SELF-KNOWLEDGE AS A PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT

URSULA RENZ
ALPEN-ADRIA-UNIVERSITÄT KLAGENFURT

MONDAY, 22 MAY 2017
17.30 - 19.15

THE WOBURN SUITE
SENATE HOUSE
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
MALET STREET
LONDON WC1E 7HU
UNITED KINGDOM

This event is catered, free of charge & open to the general public

CONTACT
mail@aristoteliansociety.org.uk
www.aristoteliansociety.org.uk

© 2017 THE ARISTOTELIAN SOCIETY
Ursula Renz is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria, where she teaches both Theoretical Philosophy (epistemology, metaphysics and philosophy of mind) and Early Modern Philosophy. She has published widely on Early Modern Philosophy (Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Shaftesbury), Kant, the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism (Cohen, Natorp, Cassirer), as well as on the emotions, self-knowledge, and the problem of epistemic trust. In her talk, she will address a few philosophical problems of which she became aware during her work for the edited volume, *Self-Knowledge. A History* (OUP 2017).

**EDITORIAL NOTE**

The following paper is a draft version that can only be cited or quoted with the author’s permission. The final paper will be published in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Issue No. 3, Volume CXVII (2017). Please visit the Society’s website for subscription information: aristoteliantsociety.org.uk.
Recent discussions about the conception of self-knowledge in analytic philosophy have been concerned mainly with the distinctive way in which we know certain of our own properties. The flipside of this focus is that a sort of self-knowledge that requires effort in order to be achieved was rarely examined; and, as a consequence, it has been rarely discussed what reasons there are for individuals to strive for improving their self-assessment. It is against this background that I propose in this paper a working definition of the kind of self-knowledge that is also considered a personal achievement. Drawing some lessons from a few historical examples, I discuss what conditions have to be met for a subject to qualify as having this sort of self-knowledge. I will close with a few considerations concerning the value this sort of self-knowledge has for the individual acquiring it.

1. INTRODUCTION

RECENT DISCUSSION about the conception of self-knowledge in analytic philosophy has largely been constrained by the concern to account for the distinctive way in which we know certain of our own properties. To do so, philosophers have either posited that self-knowledge is a special manner of relating directly to one’s mind that essentially differs from the way in which we know other minds, or they have argued against this assumption by claiming that self-knowledge can be modeled through an analogy with the procedures by which we know other people, implying that the impression of our being immediately related with ourselves is an illusion, or a merely phenomenological effect. While both of these camps have drawn on the observation that self-knowledge is at least characterized by some sort of prima facie immediacy, they have disagreed over whether this appearance has to be taken seriously or rather explained away; moreover, there are several factions within these two major camps of the debate. Thus no general agreement has been reached apart from the notion that there is at least a prima facie difference between the way in which we know some features of ourselves and the way we know the same features in others.¹

¹ See Gertler (2015) for a survey of the debate and Gertler (2011) for an exposition of those accounts that embrace the notion of immediacy. Given my concerns, I do not have to take a stance with regard to this issue, and because it is sufficient to affirm the phenomenological impression of our being immediately related with some of our
While I have learnt a lot from this discussion, I have never been wholly satisfied with it. It has long seemed to me that most — and in particular analytic — philosophers have missed that feature of self-knowledge that has most attracted my interest. What I have sought to understand is not how I relate to myself when I am aware of some pain state or my intention to go for a walk this afternoon, but rather what, among other things, the ancient Greeks had in mind when they inscribed on a tablet at the temple the imperative ‘Know thyself’ at the Apollo temple in Delphi. What precisely did they have in view when they called for self-knowledge? And why did they think of self-knowledge in terms of an achievement presupposing a real effort, if not even in terms of an ideal, the reaching of which requires that we try really hard? In other words, what previously troubled me about the recent concern of philosophers with the prima facie immediacy of self-knowledge was that by focusing on this feature they might just have missed what makes self-knowledge important for our lives and a philosophical engagement with it vital. For, why should we count something as an achievement that we are, as it were, getting for free?²

Over the years, my overall view on the recent discussion has changed. I now think that insights can be gained from it that may help account for the ideal sense of ‘self-knowledge’.³ Yet, while there is increasing interest in the more substantial or value-related aspects of self-knowledge,⁴ the problem of self-knowledge’s being a personal achievement is still a woefully underresearched topic in analytic philosophy. Notably, when analytic philosophers reflect on the value of self-knowledge, they often locate it in the idea that self-knowledge is fundamental for the mental capacities of human subjects.⁵ However, while this shows the significance of prima facie immediate self-knowledge for mankind, it does not provide individual persons with any reason to strive for better self-knowledge and to improve

