

THE NECESSITY OF FAITH

tion. And when in thus leading man our Lord first requires faith He is following an order necessitated by the nature of man, and in particular by the relation of the human intellect to its objects. We have, then, examined the disproportion between the human intellect and reality, and attempted to manifest how this disproportion is the reason for the necessity of faith. In doing this we have also considered the view of René Descartes, for whom faith was more of an impediment to coming to know. Descartes, in asserting this, also denied in a number of ways the disproportion between the intellect and its objects, thus giving a negative confirmation that this disproportion is the reason why faith is necessary.

No man can come to me, except the Father, who hath sent me, draw him; and I will raise him up in the last day. It is written in the prophets: And they shall all be taught of God. Every one that hath heard of the Father, and hath learned, cometh to me. Not that any man hath seen the Father; but he who is of God, he hath seen the Father. Amen, amen I say unto you: He that believeth in me, hath everlasting life. (John 6:44-47)

KNOW THYSELF

Michael A. Augros

Once upon a time in ancient Greece there were seven sages named Thales, Pittacus, Bias, Solon, Cleobulus, Myson, and Chilon. These sages, in their desire to make men wise and good, inscribed two sayings at Apollo's temple in Delphi.¹ The two sayings were *Know Thyself* and *Nothing too much*. The first of these two sayings is the subject of this talk.

The first thing to say about the saying *Know Thyself* is that it is an exhortation. Exhortation is very important for making a good beginning in the moral and intellectual life. Did not Aristotle himself write an exhortation to philosophy, namely his lost work called the *Protrepticus*? And did not the *Hortensius*, an exhortation to philosophy by Cicero, have a profound influence on St. Augustine's life?² *Know Thyself* differs from these two exhortations by being extremely short and by being the first exhortation of the philosophers. Note that the brevity of the two-word saying *Know Thyself* is in keeping with its wisdom. As the divine wisdom expresses all truth in one divine word, so it is the mark of wise men to say much in few words. *Know Thyself* is a truth of this sort: I will spend this entire lecture unfolding just those two little words, and even then I will not dare to claim I have exhausted them.

There are four things to ask about this exhortation. First,

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¹ Protagoras 343a-b, Phaedrus 229d-230a, *City of God* Bk. XVIII, Ch. 24-25.

² *Confessions*, Book III.

who made it? Second, whom does it address? Third, what does it mean? And fourth, why is it important? Tonight I will dwell mostly upon the last of these, why it is important to know oneself, but let me make some brief remarks on the first three.

Who made the exhortation *Know Thyself*? Not just one wise man, but the Seven Wise Men of Greece. The exhortation is attributed to seven wise men, and seven is a symbol of wisdom. Now what this attribution suggests is that this is a very wise exhortation, regardless of who actually said it first. Therefore the exhortation should be examined in the spirit of one expecting it to be very wise, regardless of how much of its wisdom was or was not seen by whoever happened to say it first. We should therefore look for what the *words themselves* reasonably lead us to do.

Next, to whom is the exhortation *Know Thyself* addressed? It cannot be addressed to the beasts, since they cannot know themselves. A beast cannot know what a beast is. It cannot be addressed to the angels or to God who naturally know themselves first of all, who therefore cannot fail to know themselves, and who therefore need no exhortation to know themselves. It can be addressed only to man who does not naturally know himself, but who can and must know himself.

But among the parts of man the exhortation is addressed more to the soul than to the body. For the soul is able to know what a soul is, but the body cannot know what a body is. Also, the soul *is* man more than the body is, a sign³ of which is that a woman feels insulted or degraded when she is loved more for her body than for her soul. Hence a man knows himself most of all when he knows his soul.

But among the parts of man's soul, the exhortation is ad-

³ The reason that the soul is man more than the body is that form is more nature than matter, so the form in human nature is more human nature than matter. For the body is able to be a man, but it is by the soul that the body is actually a man.

dressed more to reason than to any other part. For reason is the only part of the soul that can know itself. Also, reason is *more man* than any other part of the soul. As Aristotle puts it, "Reason more than anything else *is* man".⁴ For example, reason is more man than his emotions, because reason *defines* man, whereas the emotions and desires do not. A sign that reason is more a man than his emotions is that the law punishes a man for a cold-blooded and calculated murder more than for a crime of passion, as if he were not quite himself when he was beside himself with passion, but he was very much himself when cool and calculating. And a man cannot know his immortal soul except through his reason's immaterial activity. So a man is especially ignorant of himself if he does not know his reason.

Thus *Know Thyself* is addressed to man, to the soul, and to reason. Accordingly, when I come to the chief part of this talk explaining the importance of knowing oneself, I will first consider the reasons man should know himself, then the reasons the soul should know itself, and finally the reasons that reason should know itself.

Next we move to the third consideration about *Know Thyself*. What does the mysterious exhortation *Know Thyself* mean? Surely everybody knows himself to some extent. The advice of the sages cannot be to do what no one can help doing, what everyone naturally does. So *Know Thyself* cannot simply mean "Have some idea that you exist" or "Know what you look like before you go out in public". The saying of the sages positively invites us to wonder what kind of self-knowledge is required for happiness and wisdom.

What does it mean to know yourself? It means first of all to know *what* you are, and to know this well requires a definition. Second, it means to know your individual qualities, by which you are well or ill disposed toward being what you are.

⁴ *Ethics* X.7 1178a7.

Now let us move to the body of this little talk, explaining the chief reasons why man must know himself, the soul must know itself, and reason must know itself.

Man Knowing Himself

Man knows himself first when he knows *what* he is, namely an animal with reason. And when a man knows himself to be an animal with reason, he can see two things of immense importance.

