

# 1 Introduction: Socrates and the precept “Know yourself”

## The benefits of studying Socrates and self-knowledge

In this book I aim to reconstruct the Socratic response to the precept “Know yourself” as a view of self-knowledge that is plausible, interesting, and valuable. This view, I hope to show, has as good a chance to be true or insightful as more recent views; its complex structure and striking connections to other concepts reward more than a superficial reading or moment’s reflection; and were it better known it could contribute usefully to debates about self-knowledge, to diagnosing unquestioned assumptions, to our understanding of Socrates and the origins of philosophical practice, and to our own attempts to live better lives through reason. In showing the significance of Socratic self-knowledge, I wish also to slow the continual dismissal of ancient theories of self-knowledge found among contemporary philosophers of self-knowledge. “For the ancients,” a collection of recent essays begins, “self-knowledge is primarily a goal to be achieved, whereas for the moderns it is mainly a puzzle to be resolved.”<sup>1</sup> This echoes the programmatic opening sentence of *Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity*, now a half-century old:

The topic of this book is not nearly so lofty as its title may suggest. The term “self-knowledge” is used here, not in the Socratic sense, where it refers to something that few are able to attain, but in such a way that a person can be said to have self-knowledge whenever he knows the truth of a statement in which there is reference to himself.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hatzimoysis 2011: 1. Hatzimoysis makes nothing of this difference; none of the thirteen articles in his collection mentions Socrates. The following authors mention Socrates a single time, each treating his view as obvious but not their concern: Bilgrami 2006: 274; Liu and Perry 2012: 221n3; Cassam 2014: 28n1.

<sup>2</sup> Shoemaker 1963: vii.

Indeed, some see the ancient attitudes toward self-knowledge not simply as different from contemporary attitudes but also as somehow less philosophically urgent. A recent review has it that self-knowledge of the contemporary sort “may not be the sort of knowledge with which the Delphic Oracle is concerned, but the whole point of the Delphic injunction was that such self-knowledge is *hard*, and philosophers haven’t typically wanted to dispute that.”<sup>3</sup> Self-knowledge has become a thorny problem in the philosophy of mind and the theory of knowledge, with questions of introspection, epistemic warrant, mental transparency, behaviorism, and truth-makers at stake. The ancient texts do not obviously address those questions.<sup>4</sup>

These distinctions between ancient and modern conceptions of self-knowledge rest, however, on doubtful assumptions. The first is that the term “self-knowledge” generally refers to privileged first-person access to present-tense self-directed conscious mental states, especially beliefs reportable in propositional form (e.g., “I think I will enjoy writing that”).<sup>5</sup> That this conception is but one of a range of contemporary views, even within analytic philosophy, can no longer be denied.<sup>6</sup> Even were it the last view standing, the use of “self-knowledge” to name this puzzle in epistemology seems off-kilter, since few people, even philosophers, actually identify the self-directed subset of conscious (“occurrent”) mental states with the “self,” or believe that the ability to express incorrigibly those states exhausts the scope of “knowledge.” Put differently, it is difficult to see why this problem of privileged first-person access to certain conscious states, of all the problems of mind and personhood, should receive the ancient and venerable title of “self-knowledge.” Indeed, the various views of so-called self-knowledge, such as “inner sense” or “inner detection,” seem more apt descriptors of their content.

<sup>3</sup> Smith 2012. Smith does not say what kind of knowledge is the hard kind, why philosophers of self-knowledge are not concerned with the Delphic kind of self-knowledge, or why the “hardness” of Delphic self-knowledge is the injunction’s “whole point.”

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle’s *De Anima* 3.2 may be an exception; see, e.g., Caston 2002.

<sup>5</sup> See Gertler 2011 for a development of this position.

<sup>6</sup> See Moran 2001; Finkelstein 2003; Bilgrami 2006; Gertler 2011’s “rationalist” mode (a conflation of several views); Schwitzgebel 2011; Cassam 2014, as well as much of the practical rationality literature, esp. Velleman 1989; Korsgaard 2009.

