SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Engelsberg Ironworks
April 25 2019

A SEMINAR ARRANGED BY AXEL AND MARGARET AX:SON JOHNSON FOUNDATION
SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Thursday April 25th 2019
A Seminar Arranged by
Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation
The unexamined life is not worth living, Socrates says in Plato’s Apology.

In this seminar we will examine the meaning of self-knowledge, in the eyes of ancient and medieval thinkers, mystics and philosophers. Our focus might be on ancient Greece, from Heraclitus, the Greek Mystery-schools to Socrates and Aristoteles, but we will also rise above that and take a look at later Christian, Jewish and Islamic thought on self-knowledge. And we will also listen to ancient voices from China and India, telling us about self and non-self, unity and an incomprehensible simultaneous difference.

What self-knowledge means varies from time, culture and thinker. But one also finds some common ground. One such is *mors mystica*, the self has to die and be reborn to become a truer self. Superficial self-knowledge is not enough. Egocentricity doesn’t belong to the realm of deeper self-knowledge. Meister Eckhart, influential fourteenth century Dominican, sums this up neatly when he says: *Examine yourself. And whenever you find yourself, take leave of yourself.*
PROGRAMME

13:00  Kurt Almqvist, President, Ax:son Johnson Foundation
13:05  Moderator: Ulf Wickbom

Self-Knowledge in Greek Thought
13:10  Christopher Moore: Heraclitus and Socrates on Knowing Oneself
13:25  Jan N. Bremmer: Did the Mysteries Produce Self-Knowledge?
13:40  Terence Irwin: Why We Need Friends for Self-Knowledge
13:55  Discussion
14:10  Coffee Break

Self-Knowledge in Classical China and India
14:30  Michael Puett: Making and Unmaking the Self
14:45  Antoon Geels: Self and No Self in Buddhism
15:00  Ravi M. Gupta: When One Becomes Many: Identity and Difference in Vaishnava Hinduism
15:15  Discussion
15:30  Coffee Break

Self-Knowledge in Judaism and Islamic Thought
15:50  Sarah Pessin: Self-Knowledge & the Horizon of Humility in Jewish Thought
16:05  Jari Kaukua: In the First Person – Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy
16:20  Discussion
16:35  Coffee Break
Self-Knowledge in the Medieval Period

16:55 Gwenaëlle Aubry: Self-Consciousness and Self-Knowledge in Plotinus

17:10 James J. O’Donnell: “Grande Profundum Est Ipse Homo”

17:25 Christina Van Dyke: How Can I Know Myself? Practical Advice from Medieval Contemplatives

17:40 Discussion

17:55 Drink

18:30 Dinner
Photo: Painting depicting Plotinus ‘Psychological Conflict’
Self-Consciousness and Self-Knowledge in Plotinus

Gwenaëlle Aubry

Far from being immediate and obvious, the so-called « cartesian » articulation between self-consciousness and self-knowledge is historically constituted. In Platonic philosophy, for instance, the injunction to self-knowledge, the Delphic precept « gnôthi seauton », is dissociated from the ideas of immediate reflexivity and of interiority. More generally, it has been shown that the ancient self was to be found not as much in the dimension of interiority and self-consciousness as in that of exteriority and manifestation.

In this configuration, Plotinus’s position is radically singular. Indeed, Plotinus associates self-knowledge to interiority. More precisely, the condition of self-knowledge is the conversion to interiority. But this interiority is not «subjective», nor, and still less, «intimate». It bears or contains the very principles of reality, from the One-Good to Nature.

The «I», which Plotinus (and this plural is significative) calls the «us», the hêmeis, does have an immediate access to itself; in other words, Plotinus does accept an immediate reflexivity. But, and this is another remarkable point, this self-consciousness is not self-knowledge. First, because it does not give access to an unity, but to the multiplicity which constitutes the hêmeis. Second, because this multiplicity is not essential. Rather, the hêmeis perceives itself as made of multiple powers, of which only one (the intellect or the separate soul) constitutes its essence. This is why self-consciousness is not primarily revelation of the essence, but much rather of the hêmeis ‘s distance from its essence.

This is why one has to distinguish between the subject of self-consciousness (the hêmeis and, along with it, the dianoia) and the subject of self-knowledge (the intellect or separate soul). In other words, one has to distinguish between two modalities of self-knowledge, of which only the second is a real knowledge: indeed, at the level of the intellect, self-knowledge really is coincidence
of the soul with its essence and, beyond it, with the totality of ousia (or with the principal Buddha Intellect). It is those dissociations between self-consciousness and self-knowledge, as well as their consequences for the very conception of the self, that we shall describe, in order to better evaluate Plotinus’s singularity, which makes of him neither yet a «Modern» nor anymore an «Ancient».