² See Wright, Smith, MacDonald (1998), 1f., for a succinct exposition. The problem of cognitive achievement is also addressed Boghossian (1998), 164-172.
³ See also sections 3 and 4 below.
⁴ Cassam (2014) has made a case for an approach that aims at doing justice as well to what he calls “substantial self-knowledge”; in the seventies, Tugendhat (1979; English translation 1989) addressed a similar issue; yet, referring to it by the term ‘self-determination’, he abstained from considering it as a case of self-knowledge. Finally, it is also touched upon in approaches operating on the grounds of psychoanalytic theory; see e.g. Wollheim (1984) and Lear (2011).
⁵ Rödl (2017, 280-1) has recently suggested an interpretation of what he calls “the Socratic question” along these lines, whereas Kraus/Vosgerau (2016) argued that improvement of self-knowledge is basically a matter of improving our understanding of the semantics of mental predicates.
their self-assessment. The question remains: why would it be advisable for individuals to engage in this sort of personal project?

It is against this background that I have set myself the goal to propose a sort of working definition of this ideal self-knowledge, which in recent historiography of early modern philosophy has been referred to as ‘Socratic self-knowledge’. This definition is not only intended to exhibit the structural features of Socratic self-knowledge; I also hope to show why, when and in what sense self-knowledge can be taken to constitute a personal achievement.

I will pursue this task in five steps. To set the stage, I will first address the claim that ‘self-knowledge’ is simply an equivocal term, referring to different types of phenomena, not all of which constitute an achievement. It will turn out that, while the distinction between types of self-knowledge is of heuristic value, as such it does not help to account for the sense in which self-knowledge may constitute a personal achievement (section 2). Next, to get a first grip on the ideal that constitutes Socratic self-knowledge, I will look at a few historical examples. I will show that these always emphasize the importance of one’s applying some insight to oneself (section 3). Based on these findings, I shall in the remainder of the paper develop my conception of Socratic self-knowledge. I will begin by discussing two epistemological features of Socratic self-knowledge (section 4) before examining what qualifies knowledge claims with respect to their contents as contributing to a person’s approaching the ideal of Socratic self-knowledge (section 5). Together, these results will allow me to establish the promised working definition and to address, albeit only in preliminary manner, the question as to why Socratic self-knowledge is an ideal that is worthwhile to pursue (section 6). I will conclude with a few final remarks.

2. A HEURISTIC CLASSIFICATION

The question of how self-knowledge can be considered the object of some ideal is often discarded by the (implicit) suggestion that we are confronted with different ideas that have to be kept apart and are only for contingent reasons subsumed under the same conceptual label. This suggestion, if voiced at all, takes its departure from the following distinction between

---

6 This is why many German philosophers, either following or rejecting Henrich’s approach, distinguish terminologically between “Selbstwissen” – which is a term of art in German – or “Selbstbewußtsein” on the one hand, and “Selbsterkenntnis” or “Selbstbestimmung,” on the other. Cf. e. g. Tugendhat (1989), Frank (1991), or Rödl (2007). It goes without saying that behind the different labels are quite different views on what both self-knowledge and Socratic self-knowledge are.
two phenomena: there is, on the one hand, what philosophers call self-knowledge, viz. the prima facie immediate epistemic relation we bear to our conscious states or attitudes, and on the other hand what laymen refer to by the same notion and which consists in any knowledge we may have of ourselves as persons or as human beings.

It is certainly useful to introduce a terminological distinction here. It is one thing to assume some sort of basic self-relation or to claim that some sort of self-awareness is necessary for human mental life; but it is another to invoke ‘self-knowledge’ as an ideal term which denotes a specific kind of human excellence. Let us therefore join the historians of philosophy and use ‘Socratic self-knowledge’ to refer to the latter phenomenon.

But even apart from this terminological concern, one may feel the need to discern several types of self-knowledge. Considering what has been named ‘self-knowledge’ in the history of the concept, and using the distinction between properties of ourselves that we may epistemically relate to, I have recently suggested to distinguish the following types of self-knowledge:

1. self-knowledge of one’s actual states
2. self-knowledge of one’s standing attitudes
3. self-knowledge of one’s dispositional properties
4. self-knowledge of one’s being subject to the human condition.

