

KNOW THYSELF

According to legend, the Seven Wise Men of Greece met at the oracle at Delphi and put up these two words: *Know Thyself*. It is difficult to know oneself in part from the heart and in part from the mind. The heart makes it difficult to know oneself from excessive self-love or the disordered desire of one's own excellence. And on the side of the mind, the difficulty arises because what is most of all yourself cannot be sensed or imagined, and because you are too close to yourself, and because you lack a measure whereby to know yourself. (The perfect, says Plato, is the measure of the imperfect).

Since these words are a very wise exhortation, but said with the brevity of wisdom, it is necessary to unfold their wisdom for us dimwits. We can begin to unfold their wisdom by asking to whom these words are addressed. They are addressed to someone who is able to know himself, but does not know himself (or does not know himself well), and who should know himself.

They are addressed then to man, not to a beast or to a separated substance, like an angel or God. For the beast is not able to know himself,¹ and a separated substance knows first and most of all itself. But man is able to know himself, but does not know himself (or know himself well), and yet has great need to know himself (as we shall see).

But we could also say that these words are more addressed to the soul of man than to his body. For the body cannot know what a body is. And although the soul knows more the body than itself, it is also able to know itself. And this is very important, as we shall see.

¹ George MacDonald, *The Princess & Curdie*, Puffin books, p. 70: "Now listen. Since it is always what they *do*, whether in their minds or their bodies, that makes men go down to be less than men, that is, beasts, the change always comes first in their hands - and first of all in the inside hands, to which the outside ones are but as the gloves. They do not know it, of course: for a beast does not know he the is a beast, and the nearer a man gets to being a beast the less he knows it."

Finally, we could say that these words are addressed especially to the reason of our soul. For this is the only part of man or of our soul that is able to know itself even though it rarely does so or hardly does so well. And the importance of this will be seen better later.

Thus, in this exhortation, we are urged to pursue a knowledge of man that is *a knowledge of man* in both senses, and a knowledge of the soul that is *a knowledge of the soul* in both senses, and a knowledge of reason that is *a knowledge of reason* in both senses (just as wisdom is the knowledge of God in both senses of *the knowledge of God* as Aristotle explains in his Proemium to Wisdom).

Socrates in the *Charmides* stretches the meaning of the exhortation of the Seven Wise Men, giving something like what is in the exhortation. Instead of a knowledge where the knower and the known are the same, he considers pursuing a knowledge which is of itself. Logic is in one way a knowledge of itself. In geometry, we define square and circle and many other things. But in logic, we define definition itself. This is in a way, but not simply, a definition and knowledge of itself. A say not simply because the definition of definition tells us in general what a definition is, whether it be of square or definition or anything else. It is not a definition of the definition of definition in particular. And in logic we make a statement about statement: a statement is speech signifying the true or the false. Again, this is a statement about statement in general. And in the *Analytics*, Aristotle seeks a reasoned out knowledge of reasoned out knowledge (in general). In the *Phaedo*, Socrates urges his friends to pursue an art about arguments, and this is logic. A knowledge of itself in this sense is before the rest of philosophy.

Having seen to whom the exhortation of the seven wise men is addressed, the unfolding of its wisdom naturally falls into three parts.

There are many reasons why man should know himself.

It is worthwhile for man to know that he is an animal that has reason or understanding. One is knowing a little universe, a microcosm as Democritus called man. Because he is an animal with understanding, man is the highest of the animals (the crown of the material world) and the lowest of the understanding substances. He is on the horizon of the material and the

immaterial worlds whence he seems to be the universe in miniature. Thus it is worthwhile knowing what man is for its own sake.

A second reason why man should know himself is that only in this way can he know his chief good and natural end or purpose. Only when man knows himself to be an animal with reason can he know his own act and hence his own end. Knowing this end is knowing the reason for his whole life and is the starting point for all thinking about how to live so as to achieve one's natural end and therefore one's true end. Shakespeare touches upon this reason in his exhortation to use reason.

Moreover, if there is truth in Polonius' advice to Laertes:

This above all: to thine own self be true
And it must follow as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

How can one be true to oneself without knowing oneself?

A third reason why man should know himself is to recognize that he is a social animal who needs to come from a family, and live in a city, and have friends. Hence, he will see the importance of opposing whatever is contrary to the good of the family or the good of the city or to friendship.