GWENÆLLE AUBRY, former student of the Ecole Normale Supérieure and of Trinity College Cambridge, agrégée and doctor in philosophy, is Research Director at the CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research), in Paris. Initially anchored in ancient philosophy (Aristotelian ethics and metaphysics, Neoplatonism), her research, mainly focused on the question of the self and on that of power/potency, extends to contemporary and medieval philosophy (theologies of omnipotence). After having published a translation and commentary of Treatise 53 (I, 1), of Plotinus Enneads (Cerf, 2004), she wrote several studies on the posterity of the Plotinian « hêmeis », and co-edited, with Frédérique Ildefonse, Le moi et l’intimité (Vrin, 2008). She also conducted an archeological inquiry into the constitution of the ontology of power: Dieu sans la puissance. Dunamis et energetia chez Aristote et chez Plotin (Vrin, 2006), followed by Genèse du Dieu souverain. Archéologie de la puissance II (Vrin, 2018). She is co-director of the Collection « Les Écrits de Plotin ».
Photo: Plaque depicting 'Eleusinian Mysteries'
Did the Mysteries Produce Self-Knowledge?

Jan N. Bremmer

When I was a young student, nearly sixty years ago, one never heard about ‘the self’ or ‘selfhood’. It was different with ‘self-knowledge’, which was a familiar expression in my Dutch culture. Apparently, one can have ‘self-knowledge’ without having a clear idea of ‘the self’ or ‘selfhood’. At the same time, this simple example also suggests that ‘self-knowledge’ is not a trans-historical category but may mean different things in different times, depending on time and culture. This historical contingency can also be illustrated by ancient Greece. When we take a close look at Homer’s poems, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which are our oldest surviving Greek texts, we will quickly see that these poems do not have a single word corresponding to our ‘mind’ or ‘soul’. There is a word for the part of man surviving after death (psychê), for intellectual capacity (nous), and various words for emotion (notably thumos), some of which are sometimes represented as physical organs with specific locations in the body, such as the heart, lungs or gall bladder. It is only in the course of the fifth century that we start to find the Greek term psychê, ‘soul’, used as denoting the centre of our consciousness, as the unified self. It is probably not surprising therefore that it is also only in the fifth century that we start to find the famous Greek expression ‘know yourself’ (γνῶθι σαυτόν), just like the word ‘yourself’ (σαυτός) itself, although the latter never in the nominative. However, whereas philologists and philosophers are still debating its precise meaning, it is generally agreed that ‘know yourself’ does not suggest a kind of modern self-searching but rather that one should know one’s place in the order of things, that is, with regards to the gods or your fellow men.

The increasing importance attached to the psychê probably explains why it is a source of concern for a new movement that originated in Southern Italy around 500 BC, and which nowadays is called Orphism. This movement
attached more importance to the soul than its surrounding environment and became prominent in the course of the fifth century, especially in Athens, where we can see that it influenced the *Eleusinian Mysteries*, which had become very prestigious in the course of that century. In my contribution, I will take a closer look at why Orphism and the Mysteries rose to prominence, what roles they played, and what needs they fulfilled.

**JAN N. BREMMER**, born 1944, was the Chair of Religious Studies at the University of Groningen from 1990 until 2010. He has been a guest professor or fellow in Bochum, Christ Church (NZ), Edinburgh, Erfurt, Freiburg, the Getty, Macquarie, Munich, New York, Oslo and Princeton. He mainly works on Greek, Roman and Early Christian religion. Amongst his many publications are *Greek Religion & Culture, the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (2008), *The Rise of Christianity through the Eyes of Gibbon, Harnack and Rodney Stark* (2010) and *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World* (2014).
Photo: Statue of the Buddha
The idea that the self must die and be reborn, *mors mystica*, belongs to the most fundamental concepts of religious mysticism. The question is, then, how the self is defined. In early Buddhism, the texts refer to an empirical self, usually described as five groups (*skandha*) of factors: (material) form, feeling, perception, formation and consciousness. They all bear the stamp of impermanence, suffering, and no self. Generally speaking, man also consists of numerous *dharmas*, ‘factors’ or ‘elements’ that maintain existence as a whole in a permanent flow or stream of consciousness. The main components of the five groups are included in another fundamental Buddhist teaching – the twelvefold chain of dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*), explaining why the human being remains in the long night of *samara*, the cycle of birth and rebirth, and how man can be liberated from it and enter the state of *nirvana*. The practical way thither consists of the noble eightfold path, especially right mindfulness and right concentration, leading to states of meditative absorption (*dhyana*) into emptiness. The Buddhist analysis of emptiness is related to Western contemporary concepts and models, such as the notion that there exists a state of mind called the pure consciousness event. In the concluding part, a model from cognitive psychology is presented, a model that describes the different functions of the ego and how these functions can be inhibited. The psychological analysis is then related to the concept of *mors mystica* in mysticism, especially the notion of emptiness in Buddhism. The experience of ‘no self’ might very well be universal events, reflected upon, processed, and integrated in the texts of world mysticism.
Antoon Geels, b. 1946 in the Netherlands, emigrated to Sweden in 1964, Ph.D., professor emeritus since April 2013, trained in history of religions and specialized in psychology of religion, in which he held a chair at Lund University, Sweden. He also was an honorary professor in the psychology of non-Western religions at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. His primary area of research is the comparative psychological study of mystical experience and mystical techniques. His largest empirical study concerns visionary experience in contemporary Sweden, a study leading to a new psychological theory on religious visions. Another area of interest is the concept *mors mystica* or mystical death in world mysticism. Antoon Geels is the author of more than a dozen books, including *Subud and the Javanese Mystical Tradition* (1997), *Förvandlande ögonblick. Religiösa visioner i dagens Sverige* (Transforming Moments. Religious Visions in Contemporary Sweden, 2001), the comparative study *Berusad av Gud* (Drunk on God, 2002), and *Medvetandets stilla grund. Mystik och spiritualitet i världens religioner* (The Still Ground of Consciousness. Mysticism and Spirituality in the Religions of the World, 2008).