It is tempting to think that, once these types of self-knowledge are distinguished, we can safely assume that only instances of (3) and (4) are connected with the ideal of self-knowledge, whereas types (1) and (2) are marked by the prima facie immediacy that is of interest for analytic philosophers. In fact, classicists tell us that what the Greeks had in mind when articulating the Delphic injunction was anthropological knowledge or knowledge of the human condition, in particular, of course, of the condition of mortality. Likewise, one might think that what psychological

---

7 Renz (2017), 9-12. Note that the mentioned distinctions pretended neither to posit a set of completely distinctive categories, nor to establish an exhaustive classification. The aim was simply to give a structured overview of the range of phenomena referred to as self-knowledge in history.

8 This category contains not only knowledge of character traits, patterns of behavior, capacities, and limitations, but also features deriving from physical, cultural, or biological facts that dispose people to behave in a certain manner.

9 See Burkert (2011), 30. Hager (1995), 406, claims that, originally, the Delphic inscription either said “Know, man, that you are not God!” or “Know thyself, man, as a mortal being, in your mortality!” He quotes here from the first edition of Burkert (2011) from 1977, which has been largely revised in the new edition.
counselors or psychotherapists have in view when they support us in getting a better grasp of ourselves is mainly improved knowledge of our own character, dispositions, temperament, capacities -- in short of all sorts of personality traits. It may seem natural to take the above classification as proposing that Socratic self-knowledge just lacks the sort of prima facie immediacy that has been of interest in recent debates.

Admittedly, as already indicated in the introduction, it is pointless to voice an imperative calling for something which comes more or less for free. If there is such a thing as Socratic self-knowledge, it must consist in some knowledge that is not provided merely by our having of some feature, but requires some additional effort, an effort that may even involve the application of some specific empirical methods. Socratic self-knowledge must be conceived as something people may or may not acquire during their lifetime. Moreover, it seems plausible to assume that such knowledge is largely at stake in self-knowledge of types (3) and (4).

Yet, it must be emphasized that the proposed division does not as such address the question of what it is that constitutes Socratic self-knowledge, for the question remains why (3) and (4) may at all count as instances of self-knowledge, rather than of psychological or anthropological knowledge applied to the person one is. Note that we cannot dismiss the notion that they are indeed forms of self-knowledge, or else we can no longer assume that acquiring instances of them is different in kind from, say, mathematical knowledge, or any sort of expertise, and constitutes another sort of achievement. Likewise, Socratic self-knowledge cannot simply be conceptualized as knowledge of the human kind. Notably, there are people who, due to their profession, have a huge amount of anthropological knowledge, while displaying a disturbing lack of self-knowledge in their actual behavior.

In a nutshell, while the proposed classification is of some heuristic value, a simple division of the field does not help capture that aspect of self-knowledge due to which it may be considered as a form of human excellence.

3. LESSONS FROM HISTORY

But what, then, is Socratic self-knowledge? To get a first grasp of it, I suggest taking a closer view at a few historical examples in which the ideal aspect of self-knowledge is more or less explicitly addressed.

To begin with, imagine for a moment the situation of a Greek who is about to visit the temple in Delphi in order to worship the most sublime
of the Greek Gods, Apollo. Given his religious socialization, it would be pointless to assume that the inscription was meant to inform him of the fact that humans are generally considered mortal. Being on his way to Apollo, he knows this quite well. Less pointless, though, is it to conjecture that the inscription was intended to invite the visitor of the temple to affirm that -- in contrast with the God he was about to worship -- he, himself, was mortal. The reader of the inscription was not just expected to acquire some bit of anthropological knowledge, but to acknowledge that some anthropological fact, e.g. human mortality, applied to himself, too. In other words, to obey the Delphic imperative would require engaging in self-referential thoughts, or I-thoughts, and essentially so.

A similar point can be made with respect to many historical texts that aim at guiding their readers in their self-reflection and that employ special textual genres such as narratives, dialogues, monologues, etc. for this purpose. When, to take a famous example, in the beginning of Descartes’ Meditations, the first-person narrator tells us that he was struck by his mistakes and therefore wants to inquire into the sources of his epistemic fallibility, this was clearly intended to serve as a model for the reader’s self-reflection. This is even more obvious in the following passage from Descartes’ Discourse on the Method, where he writes:

\[
\text{I know how much we are liable to err in matters that concern us, and also how much judgment of our friends should be distrusted when they are in our favour. I shall be glad, nevertheless, to reveal in this discourse what paths I have followed, and to represent my life in it as if in a picture, so that everyone may judge for himself.} \]

Remarkably, this passage not only expresses the exemplary character of the narrative employed in the Discourse and the Meditations. Descartes also explicitly invites the reader to “judge for himself” thereafter. He obviously thinks that liability to error, which -- like mortality -- is classically considered one of the quintessential features of the human condition, must be acknowledged by each individual for himself. Thus, this example, too, indicates that Socratic self-knowledge involves self-referential thoughts, or the acceptance that some putative anthropological fact applies to oneself.

