

Self-Knowledge and Self-Deception

Hugo Strandberg



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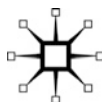
THE POSSIBILITY OF DISCUSSION: Relativism, Truth and Criticism of Religious Beliefs

Self-Knowledge and Self-Deception

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Introduction

Self-knowledge and self-deception are not so much the themes of this book as its primary tools: these concepts act as mirrors through which it is possible to reflect upon questions about the self. But in order to be able to use them as tools we must first get to know these concepts. In the first half of the book (Chapters 1–4) we will therefore discuss them specifically. The purpose of these discussions should, however, be remembered: they do not aim at being exhaustive but at developing tools for discussing the former questions and, thereby, at showing that and why this understanding of these concepts is important.

The central questions in the book are questions about the self, I said. As the words self-knowledge and self-deception indicate, ‘the self’ could be said to stand for the object of this form of knowledge and this form of deception: it is myself I know and deceive. Not being an autobiography, this essay will, however, not be about myself. Instead the issue concerns what it is that becomes visible when we use these concepts as a means of looking at ourselves; I will not ask myself the question ‘who am I?’ and try to answer it, I will try better to understand this question. Chapter 5 is here the central one, and one question there is whether phrasing it in terms of ‘the self’ is really the best way of understanding the issue.

The light in which all these questions will be asked and discussed is the light of morality or, as I think is a better way of putting it, the light of love: the light in which other people really become visible for me, and so me in my relation to them (relations the alleged negative and ultimately positive character of which will specifically be discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 respectively). What says the fact that the moral address is both internal and external to me (or neither internal nor external) about who I am? ‘Morality as a guide to philosophical anthropology’ would thus be one, somewhat joking, way of describing the contents of the

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book. Why this is the light in which the questions are discussed will be explained later on (Chapter 2); the book as a whole is in fact an attempt at drawing the reader's attention to the importance, indeed moral inevitability, of this way of understanding oneself, and the last chapter will round off the discussion by specifically delving into the concept of the good. (Chapters 8–10 do the same work by means of contrast: in them alternative central notions – will and freedom – are discussed and put to the side.) One central example is remorse, love's way of beginning to bridge the gap between self-deception and self-knowledge.

This has been a very brief sketch of the field the book will investigate. But perhaps it has been too long: the way specific concepts and ideas are introduced, when and why they enter into the discussion, and why some questions are asked and not others are not things that can be explained independently of the investigations. This is an important part of my method: the way the questions are asked and the reasons given for this way of understanding them are part of our work on them. This is important to bear in mind with regard to where we will end up when we have come to the last page of the book. What will be said about self-knowledge – about the question 'who am I?' – are not the only things you can say about this topic. You could even say radically different things about it without this necessarily being in conflict with what will be said here if you focus on aspects of the topic I will not focus on. In the following chapters reasons for this focus will be given.

As regards method I would furthermore like to draw the reader's attention to the personal character of the way I do philosophy, a way of doing philosophy which in this case is intimately connected to the topic. What you will read is thus not so much a result I have arrived at as an invitation to subject your own understanding of the issues under discussion to examination and criticism, examination and criticism which you in the end have to carry out on your own. One aspect of this is that every objection you would like to raise to what I say is double-edged: either it can be understood in an immediate way, as directed to that which it claims to be directed to, and then be to the point or misleading, or it can be understood as a manifestation of your own shortcomings and failings, in which case you have to subject to critical examination your own unwillingness of taking to heart the points I am making. Which of these two possibilities, which are there in every case, is the right one in the concrete situation can certainly not be said beforehand, least of all by me. And this means that reading a philosophical text is in the end a work you have to do on yourself, is in the end a question of self-knowledge.

It should however be evident from the way I sketched the contents of the book that this personal character of philosophical work does not mean that it is carried out in isolation and solitude: studying oneself by means of the mirror of self-knowledge and self-deception and in the light of love is to see one's moral relations to others as central. I would therefore like to end this introduction by thanking those the conversations with whom have made it possible for the ideas this book contains to come to growth: first and foremost my philosophical friends at Åbo Akademi University, second those who have commented on previous versions of many of its chapters when presented at conferences and workshops. This way of putting it risks however to give a distorted understanding of how philosophy is done. The impression might namely be created that it is conversations of a special, professional kind that are important, and the personal nature of philosophical work would then be toned down. But as I see it the professional side to the work is comparatively superficial: you do not arrive at the decisive insights in that way. Instead it is in conversations you have with people you do not only have a profession in common with, people you do not only discuss specific, evidently philosophical topics with, that you really come to think in new ways. No doubt many of those already mentioned are important also in this regard, but ultimately my gratitude concerns all those I share and have shared life with, a gratitude which obviously does not only concern things that can be enumerated but life as such.

That life is not primarily a life of thought. The work on this book was given financial support by the Kone Foundation, without which it would not have been possible. Thanks therefore also go to those who have provided its 'material conditions'.

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Know Thyself!

Are philosophical discussions sometimes about self-knowledge, sometimes not? Early in the history of philosophy, this suggestion would have been rejected. Philosophy and self-knowledge were seen as intimately connected; the call to 'know thyself' was an impetus to philosophical work and, by Aristotle, regarded as popular wisdom (δεδημοσιευμένα).¹ That self-knowledge is central to philosophy is by contrast nowadays something you say almost only on ceremonious occasions. This book is, however, written in the belief that there is something important to the connection of philosophy and self-knowledge. This should, however, not be understood as a connection between two concepts the meanings of which are already clear. On the contrary, saying that philosophy and self-knowledge are connected means clarifying the concept of philosophy in one particular way. And the same goes for the concept of self-knowledge. In other words, an understanding of these concepts is not given from the start; clarifying the relation of philosophy and self-knowledge is to clarify what philosophy and self-knowledge are.