A failure to recognize the plausibility, interest, and value of ancient conceptions of self-knowledge is found not only among contemporary philosophers of self-knowledge. Some scholars of ancient philosophy make a related mistake. They assume that the really catchy or modish questions of self-knowledge come out of present-day “psychoanalytic” concerns, which involve “finding oneself” in a self-help, secular, getting-in-touch-with-one’s-emotions fashion. It seems obvious to these scholars that the ancients lacked this therapeutic orientation when they spoke of self-knowledge.<sup>7</sup> And so ancient self-knowledge must, by this logic, be something distinct – presumably rather more austere, impersonal, and theoretical – from this talky and memoiristic vision of self-knowledge. Socratic self-knowledge would then be an extension of ancient epistemology and metaphysics, worthy of study for those reasons but without independent significance.

The popularity of this binary contrast, between putatively psychoanalytic and impersonal views of self-knowledge, has a number of explanations. I mention just two. Readers have often interpreted Plato as a thinker who maintained strict boundaries to the scope of knowledge, such that only changeless and impersonal universals, rather than the concrete and particular contents of human psychology, can be known.<sup>8</sup> Scholars have also assumed that the Delphic precept, given its Apolline context, directs people simply to observe the distinction between men and gods, or between hubris and modesty, and

<sup>7</sup> Annas 1985: 121–125, claims that only the modern view of self-knowledge understands it to be awareness of personal facts, “knowledge of the individual personality,” which is whatever results from “thinking over one’s past actions or by techniques like psychoanalysis,” or from mining the “subconscious” and one’s “unique and subjective point of view.” Johnson 1999: 16, concludes that the *Alcibiades*’ “version of self-knowledge could hardly be farther removed from ... the search for a subjective, personal self that is more a matter for psychoanalysis than philosophy,” for it deals not with “who we are as individuals” or as “inner selves” but with us “as rational creatures.” Rowe 2011: 210, writes that “If there is ‘therapy’ here [in Socratic self-knowledge], it is the ‘therapy’ of the academic tutorial (run by a friendly, beneficent, but finally research-obsessed tutor, who thinks that finding out what the truth is [is] more important than anything else); it is not at all that of the psychiatrist’s – or the psychotherapist’s – couch, and anyone who is tempted to assimilate the latter to Socratic practice has simply not understood Plato or, I would hazard, the original Socrates.”

<sup>8</sup> I note that it is possible to interpret Plato this way and still think he could countenance a richer picture of self-knowledge than the binary assumed by these other authors: see Gerson 2003.

not to engage in some finer-grained self-examination. Unfortunately, even aside from the errors in these two views, assuming this binary contrast overlooks the much richer field of possible views adumbrated by the history of philosophy, and especially twentieth- and twenty-first-century approaches to selfhood, practical rationality, and authenticity. It also depends on the drastically over-simplified assumption that ancient philosophers cared little about personality, interiority, and self-consciousness.

By contrast with this common position against the philosophical importance of Socratic self-knowledge, this book argues for its broad philosophical appeal. I show that Socratic self-knowledge need not depend on controversial, outdated, or unpalatable metaphysical suppositions. It treats the “self” in a nuanced, non-arbitrary, and linguistically familiar way. It sets self-knowledge at the origins of a history of philosophy concerned with living well, orientation toward the truth, and the public debate of reasons for action. And it finds in self-knowledge simultaneously an epistemic, ethical, and practical ideal. Together these reasons suggest Socratic self-knowledge is far from an antiquarian reconstruction; it is a key legacy from the Classical Athenian philosophical period.