Let us come to one final example. In one of his maxims, François de La Rochefoucauld claims:

---

10 As Garrett (2012) has convincingly argued, we must comprehend many approaches in early modern ethical thought as attempts at providing its readers with guidance for self-help.

11 CSM 1: 112. For an extended discussion see also Renz (2017b, 148-9).
Our enemies come closer to the truth in their judgments about us than we ourselves.\(^\text{12}\)

As in the case of the Delphic inscription and Descartes’ narratives, the point of this maxim is missed if we reduce it to a lesson in anthropology. Voiced in the form of a moralist maxim, it articulates an insight which is expected to have a very practical bearing for the reader. To see why and in what sense this is so, we need to look at the way in which it functions epistemically. The question is, in other words, how this maxim is expected to be taken in by the reader.

Before we can address this question, we must say a few words about the context and La Rochefoucauld’s rhetorical strategy. Note that the maxim is voiced against the backdrop of the overall theme of the *Maxims*, viz. the problems which the passions, and in particular self-love, ‘amour-propre’, pose for man’s self-assessment or virtue.\(^\text{13}\) La Rochefoucauld assumes that, due to his self-love, man is extremely prone to self-deception. Most tantalizing, man even deceives himself about the motives for his striving for self-knowledge as well as about his achievements in this field: we may think that our aspiration is really to know ourselves better and we may also believe ourselves to have learnt something about us, while in fact we are driven by self-love, vanity, and ambition.\(^\text{14}\) Notably, for an author of moralist maxims, whose concern, among others, it is to help his readers to improve their self-assessment, this view poses a specific challenge. For against this background the question arises how any reader can ever be taught something true about the real nature of his own mind and character.

How does La Rochefoucauld respond to this challenge? One suggestion, clearly, is to read him as simply denying that this epistemic situation can ever be changed. Accordingly, the *Maxims* would just offer a very pessimistic, deflationary outlook on humans in general and on the issue of self-knowledge in particular, with the result that the very idea of there being some immediate self-knowledge of our intentions is to be discarded from the outset.

Fortunately, one is not forced to interpret the *Maxims* in this way. Instead, one can also read this text as employing a particular rhetorical strategy aimed at providing its readers with insights which, despite such

\(^{12}\) “Nos ennemis approchent plus de la vérité dans les jugement qu’ils font de nous que nous n’en approchons nous-mêmes.” (La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, 458.)

\(^{13}\) Elster (1999, 85) rightly points out that for La Rochefoucauld “the fundamental human motivation is amour-propre.”

\(^{14}\) As Garrett (2017, 164-5 and 172-8) recently argued, it is a frequent claim in French Moralism that man’s striving for self-knowledge is undermined by self-deception.
readers’ dispositions toward self-deception, result in an improvement of their self-knowledge. This would explain why the *Maxims* try to *surprise* the reader more or less systematically -- for instance by confronting her with the verdict that even our enemies come closer to the truth in their judgments about us than we do ourselves.

If we read this maxim along the lines of the second strategy, the question we have to address, as philosophers interested in the issue of self-knowledge, is not whether it is true or not that our enemy is in a better position to know us than we ourselves are. The crucial question is rather *on what theoretical grounds this insight can come as a surprise.* Evidently, the aforementioned maxim can be surprising only against the background of the presumption that we ourselves are always in the best position to judge ourselves. In other words, that our enemy should be in a better position than we ourselves are to make judgements about us is surprising to the extent to which we accept that there exists a certain epistemic asymmetry between the way in which we know ourselves and the way in which others do. Thus, following the second reading, it is crucial for the rhetoric of this maxim that it presupposes the notion of some sort of privileged access of the first person. Yet, if this is true, then what this maxim tries to show cannot be that there is no such thing as prima facie immediate self-knowledge, but rather that we tend to overrate its reach.

What can we learn from these examples? Apparently, it belongs to the rationale behind the traditional imperative to acquire (more) self-knowledge that it affirms rather than denies the notion of epistemic asymmetry between first-personal and third-personal thoughts that one may have about oneself. This corroborates what I voiced at the end of section two, viz. that Socratic self-knowledge cannot be reduced to the accumulation of any sort of third-personal knowledge, but requires that one *self-ascribes* some features to oneself in the form of I-thoughts.

