
ФИЛОСОФСКАЯ ЭССЕИСТИКА

PLATO ON HOMER: HEROIC LIARS AND THE CONCEPT OF INJUSTICE IN «HIPPIAS MINOR»

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The article addresses Plato's dialog *Hippias minor* as a text investigating the possibility of alternative models of morality presented by Homeric heroes Achilles and Odysseus. We study the way Socrates' thought going from examples of particular acts to the level of moral abstractions. While on the level of concrete cases the acts of «heroic liars» seem to contradict certain principles of morality the further we go to its abstract core the greater is the gap between what is moral on its surface and what is moral indeed. Thus we see how Socrates comes from ethical question to metaphysical one which is found within the former.

Key words: abstraction, ethics, Homer, lying, Plato, truth.

In *Hippias minor*, Socrates engages the noted sophist, Hippias. The dialogue investigates the basis for the ethical life. It does so entirely in relation to the characters of Achilles and Odysseus as alternative models of morality. The movement in the dialogue is from the concrete heroic liars, Achilles and Odysseus, to a concept of injustice, and, in specific, whether doing injustice voluntarily is morally preferable to doing injustice involuntarily. The unique contribution of this article will be to show how Socrates moves from concretes to abstractions through two stages of, first, analysis, in which the concretes are fully in play, and, second, abstraction proper after which Socrates dispenses with the concretes altogether. In the discussion of the move from concrete to concept the Straussian principle of logographic necessity (1) is adopted here, namely that every word functions in the text as an organ in the human body. Thus, where one finds any given word in the Platonic text is taken as signifying the author's intention. The present discussion will attend to the shifts in the dialogue, especially the moment when Socrates dispenses with concretes as a kind of dialectical *volta*. This article will also make a contribution to understanding Plato's reception of Homer. However much Plato may distance himself from Homer the author (e.g., Socrates' steady assault in the *Republic*), nevertheless Plato makes extensive use of Homeric material and is not only

ready to have Socrates distinguish Homeric characters from each other (in *Hippias minor*, Achilles and Odysseus), but at least implicitly to distinguish also Homeric characters from Homer himself as poet. In this respect, the insights of Monsieur David Lévy-stone [2. P. 181—182] regarding the separation of the author Homer from Homeric characters in fifth century B.C. Athenian culture constitute a basis for a right understanding of Plato's reception of Homer which is essential for a full reading of *Hippias minor*. While the dialogue's moral and, ultimately, metaphysical questions are of interest here, the method for illuminating those questions arises from an examination of Plato's reading of Homer.

A distinction, as curious as it is important, was made in fifth-century Athens between Homer and Homeric heroes. This is true not only with respect to Achilles and Odysseus, but to many others from the Homeric epics who people the dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides (2). The heroes take on lives of their own in Greek culture. Even as Homer was being recited by rhapsodes, a fact which provides the setting for Plato's *Ion*, Odysseus had become an object of disdain. Homer's own authority was separated from the popular estimation of Homeric characters. M. Lévy-stone summarizes instances of Greek cultural animus towards Odysseus as, for example, his "Machiavelian" aspect in the *Philoctetes* by Sophocles. He argues that Odysseus became a symbol of the political leadership which led Athens to disaster in the Peloponnesian War [2. P. 181—182]. The Socratic writers, by contrast — M. Lévy-stone names Antisthenes, Plato and Xenophon — take up the cause of Odysseus. Though not without criticism, they regard him as representing "an example of moderation and wisdom" [2. P. 182] (3).