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Photo: Folio from Isarda Bhagavata Purana, 'The Gopis plead with Krishna to return their clothing'.
sad eva saumya idam agra āśīd ekam evādvītyam

In the beginning, this world was simply what is existent – one only, without a second.

So begins what is probably the most famous passage on the nature of the self in Hinduism, from the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (6.2.1). The Upaniṣads, a collection of ancient wisdom texts from India, are convinced that deep down, beneath all the different forms, labels, and categories that we see in our world, reality is in fact unified. There is a fundamental unity of consciousness – the desire to survive, the ability to feel pain and joy, the capacity to know – which pervades all of existence.

But in the very next paragraph, the Chāndogya Upaniṣad says (6.2.3):

tad aikṣata bahu syāṁ prajāyeya iti

“And it [the one] thought to itself, ‘Let me become many. Let me propagate myself.’”

The text immediately tempers its claim of unity by affirming the importance of multiplicity. Indeed, diversity and multiplicity – the desire to become many – is also inherent within reality. The movement from singularity to multiplicity is also enshrined in the text.

And therein lies the fundamental paradox of the Upaniṣads – how do we account for both the unity and multiplicity that is present in our world? Some Vedānta philosophers – those philosophers whose ideas are grounded on the Upaniṣads – have privileged unity at the expense of multiplicity, arguing that the variety we see in the world is only a reflection, a shadow of a reality that is fundamentally simple, formless, and non-relational. Other philosophers have argued that duality is the foundational quality of the world, and unity is a mistaken assumption. This presentation, however, will focus on the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition, which argues that unity and multiplicity are both fully and perpetually inherent in the nature of ultimate reality. Unity and multiplicity
have to be held together in our understanding. And this creates a paradox, a contradiction, a mystery, an inconceivability, that is at the very heart of reality itself.

This inconceivability – acintya, in Sanskrit – is useful in two ways. First, it applies to the relationship between the world and God, or between human beings and God, who are simultaneously one and different. Second, it applies to the wondrous acts of God – his ability to accomplish the impossible and sustain all contradictions within himself. In the end, the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition builds its entire philosophical system around the notion of inconceivability, arguing that the most important characteristic of reality is, indeed, our inability to comprehend it.

Ravi M. Gupta is the Charles Redd Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the Religious Studies Program at Utah State University. He is the author or editor of four books, including an abridged translation of the Bhagavata Purana (with Kenneth Valpey), published in 2017 by Columbia University Press. Ravi completed his doctorate in Hindu Studies at Oxford University and subsequently taught at the University of Florida, Centre College, and the College of William and Mary. He has received four teaching awards, a National Endowment for the Humanities summer fellowship, two visiting fellowships at Oxford, and a book award. He is a Permanent Research Fellow of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies and a past president of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies.
Photo: "The School of Athens" by Raphael
We might naturally think of self-knowledge as the product of self-observation. We learn about a bird or an animal or another person by observing them. Since we are trying to learn about an object in the external world, we try to avoid intervention and manipulation that would conceal or distort features of the object. In short, our attitude is passive, since we want our cognitive state to be determined by the state of the object, and not the other way round.

We might think we can acquire self-knowledge by trying to observe ourselves in the same way, as far as possible. We cannot observe ourselves, however, in exactly the same way as we observe other things and people, since the observed and the observer are the same. Ought we, then, to come as close as we can to our observation of other things and people? To do this, we might try to be as detached and as passive as possible, so that we can observe and report our behaviour and our mental states. To see how we might try to do this, we might read Montaigne’s Essays, where the author looks back on what he has done, recalls how he has behaved and what he has thought in various circumstances, and reports on what he has found. He tries to achieve the detachment that an external observer of his behaviour might achieve.

This is not the only way to think of self-knowledge, however. If I want to know about my mental states, I want to know about my beliefs as well as my desires. If I am asked a question and I ask myself ‘Do I believe this?’, I am apparently trying to achieve some self-knowledge. To find out whether I believe it, I might try to recall whether I have considered the question before, and what I thought about it then. But this appeal to memory and observation is not the only way to answer my question about what I believe. An alternative method is to ask myself what I think the true answer to the question is, by considering the evidence for one or another answer. I am not trying to recall what I thought, but trying to make up my mind.
We can ask a similar question about our desires. If I am looking at a menu, and wonder what to order, I might ask myself ‘Do I want artichokes?’ I might answer this by trying to recall the last time I ate artichokes, to remember whether I liked them or not. This appeal to memory brings me as close as I can get to observational self-knowledge. A question of the same form, however, can produce a quite different sort of reaction. Suppose that I am offered a job that pays a large salary, but involves long hours, work at weekends, and a long journey to and from work each day. I might ask ‘Is that what I want?’ or ‘Do I want this job?’ To answer this question I do not rely on memory of similar situations. I think about whether the money really compensates for all the disadvantages of the new job in comparison with my present situation. My knowledge about what I eventually want is the result of deliberation on the merits of different courses of action. It is not knowledge based on introspection or self-observation. Deliberative knowledge of what I want is analogous to knowledge of what I believe that is based on evidence about the relevant facts.