### **Some theses about Socratic self-knowledge**

I have just identified the way this book endeavors to show the significance of the study of a self-knowledge associated with Socrates. I now briefly outline the book’s methodological approach and philosophical conclusions. The texts that this book studies coalesce on a certain view of self-knowledge. But those texts do not explicitly state or argue for this view. Rather, they present a range of problems in understanding or pursuing self-knowledge, among them obstacles to obeying the Delphic precept. They also present material for solving these problems, or for removing these obstacles. The solutions usually differ from the way Socrates’ interlocutor in the dialogue starts off thinking about self-knowledge. A fresh and improved way of thinking about it is presented dramatically, or incidentally, or gradually; but hardly ever directly. In this kind of reading of these texts we uncover this better approach to knowing ourselves in perhaps the same way that the interlocutor uncovers it: slowly, tentatively, with eyes on Socrates, and through meditation on it during and after the conversation. This

tentative approach in the Socratic literature might reflect the modesty of the authors, or the imputed modesty of the literary Socrates. But it might also reflect a pedagogical insight. Being given explicit definitions of and instructions for knowing oneself might lead one to assume wrongly the ease of getting self-knowledge, and tasks assumed to be easy often seem, for all intents and purposes, already to have been completed. Leaving the instructions about knowing oneself vague and underdeveloped might have the salutary effect of encouraging some rigorous preparatory interpretative work, which work might itself prepare a person for acquiring self-knowledge.

So it may be expected that Socrates never summarizes or paraphrases his overall insights into self-knowledge, and that he has good reasons for not doing so. It is counter to that wisdom, then, that I paraphrase the view of self-knowledge I believe the texts suggest. But I am not Socrates, and do not imagine I will lead a reader to self-knowledge. For the sake of exposition I offer that Socratic self-knowledge has three faces: a metaphysical, an epistemic, and a practical face. But I do not insist on this classification. I fear that any sharp differentiation would betray the Socratic insight, beyond the obvious problem of importing technical categorization foreign to Socrates' intellectual creativity and holism.

The metaphysical thesis is that Socratic self-knowledge is self-constitution. This means that Socratic self-knowledge is not merely observatory or introspective, not merely an accounting of certain internal elements. While it may involve perception or attention, it also involves practical and determinative work. In responding to the call to know oneself, the respondent defines and endeavors to become a certain kind of self. The effort to know oneself is not simply a matter of struggling to know something that already exists, though the process does include remembering and recalling. This effort comprises, too, the making of oneself into the right sort of thing, namely a thing that happens to be susceptible or obedient to knowledge. Because self-constitution requires deciding what sort of person to become, it is normative, dependent on judgments of what is best. Because self-constitution requires becoming that sort of person, it is personal and engaged, dependent on work on one's particular beliefs, desires, and skills. So self-constitution takes a dual focus, on the general or ideal, on the one hand, and on the particular or factual, on the other. It develops certain judgments, for example about the way to unify

oneself and the best ways to be, and it makes certain observations, for example about one’s goals, realms of understanding, and competencies. It is not a single finely individuated intentional attitude.

The epistemic thesis, really just a reformulation of the metaphysical thesis, is that Socratic self-knowledge is knowledge to the extent that the self becomes a proper object of knowledge. In the Platonic conception – and perhaps his conception merely articulates or extends most common Greek conceptions – we know only stable and perspicuous objects. Thus coming to know oneself requires becoming more stable and perspicuous. The ideal of self-knowledge therefore involves the ideal of stabilization and clarification of oneself.<sup>9</sup>

Half the practical thesis is that Socratic self-knowledge comes about especially in conversation with other people. The other half is that knowing oneself is akin to, even continuous with, knowing someone else. Knowing someone else is a skillful achievement, one that takes self-application and self-work. Knowing oneself operates on a similar model. Socrates, at the end of his long speech in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, urges his friend to dedicate his life single-mindedly to “love accompanied by philosophical talk,” and this wish is Socrates’ articulation of the practical thesis. The relation between the two halves – that self-knowledge comes about through conversation with others, and that self-knowledge is akin to knowledge of others – is explained specifically by the account of self-constitution.