Throughout the Platonic corpus there is a connection between Socrates and Odysseus which though "not always explicit is strong and ongoing" [2. P. 183]. M. Lévy-stone's next insight is absolutely essential to a right understanding of Plato's regard for Odysseus. Plato will often plug an entire episode of the *Odyssey* into his own text merely through the use of a tag-line or allusion, "It [the connection] reveals itself sometimes, in the Platonic text, without mentioning the name of the personage, through mere citations of Homer or even through allusion to the hero's adventures which are like the quest for knowledge undertaken by the philosopher, a philosophical odyssey analogous to that of Odysseus" [2. P. 183]. Plato, like Antisthenes and Xenophon according to M. Lévy-stone, inverts the popular cultural valuation of Homer and Odysseus, respectively. The culture honors Homer and dishonors Odysseus, while Plato praises Odysseus and repudiates Homer. M. Lévy-stone observes how extraordinary this reversal is when Plato will have Socrates "take on Homer the author" actually "in order to defend Homer's character, Odysseus" [2. P. 192]. Plato, like his Socratic contemporaries, rescues Odysseus. M. Lévy-stone suggests the reason why. For Plato's Socrates, there is no knowledge without the light of goodness, "If Odysseus is wise, then he can be nothing other than good" [2. P. 205].

Socrates develops fundamental principles of moral philosophy from an analysis of the two characters. Addressing Eudicus, the third (and by far the least) figure in this dialogue, Socrates puts the problem:

For your father Apemantus used to say that the *Iliad* of Homer is a finer poem than the *Odyssey*, to just the extent that Achilles is a better man than Odysseus; for, he said, one of these poems is about Odysseus and the other about Achilles. I'd like to ask about

that, then, if Hippias is willing. What does he think about these two men? Which of them is better? [4. 363b1-5; Cooper 923]

Socrates begins with Achilles and Odysseus, but then shifts to abstract representations of them as the man who does injustice voluntarily (Odysseus) in contrast to the man who does injustice involuntarily (Achilles) (4). The word “*hecōn*” translated here “voluntarily,” means “to do something on purpose” and sometimes even “for a purpose” (5). Odysseus controls his truth-telling and lying according to the purpose at hand with rare exceptions (e.g., the revelation of his name to Polyphemus). The words and actions of Achilles, by contrast, are subject to wrath, again with rare exceptions (e.g., his encounter with Priam). Odysseus tells lies according to calculation, while in the actions and words of Achilles wrath displaces calculation. Socrates addresses the question of moral philosophy through an exegesis of character. He analyzes what Homer depicts in the words and deeds of Achilles and Odysseus. That is to say, Socrates finds the paradigm of ethics in those two figures which he must mine with the tools of logical analysis.

It will be observed that when Socrates pushes this argument to its logical conclusion, Hippias declines to accept it. Socrates only partially joins his demur, “But given the argument, we can’t help having it look that way to us, now, at any rate” [4. 376b7-c2; Cooper 936]. As a dialogue proleptic (6) to the *Republic*, *Hippias minor* develops the moral and logical framework for the “useful” lie (7). The critic of the present analysis might also point out that mention of Achilles and Odysseus ceases “in the last third of the dialogue [from 372a ff.] there is no reference to them at all, not even in the conclusion” [5]. Let it be noted that Platonic method is to have Socrates first analyze the concrete and then abstract from it (8). That is the pattern which Plato as author applies here. First, Socrates analyzes Achilles and Odysseus. The result of that analysis is that Achilles lies unintentionally and Odysseus intentionally, and, therefore, Odysseus is the better man:

Socrates: Then it seems that Odysseus is better than Achilles after all.

Hippias: Not at all, surely, Socrates.

Socrates: Why not? Didn’t it emerge just now that the voluntary liars are better than the involuntary ones? [4. 371e4-8; Cooper 931]

In fact, it is exactly at that point (371e4—8), when analysis has yielded an abstraction (“the voluntary liars are better than the involuntary ones”) that Socrates leaves off reference to the concrete figures of Achilles and Odysseus. From that point to the end of the dialogue, Socrates no longer has need of Achilles or Odysseus as concretes; he can develop his argument conceptually, in terms separate from the concrete. Plato is engaged with Homer first on the concrete level, but then moves through analysis and abstraction to the discussion of concepts separate from the concrete.

