‘Homeric psychology’ has been the object of ongoing research since the beginning of the 19th century, and it can be considered a field within Homeric studies in itself, comparable in this regard to the issue of oral/formulaic composition. It has several sides to it, which all point to fields wider than Homer: there is the linguistic (semantic/pragmatic) approach, which studies the vocabulary for ‘mind/spirit’—the fact that there are at least six terms for this and that one of these appears every 16 lines gives an idea of the central relevance of this kind of research. But we cannot hope to establish the meaning of any of these concepts without realizing what our own terms mean and whence our set of concepts derive. This is where thinkers like Descartes come in—the philosophical approach. Then, there is the psychological/neurological side to the matter—and the research and debate on the personality and the brain is a hot topic today; it has been approached from an anthropological angle, comparing e.g. the concept of the ‘free soul’ in shamanist societies; and finally, whatever angle one takes, the texts must also, perhaps foremost, be interpreted correctly, which calls for familiarity with the Iliad and Odyssey as literary texts, and this is where those who are foremost readers of Homer join the fray. This deceivingly narrow subject thus allows cross-fertilizations both within each approach (between Homer and other material) and between the different approaches. This makes it fascinating, but also complicated; and results achieved in one corner are often insufficiently taken into account in others.

An attempt to combine several approaches was made by Bruno Snell: studying the different terms denoting mind/spirit, he assigned to each a specific, discrete meaning and function (in accordance with contemporary linguistic ‘word field’ theory) and squared this with his reading of how Homeric characters arrive at a decision. With spectacular results: Homeric man arose as someone without a conception of himself as a whole, neither physically (he always speaks of his ‘limbs’ and other parts, never of his ‘body’) nor psychologically (there being no concept for ‘mind,’ only for ‘mental parts’ analogous to body parts). As a result, Snell reasons, Homeric man doesn’t feel responsible for his actions, because he lacks an ‘I’ or a ‘Self.’

What Snell did not do is lay open the theoretical assumptions behind his own idea of Self and he has been taken to task for this by philosophers like Bernard Williams, Arbogast Schmitt and Christopher Gill who have all shown that Snell’s own conception reflects Descartes’ model of the human mind and
a Kantian conception of ethics. They offer alternative approaches which are oriented on Plato (Schmitt) and Aristotle (Gill), respectively.

Proscurcin’s book, based on his Dissertationsschrift of the same year, is in this tradition. Chapter I (pp. 24-32) discusses Snell’s theory and chapter II (pp. 44-81) the view of Schmitt, who argues that in Homer the people are often torn between their ‘thymotic’ and their ‘noetic’ thoughts, but that the νόος is the ruling part, more or less like Plato’s λογιστικόν, and that of Gill, which centers around an assumed pre-Cartesian ‘objective-participant’ conception of Self against the modern (Cartesian-Kantian) ‘subjectivist-individualist’ one. P. finds both Schmitt’s and Gill’s models useful. Both show that the idea of Snell’s idea of non-existing Self is an anachronistic misconception.

As long as Snell had not been refuted, more general studies of Homeric personality usually took a stand on the theoretical issues Snell has raised. Examples of this are Walter Marg’s Der Charakter in der Sprache der früh-griechischen Dichtung (1937) and Wulfert’s lesser-known dissertation Handeln und Ethik des Kriegers in der Ilias (1955).

Against this background, a book title “Der Begriff ἦθος bei Homer” would appear to be about the depiction of character (or as Gill more aptly calls it, personality) in Homer. Far from it. In fact, it is about the word ἦθος in Homer, which, on the face of it, denotes something quite different; looking closely, the form ἦθος doesn’t even occur at all in Homer; we only find the plural ἤθεα (which is a problem if we want to find an abstract concept), and this occurs only three times in all of Homer, two of the three being moreover iterata. All three refer to the habitat of animals. We are quite a stretch removed from the concept of ‘personality’ here.

P. nevertheless posits that beside this literal meaning and the reference to animals, the contexts invite a more immaterial meaning and an application to people, not animals. ἤθεα would then denote, or rather connote, people’s spiritual habitat, their ‘comfort zone,’ so to speak. And for this, he needs to do away with the Snellian conception of the absence of Self. “Nur nach Überwindung der vorherrschenden Primitivitätstthese” (p. 8) can we tackle the concept of ἦθος in Homer.

This is somewhat surprising. Despite its impressiveness, Snell’s theory has not, to my knowledge, convinced many Homerists. Literary interpretation of individual characters in Homer has hardly if ever bothered to take account of it. It has been frontally challenged more than once (e.g. by Lesky’s concept of ‘double motivation’ as regards the role of the gods, which has found wide acceptance); the theory behind the theory has been challenged by e.g. Schmitt and Gill, to which P. does not really add anything; and the semantic complementarity of the Homeric terms, considered by Snell as the solid foundation