4. EPSEMEOLOGICAL FEATURES OF SOCRATIC SELF-KNOWLEDGE

I began my considerations by pointing out that self-knowledge can only constitute an achievement if it is not provided to us merely on the basis of our possession of some feature. There is the presumption that Socratic self-knowledge requires some additional epistemic effort or involves some bit of *a posteriori* knowledge and so far no argument has been provided against it. On the other hand, I argued that the achievement envisaged by the traditional appeal to the ideal of self-knowledge cannot be reduced to the claim of third-personal knowledge of some feature holding of our-

15 That La Rochefoucauld employs a strategy of surprising the reader is emphasized also by Elster (1999, 83).
selves, but must involve self-referential thought. Taking these points seriously, we can identify the empirical character and the irreducible involvement of the first person as two essential features of the epistemology of Socratic self-knowledge.

To put this in somewhat more formal terms, we can employ some technical terminology introduced by Hector-Neri Castañeda and stipulate that a person S only has Socratic self-knowledge of a fact about herself, say that S is F, if both of the following two requirements are fulfilled:

(i) (S is F) is not known by S's being F, but \textit{a posteriori}, and

(ii) S knows, (s)he* is F,

Note that these two conditions do not constitute a full-fledged definition of Socratic self-knowledge; they only articulate our previous findings in a more formal manner.\textsuperscript{16} Still, having them both in view helps to identify two questions which have to be addressed in any discussion of the concept of Socratic self-knowledge.

Firstly, the question is how conditions (i) and (ii) can both hold of the same instances. Discussing the problem of self-reference, philosophers have often claimed that the usage of first-person pronouns is an \textit{irreducible} or \textit{essential} property of I-thoughts.\textsuperscript{17} To underline the importance of this point, some have even described self-reference as an \textit{a priori} element of I-thoughts, as it were.\textsuperscript{18} This does not really pose a problem, for, clearly, it must be possible for an I-thought to be known \textit{a posteriori}, yet it raises the question of how we can make sense of these two conditions as complementary characteristics of Socratic self-knowledge.

Somewhat more troubling is another point. Drawing on two epistemological features, the two conditions are satisfied by cases that would not normally be considered as proof of special wisdom, e.g. my knowledge of

\textsuperscript{16} Some might wonder whether it is legitimate to use the verb ‘to know’ in (i) and (ii), as it is part of the ‘definiendum’. Considering my purpose, this does not pose a problem. (i) and (ii) are not intended to decide whether a case of a person’s self-ascription of F satisfies the conditions to constitute knowledge, but to discuss whether there are instances of knowledge that, while being judged as real epistemic accomplishments, are also cases of real self-knowledge.

\textsuperscript{17} This assumption, which has been rehearsed in innumerable variants since Shoemaker (1968), is often – and wrongly – associated with Perry (1979), but see also Perry (2012, 98) for a correct representation of his intentions. In fact, that (i) and (ii) can come together poses no problem at all for Perry. The importance of self-reference for self-knowledge has recently been emphasized by O’Brien (2007).

\textsuperscript{18} See for instance Rödl, 37.
my being 1.75 meters tall. The question is whether there is a possibility to preclude such items from being counted as Socratic self-knowledge. I think there is, and it is to address this concern that I will suggest a further condition in the next section. Yet, I also think that this additional condition does not touch upon the epistemology of Socratic self-knowledge, and I would therefore admit that, considered from an epistemological perspective, my knowledge of my being 1.75 tall is indeed a candidate for Socratic self-knowledge.

We can even use this example to illustrate how conditions (i) and (ii) can be satisfied by one and the same instance of self-knowledge. That I am 1.75 meters tall is something I do not simply know from actually being 1.75 meters tall. Instead, I must use a technical device, e.g. a yardstick, to find this out. So, clearly, my knowledge of my being 1.75 meters tall meets condition (i). On the other hand, it also satisfies condition (ii), for we can certainly self-ascribe this feature of our having this height self-referentially. My knowledge of my being 1.75 meters tall can obviously be entertained as an I-thought, and we may think of situations where this is quite important. Imagine a case in which someone tries to intimidate you by making you feel small. In such a situation, you may calm yourself by thinking “After all, I am 1.75 tall and no smaller than he is.” It would not help if you thought instead, “This person is 1.75 tall and no smaller than that person.” That it is an I-thought which you articulate here is absolutely crucial, although your knowledge that the predicate ‘1.75 meters tall’ applies to you is obviously derived from some inferential process.