Aristotle interests himself in the question of “the false” in the *Hippias minor* but, by contrast with Plato, attends only to concepts separate from the concrete and not to the concrete circumstances or persons from which they are derived. This can be seen in Aristotle’s treatment of “the false” in *Metaphysics* 5.29 (1024b17-1025a13) where he criticizes Socrates’ conclusion in *Hippias minor*. Aristotle names Plato’s *Hippias* ex-

plicitly, and his discussion makes clear that he means the dialogue known as the *Hippias minor* (9). Aristotle analyzes the conclusion enunciated by Socrates:

This is why the proof in the *Hippias* that the same man is false and true is misleading. For it assumes that he is false who can deceive (i. e., the man who knows and is wise); and further that he who is *willingly* bad is better. This is a false result of induction; for a man who limps willingly is better than one does so unwillingly; by ‘limping’ Plato means ‘mimicking a limp’, for if a man were actually lame willingly, he would perhaps be worse in this case as in the corresponding case of character [7. 1025a6-13; Barnes 2.1618].

Aristotle rejects the idea that something could be true in deed (*pragma*) while false in word (*logos*), that is, the idea that truth can be communicated by producing “a false appearance” [7. 1025a1025a4-6; Barnes 2.1618]. Aristotle’s objection is that the false conclusion arises from “induction” (*dia tēs epagōgēs*) [7. 5.1025a9—10; Barnes 2.1618]. It is interesting to note that Aristotle challenges both Plato and Antisthenes [7. 1024b33-35; Barnes 2.1618] in this section on “the false”, which is support for the view that the two were contemporaries and rivals to the Socratic mantle (10). For all that the two Socratic philosophers sparred with each other and differed on this point, to Aristotle they are but degrees apart in their errors. More significant, however, is that Aristotle only addresses the conclusion of the analysis and abstraction in the *Hippias minor*, that is to say as the conclusion is separate from matter and motion. He says nothing of Achilles or Odysseus as concrete entities. This kind of transition from Plato to Aristotle is common. As a matter of historical development, Plato is the intermediary who abstracts the Homeric metaphysics from the concrete of poetic depiction. Aristotle takes the transition from concrete to abstraction as a given and deals with the abstractions alone.

The general principle of logographic necessity and its particular form in the use of tag-lines and allusions must be accepted in order to understand the *Hippias minor* as a dialogue about Achilles and Odysseus as alternative paradigms of the moral life. Without those tools, the reader is likely to miss or dismiss the conclusion. The analysis here initially follows that of M. LévyStone and subsequent arguments are consistent with his work.

In the way Socrates has framed the question, one already finds an implied reduction of the two texts: the *Iliad* is about Achilles, and the *Odyssey* about Odysseus. The reduction seems to precede Socrates although he also seems to accept it. At least, he says nothing against the reduction. The two heroes are typological figures whom the Athenians ponder in a reduced sense of heroism. In Homer, the two are heroes in respect to their being between gods and ordinary men. As Socrates quotes Apemantus, they are heroes only in the sense of role models. Should Athenian boys aspire to be like Achilles or like Odysseus? Apemantus took the view that Achilles was superior to Odysseus, and, therefore, that the *Iliad* is superior to the *Odyssey*.

There are two points to observe here. First, the characters of Achilles and Odysseus are the basis for the Socratic adumbration of an ethical problematic. What is depicted in Homer becomes the explicit basis for Socratic analysis and abstraction. The second point is that the Homeric texts are reduced from the status of epic to mere moral lesson books. While that reduction is not the work of Socrates, he does nothing to refute it. Hippias, for his part, makes clear that it is just in such a reading of Homer that the epics

have contemporary value. One is reminded of Nietzsche's criticism of his nineteenth century contemporaries that they thought they had the right to judge the past by their own standards (11). Hippias gives adequate evidence that this tendency is an old one. He says, for example, having quoted lines from the mouth of Achilles (*Iliad* 9.308-10, 12-14), "In these lines he [Homer] clearly shows the way of each man, that Achilles is truthful and simple, and Odysseus is wily and a liar [one who says what is false]; for he presents Achilles as saying these words to Odysseus" [4. 364e3-365b4; Cooper 924]. Socrates shifts the focus of discussion from what Homer meant to what Hippias means, since Homer is not present to answer for himself, but Hippias is [4. 365d1-2, Cooper 925]. Socrates develops the question of truth and falsehood in relation to power and wisdom and then to purpose [4. 366a1-2, 371e4-5; Cooper 925, 931]. Along the way, Hippias hits upon a fine point about Odysseus, and a point that lies near the center of this dialogue's puzzle, "When Odysseus tells the truth, he always has a purpose, and when he lies, it's the same" [4. 371e2-3; Cooper 931].