The first thing he can see is man's distinctive work. As Plato teaches us, "a thing's distinctive work" is what it alone can do, or, at least, what it can do better than anything else.⁵ For example, the distinctive work of the hand is to grasp, since among the parts of the body, the hand alone can grasp, or at least it can do so better than any other part. And since man is the only animal with reason, man's distinctive work is to act with reason. Now, having discovered man's distinctive work by looking at what man is, we can add to it another statement to discover the end or purpose of man. The statement we must add is that a thing's distinctive work (done well) is its end or purpose. We can see this by induction: the work of a pen is to write, and its purpose is to write well, the work of the eye is to see, and the purpose of the eye is to see well, the work of a pianist is to play the piano, and the purpose of the pianist is to play the piano well. So in general, the purpose of a thing is to perform its distinctive work well. But the distinctive work of man is to act with reason. Therefore the end of man is to live a life composed of reasonable actions done well. This statement is the beginning of all correct thinking about how to live, the foundation of all practical philosophy. It follows almost immediately from it that we ought to follow the voice of reason over our emotions and desires, since the end of man is to act with reason. And so we must often

⁵ Republic I 353a.

disobey our emotions and follow instead the guidance of our reason. This, then, is an enormously important reason why man needs to know what he is.

The second thing man can see by knowing himself to be an animal with reason is the natural road for him to follow in coming to know things. Since man is by nature an animal with reason, and he is an animal because he has senses, the natural road in human knowledge must go from the senses into reason. Why not from reason into the senses? Because sensation and animal nature is generic in man, and reason is what is specific in man, but what is generic in something comes before what is specific in it in the order of time and generation. It is obvious that we sense things before we can give reasons for things.

Now the natural road or order in our knowledge is based on the nature of man and the nature of his senses and reason. This road, since it is based on man's nature, is the first road in his knowledge. By following it to the end, we arrive at wisdom, as Aristotle shows in the beginning of his *Metaphysics*. But the natural road in our knowledge is especially followed in the study of natural things, which makes sense, since these are the first objects of our minds—the order of coming to know which is natural to our minds should most of all be followed in knowing the first and natural objects of our minds. In natural science more than in any other science we move from sense knowledge to reasoned-out knowledge, from vague knowledge to distinct knowledge, and from a knowledge of things easiest for us to know to a knowledge of things which are in themselves most knowable and worthy of knowledge.

But there is another road or order in our knowledge, which is the common road followed in all the sciences, the road studied in logic. Parts of this road or order to be followed in our knowledge are that we must name things and give examples of them before we define them, and we must make guesses about things before we can know them. The natural road in

our knowledge supplies the reasons for the parts of the common road followed in all the sciences and studied in logic.

And from the natural road in our knowledge, we can also learn the right order in which to learn all the sciences, and the right order in which to learn the parts of a particular science. But we cannot stop now to see that all this is so.

So you must appreciate some things about the nature of your mind and senses in order to proceed well toward wisdom. If you do not know, for example, that it is natural for your mind to move from a knowledge of sensible things into a knowledge of understandable things, then you will fail to respect this order in your learning and you will make many mistakes, and even the things you *do* come to understand you will understand only very poorly. Moreover, if you do not understand certain basic things about the natural order in which your mind learns, then you will not recognize the teachers in the world who respect this natural order, and so you will be apt to subject your mind to bad teachers.

It is important to distinguish what I am saying here from what many modern philosophers say. Many modern philosophers say something like this:

Before beginning philosophy, it is essential to study the nature of the human mind; for otherwise we might waste time in attempting to grasp things that are actually beyond its grasp, as all philosophers before us have clearly done, since they are always disagreeing with each other. So, in order to ensure that we will use our mind in a way that fits its nature, we must study before all other things the nature of the mind itself.

This is the modern version of *Know Thyself*. Thus certain modern philosophers come off looking very provident and circumspect; they seem to have a foresight which all philosophers before them lacked. It appears very wise to study a tool, to study its right use and limitations, before actually putting it to use, as one reads the instructions accompanying a power tool before plugging it in. And certainly one does something

much like this in studying logic before applying one's mind to the other sciences. But such modern philosophers are not recommending logic before all other inquiries so much as the study of the very nature of the human mind.

Now one might raise this difficulty about their advice: what if the nature of the human mind is one of the hardest things for us to understand? For if it were, then we should not very likely succeed in understanding it before other easier things. Moreover, if the human mind is something very hard to understand, then, even more than with other things, wouldn't we want to proceed in a way befitting our understanding in trying to understand it? But then it would follow from the advice of the modern philosopher that we would need to *know* the nature of the mind before *studying* the nature of the mind. Worst of all, what if the nature of our mind is such that it *cannot* understand itself without understanding the very things the modern philosophers tell us to refrain from investigating first? For example, what if the only way to understand the nature of the human mind is to understand how it is connected to the human body and the bodily senses? What if we must talk about substance, nature, change, matter, and a host of other things in order to grasp what the human mind is? A sign that we must do so is that even the modern philosophers themselves do not refrain from discussing all these things in their supposedly restricted treatment of the naked reason. And it is also likely that understanding the nature of the mind *is* very difficult and requires prior investigations, since the modern philosophers themselves disagree about the mind as much as about anything else. Thus, if the human mind is something very hard to understand and something which by its nature cannot understand *itself* well until it has understood certain *other* things first, it will follow that the modern philosopher's apparent foresight is really an oversight. Therefore such modern philosophers are most probably false friends of reason. It merely *appears* as if they have taken a wise precaution in order to respect the nature of reason, when in fact they do it

violence by forcing it to begin with what it cannot possibly understand well at first.

Thus *Know Thyself* does not exhort us to study our own mind before we study anything else. Although we must begin with logic (which is a kind of study of the *tools* of reason, not of its *nature*), and although *Know Thyself* exhorts us to acquire *in due time* a grasp of our own nature sufficient to yield a distinct understanding of the natural road for our mind to follow, nevertheless, in the beginning it is enough to *follow* the natural road in our knowledge even without seeing distinctly all the reasons for it, and to be satisfied in the beginning with some signs and probable arguments for its suitability.

So far, then, we have seen the importance of man knowing what he is in order to discern his end or purpose in life, and in order to discover and follow the natural road in his knowledge.

