Socrates and Self-Knowledge

In this book, the first systematic study of Socrates' reflections on self-knowledge, Christopher Moore examines the ancient precept "Know yourself" and, drawing on Plato, Aristophanes, Xenophon, and others, reconstructs and reassesses the arguments about self-examination, personal ideals, and moral maturity at the heart of the Socratic project. What has been thought to be a purely epistemological or metaphysical inquiry turns out to be deeply ethical, intellectual, and social. Knowing yourself is more than attending to your beliefs, discerning the structure of your soul, or recognizing your ignorance – it is constituting yourself as a self who can be guided by knowledge toward the good life. This is neither a wholly introspective nor a completely isolated pursuit: we know and constitute ourselves best through dialogue with friends and critics. This rich and original study will be of interest to researchers in the philosophy of Socrates, selfhood, and ancient thought.

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To the memory of Leah K. Horowitz

ἐστι καὶ χαλεπώτατον, ὥσπερ καὶ τῶν σοφῶν τινες εἰρήκασιν, τὸ γνῶναι αὑτόν, καὶ ἥδιστον … ὥσπερ οὖν ὅταν θέλωμεν αὐτοὶ αὑτῶν τὸ πρόσωπον ἰδεῖν, εἰς τὸ κάτοπτρον ἐμβλέψαντες εἴδομεν, ὁμοίως καὶ ὅταν αὐτοὶ αὑτοὺς βουληθῶμεν γνῶναι, εἰς τὸν φίλον ἰδόντες γνωρίσαιμεν ἄν.

Aristotle

Full souls are double mirrors, making still
An endless vista of fair things before
Repeating things behind

George Eliot

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Preface

The promise of self-knowledge

Philosophy has long assumed self-knowledge to be a path to happiness; but it has for just as long wondered why this might be. Some of the puzzlement devolves from self-knowledge's parent concepts. We still wonder why selfhood – personal unification and perseverance – might do us any good; and we still wonder why knowledge – truth directing our beliefs and actions – might serve us better than belief. Yet many of our anxieties about self-knowledge have their own origin. Self-knowledge introduces its own paradox, its own urgency, and its own temptation to complacence. A paradox, because we as subjects must become at once our own objects, neutral observers, and active participants. An urgency, because if we suspect that neither science, politics, nor perhaps even religion will cure our unhappiness, we might suspect that our salvation lies somewhere closer to ourselves. And a temptation, because nothing seems easier than recognizing ourselves, our nearest and most constant companion, and thus we risk always presuming more progress in our task than we really have made. Western philosophy since Thales and Heraclitus – and freshly in the past quarter century – has made serious study of self-knowledge: its avenues, its limitations, and its charms. But this study has not come to completion. In particular, the study *of* its study has only begun.

It is in this belief that I write *Socrates and Self-Knowledge*. This book contributes to the history of the philosophy of self-knowledge, and thus to the philosophy of self-knowledge itself. It does so defined by two boundaries. First, it concerns a self-knowledge that is associated historically with the name Socrates by people proximate to the historical Socrates. It is the self-knowledge that might even be said to define the image of Socrates in the Greek and subsequent imaginations. Second, it treats the self-knowledge specifically posited through Greek attempts to understand the precept "Know yourself," a precept

they took seriously as a wisdom worthy of the Sages and as inscribed at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. It is the knowledge of oneself defined as these practical contexts require, not as whatever we or others have anachronistically chosen to count as self-knowledge. Thus the following study differs from a study of other classical ideas of self-knowledge (e.g., as Aristotelian or Platonist or Stoic) and from a study of self-knowledge as a construct of modern epistemology retrojected on the past. It addresses instead how Socrates, as a key figure of Greek philosophy, talked about trying to obey the precept *gnôthi sauton*. Of course Socrates' attempts at obedience to the precept, as authors of Socratic literature had him discuss, directed his mind toward knowledge and selfhood as such, as well as much else in what we now consider Greek philosophy. Indeed, Aristotle plausibly claims that obedience to the precept occasioned Socrates' entire intellectual project. All the same, while judging where to delimit the study betokens subjective considerations – the compactness of exegesis, the avoidance of the impossibly difficult questions – I try anyway to focus on just those questions most immediately and pressingly raised by Socrates' response to the injunction.

These two restraints on the shape and size of this project – the Socratic aspect and the precept aspect – may both sound odd, fluid, even incoherent. In the remainder of this preface I shall try to make them sound more plausible.

A "Socratic" account

This book studies Classical-era views of self-knowledge associated with the name Socrates. The real man with that name, Socrates of Alopece, citizen of Athens (469–399 BC), as Aristophanes and Aristotle appear to show us, really did judge self-knowledge worth pursuing and discussing. Plato's dialogues and Xenophon's *Memorabilia* probably corroborate this historical observation. Their works, submitted to an audience who knew the real Socrates either socially or by reputation, animate a Socrates speaking constantly of "knowing yourself" and engaging interlocutors on topics of inward examination, selfhood and soul, cognition and reflexivity, and other matters related to the problems and rewards of self-knowledge. Thus we have good reason to suppose that the historical Socrates had thoughtful, articulated, and even elaborated or definitive beliefs about self-knowledge.