Taking these theses together, this book argues that Socratic self-knowledge means working on oneself, with others, to become the sort of person who could know himself, and thus be responsible to the world, to others, and to oneself, intellectually, morally, and practically.

### **Witnesses to the historical Socrates’ interest in the “Know yourself”**

The historical record shows that Socrates in fact concerned himself with the Delphic injunction *gnôthi sauton*. Many readers assume that his radical revision of Greek moral and human concepts would have led him to understand the charge differently than others did,

<sup>9</sup> This thesis is anticipated by McCabe 1994, esp. 267–269, and Gerson 2003, esp. 46, though both authors focus on *Phaedo* and *Republic*, and Gerson argues, focusing on Plato, that this ideal is achieved only in a disembodied state.

placing a so-called “philosophical” spin on what had previously been either homespun or religious. In this section I canvass the evidence for the historical Socrates’ interest in the precept. We get only hints of that interest’s texture. In the two sections following this one I canvass the evidence for a pre-Socratic meaning or understanding of the precept, both in its use as Sage wisdom and in its inscription at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Only with this evidence could we even attempt to argue for Socrates’ innovation. But the evidence does not bear out this claim to innovation. It in fact shows mainly that the Greeks saw knowing oneself as a profound, deceptively difficult, and self-revising practice. They recognized that the precept did not have a wholly transparent meaning, and that the precept demands interpretation and glossing before one might follow it. Socrates’ deployment of the precept in his conversations very much follows this earlier culture of *gnôthi sauton* veneration and scrutiny. Of course, this continuity is tenuous, since little substantive reflection on the *gnôthi sauton* predates the Socratic period. But this brings us to the same point. The interpretation of Socratic self-knowledge must come largely from the Socratic literature itself. It cannot be determined simply by contrast with prevailing interpretations.

Aristotle wrote that the Delphic “Know yourself” set the tune for Socrates’ “perplexity and search into it” (τὸ γινῶθι σαυτὸν ὃ δὴ καὶ Σωκράτει <τῆς> ἀπορίας καὶ ζητήσεως ταύτης ἀρχὴν ἐνέδωκεν).<sup>10</sup> Aristotle

<sup>10</sup> *On Philosophy* fr. 1 Ross. For ἐνδίδωμι as “set the tune” (rather than simply “set in”), see LSJ s.v. ἐνδίδωμι A.VI and Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1414b20–27: “The exordium is the beginning of a speech, as the prologue in poetry and the prelude in flute-playing; for all these are beginnings (ἀρχαί), and as it were a paving the way for what follows (ὁδοποιήσις τῷ ἐπιόντι). The prelude resembles the exordium of epideictic speeches; for as flute-players begin by playing whatever they can execute skillfully (εὖ ἔχουσι) and attach it to the key-note (συνῆψαν τῷ ἐνδοσίμῳ), so also in epideictic speeches should be the composition of the exordium; the speaker should say at once whatever he likes, give the key-note (ἐνδοῦναι) and then attach the main subject” (tr. Freese 1926). The “it” (ταύτης) surely refers to Socrates’ “perplexity” (ἀπορία) rather than to the “beginning” (ἀρχή) of the search: it would be odd to say that the *gnôthi sauton* set the tune for a search into the beginning of that very search, but quite plausible to say that it puzzled Socrates and gave him reasons – given its charge to “know yourself” – to make sense of (rather than to disregard) that puzzlement. Ross 1952: 78, translates accurately but with, to my ear, morose darkness: “induced in Socrates this mood of uncertainty and questioning.” Guthrie 1971: 151n1, is misleading when he writes that Aristotle is “saying that it [*sc.* the Delphic precept] was the starting point of Socrates’ inquiries