A fourth reason why man should know himself to be an animal with reason is to come to know the first road he must follow in all his knowledge. This is the natural road in his knowledge. Since man is an animal, he has senses. But he is an animal that has reason. Hence, although what is generic comes first in time and generation so that man's knowledge begins with his senses, it does not stop there but continues into his reason which first thinks about what he senses. Thus, the natural road for man in knowing is from the senses into reason.

The above four reasons touch upon the importance and necessity of man knowing what he is – an animal with reason. But a man also needs to know himself individually, what he is by individual dispositions, by custom and by choice.

When Aristotle, in the second book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is giving three rules for acquiring virtue, he states that we must consider to what vice or

extreme we are individually inclined so we can bend in the opposite direction. This is one very important reason why man needs to know himself individually. The Seven Wise Men of Greece are said also to have put up the words *Nothing too much* at Delphi. How can one know how much is too much for oneself if one does not know oneself?

It is also very necessary for a man to know himself individually in order to acquire knowledge. Hesiod had given the distinction of men in regard to knowing. Some men can discover great things by themselves. (I call them the “wits”.) Other men can learn these great things from their discoverers. (I call these men the “dimwits”.) And some men can neither discover the great things by themselves, nor learn them from those who have. (I call these men the “nitwits”.) This is a distinction repeated by Aristotle, by St. Basil, by Thomas Aquinas, by Machiavelli, and by many others. It is terrible when a dimwit thinks himself to be a wit and tries to discover by himself what he can only learn from another.

The sophist and the philosopher differ from each other by their choice of life. And moral virtue and vice are habits of choosing or with choice. Thus, it is very necessary to know what we are by choice.

Custom has an enormous influence upon what we think and how we think and how we live. Thus it is very important to know what we are by custom or what are the customs that help or hinder us in thinking and living.

Yet other reasons might be given why is it important and necessary for man to know himself, but the above is enough for now to begin to see the wisdom of the exhortation of the Seven Wise Men of Greece.

Socrates thought that not knowing yourself is next to madness:

He (Socrates) thought that the closest thing to madness was not to know yourself and to think and assume that you know what you do not know.²

And Shakespeare speaks of the fool as not knowing himself:

Ay, but that fool knows not himself.³

² Xenophon (434 B. C - 355B.C.), *Recollections of Socrates*, Bk. 3, Ch. 9, n. 6

Hence, Socrates thought he needed to know himself before he tried to know other things:

Socrates: I am not yet able to know myself, as the Delphic inscription says, so that it seems laughable when still ignorant of this to consider other things.⁴

And Heraclitus said:

I have sought out myself.⁵

As we said in the beginning, this exhortation is addressed more to the soul of man than to his body. For the body cannot know itself, but the soul (of man) can know itself as well as the body. However, it is very difficult for the soul to know what it is, as we can see from the first book *About the Soul* (the *De Anima*) by Aristotle. The soul must be known through its powers or abilities. And these must be known through their acts. And these must be known through their objects. And each step in this long discourse is difficult. As Heraclitus said:

One would not find in going the ends of the soul, having traveled every road; so deep is the reason it has.⁶

The first reason why a knowledge of the soul is necessary is to understand living bodies. For the soul is the first cause of life within such bodies.

Another reason why it is useful to know the soul and its parts or abilities is for ethics. The virtues and vices studied there are in different parts or powers

³ *Troilus & Cressida*, Act II, Sc. 1

⁴ Plato (427B. C. - 347B.C.), *Phaedrus*, 229E-230A

⁵ Heraclitus, DK 101

⁶ Heraclitus, DK 45

of the soul. Hence, a full understanding of the virtues and vices requires a knowledge of the powers they perfect or pervert.

And a knowledge of the acts of reason acquired in the study of the soul is a foundation of logic. For logic is the art that directs the acts of reason. Hence, it is necessary to know these acts through a knowledge of the soul and its powers.

And a knowledge of the soul in its highest and immaterial powers (universal reason and the will) is the opening to get a glimpse of the immaterial world. For the separated substances, and God himself, have understanding and will. Without a knowledge of these higher powers of the soul, the door is closed to us of any understanding of the things better than man.