This shows that conditions (i) and (ii) relate to two different aspects of Socratic self-knowledge: (i) touches upon the way in which some fact, or that some predicate that applies to oneself, is learnt, whereas (ii) concerns the form in which the fact is thought. It is certainly no problem to think self-referentially of some fact one has learnt by empirical methods. On the contrary, it points to a phenomenological peculiarity of certain insights that we have about ourselves. Although obviously learnt indirectly, some facts about us may strike us as being essentially concerned with us. Thinking of some empirically learnt feature in the form of I-thoughts, we bring it in line, and sometimes in some connection, with our immediate self-awareness. That is why we can learn important things about ourselves

19 I am especially thankful to Sarah Tropper, who mentioned this example in a discussion of a previous version of this paper.
20 Cassam 2014 appeals to what he calls “substantial self-knowledge” in order to advocate an inferentialist approach to (all) self-knowledge. In doing so, he not only – as Boyle (2015, 344-6) argued – falls short of the special role of the first person in trivial self-knowledge; he also overlooks the fact that the first person is crucial for substantial self-knowledge as well.
by observing others, from hearsay or through reading novels.

To conclude, we can answer our question of how it is possible that the very same bit of self-knowledge can both be known \( a \ posteriori \) and thought \( self-referentially \) by pointing out that these features simply refer to two different aspects of Socratic self-knowledge, aspects which, while being independent of each other, are both essential for it. It is one thing to ask how some fact is learnt by a subject, but another to consider how a subject relates to the same fact in her actual thought.

5. CONTENTS THAT MATTER

In the previous section, I employed an example that is hardly considered a personal achievement: one’s knowledge of one’s height. The question remains how the concern can be addressed that many instances of self-knowledge are just too trivial to be judged as some sort of genuine achievement, given their particular content.

To begin with, let me emphasize that no bit of self-knowledge can be precluded right away from counting as or contributing to a personal achievement simply on the basis of its content. To see why this is so, it is helpful to look at cases of privations of self-knowledge. Imagine, e.g., a grown-up man who always looked up to his older brother, even though he is now stronger, taller, and cleverer than his brother is. We would certainly judge it as a case of severe lack of self-knowledge, or self-ignorance, if he still thought of himself as smaller, weaker, and less intelligent than his brother, and we would also not judge otherwise if we could see how his distorted self-perception came about. This makes it clear that even seemingly trivial I-thoughts such as this man’s insight that he* is 1.75 meters tall, and thus at least 10 cm taller than his brother, are in a sense a real achievement, although we would usually take it for granted that adults have this sort of knowledge about themselves.

This shows two things. First and foremost, it suggests that although Socratic self-knowledge is often thought of as form of human excellence or even an unreachable ideal, we better conceive of it as a dimension of human maturation that may be realized in a stepwise manner. By adding more and more insights into all sorts of features about ourselves, we refine our overall grasp of ourselves, and perhaps eventually some people may even achieve some sort of excellence in this respect. In a nutshell, like being knowledgeable in general, having Socratic self-knowledge is a property that comes in degrees.
Second, the example also exhibits that it is a matter of the particular context whether or not a given bit of self-knowledge constitutes an achievement. We can think of cases where a person’s knowledge of facts concerning issues such as her height or figure, the cause of her pain states or the true nature of her feelings turned out to be quite important for her further development. Moreover, keeping in mind that accepting such facts often involves overcoming some sort of psychological conflict, we can conclude that, all considered, even the acknowledgment of trivial facts may constitute real progress in a person’s maturation. This is of course not to say that any insight into these sorts of matters constitutes a personal achievement. It may be an achievement for a person to think that she is no longer attracted to her lover, whereas to say the same about another person or with respect to her relationship with her former husband is trivial. Thus, whether or not a given I-thought is an achievement bringing us closer to excellence depends on whether, given the context, it contributes to a person’s cognitive grip on herself. It must disclose to her some of her properties and in such a manner that she is willing to commit herself to the view of their being properties of herself.

This has an important implication. Apparently, whether or not some I-thought is an achievement bringing us closer to ideal self-knowledge is dependent on the particular context. Knowing that one is 1.75 meters tall can be revealing in some cases, while it is trivial in others, and it may be revealing for some persons of this height, but not for all. In other words, whether or not some insight improves our overall grasp of ourselves is dependent on how it relates to other features of ourselves such as our physiological and psychological condition, our personality, our culture and biography, etc. This indicates that self-cognition is holistically structured, as it were, and this seems to be due to the fact that our self is itself a holistically structured entity. It would go beyond the scope of this paper to say much more about this, yet it points to an important metaphysical background against which the very idea of self-knowledge’s constituting an achievement makes sense.

