

Gnōthi sauton — “Know Thyself”

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Greek Spelling, Roman Transliteration, English Translation

- γνῶθι σαυτόν (or without contraction, σεαυτόν — σαυτόν blends the epsilon into the alpha-upsilon sound)
- *gnōthi sauton* (or *seauton* — “au” as in “ouch!”)
- “Know thyself” (*gnōthi*, a command form, = “get to know,” “become acquainted with,” “learn [about],” “know”)

Basic Information

- Conventionally treated, along with *mēden agan* (“Nothing to excess!”), as a defining catchphrase of ancient Greek culture and thought
- Said to have been inscribed, along with *mēden agan*, onto the wall of the forecourt of Apollo’s temple at Delphi
- Traditionally attributed to, among others, Chilon of Sparta (ca. 550 BCE) — older certainly than either Socrates or Plato, with whom the saying is, nevertheless, closely associated

Mini-Essay

In the 1999 film *The Matrix*, there is a scene in the apartment of the character known as the Oracle. Above her kitchen door hangs a plaque with the following inscription, “Nosce te met,” which Latinists will recognize as a translation of *gnōthi sauton*, Greek for “Know thyself,” from the temple of Apollo at Delphi. The fitness of the proverb in that spot is fairly obvious. Ancient petitioners seeking guidance from Apollo (through his mouthpiece, a priestess called the Pythia), needed first to know themselves before they could really assimilate whatever destiny the god at Delphi would lay out for them. Just so, Neo, whose name is an anagram for “the One” — in a sense the savior destined to rescue humanity from the technology tyrannizing over it — must know himself first before he can understand the full significance of any oracle delivered him by the char-

acter so named in the movie. Or, as Socrates would put, “the unexamined life is not worth the living” (Plato *Symposium*).

As originally written, the saying *may* have looked something like this — archaic alphabet, backwards writing, etc., sort of a guess:



This saying, which neither Socrates nor Plato came up with originally, plays an important part in the Socratic writings (writings in which Socrates plays a starring role) not just of Plato but of other Socratics (authors who were students, followers, admirers of Socrates) like Xenophon and Aeschines Socraticus. The saying is important especially in the philosophy of Socrates, to the extent that his philosophy can be reconstructed at all. (Socrates wrote nothing but versions of Aesop’s fables.) For Socrates, the beginning of all knowledge, the most important knowledge to be pursued, was *self*-knowledge. As for Socrates’ *own* self-knowledge, the most important thing that he knew was that he knew nothing. He could, therefore, boast (and the Delphic Oracle seconded him) of being wiser than anyone else: no one he knew was as willing as himself to own up to the profound ignorance afflicting human beings. To face one’s ignorance honestly becomes, therefore, the beginning of true knowledge. So, for instance, in Plato’s *First Alcibiades*, the title character, impatient to enter politics, is forced to admit his poor preparation and general ignorance — his need to unlearn the ignorance of the many, to seek out the wisdom of the few.

This theme of self-knowledge vividly comes to life in Greek tragedy. In Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, the chorus declares that Zeus “has laid it down as law: from suffering, knowledge.” In Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, tragic events unfold as the title character gradually discovers the horrible truth of his own identity. Thus Oedipus the arrogant tyrant can see with his eyes but can see nothing of the truth. Traveling to Delphi to seek the Oracle’s guidance, he understands not a word of it — he knows not yet himself. But when he finally faces the truth of his past, that truth, too terrible to behold, prompts him to gauge out his eyes. A humbler but wiser Oedipus, he abdicates his throne and heads into self-imposed exile.

Paradoxically, self-knowledge must be gained through others. Thus in Plato’s *Symposium* and *First Alcibiades*, one’s beloved provides one with a window into the one’s self, the self one sees mirrored in the adoring looks of one’s beloved — those spiritual qualities, in other words, that one’s beloved is drawn to. But that only underscores the paradox

of self-knowledge, which is never simply knowledge of the self, but of the self in relation to others.

See also <https://www.binghamton.edu/cnes/classical-studies/greek.html>