The ethical problematic which unfolds here will have life both in the later work of Plato and in that of Aristotle, especially in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. That ethical problematic of Classical Greek Philosophy, however, represents a misreading of Homer. The depiction discussed morally in the *Hippias minor* and in subsequent works is primarily metaphysical in Homer. Homer shows no concern whatsoever that Odysseus lies. In fact, not just *that* he lies, but more importantly *how* and *why* he lies are signs of who Odysseus *is*. When Odysseus finally lands on his home island of Ithaca, Athena remarks not only that she recognizes him by his skillful lies, but also that in that regard Odysseus resembles her [9. 13.287-99]. Skillful lying inheres in his identity. When compared to that Homeric depiction of Odysseus, Socrates of the *Hippias minor* — or at very least authors of early fourth century B.C. Athens — created an ethical problematic which did not exist for Homer. For Socrates of the *Hippias minor* and for Hippias himself, as Plato presents them, lying had become a form of injustice. It may be that it is just this point Plato wants his readers to ponder: is it possible to lie for a virtuous end?

Hippias minor finishes with a moral conclusion to which neither Hippias nor even Socrates can quite assent, namely, "It is up to the good man to do injustice voluntarily, and the bad man to do it involuntarily; that is, if the good man has a good soul... So the one who voluntarily misses the mark and does what is shameful and unjust... would be no other than the good man" [4. 376b2-3, 4-5; Cooper 936]. There is an important proviso here and, in fact, a new theme introduced as the dialogue approaches its end: the good man does injustice voluntarily "if the good man has a good soul" (12). Socrates raises the issues of the soul and its goodness, but he does not address those issues. The model for their discussion has been Odysseus as the man who did injustice voluntarily, at least in respect to telling what he knew to be false with great skill. The reader does well to remind himself that this dialogue was written decades before Aristotle distinguished moral from intellectual virtues. It may be that Socrates of the *Hippias minor* does not think of making the distinction here precisely because those kinds of qualities were united in the person of Odysseus.

One senses that there is something not just puzzling to Plato's Socrates about Odysseus, but troubling as well. He seems clearly to prefer Odysseus to Achilles throughout the dialogue, and yet he cannot quite get over the "rascality" (13) of Odysseus. At the

same time, Socrates also exhibits a certain “rascality” in what has long been called “the Socratic method.” Socrates rarely says clearly what he holds to be true, and he often dissembles deftly — as deftly as Odysseus — while guiding his interlocutor toward some elusive conclusion. One of the ways in which *Hippias minor* may be read as proleptic to the *Republic* is the way that it prepares Plato’s readers for the notion of the noble lie. At the end of *Hippias minor*, Socrates implicitly breaks through the presenting ethical issues to the underlying metaphysical question. When does the truth of being require the telling of something superficially false? The movement of the dialogue has been from the concrete heroes who lie to the concepts of doing injustice either voluntarily or involuntarily. In the end, however, having created a new ethical problematic, at least as his assessment of Odysseus is compared to the hero’s standing in the Homeric text, Socrates discovers the metaphysical question within the ethical one. For the final summation in the *Hippias minor* engages the question of the soul and what constitutes a good soul. The puzzle of Odysseus, the hero who lies on purpose, provides the basis for arriving at questions both ethical and metaphysical. Once the questions are posed, the dialogue ends.