For convenience we may distinguish observational self-knowledge (when I realize that I don’t want artichokes because I recall that I have never liked them) from normative self-knowledge (when I conclude that I don’t want something because the case against it is too strong). No doubt the difference between the two is more complex than I have made it appear. But if there is some difference of this sort, we can explore some of its implications.

Recognition of the possibility of normative self-knowledge helps us to see the point of some of Aristotle’s claims about self-knowledge and friendship. In his view, self-knowledge is not achieved by observation of oneself in isolation from one’s relations to other people. It requires the presence of other people, but it requires more than their presence; it also requires reciprocal friendship with another for the other’s own sake. In this type of friendship the friend is an alter ego. Aristotle quotes Heracles, who says that his friend is another Heracles. This type of friendship is also necessary for self-knowledge. It is both difficult and pleasant to know oneself, because we cannot view ourselves as clearly as we can view someone else. We are biased towards ourselves either because of excessive goodwill to ourselves or because of emotions that interfere with recognizing our true character, but we can overcome these difficulties through a friend. We can see our own face better by looking at it in a mirror; similarly, the friend who is an alter ego provides a mirror for us.
Aristotle’s argument may not seem immediately persuasive, for several reasons: (1) We might have expected him to say that our friend sees us more clearly than we see ourselves, and therefore helps us to fulfill Robert Burns’s wish that we could see ourselves as others see us. But this is not what he says. He is not thinking of how others see us, but of how we see others. (2) Is he not expecting too much of the friend as alter ego? If I am to learn about myself by observing my friends, must they not be very similar to me? It may seem unrealistic to expect such a high degree of similarity. Moreover, such an expectation might seem to betray a misunderstanding of the point of friendship; for we might expect to value our friends just because they are different from us in many ways. (3) Why is friendship, including concern for the other for the other’s own sake, necessary for the friend to serve as a mirror? Why should I not simply look for someone who is similar in character and personality to myself, whether or not they are my friend? Why would such a person—friend, enemy, or neither—serve as the right sort of mirror?

We can answer these objections on Aristotle’s behalf, once we understand that he is not speaking of observational self-knowledge, but of normative self-knowledge. I acquire normative self-knowledge of my desires by deliberation on the merits of different possible courses of action. In that case I will learn what I really want only if I deliberate correctly. But what can I do to make it likelier that I will deliberate correctly?

This is the point at which friendship becomes relevant. In Aristotle’s view, friends of the best sort share in reason and thought, and especially in practical thought, and therefore in deliberation about what to do. In the best type of friendship each cares about the other for the other’s sake, and therefore deliberates about the good of the other for the other’s sake. They start with the same end in view, and their deliberation is shared. I have a better prospect of reaching the right answer through deliberation if the deliberation is shared with a friend whose outlook I can rely on. The errors that might lead me into deliberative error may be corrected by the contribution of another person who is not subject to the same errors on the same occasions.

Aristotle’s claims about friendship, then, are intelligible if we suppose that one’s friends contribute to one’s normative self-knowledge, rather than one’s observational self-knowledge.

Is normative self-knowledge really an aspect of self-knowledge? If I have
described it correctly, we know ourselves only if we know what is good, because we have the right answer to the normative question ‘What do I want?’ only if we have found out what is worth wanting. This, we might say, is really knowledge of something other than oneself; it is knowledge of the good, which should not be confused with self-knowledge.

No confusion is involved, however, in the claim that normative self-knowledge is self-knowledge. In so far as I seek to form my actual wants by knowledge of what is worth wanting, deliberation tells me what aims and choices I am committed to because of my aim of wanting what is worth wanting. Knowledge of my deliberative commitments is a genuine form of self-knowledge, even though it requires knowledge of more than one’s mental states.

SOURCES:
Aristotle, Magna Moralia ii 15

TERENCE IRWIN is Professor Emeritus of Ancient Philosophy, University of Oxford. He read Literae Humaniores at Magdalen College, Oxford, and received a PhD from Princeton. From 1975 to 2006 he taught at Cornell University. He was Professor of Ancient Philosophy in the University of Oxford from 2007 to 2017. He is a visiting professor at Stanford University. He is especially interested in ancient philosophy, in moral philosophy and its history, and in the philosophy of Kant. He is the author of: Plato’s Gorgias (translation and notes, 1979); Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics (translation and notes, 3rd edn., forthcoming 2019); Aristotle’s First Principles (1988); Classical Thought (1989); Plato’s Ethics (1995); The Development of Ethics, 3 vols. (2007-9); Virtù e obbligo morale (2018). He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a Fellow of the British Academy.
Jari Kaukua: har inte inkommit med något förslag, jag föreslår Avicenna.