One might say that this leaves us without any clue which knowledge regarding ourselves is really worthwhile to acquire. But this seems wrong to me. That the relevance of self-knowledge varies with context and person does not preclude any presumption regarding some contents that may have existential weight for all humans. The Socratic or Cartesian insight into the fundamental difference between the reach and nature of our beliefs on the one hand and the reach and nature of our knowledge on the other predominantly concerns those contents that are taken to be of general importance to all humans.21 And the same holds most likely for in-

---

21 See Renz 2017a, 8, for an analysis of this insight.
sights into other facets of the human condition, such as mortality or other sorts of fundamental vulnerabilities. But this is not to say that voicing them expresses in all situations a deep insight. On the contrary, it often comes close to rehearsing a simple truism. On the other hand, there is the whole spectrum of personal features, biographical facts, etc., the relevance of which can only be defined with respect to the particular knowing subject, and sometimes it may even be such that its importance can only be judged by the subject itself.

To conclude, we can say that a bit of self-knowledge qualifies as Socratic self-knowledge only if it contributes to the subject’s getting a better grasp of her self or her own nature.

6. The value of socratic self-knowledge

I am now in a position to suggest the following working definition of Socratic self-knowledge:

S Socratically self-knows (S is F) iff

(i) (S is F) is not known by S’s being F, but a posteriori, and

(ii) S knows, (s)he* is F

(iii) S, by knowing (s)he* is F, gets a better grasp of who or what (s)he* is.

As discussed in the previous two sections, this definition combines insights into the epistemology of Socratic self-knowledge with the assumption that not all I-thoughts are such that they really constitute a personal achievement. As condition (i) exhibits, Socratic self-knowledge requires an epistemic effort that may involve the application of empirical means. Moreover, it shows why some obvious truths about us may strike us on a very personal level: given condition (ii), it makes a real difference whether I think that powerful people generally tend to overrate their significance, or whether I come to see that this mechanism determines my sense of my own significance. The considerations resulting in condition (iii) finally have made it conceivable why some fact about us, which appears trivial from the perspective of the third person, can constitute a significant achievement for a subject embracing it in the form of an I-thought.

There is a crucial question remaining: Does this definition also hint at the reasons why becoming more self-knowledgeable can be considered an end? Does it, in other words, reveal the sense in which achieving Socratic self-knowledge is worth striving for individually?
Let me begin by voicing a skeptical doubt one is often confronted with when dealing with ideal self-knowledge. It might be objected that it is by no means certain that increased self-knowledge results in a person’s being more virtuous or acting better nor is it something essentially pleasurable that makes us happy.\(^2\) It is important to see in what respect this reservation is legitimate: many insights that are typically considered as crucial lessons for the achievement of Socratic self-knowledge are not immediately good for us. Knowing the truth about us neither makes us happier nor more virtuous, simply in virtue of its being entertained in the form of I-thoughts.

Note, however, that doubt does not really undermine the notion that Socratic self-knowledge denotes an ideal that is worthy of being pursued. On the contrary, the above definition may also help us explore the intuition that there is something inherently good in Socratic self-knowledge, the understanding of which may also provide us with reasons for accepting it as an ideal. Following condition (iii), our knowledge of some additional fact about ourselves must result in a better grasp of ourselves. This does not simply posit a further criterion for Socratic self-knowledge; it also specifies the sense in which we are better off when we actually succeed in knowing ourselves better: we get a better grasp of who or what we are. The question is, of course, why are we better off with such a grasp than without it.

There is an obvious reason to be mentioned here. Having a better grasp of ourselves provides us with good grounds for future self-guidance. So, whereas Socratic self-knowledge lacks immediate prudential value, it is likely to improve future processes of practical deliberation.

Yet, there is also another reason that is only rarely voiced, although it points at the very heart of the Socratic legacy. Consider what happens when a good friend of ours tells us some detail about his life or character. We get acquainted with a facet of this person that has hitherto been unknown to us. Unless his report about himself offends our sensibilities, it is likely to enhance our intimacy with him and to reinforce our friendship, and this in turn makes the time we spend with him more precious. My contention is that something similar happens in our own case: Socratic self-knowledge makes us better acquainted with ourselves; and in doing so it is likely to enhance our self-intimacy and to foster a sense of friendship for ourselves. As a result, the very fact of our being alive may become more precious.

\(^2\) Note that this objection is not the same as, say, the “Romantic” worry that indulging in self-examination prevents us from living emphatically. This worry rests on false alternatives; see also Wollheim (1984, 165ff.).
Some might object here that there are many facets of other persons, including our best friends, which we would prefer not to know. It can go against our will that we get acquainted with some features of other persons, and in such cases the enhanced intimacy is probably not really wanted. We want to decide, in other words, how intimately connected we want to be with other persons.