Unfortunately, we know practically nothing about the details of these beliefs; time and the constraints of genre have obscured their content, grounds, and implications. Aristophanes' *Clouds* aims overtly for parody; Aristotle's remarks, probably from his dialogue *On Philosophy*, survive only in minute fragments. Other good sources of information, for example the works of Phaedo or other contemporary Socratics, have disappeared almost completely. While Plato and Xenophon wrote thousands of pages about Socrates, they lack the fidelity to facts appropriate to journalists and the explanatory care proper to historiographers. These works may report, in the course of their fictive reconstructions, much truth about Socrates' views of self-knowledge; but we cannot readily perceive the parts that reveal the thoughts he really had or would commit himself to.

Our dark window onto the historical man named Socrates, son of Sophroniscus, blurs his intellectual positions. But there remain intellectual positions linked to Socrates worthy of study. Fourth-century authors depicted characters called Socrates with express and implicit beliefs articulated with a provocative degree of definition. Granted, we cannot know to what degree any literary Socrates represented accurately the historical Socrates. But we may suppose them to have been more than coincidentally synonymous. However fictional, they point somehow at Socrates himself and his defining principles.

They point in a roundabout way, crookedly, and with intermediation; this is one clear result of the scholarship on the "Socratic Problem." Some authors of Socratic literature surely strove to recreate the Socrates they knew or remembered. Others, who may hardly have known Socrates but who still prized robustness and plausibility in their representation, may have worked from the memories of friends and the depictions of other authors, endeavoring to correct for those authors' biases or argumentative restrictions. Yet others would have depicted Socrates apologetically, polemically, stereotypically, or generically. It is a truism that the supposedly Socratic beliefs these authors burnished tell us as much about the authors themselves as about the son of Sophroniscus. But these near-contemporary authors of Socratic literature lived in an intellectual and literary milieu deeply impressed by the historical Socrates and by men themselves deeply impressed by the historical Socrates, and they wrote with a consciousness of this milieu and their likely readers and critics. No author could simply depict a man of their choosing who happened to go by the name

Socrates. Each literary Socrates refers ultimately, however indirectly and partially, to some historical element of Socrates, through either the intellectual society to which Socrates contributed, or the allegiances into which his students divided, or the literary conventions writers of Socratic literature followed, or any number of other possible avenues.

Many of the extant depictions of Socrates treat the questions of self-knowledge. This fact might seem an accident of papyrus deterioration. Plato swamps our sample with his grand and excellently preserved oeuvre and obvious interest in epistemology and metaphysics. But perhaps Plato typifies a common practice of depicting Socrates talking about self-knowledge. In any case, Plato and Xenophon do develop such ideas at length, Plato doing so explicitly on many occasions.

Thus this book studies a number of Platonic dialogues and one Xenophontic text for their Socrateses' beliefs about self-knowledge. I say "Platonic" because several dialogues of interest, including *First Alcibiades*, *Rival Lovers*, and *Hipparchus*, have weathered heavy skepticism about their authorship. This book therefore approaches these texts as discrete literary and philosophical productions, not primarily as revelatory of Plato's views about Socrates. Even in so doing, it finds remarkable similarities in the ideas about self-knowledge associated with their respective Socrateses. This is despite the differences among the texts' descriptive, protreptic, analytic, or defensive goals. These similarities justify speaking of a relatively constant set of "Socratic" ideas about self-knowledge, even against hermeneutic worries about identifying a single "character" called Socrates across this range of works. That there might be such a relatively constant set of "Socratic" ideas about self-knowledge should hardly sound strange; we readily accept a core of Socratic ideas about method (constant questioning), attitude (irony and enthusiasm), virtue (its supremacy and intellectual inflection), and sociality (a deep interest in his friends' and neighbors' wellbeing). This book shows that certain ideas of self-knowledge, in part because of their connections to these other ideas, and probably in part too because of the historical Socrates' marked interest in them, remain relatively stable across these works.

For all these plausibility arguments, not much of philosophical importance ultimately depends on the constancy of these ideas across works. Nor do I argue that consistency in the Socratic literature points, as an overlapping consensus, to the actual beliefs of the historical

Socrates. It very well may, but other explanations could account for that consistency. Further, I do not insist on the robustness of this claim, that these ideas really are completely similar. Should the accounts in various of Plato's works strike the reader as incompatible, the reader should consider the explication and discussion of each work on its own terms, and should treat the book as an analysis of several admittedly distinct but individually provocative views of self-knowledge. For this sort of skeptical reader, my attempts to show commonalities across those views should be received as little more than attempts at narrative coherence. For the more sympathetic reader, however, I hope to contribute to Socratic studies while also contributing to the philosophy of self-knowledge.