Photo: Avicenna, portrait on silver vase
In the First Person: Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy

Jari Kaukua

This talk will depart from the concept of self-awareness (Ar. shuʿūr bi'l-dhāt), which Avicenna (d. 1037 CE) developed in order to address a range of problems related to theological questions concerning human agency and responsibility as well as the psychological substance dualism he endorsed. There are three arguments in which the concept was particularly relevant: the thought experiment known as the flying man, a closely related argument against the explanation of self-awareness through a second-order act of reflection, and a rich version of the so-called Achilles argument, which applies the phenomenological unity of experience as evidence for the psychological unity of the soul. In addition to these arguments, a posthumous collection of notes derived from Avicenna’s teaching bluntly identifies self-awareness with human existence.

It is curious that despite the important argumentative role he ascribes to it, Avicenna never defines his concept of self-awareness. Moreover, the arguments pose considerable demands on the concept – for one, it should be both constant and something we can readily recognise from commonplace experience. It may therefore seem reasonable to ask whether this all adds up in the end. I will argue for the possibility of reconstructing Avicenna’s concept in a way that is phenomenologically plausible and capable of meeting the different argumentative tasks. This is by interpreting the concept as grounded in the abstracted phenomenon of pure subjectivity or first-personality, which is understood as a necessary feature of all mental life and as epistemically primitive, that is, irreducible to any mental content.

Following the reconstruction of Avicenna’s concept of self-awareness, I will briefly survey its reception in the twelfth-century CE, a formative period for subsequent Islamic intellectual history. Although most of the related arguments were subjected to intense critical scrutiny, Avicenna’s concept of self-awareness
was broadly endorsed by a variety of authors. It also found important new applications, especially in the thought of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (d. 1191 CE), the founder of the so-called Illuminationist (Ar. ishrāqī) school of philosophy. As a consequence, the concept has been part of the mainstream of Islamic theology and philosophy down to our time. Perhaps this subsequent success testifies to Avicenna’s acuity in the analysis of human mental life. Although many of his psychological arguments are only valid when accompanied by other, more controversial assumptions, his concept of self-awareness finds significant parallels in contemporary philosophy of mind. Its plausibility is therefore not entirely dependent on its historical context.

JARI KAUKUA is professor of philosophy in the University of Jyväskylä. His research focuses on the Islamic philosophical and theological traditions, especially on the philosophy of Avicenna and its development in the so-called post-classical period. He is the author of Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 2015), which received the Iranian Book of the Year Award for the best book in Islamic philosophy. He is currently leading a research project, funded by the European Research Council, on the developments in epistemology and theory of science in post-classical Islamic thought.
Photo: Socrates statuette.
Heraclitus and Socrates on Knowing Oneself

Christopher Moore

We find the earliest abstract or explicit reflections on self-knowledge in the Western tradition in Heraclitus of Ephesus, who wrote his maxims by the early fifth century BCE, and Socrates of Athens (469–399 BCE), whose thought is recorded from the late fifth century. In both cases the philosopher presents himself as responding to the sage maxim, “Know yourself” (Gnôthi sauton), which was inscribed at the entrance to the Temple of Apollo at Delphi – arguably the most important Panhellenic sanctuary – and thus somehow represented a core Greek value. The present talk addresses the following three issues:

1. What historical context gave rise to these first steps in reflection on self-knowledge?
2. What does “knowing oneself” in these two thinkers amount to, and how does one do it?
3. Can we say that this talk of “knowing oneself” implies some idea of a “self”?

The minor goal of this talk is philological and interpretative, clarifying how these two thinkers contribute to the early history of thinking about self-knowledge. The major goal of this talk is practical and even therapeutic, providing two related approaches to our own (contemporary) efforts at coming to know ourselves.

Contrary to scholarly and popular assumption, we do not know why somebody at Delphi engraved the maxim, “Know yourself,” on the temple. Nor do we even know what the maxim originally meant. But we can take educated guesses at both. In everyday situations, a person would be told to “know himself” as a rebuke after (repeatedly) acting inconsistently with his capacities and fundamental values, ones he should already be aware of. He might, for example,
be complaining that circumstances prevent him from keeping promises; the critic would want him to recognize that the fault is with himself, overpromising despite actually caring that he not wrong those whom he promises. The rebuke is called for when the matter is local and urgent – there is a specific error that could be prevented through closer fidelity to one’s abilities and commitments. Inscribed on a temple, occasioned by no specific transgression, the maxim “Know yourself” comes to treat a general or standing attitude toward oneself as local and urgent. It encourages all readers to realize that their present impulses and opinions are not authoritative simply for being the present ones; they are not for that reason the motivations and assumptions on the basis of which they should act and think. The injunction to “Know yourself” asserts, in effect, that it is proper to oneself to act for reasons – that what it is to be a “self” is to live with principles, and to know oneself is to discover and affix oneself to the right principles. It is less to “find” oneself than to constitute oneself as a self.

The evidence for this view comes from a reconstruction of both Heraclitus’ and Socrates’ views. Relevant information has, for nearly two centuries, been obscured by scholarship that has supposed, mistakenly, that the pertinent fragments or dialogues are inauthentic or superficial. A textual (“source-critical”) recuperation of such material is a prerequisite; I have done this in previous work. Heraclitus’ key passages are his fr. 101 DK, “I searched out myself,” fr. 116, “It belongs to all humans to know themselves and be disciplined [sôphronein],” fr. 114, “Sôphronein is the greatest virtue [etc.],” and several others to be mentioned. Careful study of his use of language suggests that, for Heraclitus, the self is the locus of epistemic agency: the responsibility to inquire and seek to know that on the basis of which one ultimately should act – the logos. Socrates’ key passages are, besides a passage in Aristophanes’ Clouds and in Xenophon’s Memorabilia, several of Plato’s dialogues, the Alcibiades, Charmides, and Phaedrus in particular. We see that, for Socrates, self-knowledge amounts to self-examination, determination of the commitments one holds that can weather continued scrutiny and refutation.

