conceding that their objects are often different, the various methods of studying the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have much to offer one another. As Redfield notes, Homer’s art was constructed in light of a tradition of which he became the master.⁷² The brilliance of Homer’s art—regardless of whether an individual with such a name existed, how many “Homers” there were, and his degree of innovation relative to the preexisting tradition—made use of the poetic techniques available with artistry that continues to provoke comparisons to Mozart and an acknowledgment that the texts themselves are polished literary masterpieces.⁷³ This artistry can perhaps best be observed in the subject of this book—Homer’s individual characters. Although sometimes called uniform, flat, and unchanging, recent scholarship supports the individuality of Homer’s characters.⁷⁴

In common with one another, these characters claim pride of place as the original heroes of the Greco-Roman tradition and thus as the literary departure point for many an enduring question. The particular question driving this reading of Homer relates to the excellence of these characters and to the potential for friendship and justice among them. Amid the action, the desire, and the suspense, where does Homer reveal human excellence—that excellence that is worthy of admiration and emulation? Or, to phrase the question more directly, why are his characters heroes, and do they have any virtues? Do female characters ever exhibit the heroic virtues? How does the excellence of Homer’s characters enhance or inhibit their capacity for friendship and justice?

The complexity of the epics defies simple answers to these questions. No less than in his weaving together of differing points in time and space, Homer's epics weave together several virtues (and failings of virtue) in differing degrees of strength in each important character. Indeed, it may be helpful to imagine Homer's epics as a pair of tapestries intended to be displayed in the same room. Attempt to discern any one virtue as emblematic of the "hero" and you may successfully trace the virtue's appearances throughout both epics, like someone who has identified all the thread of one color in the two tapestries. But the virtue thus traced will not reveal the essence of the excellence of a "hero" any more than a pile of string pulled from its place could communicate meaningfully about the tapestries of which it had once been a part.

Just as Homer does not hold up one supreme virtue as emblematic of the hero, he likewise declines to provide one supreme individual as an unflawed model of human excellence. No one character—not even Achilles—stands atop an apex of virtue against which the others can be judged based on their similarity to the crowned champion of virtue. Rather, Homer offers a host of characters different in both kind and quantity of virtue. One hero excels in intelligence, one in courage, and yet another in moderation: but comparison—let alone ranking—still proves problematic because each character is a mixture of multiple virtues in varying degrees of strength (rather than simply a representation of one virtue). Homer's use of epithets, which are shared by the heroes but allocated to specific characters in differing proportions, provides one preliminary indication of this quality.⁷⁵ Another layer of complexity arises from the differences in circumstances of various characters: some are old and others young, some male and others female, some free and others enslaved. But virtue and its absence—although sometimes manifesting differently because of differences in context—can be located within all these circumstances and, thus, adds another dimension to the analysis required to grasp the meaning of human virtue within the Homeric landscape.

To conceptualize the excellence of the heroes found in Homer's tapestry-like epics, it is necessary to start with the loves or desires. Two loves—the love of public honor and of private life—are woven through the two epics like distinct but complementary color schemes. Love of honor, as many have observed, provides the dominant color scheme of the *Iliad*. The desire for private life functions within the *Iliad* to provide contrast, casting the love of honor into sharper definition than would otherwise be possible. Conversely, the desire for private life dominates

the *Odyssey* and is ultimately celebrated therein. Within the poem of homecoming, in contrast to the poem of war, love of honor ultimately recedes into the backdrop. Once this thematic contrast between the love of honor and the desire for private life is brought to light, it is possible to observe its consequences in the lives of individual characters and the plot of each epic. Some characters are driven by one love, some by the other, and yet others do not fit neatly into either category, but—more importantly—the object and strength of Homer's characters' loves shape their lives. Their distinct passions produce distinct tendencies in their virtues, thus solving and creating different political problems. For those who seek to understand why, whether, and how Homer's characters are exemplars of human excellence, grasping the relationship of their excellence to their loves is paramount. Similarly, connecting their excellence to their potential for justice and friendship requires grasping the desires that produce their different combinations of virtues.

As the forgoing has doubtless made clear, this argument encompasses Homeric virtue as presented in both epics. Yet it must of necessity start at a particular point and with a specific character or set of characters. The point of departure in part 1 is the *Iliad* and, within the *Iliad*, chapter 1 commences with the love of honor exhibited by two of Homer's most unequivocally honor-driven heroes, Ajax and Agamemnon. Unlike Achilles, whose predominant passion—whether for a particular friend, honor, or private life—vacillates, Ajax and Agamemnon remain steadfast (except for Agamemnon's moments of cowardice) in pursuit of honor. Chapter 2 turns to two characters whose loves exhibit a complexity incompatible with Arendt's reading: Achilles and Hektor. Both suffering and ultimately dying in the Trojan War, Achilles and Hektor share Ajax and Agamemnon's desire for honor, but they also love particular individuals and express the desire to lead private lives focused on spending time with their particular friends. When that which is their own is destroyed by the Trojan War, Homer's description of grief and loss reveals the humanity and the excellence possible in private life. Concluding analysis of the *Iliad*, chapter 3 provides a view of the man of many turns, pausing and pondering Odysseus. Odysseus is gifted in speech and surpasses his peers in self-restraint. He is a capable hero who wants honor but is willing to risk less for it than his peers.

Part 2, like the *Odyssey*, is evenly divided between Odysseus's voyage and his time in Ithaka. Chapters 4 and 5 detail how a man who desires his homecoming can take ten years to find it, and they chronicle