But a knowledge of man's nature is also desirable for its own sake, as a large part of the science about natural things. For man is a microcosm.⁶ His soul, in a way, takes in all things sensible and understandable, and he is composed of body and soul, and thus he stands on the horizon of both the bodily and spiritual parts of the created universe. And man is like a summation of all natural things: rocks are mere bodies, plants are bodies with life, animals are bodies with life *and* sensation, but man is a body with life, sensation, *and* reason.

This is only to say that if you understand what man is, you have understood a great deal. It is not to say with Descartes that understanding yourself is a sufficient principle of understanding all other things. And yet a knowledge of man's nature and actions *is* of much help in understanding *some* other things of great importance to philosophy, such as substance and causality. Let me explain.

We must begin by knowing ourselves in order to understand substance. It is important to see that a bodily substance,

⁶ See *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 96, a. 2, c.

such as a piece of clay, is not the same thing as its shape and size; the clay is one thing, and it *has* a shape and a size which are something else. The substance of the clay is something even more fundamental than its quantity. But quantity is so basic in a bodily thing, and is subject to so many qualities, that many people fail to distinguish a bodily substance from its quantity—Descartes, for example, failed to make this distinction. But we can see that substance is distinct from quantity by calling to mind our own growth. I remain today the same individual thing I used to be as a child, only I am now of a different size and shape. If my size were my very substance, if my size were me, then when I ceased to be that size, I myself would simply cease to exist. But since in fact I remain throughout many changes of quantity, I myself must be something distinct from, and underlying, all the various quantities I've had throughout my life. Thus, to distinguish substance from quantity, we must begin by knowing something in ourselves.

Another point about substance and self-knowledge. It is very hard to know whether a lump of rock is one substance or a whole bundle of them clustered very closely together. We know there is *substance* there, but we find it hard to be sure *how many*. Even in the case of a glass of water, it is not terribly clear whether the glass contains one single substance, or a countless multitude of very tiny substances. When can you be sure you are looking at one single substance? When you look in the mirror. That *you* are a single substance is more evident to you than the substantial unity of any other thing in existence. Since it is the same you who sees with your eyes, who feels in your hands and your feet, and who thinks with your mind, you have a simultaneously external and internal experience of yourself containing a very sure knowledge that your body is all you, is all a single thing, however different the looks and properties of all its parts. For these reasons, then, Aristotle always uses an individual man, or an animal very much like a man, as examples of substance.

It is also chiefly by substantial changes among ourselves, that is, through other men coming into existence and dying, that we are sure that substances come into existence and go out of existence. Changes among non-living things, or among living things very different from ourselves, such as plants, are not as clearly identifiable as the destruction of a substance or the generation of a new substance.

Thus we begin to understand that substance is distinct from quantity, and that change of substance really does occur, by looking to ourselves first of all.

We also come to understand many things about causes by beginning with ourselves. Material causality is easy enough to see in sensible things, and so is the easiest kind of cause to grasp. But the nature of a mover or maker is not as easy to grasp; when we see one thing in motion, and then another thing in motion after it, what makes us say the first *caused* the second? What do we even mean? Do we simply mean that the one motion happened before the other, and in such a way that the other motion had to follow after it, as night follows day? That cannot be all, since we do not think that the day *causes* the night, even though the night must follow after it. No: for a first motion to *cause* a second one, the second motion has to come *out of* the first one somehow. But then the second motion had to be somehow *in* the first motion to begin with. But how that is so, if it is so, is very obscure. This is David Hume's problem. And since, Hume says, there is no more familiar an example of a cause of motion than one billiard ball hitting another one, and since even in this, the clearest of all cases, it remains obscure whether the second motion was *in* the first one and what this could even mean, we may safely conclude that all talk of "causes" of motion is hypothetical at best, and mere fiction at worst.

But Hume makes many bad beginnings in thinking this way. First, he begins the study of causes with movers and not with matter, whereas the way matter is a cause is far more evident than the way a mover is a cause.

Second, Hume's very examples of the mover cause are bad beginnings. His examples *seem* as though they should be the clearest because, after all, one body knocking into another is as familiar an experience as one could desire. But, it is possible for something to be very manifest in one way, yet very obscure in another. For example, it is extremely evident to me *that* my eyes enable me to see things, but it is not at all clear to me *how* they enable me to see things. And just as I should not doubt my eye's ability to see merely because I don't know exactly in what this ability consists, neither should I doubt the causality of the first billiard ball, even if I am at a loss to explain the nature of it.

But there *are* examples of effects which can easily be seen to come out of their cause, namely when we ourselves are the cause. For example, if you walk behind my car with your hands on the trunk while I am driving, you have one kind of experience. If I turn off the engine, but you insist on continuing to walk with my car in front of you, you have a very different kind of experience. In the first case, you do not feel the motion of the car taking anything out of you, in the second case you do; in the first case you are not causing the motion of the car, in the second case, you are.

Another example: before the carpenter builds a house, he has the house to be built *in* his mind. And that is why you can get a house *out of* a carpenter. Thus Aristotle's first examples of a mover or maker are an advisor or a father; he is drawing from human causality. It is very clear that the thought operating in a man following someone's advice was first *in* the advisor. It is much more evident how we ourselves can be causes than how other things can be causes. (Likewise purpose is much more evidently a cause in our own affairs than it is in natural things.) A sign that man himself is the most evident cause of motion is that the Greek word for cause, *αἰτιον*, was a term used first in courts of law; it meant "blameworthy" or "responsible". Thus the word for "cause" in Greek came from a word referring to a voluntary agent cause—a criminal

or culprit. And so the saying *Know Thyself* exhorts us to begin investigating the nature and kinds of causes by reflecting on our own causality.

So for all these reasons, man needs to know *what* he is. But it is also of immense importance for a man to know *who* he is, that is, to know his own individual or personal qualities.