Neither of these ancient views of self-knowledge is a dominant one in contemporary discussions of self-knowledge; and yet, I argue, both should be taken seriously as active contenders.
CHRISTOPHER MOORE is Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Classics, Director of Undergraduate Studies in Philosophy, and Director of the Hellenic Studies Group at the Pennsylvania State University. He previously taught at the University of Texas at Austin and at Skidmore College. He has published two dozen articles and chapters in ancient philosophy and philosophy, focusing on the fifth- and fourth-century Greek thought. His books include *Socrates and Self-Knowledge* (Cambridge, 2015) and *Calling Philosophers Names: On the Origins of the Discipline* (Princeton, 2019); the edited collection *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Socrates* (Brill, 2019); the co-authored *Plato: Charmides. A Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Analysis* (Hackett, 2019); and the co-edited collection *Socrates and the Socratic Dialogue* (Brill, 2018).
Photo: Mehmed II, portrait.
“Know thyself” is a Delpho-Socratic maxim of great power in cultures that make reading the old Greeks their business. The history of its influence down to the high middle ages can be compendiously explored in a work by one professor of the Collège de France, Pierre Courcelle. But in the last decades, our conventional histories of ‘western thought’ and ‘spirituality’ have been replete with moments in which the ‘self’ or ‘the individual’ is ‘discovered’, an implicit advance over the classical and Hellenistic philosophers. ‘The individual’ was discovered in the eleventh and twelfth centuries by one book in 1972, but the ‘inner self’ was discovered by Augustine in another volume of 2000. ‘Interiority’ seems in many recent articles to be a particular province of Augustine’s exploration.

Balanced against that consensus, which largely arises from scholars sympathetic to early Christianity and looking for alignment with modern interests, it is well to bear in mind the words of another professor of the Collège de France, not yet so exalted when he wrote these famous words in 1966: “If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, … as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.” So much for the object of that self-knowledge. But the care of the self – le souci de soi – was the animating phrase of Foucault’s own study of the history of sexuality in Roman Hellenism apart from Christianity but leading up to the age of Augustine. (The newly published fourth volume chronicles les aveux [not les confessions] de la chair.)

The scare quotes I have used above, however, are the ones that we now need to place on those ideas and expressions as we live in a post-western world where the disciplines of cognitive science have made clear how inaccurate most of our traditional language about human beings, human cognition, and human self-description has been. What has been less often discussed so far is how such
advances can and should shape the way we think and speak of ancient figures and especially how we think and speak of them when they think and speak of ‘knowing the self’. The closest we have come is with a third contribution from the Collège de France, that of Pierre Hadot’s work on philosophy as ‘spiritual exercise’, but much remains to be done.

Discussion therefore of these issues for purpose of this seminar will focus on a set of passages in Augustine’s *Confessions* (trans. G. Wills):

4.14.22 *grande profundum est ipse homo, cuius etiam capillos tu, domine, numeratos habes et non minuuntur in te: et tamen capilli eius magis numerabiles quam affectus eius et motus cordis eius.*

*Man is a great abyss. Though you ‘number the hairs of his head,’ missing none, yet the moods and attractions of his heart far outnumber the hairs of his head.*

7.10.16, *et reverberasti infirmitatem aspectus mei, radians in me vehementer, et contremui amore et horrore. et inveni longe me esse a te in regione dissimilitudinis.*

*Your brilliance, striking my gaze, blinded its feebleness, and I shivered between affection and apprehension. I realized how far away I was, still, in the land of shadows.*

10.1.1, *cognoscam te, cognitor meus, cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum.*

*You, who know me, may I come ‘to know, even as I am known.* (Cf. Aug. soliloquia 1.1, *Deus semper idem, noverim me, noverim te* (*God ever the same, let me know myself, let me know you.*)

10.5.7, *ego vero quibus temptationibus resistere valem quibusve non valeam, nescio.*

*... yet I … do not know whether this test or that one will overcome me.*

That exploration will lead back to questions of substance and method. To confront the specifically Augustinian legacy of self-undermining interiorization and self-care requires us – quite paradoxically – to know ourselves better than before, to recognize the limits on self-awareness and to make that recognition a part of our practice of, among other things, history. What can a radical
skepticism about autonomy, consciousness, and freedom tell us about ourselves and the cultural issues that divide and threaten us? The thinkers and doers of late antiquity provide, as it happens, rich material for exploring such questions with the helpful distancing of history.