ENDNOTES

- (1) Professor Strauss has translated literally “tina anankēn logographikēn” from Phaedrus 264b7, “logographic necessity” [1. P. 53].
- (2) E.g., the plays *Helen*, *Hecuba*, *Andromache*, and *The Trojan Women* by Euripides.
- (3) The translations of quotations from M. LévyStone’s article are my own. Professor Kahn discusses the treatment of Odysseus by Antisthenes and proposes that, at least in part, Plato is responding to Antisthenes in *Hippias minor* [3. P. 122—123].
- (4) “So the more powerful and better soul, when it does injustice, will do injustice voluntarily, and the worthless soul involuntarily” [4. 376a6-7; Cooper 936].
- (5) The word “hecōn” is defined “readily”, “willingly, purposely”. LSJ s.v., hecōn.
- (6) The view is adopted here, as set forth by Professor Charles Kahn, that the following dialogues should be read proleptically to the *Republic*: *Apology*, *Crito*, *Ion*, *Hippias Minor*, *Gorgias*, *Menexenus*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras*, *Meno*, *Lysis*, *Euthydemus*, *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Cratylus* [3. P. 47—48]. He defines “proleptic” as a “systematic orientation towards the *Republic* that ties all or most of these dialogues together and offers the most enlightening perspective on their interrelationship” [3. P. 48].
- (7) R. 2.382c6-d3; Cooper 1021; 3.389b7-c6; Cooper 1026. M. LévyStone discusses this point at length. He notes that Socrates of the *Republic* 2.382c distinguishes between lying “in word” and “in deed”. He develops the distinction of “the true liar and the true falsehood”. The one who lies only “in word” can be considered positively, whereas the one who lies “in deed” is altogether false because he lies in his soul. He then applies the results of this analysis to *Hippias minor*. He also notes, aptly, that in the *Iliad*, Odysseus is depicted as employing only “useful” lies in order to win the war, “Without such useful lies, Troy could never have been taken” [2. P. 199, 202—203, note 66].
- (8) For example, in the *Ion*, Socrates gives a brief analytical summary of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. *Ion* 531c2-d1; Cooper 939. Also, Director of Research Luc Brisson notes that in *Republic* 2 and 3, Socrates summarizes five different categories of beings, e.g., R. 2.376e-3.403c [6. P. 22].
- (9) M. LévyStone notes that the acceptance of the dialogue’s authenticity is due in no small part to Aristotle’s witness [2. P. 199, n. 57].
- (10) On the competition to inherit the Socratic mantle, see [3. P. 1—9].
- (11) “Those naïve historians call measuring past opinions and deeds by the common opinions of the moment ‘objectivity’: here they find the canon of all truths; their work is to make the past fit the triviality of their time” [8. P. 34].

- (12) Professor Kahn points to the conditional clause and summarizes the scholarly consensus about its importance in analyzing the dialogue's argumentation [3. P. 117].
(13) "Homer was a great poet altogether and that made up for a lot of the rascality" [10. P. 168].

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ПЛАТОН О ГОМЕРЕ: ГЕРОИ-ЛЖЕЦЫ И ПОНЯТИЕ НЕСПРАВЕДЛИВОСТИ В «ГИППИИ МЕНЬШЕМ»

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Диалог Платона «Гиппий меньший», в котором Сократ встречает известного софиста Гиппия, посвящен выявлению основ этического. В нем гомеровские персонажи Ахилл и Одиссей рассматриваются в качестве альтернативных моделей морали. Логика диалога разворачивается от рассмотрения конкретных героев-лжецов, Ахилла и Одиссея, к понятию несправедливости и к вопросу — является ли сознательно чинимая несправедливость морально более предпочтительной, чем несправедливость, которую мы творим, не осознавая этого? Задача статьи заключается в том, чтобы показать, как мысль Сократа движется от конкретного к абстрактному в два этапа, начиная с анализа конкретных примеров и заканчивая отбрасыванием всего конкретного. В конце диалога Сократ совершает прорыв к стоящему за обозначенными этическими проблемами метафизическому вопросу: когда истина бытия требует, чтобы мы говорили нечто, что на поверхности оказывается ложным (то, что в «Государстве» превращается в «благородную ложь»)? По-новому обозначив проблему морального — по крайней мере настолько, насколько его оценка поступков Одиссея сопоставима с тем, как этот герой представлен в тексте Гомера, — Сократ открывает в этическом вопросе вопрос метафизический, поскольку в конечном итоге в «Гиппии меньшем» ставится вопрос о душе и о том, что образует благу душу.

Ключевые слова: абстракция, Гомер, ложь, Платон, правда, этика.