It is clear that self-knowledge is necessary for the virtue of moderation (or temperance) in particular. It is impossible to drink moderately, for example, if you do not know your own limits. A moderate amount of beer for a professional football player may not be the same as a moderate amount of beer for another. *Know Thyself* warns that what is not too much for another might nevertheless be too much for me. Notice the close connection here to the other saying of the sages, *Nothing too much*. The two sayings are so close that Critias, in the *Charmides*, says they actually mean the same thing.⁷ Shakespeare also puts these two sayings together in *Measure for Measure*.⁸ The disguised Duke asks Escalus what sort of man the Duke is, and Escalus replies

One that above all other strifes, contended to know himself

And a few lines later he adds

a gentleman of all temperance.

So on one reading, *Know Thyself* seems to mean almost the same thing as *Nothing too much*. Now *Know Thyself* exhorts you to know not only your bodily limitations, but all your strengths and weaknesses, in order to help you uproot vices in your soul and plant virtues in their place. A man who is given to drink too much will not succeed in becoming a moderate drinker if he often finds himself in situations where he is tempted to drink too much. He must know himself well enough to see that this or that would be an occasion of sin for him. The Catholic faith teaches the wisdom of making an

⁷ *Charmides* 164d-165b.

⁸ III.1.490.

examination of conscience before going to confession. Why? Partly because we cannot confess and be sorry for sins we do not call to mind, but also because we cannot avoid the near occasions of sin in the future if we do not know ourselves and the circumstances of our past sins well.

Thus it is also evident that humility depends on self-knowledge, and is almost defined by it. For a humble person is one who knows or recognizes his own limitations, weaknesses, and defects. If we do not see our own weakness well, we will not seek the help we need, and thus humility also prevents us from undertaking things too great for ourselves, from biting off more than we can chew.⁹ It pertains to humility to be willing to receive things from others, and not to desire complete independence when it is unreasonable to expect this of ourselves.

Notice that it is especially hard to know yourself in this respect, because it is painful to see your own defects and vices. On the other hand, it is most delightful to know yourself if you are good. In the *Ethics*,¹⁰ Aristotle says that for the good and happy man, contemplation of his own life is a desirable and pleasant activity; self-knowledge, to the good man, is actually a *part* of his happiness. But it is painful to know yourself if you are ugly and unnatural. The children of the light seek the light and do not fear having their deeds made known, whereas wicked men seek darkness and wish to remain hidden even to themselves. Thus vice induces blindness in a man's mind, as is seen most clearly in the case of alcoholics, who are always the last to see their own vice. It is hard to get as objective a

⁹ "Ad humilitatem proprie pertinet ut aliquas reprimat seipsum, ne feratur in ea quae sunt supra se. Ad hoc autem necessarium est ut aliquis cognoscat id in quo deficit a proportione eius quod suam virtutem excedit. Et ideo cognitio proprii defectus pertinet ad humilitatem sicut regula quaedam directiva appetitus." II-II q. 161, a. 2, c.

"Seek not the things that are too high for thee, and search not into things above thy ability", *Ecclesiastes* 3:22.

¹⁰ *Ethics* IX.9 1170b1 and *Ethics* IX.12.

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view of yourself as others have of you, since others are more detached from your desires than you are. Thus the exhortation *Know Thyself* is not like an exhortation to breathe; it is about something difficult.

It is difficult to know your own strengths and weaknesses also because these are hidden qualities in your soul; they are not like physical ugliness or weakness which are very external and manifest. Thus we can be ignorant of the nuances of our own actions and feelings, which often surprise even ourselves. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio is surprised at himself for feeling sad, saying

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.
. . . how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn;
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me
That I have much ado to know myself.¹¹

As our own thoughts, which need speaking out to become manifest even to ourselves, so our own desires and motives, being within, are hidden to us and are made more evident to us by outward signs. It is because of this difficulty in knowing your own moral strengths and weaknesses, being hidden in your soul, that Aristotle says

We must take as a sign of moral habits the pleasure or pain following action.¹²

For we need to argue from *signs* of things only when those things are not manifest to us in themselves. We might add that humility or a knowledge of one's own defects helps us to refrain from hasty and unmerciful judgment of others. Thus our Lord asks

¹¹ *Merchant of Venice* I.I.7.

¹² *Ethics* II.3, beginning.

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why seest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye; and seest not the beam that is in thy own eye?¹³

Our Lord himself seems to be saying *Know Thyself*.

There is yet another reason that self-knowledge is required for the moral life. It is impossible to *love* yourself truly if you do not *know* yourself truly, just as it is impossible to love another truly if you do not know him truly. For loving someone is wanting good things for him. But you cannot *want* what is really good for him unless you *know* what is really good for him, and you cannot know what is really good for him without knowing him. This applies just as well to yourself: you cannot love yourself truly without knowing yourself truly. For this reason, children fail to love themselves as truly as their parents love them; the little child wants to explore the electric outlet with a fork. His mother does not let him, and he is angry; he thinks her love for him is deficient, but really it is his love for himself that is imperfect, due to an ignorance of what is good for himself. The unruly teenager thinks his parents are bent on restricting his freedom, when really his parents love him better than he is able to love himself, knowing what is good for him better than he does. St. Thomas says about bad people that,

not knowing themselves rightly, they do not love themselves truly, but rather they love that which they reckon themselves to be. But the good, knowing themselves truly, love themselves truly.¹⁴

Thus your love for yourself is defective in the measure that your self-knowledge is defective. But furthermore, your love for *others* is defective in the measure that your love for yourself is defective. For, one reason some things are more loveable to you than others is that they are closer to you or more like

¹³ Matthew 7:3.