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Photo: Marc Chagall Il trionfo della musica
Self-Knowledge & the Horizon of Humility in Jewish Thought

Sarah Pessin

Thinking self-knowledge within a horizon of humility, I trace a complicated (and humble) bi-part mood of (1) vulnerability and (2) effort in late ancient and medieval Jewish tradition. I start with some framing insights about a Jewish textual “hermeneutics of humility” in Midrashic and Rabbinic sources, including insights about the fluidity (which is in part to say, impossibility) of interpretation and a human “fellowship-in-fragility” that comes with it, and I go on to examine Jewish analyses of Moses and Mt. Sinai that seek always to precariously balance the gifts of goodness on the humblest, most imperfect grounds. I go on to trace this theme in Greek-into-Jewish medieval traditions in the thought-spaces of the Sefer Yeẓirah, Philo, Maimonides, and Ibn Gabirol, by considering the fragile logics of “creation-through-letters/words,” “imitatio dei” (“imitating God”), and hylomorphic (matter+form) reflections on the human condition. Drawing on this range of Jewish voices, I aim to show that self-knowledge is at its best when strong efforts to attain goodness are coupled with equally strong senses of one’s limits and imperfections. Self-knowledge is, in other words, best practiced as a compresent paradox of vigorous forging-forwards and fragile starts-and-stops.

Starting with Rabbinic and Midrashic sources, I explore the implications for self-knowledge of the Torah’s being said to have “seventy faces,” of the “oven of Akno” in which the company of human voices displaces God’s own call, of Mt. Sinai’s being described as the lowest of the mountains, and of the imaginative linking of the strength of Mosaic voice to a failure of speech.

Turning to the fractured symphony of ‘creation-through-letters/words,’ I consider the implications for self-knowledge of the Sefer Yeẓirah’s and Philo’s
arresting encounters with a world – and a self – writ through with an infinity of numbers, letters, and words.

I next consider the “microcosm-macrocosm” cosmology – and ethics – of imitatio dei in the works of Philo and Maimonides in terms of the following fragile grounding of self: (1) On the one hand we are grounded in a source of goodness and wisdom radically different from ourselves and from anything we can know (in this sense we are rooted in an alterity and an absence that we can simply never know, imitate, or strive after); (2) on the other hand, we are structured in and through this unknown/unknowable source’s wisdom and goodness such that we ourselves are the sorts of creatures who tend towards wisdom and goodness (albeit imperfectly, and even at our best in starts and stops). In other words, we strive – and are set up to strive – to imitate a source that we cannot possibly imitate. This tension in our sense of goodness as on the one hand completely transcendent and on the other hand as the ground and goal which animates us can be seen as a “fact about goodness” or as a “fact about God”; but more importantly, it can be seen as a fact about the fragility of the human condition in a vulnerable “in between” state of knowing and unknowing that calls for and invites a spirit of humility at the core of our comportment to living – and with it, at the heart of how we ought engage our neighbors.

One of the most important aspects of the imitatio in Jewish sources is that we learn – in the spirit of God’s own impossible description in terms of transcendence and immanence – to live in an impossible tension between (1) being grounded in the mystery and alterity of a goodness we can never really know and (2) being called to invest daily effort to enact that goodness anyway – in feats of learning and in acts of justice. What we have, in other words, is not simply a theological point about comporting ourselves to a paradoxical God (in His absence and in His presence); what we have is an ethical and political call to vulnerably comport ourselves to the tasks of knowledge and justice (wisdom and goodness) in the day to day – knowing that we don’t know goodness and knowing too that we must nonetheless commit to bringing it in. It is a call to be pulled to do good (immanence/presence of wisdom and goodness) even as one recognizes in trembling that one must adjust and adapt to the
ebbs and flows of the concrete situations in the moment without a roadmap (alterity/absence/transcendence of wisdom and goodness). To arrive at this insight, I consider Philo’s confident-and-vulnerable sense of the God-human link in Logos, and Maimonides’ confident-and-vulnerable sense of the gifts and limits of human knowing in his analyses of Exodus on God’s Face and Ezekiel on God’s Throne.

I end with an analysis of the “Hylomorphic Emanationism” and “matter metaphysics” of Ibn Gabirol as an extended call to humility and vulnerability, itself opening us onto a trembling encounter with and grounding in a goodness that we cannot ever know but after whose traces we must always seek. I begin by giving a brief overview of his analysis of reality in terms of a series of descending material moments, emphasizing that even Intellect and Soul are rooted in Matter. Contrary to the history of philosophy’s treatment of this view as an at best spurious or just plain erroneous over-extension of Aristotle, I show how it is better understood as a poetic Neoplatonic reflection on the ground of all reality – including the self – in a moment of pure receptivity. I end by exploring the implications for self-knowledge of his grounding of the human condition in a complicated (and humble) bi-part state of shadowed light.

SARAH PESSIN is Interfaith Chair and Professor of Philosophy and Jewish Thought at the University of Denver. She works in the intersections of the philosophies and phenomenologies of religion, ethics, and civics. She is the author of Ibn Gabirol’s *Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism* (Cambridge 2013) and has written chapters on Jewish and Islamic philosophy for such works as the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the *Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy*, the *Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, and the *Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy*. She is also the editor of the “Jewish Tradition” section of *Medieval Philosophy: A Multicultural Reader* (Bloomsbury, 2019), and is currently working on projects on Ibn Gabirol and Maimonides, race and interfaith civics, and a new book on the phenomenology and politics of past-ness, paradox, and pardon in the early writings of Emanuel Levinas.
Michael Puett: har inte inkommit med något förslag, jag föreslår TaoismTangYin eller TaoismMundusImaginalis.