There may be other reasons why it is necessary for the soul to know itself, but the above four reasons are enough to see the great wisdom of the exhortation to know oneself.

We also noted in the beginning that this exhortation could be directed to one part of the soul in particular, our reason. For reason is the only part of the soul that can know itself.

It is good for reason to know what reason is. For reason is something godlike as Shakespeare says in his *Exhortation to Use Reason*. And it is reason that puts man above all the other animals. So reason is something noble to know for its own sake.

Moreover, we need to use reason for many reasons. But knowing what reason is helps us to use it. For we define reason by its act (just as every ability is defined by its act); and the act of reason is its use. Hence understanding what it is to use reason will help us to use reason.

Shakespeare defines reason as reason as the ability for large discourse, looking before and after. Once we see that reason is defined by order or before and after, we can distinguish the knowledge of reason by the distinction of the order which it considers. For some knowledge of reason is about an order not made by reason, such as natural philosophy is about the order made by nature. And some knowledge of reason is about an order made by reason. Thus logic is

about the order made by reason in its own acts, and ethics is about the order made by reason in the acts of our will, and the servile arts are about an order made by our reason in some kind of matter.

And once we know that reason looks before and after, we can see why wisdom, the highest perfection of reason, is especially about order. *Sapientis est ordinare* as the Philosopher teaches us in his *Proemium to Wisdom*.

Further, if we do not know what reason is, we cannot know what our soul is or what man is. And the importance of knowing the latter has already been seen.

But it is also necessary for our reason to know itself individually as well as what it is. And it was Socrates who especially pointed out and showed that most men thought they knew what they did not know. And many thinkers think they do not know what they do know. Now whether our reason thinks it knows what it does not know or thinks it does not know what it does know, in either case it does not know itself. And since the discourse of reason should go from what it truly knows to investigate what it does not know, either confusion hinders the discourse of our reason and prevents it from coming to know. Heraclitus had also seen how men make the mistake of thinking they know what they do not know:

The many do not understand such things as they meet with, nor in learning do they know, although they seem so to themselves.⁷

For the most approved knows, defends what seems; and surely justice will seize the makers and witnesses of falsehoods.⁸

APPENDIX

Socrates says (in the *Phaedrus*) that he should know himself before he tries to know others things. And in the *Charmides*, he tries to extend the exhortation to seeking a knowledge of knowledge.

⁷ Heraclitus, DK 17

⁸ Heraclitus, DK 28

But can there be a knowledge of itself for man? Can there be a knowledge which is about itself?

In one sense, this seems possible and in another impossible.

Consider the definition of definition. One can not only define square and many other things, but also definition itself. But the definition of definition *is not* a definition of the definition of definition (in particular). The definition of definition is speech signifying what a thing is. And this definition can be said of the definition of square as much as of the definition of definition. Both the definition of square and the definition of definition are a definition. But definition is not what square is.

Or consider that logic is a reasoned out knowledge as well as geometry. But logic is also about what reasoned out knowledge is. Logic then is about what it is *in general*. Geometry is not about what reasoned out knowledge is even though it is one form of reasoned out knowledge. Geometry is about lines, angles and figures. Logic then is more a knowledge of itself. But not in particular.

If logic is a knowledge of what definition is and how to define and a knowledge of what reasoned out knowledge is and how it is acquired, then logic is useful in acquiring itself as well as in acquiring any other form of reasoned out knowledge. In this way, the logician resembles the wise man. He can direct others because logic is more a knowledge of itself than any other reasoned out knowledge.

Just because reason can know what reason is, and the senses and imagination cannot know what sense or imagination is, but reason can; it belongs to reason to distinguish between itself and sense and imagination, and to show the order of them to reason.

If it is true that one cannot rule others if one cannot rule oneself, and one cannot rule oneself if one does not know oneself, it would seem to follow that only what knows itself can rule others. Thus man can rule the beasts and the soul can rule the body, and reason can rule the other parts of man. But the reverse is not possible: for the beast, and the body, and the other parts of man, are not able to know themselves. Can one say also that a knowledge, which is about itself, can be used to direct other kinds of knowledge that are not about themselves? This seems to be true of logic. But is wisdom also in part a

knowledge of what wisdom is? Aristotle would seem in wisdom to distinguish wisdom from the other forms of reasoned out knowledge and all the rest of our knowledge.

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