¹⁴ "Unde non recte cognoscentes seipsos, non vere diligunt seipsos, sed diligunt id quod seipsos esse reputant. Boni autem, vere cognoscentes seipsos, vere seipsos diligunt." II-II, q. 25, a. 7, c.

you, and to that extent you are more loveable to yourself than others are. As Proteus says in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*,

I to myself am dearer than a friend.¹⁵

And that is why Aristotle says that

Friendship . . . seems to proceed from a man's relations to himself.¹⁶

Odd as it may sound, if you desire what is truly good for *yourself*, and especially for your soul, then you will also want what is good for *others*. Wanting what is truly good for yourself is *not* the same thing as being selfish. The selfish man is often characterized as loving himself too much. Of course there is something true about that, but it is better to say with Aristotle that the selfish man loves himself *too little*: his love for himself is deficient, not knowing himself well enough to see how impoverished are the external goods and the goods of his body which he seeks for himself over the goods of his soul. He fails to see that his unhappiness is due to his putting inferior goods, such as wealth and bodily pleasure, before the goods of his soul. He is like a man in danger of dying from a disease who devotes all his energy to becoming rich rather than to becoming healthy.

So a man must know himself before he can love himself and others truly.

There is yet another reason that self-knowledge is necessary for the moral life of man: it is impossible for a man to be happy without friends. Thus he must be able to distinguish true friends from false ones. What does this have to do with self-knowledge? Well, since a friend is someone you love like yourself, and with whom you live a common life and with whom you seek after and delight in the same things, a friend is like another self, an extension of yourself. This is especially clear in the friendship between husband and wife; often each

¹⁵ II.6.20.

¹⁶ *Ethics* IX.4 1166a1.

will speak of the other as "my better half", and a man is supposed to love his wife as he does his own body. And when a married couple lives together long enough, if one dies, it happens very often that the other dies soon after, as if they had only one life, and when the one is gone, the other has no life left to live. So, since it is very important to recognize your true friends, and since your friend is like another self, one could say that *Know Thyself* exhorts you to know your friends from your enemies: *know who your true other selves are*. King Lear is a famous failure in this regard. After Lear blesses the two daughters who will later betray him, and disowns his one faithful daughter, Cordelia, and banishes his faithful servant, the Earl of Kent, Kent says to Lear:

Kill thy physician, and thy fee bestow upon the foul disease.¹⁷

These, then, are some of the reasons it is important for a man to know himself, both what he is and what his personal qualities are.

The Soul Knowing Itself

It is also of great importance for the soul to know itself, and the soul must be exhorted to know itself today more than ever. Knowledge of the soul is being erased by bad philosophy and by a steady submersion of modern life in material goods and bodily pleasures. The new mistranslations being used at Mass are systematically eliminating even the word "soul". The soul in modern times seems to be seeking ignorance of itself.

At the outset of his book *About the Soul*, Aristotle exhorts us to self-knowledge by recommending the study of the soul, because the study of the soul is very useful and wonderful and it begins from things we know with very great certitude. Thus *Know Thyself* recommends a very noble knowledge. Nor should we think that *Know Thyself* recommends only a detailed

¹⁷ *Lear*, I.I.162.

knowledge of the soul which is difficult to attain. It also recommends the very evident and inescapable knowledge that we are alive and thus have in ourselves something by which we are alive, called a soul. Our natural and continuous inward experience of being alive is indeed inevitable for all of us, and so we need not be exhorted by sages to *have* this knowledge of ourselves. But we do need to be exhorted to *attend* to this knowledge, since it is possible to leave this irrefragable experience out of our thoughts when focusing on other matters in philosophy, even though reflecting on the certitude of this experience would be helpful to us or even indispensable. For example, we would be hopelessly lost in trying to understand life in other things while entirely ignoring life in ourselves.

It is a commonplace among biologists today that we can draw no sharp line between living things and non-living things. It seems as if any candidate for a property unique to living things can always be found among things which *nobody* thinks are alive. For example, you may say only living things *grow*, but then I show you that crystals grow and fire grows and a metal bar expands in all directions when heated. Or you say only living things *move themselves* from place to place, but then I show you an automobile with a brick on the accelerator. You might answer me with some subtle distinctions about the *way* in which living things grow and move themselves, and so we might go back and forth like this for some time; it looks as if the sharp distinction between living and non-living things is a very sticky business, difficult to settle, and always provisional depending on what the experimental sciences have succeeded in verifying so far. With the biologists, then, we are tempted to assume that the line drawn between living and non-living things is a rough and somewhat arbitrary assumption, made in concession to ordinary language for convenience' sake, and is in danger of being utterly erased by the implacable advance of biology toward sheer physics and chemistry.

But it is not so. It is far easier than this to see the essential distinction between living and non-living things. In looking

first to growth and locomotion as distinctive of living things, we make a serious mistake. We are tempted to start with them because they are most external to a living thing, and therefore most accessible to our outward senses; but for that very reason, they are also *least distinctive* of living things, for life is something *within* the living thing. Changes in size and location belong to non-living things as well as living things. And growing and walking, as far as our outward senses can tell us, are changes in size and location like any other. Therefore we cannot see clearly in these activities precisely what makes them *living* activities, so long as we restrict ourselves to what we can know about them through our five outward senses.

It is better, therefore, to begin with a living activity such as *sensation*. Sensation is not something we can witness directly in other things, as we can witness local motion by watching with our eyes. We cannot *see* an animal's experience of hearing in the same way we can see it turn its head or perk up its ears. But we can certainly experience hearing in ourselves. It is in this inward experience of our own living activities that we first know what it is to be alive, and it is in the inward experience of such living activities as sensing, desiring, fearing, and imagining, that we see *within ourselves* activities which we cannot find a scrap of evidence for in a fire, or a crystal, or an automobile, or a computer. And without this internal experience of our own life, we could never recognize life in other things. Charles De Koninck makes this point:

the life which I experience, the knowledge which I have of knowing sensible objects and of experiencing certain of these as parts of myself, as instruments of my knowledge and of my movements, all this makes me recognize in my neighbor, in his form, in his movements comparable to mine, a life similar to that which I can experience only in myself.

It is fitting, therefore, to affirm that if we did not have this internal experience of living, all life would be totally unknown to us, nowhere would we know how to recognize it and we would not inquire about it. . . . The exterior

manifestations of the life of another are recognized as vital only insofar as I comprehend them as similar to my own—which I perceive through an external experience, of which I have at the same time an internal experience.¹⁸

If we could (*per impossibile*) sense and think about things other than ourselves without ever being aware of our own sensing and thinking or any of our other operations, if our attention were necessarily directed exclusively to objects external to ourselves, then we could never understand living operations as such. An animal's act of sitting would appear as no more to us than an unusual collection of motions among the shapes and colors of some complicated object, remaining essentially a mere locomotion like any other.