Photo: Tang Yin, 'Bamboo in a Spring Thunderstorm'
Making and Unmaking The Self

Michael Puett

This essay will explore the notions of the self that arose in classical China. One of the striking characteristics of visions of the self in China is the degree to which the self is seen as something that is constructed through our daily practices. The focus thus turns to both overcoming the self that has been constructed passively as well as developing proper practices to construct a better self. My paper will explore the debates that arose around these notions of overcoming and constructing the self, as well as the resulting definitions of knowledge, and particularly self-knowledge, that emerge from these debates.

Michael Puett is the Walter C. Klein Professor of Chinese History in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University. He is the recipient of a Harvard College Professorship for excellence in undergraduate teaching. He is the author of *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* and *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China*. He is also the co-author, with Adam Seligman, Robert Weller, and Bennett Simon, of *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, as well as the co-author, with Christine Gross-Loh, of *The Path: What Chinese Philosophy Can Teach Us About the Good Life*. 
How Can I Know Myself? Practical Advice from Medieval Contemplatives

Christina Van Dyke

How Can I Know Myself – And Why Should I? Practical Advice from Medieval Contemplatives.

Self-knowledge is widely acknowledged as central to a meaningful life. In the 12th-15th centuries in particular, the injunction of the oracle at Delphi to ‘know thyself’ took on special importance for the Latin West: knowing oneself was seen as necessary not just for the best life here on earth but also for union with God – in this world and in the next. Contemplatives in regions and traditions as distinct as Hadewijch of Brabant, Meister Eckhart, Catherine of Siena, and Julian of Norwich exhort their readers to self-examination not only at the beginning of their spiritual journey but throughout their travels.

Human beings are notoriously good at deceiving themselves, though; knowing oneself in the way needed for genuine moral progress requires hard and rigorous work. How are we to know ourselves, and what might such knowledge look like? Here, medieval contemplatives provide a wealth of information, much of which remains relevant today.

The first recommendation involves becoming aware of our limitations – a practice the anonymous fourteenth century English Book of Privy Counselling vividly describes as gnawing on the naked blind feeling of thine own being. Inappropriate attachment to self constitutes a serious impediment to spiritual growth, and self-knowledge is required for seeing the depth of that attachment. It also proves essential for releasing our hold on our egos. Meister Eckhart, an influential fourteenth century Dominican, sums this up neatly when he says:

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Examine yourself. And whenever you find yourself, take leave of yourself. To be effective, this self-examination needs to be broad-ranging. We need to pay attention to how we think we will respond and how we actually do respond, and to good as well as to bad fortune.

The self is a moving target, though—our behaviors, feelings, and attitudes change frequently, and so the practice of self-examination needs to happen on a regular basis to allow us to assess both where we are and where we want or need to be. Genuine self-knowledge also differs sharply from the complacent navel-gazing of selfish pride. Introspection in this context is intrinsically humbling: we are rarely where we think we are, and even more rarely where we would like to be. The humbling effect of self-knowledge is amplified in that, when we see ourselves clearly, we recognize not just our own individual shortcomings but the extent of general human finitude and our relative place in the grand scheme of things as well.

The humility we gain via introspection needs to be taken in its proper context, however. For one thing, the spiritual discipline of ‘dwelling in the cell of self-knowledge’ should be practiced in concert with other disciplines such as Scripture reading, prayer, and meditation. For another, self-examination is a practice undertaken in community, not in isolation. We need fellow travelers to check in with and to serve as mirrors when we can’t see ourselves clearly.

Finally, the work of introspection is ultimately aimed not at highlighting our inadequacies, but at allowing ourselves to experience God’s love and to be unified with God. When Hadewijch advises her fellow beguines to learn to know yourselves...in your attraction or aversion, in your behavior, in love, in hate, in fidelity, in mistrust, and in all things that befall you (Letter 14), the motivation she offers is that this is the first step towards experiencing God’s perfect love. Similarly, Catherine of Siena’s Dialogue begins with God stating: If you would come to perfect knowledge and enjoyment of me, eternal Life: Never leave the knowledge of yourself. For the medieval contemplatives, self-knowledge is the key to nothing less than knowledge of God himself.

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Christina Van Dyke is Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, specializing in medieval philosophy and the philosophy of gender. Van Dyke spent the 2017-18 academic year at Rutgers University as Senior Fellow and Interim Director of the Rutgers Center for Philosophy of Religion. In the past five years, she has been awarded research grants from the Experience Project⁵, the Immortality Project⁶, and New Agendas for the Study of Time⁷. During this time, Van Dyke has also spent time as a visiting fellow at Oxford University, the University of Notre Dame, and the University of Colorado at Boulder. In addition to editing a four-volume Major Works in Medieval Philosophy, Van Dyke is currently writing a book (under contract at Oxford University Press) on medieval women contemplatives that challenges the common belief that women didn’t do philosophy in the Middle Ages.

⁵ http://the-experience-project.org
⁶ http://www.sptimmortalityproject.com
⁷ https://newagendasstudyoftime.wordpress.com
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