claims that the *gnôthi sauton* did more than introduce Socrates to a life of puzzlement, about self-knowledge at first but then about much else besides. He claims that the inscription provided the tenor for Socrates’ overall puzzlement, and the tenor for the methods Socrates took to resolve it. What is this puzzlement, and what is this search? Elsewhere Aristotle identifies Socrates as noteworthy for his inquiries into the ethical life, good character, and the best ways to talk about them.<sup>11</sup> For Aristotle, then, Socrates’ puzzlement may be about just those matters: ethics, character, and conversation. Aristotle claims that Socrates’ response to the Delphic inscription “Know yourself” colored or inflected all this work. Aristotle’s comment might seem bold, an incisive intellectual biography in a half-dozen words. Yet we might cede Aristotle the grounds for making it. He began his own ethical works in meditation on a temple inscription.<sup>12</sup> He collected precepts and maxims.<sup>13</sup> He wrote in particular about the origins of the Delphic inscription, and believed that Socrates visited Delphi.<sup>14</sup> These last facts, incidentally, give reason to think that Aristotle’s judgment about Socrates came not solely through Plato’s dialogues, given that Plato does not mention any visit to Delphi.<sup>15</sup> That Aristotle’s dialogue *On Philosophy* appears to have a historical and factual character gives further reason to think that Aristotle’s evidence is more than purely literary.<sup>16</sup> All the same, we know so little about Aristotle’s specific

into the nature of man. (ἀπορίας ταύτης there [*sc.* in the passage] refers to the question τί ἀνθρώπος ἐστίν, though this is not made clear by the passage as printed [by Rose or Ross]): Guthrie’s “the nature of man” is really more determinate than the passage, even with the Plutarchian context, allows.

<sup>11</sup> *Metaphysics* 987b1 (τὰ ἠθικά), 1078b17 (τὰς ἠθικὰς ἀρετὰς), *Sophistical Refutations* 183b7.

<sup>12</sup> The *Eudemian Ethics* opens with the maxim inscribed on the Temple of Leto at Delos: “The most just is finest; being healthy is best; most pleasant is to achieve one’s heart’s desire” (*Eudemian Ethics* 1214a7, cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.8, 1099a27–28). See Mikalson 2010: 95–101, for the broader context of philosophers’ interests in inscriptions and dedications.

<sup>13</sup> Searby 1998.

<sup>14</sup> *On Philosophy* frs. 2, 3, 5, 8 Ross.

<sup>15</sup> Plato appears to deny that Socrates left Athens except on military campaign and, according to most manuscripts, once to the Isthmus (*Crito* 52b, *Phdr.* 230c–e). But Diogenes Laertius reports on Ion of Chios’ authority that Socrates visited Samos (DL 2.23), a claim defended by Jacoby 1947: 9–10, and Graham 2008, in particular against Calder 1961, 85, and Woodbury 1971. This suggests that Socrates traveled more than his character in Plato’s works implies.

<sup>16</sup> On the historical character of the dialogue, see Chroust 1975.



understanding of his philosophical grandfather. We may infer only that Aristotle takes Socrates' intellectual journey to have been both founded on and textured by his response to the *gnôthi sauton*, and that this journey concerned itself most notably with investigating the best way to come to and talk about living well. (Proclus repeats this lore 800 years later: Socrates "began his impulse towards philosophy by coming upon the Pythian inscription and considering it to be the bidding, as it were, of Apollo himself.")<sup>17</sup>