We are told "love thy neighbor as thyself"; in some sense, not only our *love* of our neighbor depends on our love for ourselves, but even our *knowledge* of our neighbor depends on our knowledge of ourselves, and on our awareness of our soul as a principle of our operations.

The soul must also know itself because knowledge of the soul is a doorway from natural science to wisdom, and it is a *necessary beginning* for studying God and the angels. St. Thomas hints at this when arguing that every activity has some end. He says

I consider the body so that I might consider the soul, which I consider so that I might consider a separated substance, which I consider so that I might consider God.¹⁹

And again, St. Thomas says that

¹⁸ *Introduction À Étude De L'Âme*, II, in L'Abbé Stanislas Cantin, *Précis de psychologie thomiste*, Éditions De L'Université Laval, Québec, Canada, 1948 [translation mine].

¹⁹ "[C]onsidero corpus ut considerem animam, quam considero ut considerem substantiam separatam, quam considero ut considerem deum." *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III.2.

Our mind by knowing itself knows other minds, inasmuch as it itself is a likeness of other minds.²⁰

God is a mind, and we too have a mind. Since the nature of our mind is much more accessible to us than God's mind, we must investigate our own mind first. If we know our own mind well, this will be an indispensable beginning for knowing certain things about God's mind. Even things which reason *cannot* reach by itself, such as a knowledge of the Trinity, can be very much illumined by the things which reason *can* grasp about *itself*.

The soul's knowledge of itself is also important to moral theology and ethics, since the knowledge of the soul is to these disciplines what the knowledge of the body is to the art of medicine. Moreover, in theology we study the Incarnation, in which the first cause of all things has taken on human flesh. To understand the God-man as best we can, it is necessary to understand the human soul. We cannot, for example, understand the Incarnation by thinking that the Word of God took the place of the human soul and animated the body of Christ, so that Christ has a divine nature *instead* of a human soul. That is impossible: the divine Word cannot enter into composition with things in the way the soul does, and even if He could, since He would then lack the greater part of human nature, He would not be a true man. But the union of the Word and human nature *is* very much *like* the union of the soul with the body, which union can therefore be a help for understanding the Incarnation in some way.

Thus the knowledge of the soul is important in coming to know the higher things, such as the angels and God.

Finally, the individual soul must know itself individually, in order to reach the happiness in the life to come. You will inherit eternal life after your death if, and only if, at the time

²⁰ "Intellectus noster cognoscendo seipsum cognoscit alios intellectus, in quantum ipse est similitudo aliorum intellectuum." *Quaestiones Disputatae De Anima*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 1.

KNOW THYSELF

of your death, you are in friendship with God. But you do not know when death will come for you, and so you must be ready for it at every moment.

Watch ye therefore, because you know not at what hour your lord will come.²¹

Always watch your own soul; be sure that your house is in order. Never once become distracted from the affairs under your own roof. As to what you individually need to know about your own soul as opposed to me or anyone else, I leave that to you and God and your confessor or spiritual advisor.

Reason Knowing Itself

Reason must also be exhorted to know itself. Of course, reason studies itself in the study of the soul, but there it studies itself as a particular nature, and not as reason. It must also know itself *as reason*.

What does that mean? To explain myself, I must take a moment to explain that nature is determined to one. For example, since fire is a purely natural agent, it is not open to doing the opposite of what it naturally does. If I throw a piece of paper in the fire, the fire *must* heat the paper and do so as much as it can; the fire does not have the option to cool the paper, or to withhold some or all of its heating power from the paper. On the other hand, a rational agent, such as a doctor, is able to heal a patient, or to withhold treatment, or even to *harm* the patient. The reason he is able to act in contrary ways is that his ability to heal is based on his knowledge, and the knowledge of opposites is the same. For example, the science of health also studies disease. Thus the natural agent is determined to one way of acting upon things, whereas the rational agent is open to contrary ways of acting.

²¹ Matthew 24:42 and also 25:13.

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Now, this does not mean that reason is open to opposites in all things: in *some* things it is naturally determined to one. For example, as soon as you hear and understand the words

No number is both even and odd

or

Every whole is greater than any of its parts

you cannot fail to see that these statements are true, and you are unable to believe their contradictories. For this reason, such statements are said to be *naturally* known. And so reason is in some matters a nature, being determined to one, though in other matters, being open to opposites, it must somehow move itself in order to become determined to one of them. For example, reason is *not* naturally determined to one side of this contradiction:

There are only 5 perfect solids.

There are more than 5 perfect solids.

Even once the *meaning* of these contradictory statements is known, reason does not naturally move to one side or the other. Reason must determine itself to one side *by making an argument*. Hence reason does not need any direction insofar as it has a particular kind of nature whereby it *naturally* knows certain things, such as the axioms and their parts. But if reason is ever to understand the difficult things which it does *not* know naturally, it needs direction in moving itself.

Summing up: reason is a nature insofar as it knows some things naturally, but it is not just a nature, since most things it knows it must arrive at by reasoning. So we distinguish between knowing reason *as a nature*, namely insofar as it knows things naturally, from knowing reason *as reason*, namely insofar as it is initially open to opposites, and then eliminates one of them by reasoning.