A response to the "Know yourself"

I have said that this book studies just those texts where Socrates talks about the precept "Know yourself" (*gnôthi sauton*). He does so in the Platonic *Charmides*, *Alcibiades*, *Phaedrus*, *Philebus*, *Protagoras*, *Rival Lovers*, and *Hipparchus*, in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 4, and implicitly in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. Across those works Socrates asks what the precept means, offers it as the best maxim of action to follow, claims to follow it himself, says it diagnoses a common failing, equates it with some of the cardinal virtues, and frequently identifies it as a propaedeutic to education. His remarks make clear that the precept's privileged position in moral life was universally endorsed by the Greeks but that they lacked a settled consensus about its meaning. Socrates suggests that the Greeks, in the best of circumstances, kept open the question of its implication, and of the implications of its constituent parts – whatever counts as "yourself" and whatever counts as "knowing" or "recognizing" (*gignôskein*) it. This openness was not just toward academic concept-analysis but toward this precept's legitimate action-guiding significance.

An important interpretative hypothesis, one I try to vindicate in each chapter, is that the dialogues where Socrates speaks of the *gnôthi sauton* provide material for understanding the Socratic interpretation of the injunction. References to the precept, I hold, do not simply show the speaker's fondness for cliché, idiom, or mild correction. They are not merely part of the dramatic by-play. We have many reasons, most from within the literary works themselves, to take such references as

crucial to the incident and argument of those works. When we give them the weight their authors allow them, even if they do so subtly and quietly, we see the way the conversation, argument, and thematic progress inform and are informed by the charge to "know yourself." In any particular case the work as a whole might include material helpful for discerning what the precept is thought to demand, what route an effective response might take, and by what criteria that response might be judged successful.

Following Socrates' discussions of the Delphic precept fulfills two desires a student of self-knowledge might have. First, it helps tell us what occasions a concern for the study of self-knowledge. Of course, self-knowledge might simply seem fascinating, or a logical conundrum, or manifestly, even existentially, important. But I suspect that only within a complex historical context would it seem any of these; and only within those contexts could one fix a referent of this term "self-knowledge." The context for the Greeks would be the precept's concrete and traditional moral authority and thus the normative pressure to follow it. Perhaps this context is no less foreign or arbitrary than the context that spurs on research for contemporary philosophers, a context of journal articles and familiar paradoxes and the imperatives of tenure and professional success. But the Greek context of the precept, of Sage and Delphic-Panhellenic wisdom, has the chance of fitting in more broadly and snuggly with the everyday life and moral imagination of those who listened to it. Second, following Socrates' discussions of the *gnôthi sauton* lets us define the content of "self-knowledge" as only what could be interpreted as what the precept demands, given its particular role in Greek life, and thus as other than a conundrum of epistemology or metaphysics, as impressive as that conundrum may be. Part of knowing yourself would then include interpreting the meaning of "knowing yourself," which would include not only investigating the concepts "knowing" and "self" but the purposes behind the promulgation of the precept.

This procedure, studying self-knowledge only in the context of specific references to the *gnôthi sauton*, does force aside texts canonical in understanding ancient self-knowledge. I feel the strongest regret at leaving aside Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Republic*, and Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 3. (I discuss the *Protagoras*' reference to the *gnôthi sauton* in another publication (Moore 2015a). But as the concept of self-knowledge blends readily into the concepts of knowledge and

self-improvement, a study of self-knowledge would soon become even more a study of the central questions of philosophy than it already must be. Such a study would demand too much from this author, and perhaps even from its readers. This book may succeed in its narrower ambit when its readers find in it cause to think again about self-knowledge with Socrates.

Acknowledgments

I tremble to take for an authorial model Marcus Aurelius, who recognized those by whom, and their characteristics by which, he came to learn to live, and thus to write. Luckily, following his lead publicly would be too awkward; this book is about ancient self-constitution, not my own. Yet I am not wholly relieved from the task. I really must mention six women without whom, even had this book been written, *I* could hardly be considered the author:

my mother: from whom my greatest good fortune comes;
my friend Leah: in the memory of whose most serious examination of self and others – including me – I wrote and rewrote every page;
my first professor at Dartmouth, Nancy Jay Crumbine: from whom I learned to talk about my education, and what is beyond myself, and also about Socrates;
my philosophy graduate advisor, Sandra Peterson: from whom I learned to write the history of philosophy, and who demonstrated an orientation to this profession I could find comfortable;
my classics graduate advisor, Elizabeth Belfiore: from whom I came to understand the meaning, promise, and ethic of rigorous scholarship; and
my wife, Kate Baldanza: from whom I have faced the truest Socratic interrogation about matters of deepest significance, and have discovered it to be filled with unimaginable fellowship and glee.

My debts for the book itself may be cited with less diffidence. I owe the topic to Josh Kortbein, my most companionable classmate, who each afternoon in graduate school brought me to the actually urgent questions of philosophy; he sketched those of self-knowledge with greatest vigor and color. Some years later, during the imagination, composition, and revision of the manuscript, Vincent Colapietro was my most genuine and constant interlocutor, and Chris Raymond talked with me joyfully about Socratic studies and read several chapters. My

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As I finished writing this book's index, my son, Solomon, entered the world. He has much yet to know of himself, and of what is good. Should the present study have taught me anything, it is to hope that by knowing the one he might know the other, and that by my care, conversation, and companionship he – and I – might be nudged just a little closer to that knowledge.