

Gnōthi sauton — “Know Thyself”

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Greek Spelling, Roman Transliteration, English Translation

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

Basic Information

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

Mini-Essay

γνῶθι σαυτόν, *gnōthi sauton*, “Know thyself!” — this nugget of wisdom, along with several others (“Nothing to excess,” etc.), was originally inscribed in the entrance porch of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. That’s going to be significant: Delphi was the main place to go when you wanted answers. There, the god would speak to you via his mouthpiece, the Pythia. Her utterances would then be edited by the priests of the place and handed over to you.

The saying in Greek *may* have looked something like this — archaic alphabet, right-to-left writing, etc., sort of a guess:



In the 1999 film *The Matrix*, there is a scene in the apartment of the character known as the Oracle. Above her kitchen door hangs a plaque with the following inscription, *Nosce temet*, which Latinists will recognize as a translation of *gnōthi sauton*, Greek for “Know thyself,” from the temple of Apollo at Delphi. The fitness of the proverb just above the entrance to the Oracle’s door is fairly obvious: For Neo to understand his destiny, what awaits him, he must first understand what it within him. Is that what it meant in ancient times? In the works of Plutarch (46-c. 120 CE), its meaning varies depending on context, and maybe that’s right: the phrase means whatever is most meaningful *to you*. To Socrates, it meant knowing “that I know nothing.” For awareness of one’s own ignorance is the beginning of knowledge. But self-knowledge doesn’t stop there. For, as Socrates puts it, “for any human being, the unexamined life is not worth living” (ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ, Plato *Symposium*).

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

Paradoxically, self-knowledge must be gained through others. Thus in Plato’s *Symposium* and *First Alcibiades*, one’s beloved provides one with a window into the one’s self, the self one sees mirrored in the adoring looks of one’s beloved — those spiritual qualities, in other words, that one’s beloved is drawn to. But that only underscores the paradox of self-knowledge, which is never simply knowledge of the self, but of the self in relation to others.