Now reason must know itself as reason before it can direct itself as reason. Thus it is important for reason to know itself

as reason, and not just as a particular nature, as it knows itself in the study of the soul.²² (Incidentally, it is because reason naturally knows what some things are, and naturally knows that some things are true, that these two acts of reason are

²² The following are some texts in which St. Thomas distinguishes between reason as reason and reason as a nature:

"Alio modo potest intelligi praedicta distinctio, ut dicamus rationem ut naturam intelligi secundum quod ratio comparatur ad ea quae naturaliter cognoscit vel appetit; rationem vero ut rationem, secundum quod per quamdam collationem ordinatur ad aliquid cognoscendum vel appetendum, eo quod rationis est proprium conferre. Sunt enim quaedam quae secundum se considerata sunt fugienda, appetuntur vero secundum ordinem ad aliud: sicut fames et sitis secundum se considerata sunt fugienda; prout autem considerantur ut utilia ad salutem animae vel corporis, sic appetuntur. Et sic ratio ut ratio de eis gaudet, ratio vero ut natura de eis tristatur." *Quaestiones De Veritate*, q. 26, a. 9, ad 7.

"Et hoc etiam quidam aliis verbis dicunt, scilicet quod patiebatur ut est natura corporis, non autem ut est principium humanorum actuum. Et sic etiam dicunt quod inferior ratio patiebatur et ut est natura et ut est ratio. Quamvis etiam aliter possit intelligi distinctio qua distinguitur ratio ut natura et ratio ut ratio; quia ratio ut natura dicitur secundum quod iudicat de eo quod est secundum se bonum vel malum, naturae conveniens vel noxium; ratio autem ut ratio, secundum quod iudicat de eo quod est bonum vel malum in ordine ad alterum." *Scriptum Super Lib. III Sententiarum*, Distinctio XV, Quaestio II, Articulus III, Solutio II (answer to Quaestiuncula II).

"Sic igitur de eisdem de quibus dolebat secundum sensum, imaginationem et rationem inferiorem, secundum superiorem gaudebat, in quantum ea ad ordinem divinae sapientiae referebat. Et quia referre aliquid ad alterum est proprium opus rationis, ideo solet dici quod mortem ratio Christi refugiebat quidem si consideretur ut natura, quia scilicet naturaliter est mors odibilis: volebat tamen eam pati, si consideretur ut ratio." *Compendium Theologiae ad Fratrem Reginaldum*, Ch. 232, n 492 end.

"Ratio et intellectus non sunt diversae partes animae, sed ipse intellectus dicitur ratio, in quantum per inquisitionem quandam pervenit ad cognoscendum intelligibilem veritatem." *In III de Anima*, Lectio 14, n. 812.

"Sunt autem rationis tres actus: quorum primi duo sunt rationis, secundum quod est intellectus quidam . . . tertius vero actus rationis est secundum id quod est proprium rationis, scilicet discurrere ab uno in

studied in the science of nature, as in Aristotle's *De Anima*; but since reason does *not* naturally know any arguments, the third act of reason, namely to argue, is *not* studied in the science of nature, but only in logic.)

Now, following one of my teachers, I maintain that Shakespeare has given us the best definition of reason as reason: Shakespeare tells us in the words of Hamlet that reason is *the ability for large discourse, looking before and after*. And the discourse that here defines reason is *coming to know the unknown through the known* (or coming to a guess about the unknown through the commonly accepted).

Logic is the art that directs reason as reason, that is, it directs reason in making the discourses it needs to move itself to any knowledge it does not acquire naturally. Logic is about two discourses: defining and reasoning. So logic begins from a kind of self-knowledge, since it is about discourses which reason discovers itself making, and which reason learns to direct by reflecting upon them.

Another way that reason's self-knowledge is helpful for logic is that when reason knows itself as reason through Shakespeare's definition, it knows that its discourses enable it to "look before and after" (which phrase concludes Shakespeare's definition). But whenever there is a before and after in things, there is order. So the object of reason as reason is order, and its discourse must be orderly. But the perfection of reason as reason is science, the most rigorous kind of reasoned-out knowledge. Therefore, once reason knows itself as reason, it is more than half way to seeing that science is an ordered knowledge of order. St. Thomas explains in his proemium to the *Nicomachean Ethics* that science is a knowledge of order, and he explains in his proemium to the *De Caelo* that science is an ordered knowledge.

So reason must know itself as reason in order to under-

aliud, ut per id quod est notum deveniat in cognitionem ignoti." *In I Post. An.*, Lectio 1, n. 4.

stand logic, the art which directs reason as reason, and to understand science, the perfection of reason as reason, toward which reason is directed by logic.

But it is important to logic for reason to know itself in another way. Since logic is not among the sciences most people wonder about first, and since it is about very abstract things such as genera and species and syllogisms, people are not very inclined to study it. Thus, in terms of our *desire*, we must *want* to study logic first in order to become wise. But we will not *want* to study it unless we *see* the need for it, and we will not see the need for it unless we see the natural weakness of our minds, that is, unless we know reason as reason. Logic is the art by which reason directs its own progress so that it can arrive at the truth with ease, with order, and without mistakes. But if you are convinced that you can thus arrive at the truth without the sometimes painful and tedious study of logic, you will never study logic first, and thus you will never become wise. For just as the higher a tree reaches up the deeper its roots must penetrate the earth, so the more elevated our knowledge becomes the firmer its foundations in logic must be.

And there is yet another way reason must know itself which is important to logic and to the whole life of the mind. Reason must know itself individually. For since logic directs reason by ordering what it already knows to the discovery of what it does not know, and since order always presupposes distinction, therefore reason cannot go forward without distinguishing what it knows from what it does not know. Socrates showed this better than any other man in history. If you think you know something, but you really don't, you are much worse off than someone else who also doesn't know it, but at least does not think that he does. For among the ignorant, those who are aware of their ignorance can begin to seek the truth, whereas those who deny their ignorance will not begin to seek the truth, imagining they possess it already. As with the abuse of alcohol, the first step is admitting that you have a

problem. Meno's slaveboy is an example. He thinks he knows how to double the square. Because he thinks this, and yet he really does not know, Socrates must have *two* conversations with him rather than just one: one conversation to show the boy he doesn't know, and another conversation to help the boy see how in fact to double a square.

