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What Kind of Self-Knowledge?

Philosophical discussions about self-knowledge tend to focus, almost exclusively, on one understanding of the concept. For example, in the volume in the series *Oxford Readings in Philosophy* devoted to the concept of self-knowledge,\(^1\) the starting point is obviously Cartesian: are the contents of my own mind peculiarly transparent to me? That this is not the question I ask is hopefully already evident by now. When Socrates talks about knowing oneself, what he is after is not that kind of self-knowledge. And that the title of the book connects self-knowledge and self-deception suggests as much. Self-knowledge is hence not one thing. The concept is connected to a number of different questions; the knowledge and the self which are relevant are different from case to case, and they offer their respective problems, possibilities, and perspectives. The philosophically interesting task is hence not to make a complete description of self-knowledge as such. Instead we will focus on one issue.

Is self-knowledge difficult to acquire? If the contents of my own mind are transparent to me, then that kind of self-knowledge is not difficult to acquire, on the contrary. But there are concepts of self-knowledge that designate precisely what is difficult to acquire: ‘In fact it seems to be the most difficult thing of all to get to know yourself.’\(^2\) But how come such a difficulty exists at all? Should not knowing oneself be the easiest thing there is? Should not self-knowledge be so easy to acquire that we never speak about it at all? What is the difficulty?\(^3\)

That I do not know everything there is to know about myself is a trivial fact. Empirical knowledge about myself could be just as hard to acquire as empirical knowledge about others. Whether I have some specific illness or not is an ordinary medical question, no matter whether the person examining me is myself or somebody else. There are differences, of course: it is easier to study the back of somebody else than to study
one’s own back, and in order to examine somebody else I must see to it that we meet but this is not so with regard to myself. But these differences are trivial. If there are special difficulties connected to self-knowledge, difficulties the possibility of which one may have a hard time to understand, the kind of knowledge and the sense of self we are then focusing on are different.  

What gives rise to the special difficulties of self-knowledge, speaking to begin with in general terms, is that the subject and the object of this knowledge coincide. In other words, the kind of relation I have to this knowledge and to what this knowledge is about is peculiar. For this reason it is not strange that the word ‘self-knowledge’ is most often used with reference to psychological issues: here the knower and the known are identical in a sense in which me and the cut on my finger are not. In the latter case I could put a plaster on it just as I would do if the finger were somebody else’s, but in the former case my thoughts about the problem cannot be clearly distinguished from the problem itself. That there are special difficulties connected to self-knowledge is here not strange at all.

Even in the case of psychological knowledge there are distinctions to be made, however. Psychological knowledge need not have to do with me in particular, if I, say, take an interest in some psychological theory which claims to be of general validity. But what about the character of my interest? One possibility is that my interest is of general kind too: I study in order to be able to work as a psychologist, more or less as the medical student studies in order to be able to work as a physician. Another possibility is that my interest is of a more self-centered kind. In that case the theory I read about may make claims to general validity, but the interest I approach it with concerns the possibility of me changing my life. (This change can be brought about by me applying the theory directly to myself, in that way coming to an understanding of myself and thus changing my life, or by me applying the theory to people I know and meet with, in that way coming to an understanding of them and thus change my relation to them and so my life.) What is important to me in such a case is not primarily whether the self-knowledge I see myself as acquiring by means of the theory is really an instance of a general kind of knowledge or not, even though it may be important to me in what way the social status of this theory contributes to my own social status; what is important to me is that I experience this theory as a way of dealing with problems and difficulties in my own life.