Aristotle comments neutrally about Socrates: he gives an intriguing bit of biographical information but does not explicitly endorse Socrates' attitude toward investigation.<sup>18</sup> Our source for Aristotle's comment, however, treats the mere association of Socrates with the *gnôthi sauton* as an endorsement of "knowing oneself." Plutarch is defending his philosophical commitments, and thereby his forebears, against the harsh charges of the Epicurean Colotes (c. 320–after 268). Colotes has claimed that Socrates investigates absurd and trivial matters (*Against Colotes* 1118c). He has laughed at Socrates for "seeking out what a human is" (ζητοῦντα τί ἄνθρωπος ἐστὶ) and for "brashly asserting that he does not know it" (νεανειούμενον ... ὅτι μὴδ' αὐτὸς [αὐτὸν] εἰδείη).<sup>19</sup> Plutarch does not cite Colotes' sources. We might at first suppose that he has read Plato's *Phaedrus*, *Theaetetus*, or *Apology*, but in none of these does Socrates explicitly claim that he seeks out the nature of man and yet does not know it. In any event, Plutarch does not impugn Colotes' fidelity to his sources, or the sources themselves. He makes three other responses.

Plutarch's first response is to argue in several ways for the importance of self-knowledge. Heraclitus presents his having "sought out myself" (fr. 101 DK) as some grand and somnolent (μέγα τι καὶ σέμνον) achievement. Plutarch then relies on his own status as high priest at Delphi to observe that the *gnôthi sauton* "seems the most divine" (θειότατον ἐδόκει) of the Delphic inscriptions. He mentions Aristotle's comment about the centrality of the *gnôthi sauton* to Socrates. He later adds that one could hardly hope to gain knowledge of anything else were

<sup>17</sup> Proclus, *Commentary on Alcibiades I*, 5–6, tr. O'Neill 1971.

<sup>18</sup> Matthews 2003 argues that Aristotle came to value perplexity in philosophy differently than Socrates did. Lear 1988 argues that Aristotle's philosophy culminates in a kind of self-knowledge.

<sup>19</sup> This text, proposed by Pohlenz, is from Einarson and De Lacy 1967, followed by Kechagia 2011: 300.

he to avoid gaining knowledge of the most important aspects of himself. Plutarch’s second response is to reveal the preexisting Epicurean commitment to the investigation of human nature, and thereby to charge Colotes with hypocrisy or crass ignorance. Plutarch notes that Epicurus writes and talks about the “being of soul and the origins of the human race” (περὶ οὐσίας ψυχῆς καὶ τοῦ ἀθρώου τῆς καταρχῆς). Since the soul is the most authoritative principle of the human, a search into the soul amounts to a search into human nature. So Epicureans must themselves value seeking out what a human is. Plutarch’s third response is to point out that Colotes should have recognized the difficulty in seeking out the nature of soul. His Epicureans claim that the material of soul is something hot, breathy, and airy, but when it comes to accounting for its functions, that by which it “judges, remembers, loves, hates – how, in sum, it reasons and calculates,” they plead that there is no name for it. No doubt this may be so, but their silence shows their confusion, and thus the ubiquitous challenge for all those seeking to discover the nature of the soul, and by extension, what a human is.

Plutarch concludes, *contra* Colotes, that Socrates should seek himself (ζητῶν ἑαυτόν), that Colotes’ philosophical commitments entail his accepting the value in doing so, and that there should be no surprise if Socrates claimed not yet to have finished the task. Of course, Plutarch’s argument rings strongly forensic. He conflates, without argument, knowing what a human is with knowing oneself and knowing the material basis of the soul. But the confidence and urgency of his responses to Colotes, and more importantly Colotes’ focused choice of charges, show that the search for self-knowledge had become emblematic of Socrates.<sup>20</sup>

Both Aristotle and Colotes came of age decades after Socrates’ death, and so they may have come to know of him, and his supposed commitment to following the *gnôthi sauton*, only through the prisms of the Socratic circle’s reports – and those of its opponents. But one witness to Socrates’ interest in self-knowledge could have known him directly, sharing nearly thirty years of an Athenian adulthood with him.

<sup>20</sup> On the Epicureans’ particular interest in Socratic self-knowledge, see Riley 1980; Kleve 1983; Long 1988; Brouwer 2008. On Colotes’ use of Socratic ignorance to settle contemporary scores, see Vander Waerdt 1989: 253–259; Ioppolo 1995, 98–106; Warren 2002.