This is indeed where the analogy ends. We can choose our friends, but not the persons we are identical with.\textsuperscript{23} This being so, it is certainly better to be in a relationship of intimacy to oneself than one of ignorance,\textsuperscript{24} and this holds even if it requires us to accept features of ourselves the knowledge of which may make us sad at first. In a nutshell, I think that Socratic self-knowledge is not such that it immediately makes us more rational or happy, but is valuable in providing us with the grounds for a deeper and friendlier relationship with ourselves that makes our being alive more precious to ourselves.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have combined insights deriving from the history of philosophy with lessons from recent discussions about the epistemology of self-knowledge to develop a definition of Socratic self-knowledge. This definition proved instructive in three respects. (1) It illuminated a structural peculiarity of certain insights about us: some truths which we find out in an indirect way may strike us as immediately concerned with us. This is because even facts that we have learnt \textit{a posteriori}, i.e. that are not known simply in virtue of our having a certain feature, can be maintained in the form of an I-thought. (2) The definition also showed why it is so difficult to say in a general manner which contents are relevant for a subject’s improving her self-knowledge. Given condition (iii), it depends essentially on the particular context whether some bit of self-knowledge constitutes an achievement in a given case and moment. (3) Through the definition, we also got a first understanding of the sense in which Socratic self-knowledge is worth achieving: assuming that it results in a better grasp of the sort of entity that we are, it provides us with the grounds for standing on good terms with ourselves.

\textsuperscript{23} This does not preclude there being a sense in which answering the question of who we are is a matter of self-constitution. Affirming that we cannot choose the persons we are identical with does not commit us to the rejection of theories that have framed the process of self-knowledge in terms of self-constitutive relations, such as Moran 2001, and Bilgrami 2006.

\textsuperscript{24} Note that even the attitude of irony that Lear (2011) champions presupposes some sort self-intimacy, whereas self-ignorance just precludes that we adopt an attitude of irony toward ourselves.
One might regret that the provided analysis falls short of many expectations. Nothing of what I have said explains, e.g., how we can acquire beliefs that count as Socratic self-knowledge. But this is a misunderstanding; philosophical epistemology is not meant to instruct us about how to pursue epistemic projects, or at least not primarily so. My exposition is also far from deciding recent debates on self-knowledge, and in particular it does not contribute to a better understanding of the prima facie immediacy that has attracted the interest of philosophy.

This does not preclude there being important connections between Socratic self-knowledge, as I defined it, and the notion of there being some prima facie immediate self-knowledge. On the contrary, we have seen that the role self-knowledge plays in thought and action in virtue of its prima facie immediacy has repercussions for the claim that Socratic self-knowledge requires people to have I-thoughts. And this may even be noticed by the subject itself. It is at least reasonable to expect that if the acquisition of Socratic self-knowledge truly plays a part in shaping the relationship of persons to themselves, this is somehow even sensed by the persons themselves. Presumably, it was in this spirit that Shaftesbury rehearsed the ancients’ claim that it was “the peculiarity of philosophers and wise men to be able to hold themselves in talk. And it was their boast on this account that ‘they were never less alone than when by themselves’. A knave, they thought, could never be by himself.”

Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt
Universitätsstraße 65-67
9020 Klagenfurt am Wörthersee
Austria

25 Shaftesbury 1999, 79. During my work on this topic, I have greatly benefited from conversations with Catherine Elgin, Barnaby Hutchins, Martin Kusch, Richard Moran, Gabriele Mras, Amelie Rorty, Robert Schnepf and Alison Simmons, as well from discussions with my colleagues and students in Klagenfurt. I thank to audiences at the ETH Zurich, Vienna, Konstanz, Cologne, and London. I thank Zachary Gartenberg for his corrections, and especially Sarah Tropper for her incisive and helpful comments on a previous version of this paper.
REFERENCES


C., B. Smith and C. Macdonald (Eds). *Knowing Our Own Minds* (pp. 1-11). Oxford: Clarendon
PRESIDENT: Tim Crane (Cambridge)

PRESIDENT-ELECT: Helen Beebee (Manchester)

HONORARY DIRECTOR: Rory Madden (UCL)

EDITOR: Guy Longworth (Warwick)

LINES OF THOUGHT SERIES EDITOR: Scott Sturgeon (Oxford)

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE: Corine Besson (Sussex) / Kimberley Brownlee (Warwick)
Rowan Cruft (Stirling) / James Harris (St Andrews) / Ulrike Heuer (Leeds) / Sacha Golob (KCL)
Susan James (Birkbeck)

MANAGING EDITOR: Hannah Carnegy (UCL)

ASSISTANT EDITOR: David Harris

GRAPHIC & WEB DESIGNER: Mark Cortes Favis

ADMINISTRATOR: Josephine Salverda (UCL)