Moreover, the reverse is possible: you can know something, and yet think that you do not know it. This is also exemplified in the *Meno*; Meno thinks he is not sure whether it is possible to seek out something unknown, because he is misled by a trick argument. He also thinks he might be in doubt about what color is, when Socrates uses color to define shape.²³ Another example: anyone who denies the principle about contradiction does so because he thinks he has found something that contradicts it, and thus denies it precisely because he accepts it. Thus he sees its truth without seeing that he sees it. And anyone who thinks he is in doubt about whether he is awake or not is also in that condition; of course he knows he is awake and not dreaming, but he might think he does not know this, since he cannot see *how* he knows this.

Almost every Platonic dialogue illustrates someone who has mixed up what he knows with what he does not know. Thus *Know Thyself* warns us: know what it is you know. For if you are ignorant but think you know, you will not try to escape your ignorance, as a man with an undetected heart condition will not take precautions against a heart attack. And if you know but think you don't, you will not be able to go forward from what you know as from a premise: you will reject it because you think you don't know it. Hence you will be denied any knowledge that follows from it.

In connection with reason knowing itself individually so as to distinguish what it knows from what it doesn't, we can add that your reason must know *what things it is accustomed to believe* or is naturally inclined to believe. There are some things that

²³ 75e-d.

we are naturally inclined to accept more easily than others, and some things that we become accustomed to accept more easily than others, and we can become enslaved to these natural or acquired prejudices if we are not careful.

For example, an American who has heard all his life that all men are created equal and that equality is one of the greatest goods will most likely be inclined, because of his national customs, to reject anything that is based on inequality as bad or false. Alexis de Tocqueville, one of the keenest observers of American customs, is very helpful to Americans wishing to get an outside view of their own intellectual prejudices. He says that we Americans, being loathe to recognize any kind of authority, each prefer to rely on the individual efforts of our own minds, that we tend to ignore the thoughts of others and thus lose the benefits of their contributions and tend to repeat their mistakes. As opposed to men in aristocratic ages, who tended to shape their opinions by the standard of a superior person or a superior tradition, and who strongly resisted following the mass of men, we democratic folk are averse to granting such distinction to any person or tradition, and as a consequence of seeing everyone as equals, our readiness to believe in the infallibility of the multitude increases.

If you have an American soul, beware of these tendencies ingrained in you from your very youth. They can often make the unknown seem known, the true seem false, and the good seem bad. The love of equality, for example, is so strong in our country, that many people tend to love it indiscriminately, and to hate indiscriminately any claims to superiority. I once had a student who refused to grant me that some things are better than other things, and as a consequence, she even admitted that her mother was no better than a worm! Such is the force of custom.

But not only our *national* customs can shape our minds in good or bad ways for future learning. Our upbringing and education can also accustom us to certain ways of thinking. For example, someone who has studied nothing but mathematical

sciences will very likely become accustomed to demonstration and to thinking about things he can imagine, and so he will be inclined, because of what he has grown accustomed to, to reject any form of argument as worthless which is not a demonstration, or to reject as superstition all talk of anything he cannot picture in his imagination.

It is evident what a serious threat one's intellectual customs can pose to the life of the mind if they inhibit the mind from conforming itself to the way things are. Thus you must know yourself well; you should know what things, because of your upbringing and surroundings and habits and personal inclinations, you are inclined to reject or accept *without good reason*. Only thus can you take precautions, and be prepared to bend the stick the other way. One way to do this is to weaken the force of custom by travel in both time and place: if you travel in place around the world or travel in place and time by reading books from far away places and very different times, you see many things opposed to your own intellectual customs and become more aware of what things within yourself you hold because of their own evidence, and what things you hold merely because you are accustomed to them.

Again we see that *Know Thyself* exhorts us to what is not only essential but also difficult, since it is not easy to step back from ourselves and discern our own prejudices: our intellectual customs (whether good or bad), especially when we have adopted them since our very youth, will often seem to us as truths naturally known or evident. So knowing what you are apt to accept because of habit or custom is one way you must know yourself before you can become wise.

So it is that man, his soul, and his reason must be exhorted to self-knowledge.

Let us conclude with this consideration. Although wisdom for man does not consist entirely in self-knowledge (since man is not the best thing or the first cause), nevertheless, for man both practical wisdom and speculative wisdom depend on self-knowledge. Moreover, although wisdom for man does not

consist in self-knowledge alone, the higher one goes among intellects, the more true this becomes. Thus the human soul is one of the most noble things we can understand, and so it forms a part of wisdom for us. And in the case of the angelic minds, their own natures are the first and defining objects of their understanding, and their self-knowledge gives them a greater share of wisdom than our self-knowledge does, since they are better and more causal than we are. And in the case of God alone, the knowledge in which His perfection consists (since He is the best thing and the first cause) is self-knowledge.

We see this order even among lower things, namely that the nobler and wiser something is, the more capable of reflection or self-knowledge it is. Of course, plants are entirely incapable of it, but at least nobler animals seem to have some kind of self-knowledge or self-awareness. In man, none of the outward senses can reflect on themselves; you cannot see your own seeing with your eyes, or taste your own tasting with your tongue. But man's inward senses, which are better and more like intellects than his outward senses, can reflect on the activity of the outward senses. Yet reason alone, among the abilities of man, is able to reflect on itself and on its own activities.

We see this order again in the sciences, since mathematics does not reflect on itself at all, but natural science, which is more like wisdom, reflects on itself enough to distinguish itself from mathematics; and metaphysics, which is human wisdom simply speaking, reflects on itself enough to distinguish itself from natural science and mathematics and even to divide out all the various sciences contained in the genus "science", including itself. And sacred theology, which has more the character of wisdom even than metaphysics, since it partakes more of divine wisdom, must distinguish itself from all of philosophy, and so it is even more self-knowing than metaphysics.

From this induction, we see that the nobler a thing is and

the more it partakes of the nature of wisdom, the more it will know itself, and the more its perfection will consist in self-knowledge. Since the beast is incapable of self-knowledge, and God or an angel cannot fail in self-knowledge, man alone, being open to self-knowledge but beginning in self-ignorance, needs the exhortation of the seven sages *Know Thyself*.