How should the relation between self-knowledge and philosophy be understood? Simone Weil says:

'Know thyself' was among the Greeks a precept which had become a proverb, and which was written up at the entrance to the temple at Delphi, which was a repository of all wisdom. What sense could this saying have had? It seems that it meant: 'Why do you have to come and ask me about the secrets of nature, of the future? All you need to do is know yourself.'²

In other words, philosophical thinking contrasts to oracular knowledge; wisdom is not to be found in the temple but in one's own thinking.³

When trying to understand the nature of philosophy and oneself as a philosopher, self-knowledge is the central notion, for philosophy is about answering questions by going to oneself.

The most explicit emphasis of self-knowledge as philosophically central is, however, to be found in the thought of someone who understands what he does as, in fact, originating in an oracular mission: Socrates.⁴ His wisdom, it is said, does not consist in him knowing more than others, but in him knowing that he does not know, in him not believing that he knows that which he does not know; his wisdom, that in which he is superior to everyone, is his *self-knowledge*.⁵ In this first chapter, I will give an account of how the intimate connection of self-knowledge and philosophy in Socrates and Plato could be understood. This understanding is however not identical to my own, even though I believe there is much to learn from it; at the end of the chapter I will say a few words about how our investigations will proceed.

1 Self-knowledge in Socrates and Plato

Socrates's self-knowledge is intimately connected to his wisdom, as we have seen. The wisdom the Socratic philosopher loves and searches for, but does not possess,⁶ consists in self-knowledge. The self-knowledge of the philosopher does not consist in new knowledge of a familiar kind, but in an understanding of the character and scope of the knowledge one already considers oneself the possessor of, and consists for Socrates in him knowing that he does not know. This understanding must be understood both as an understanding and as an attitude: 'philosopher' already indicates a distance to the sophist's belief in his own wisdom or to the sophist's claim to wisdom.⁷ The paradoxical character of this wisdom⁸ is then that it seems to disown itself: wisdom consists in not possessing wisdom. The paradox is, however, only apparent. Whereas the other attitude is about (giving others the impression that one is) focusing on the object of knowledge – the nature of things – the philosophical attitude is about turning⁹ one's attention to oneself as a possible possessor of knowledge. The philosopher's knowledge is then self-knowledge, and self-knowledge is not knowledge about just another object in the world but about my alleged knowledge of the world. Self-knowledge is knowledge in another sense than other kinds of knowledge, the self not an object of self-knowledge in the sense that every kind of knowledge has its particular object, and the wisdom of the philosopher another kind of wisdom than the wisdom the sophist claims to have. But that they are different does not mean that they are unrelated.

On the contrary, self-knowledge is about countering those claims made in the name of other kinds of knowledge; self-knowledge is knowledge about my relations to things, in contrast to knowledge about the things as such and to knowledge about myself in isolation from them. Self-knowledge could therefore be said to be about the place of knowledge in my life, and is given a merely negative role by Socrates: self-knowledge is about understanding that you do not actually know what you took yourself to be knowing. If this is what self-knowledge is, it also provides an answer to the question ‘who am I?’: I am the one who knows or does not know, I am a possible possessor of knowledge, my relations to that which I am part of are epistemological relations.¹⁰

However, the topic of self-knowledge has an even more pervasive place in the Socratic or Platonic philosophy than the one accounted for above, although it is in the above context it is made most explicit. For Plato epistemological questions are questions with central moral dimensions. ‘The theory of forms’, when it is classically formulated in *Phaedo* and *Republic*, does not primarily enter as a way of understanding knowledge; the contexts in which it enters are about the relation of body and soul, about the ‘practice for dying and death’,¹¹ about ‘adorning one’s soul [...] with its own ornaments’,¹² about ἀρετή and δικαιοσύνη. And recollection, when it enters in *Meno*, enters in order to clarify whether virtue can be taught. In other words, three different questions are associated: epistemological questions (or, with a different emphasis, questions about the relation between empirical and conceptual knowledge and about the nature of the latter), moral questions (about the good, about whether there is knowledge about the good and what nature that knowledge then has), questions about self-knowledge (about the soul, about my own nature, and about what self-knowledge is).

Describing these connections in greater detail, we could start with the question about how to judge claims to expertise. The expert is by means of definition someone who knows more than I do as a layman. This could seem to mean that it is not possible for me to judge whether someone is really an expert, for the one who claims to be an expert exemplifies her purported knowledge by stating things I am not knowledgeable enough to verify or refute. So is it the case that the only one who can judge whether someone really has expert knowledge is the one who has it? Are we going in a circle? And Socrates says again and again that we should ask the physician, that is the expert, if we want to know anything about health.¹³ But who is really a physician, and who is a quack who poses as a physician? This question I must consider myself, without being able to consult any experts. Furthermore, this question – who is

really a physician? – can be rephrased as a question about what health is, that is, as a conceptual question. The physician has expert knowledge about health (about how health is produced, for example), but I must ask myself what I really consider as health. This is a conceptual question – unlike the physician’s knowledge which is an empirical one, even though the physician’s knowledge certainly presupposes the same conceptual knowledge my question is about – and a question I must answer. The conceptual question could be said to be a question about self-knowledge, a description the point of which is underlined by the observation that this knowledge is not a knowledge one acquires in any usual sense since that would only lead us back to that circle – conceptual knowledge as expert knowledge – which the emphasis on the personal nature of the question takes us out of. This consideration, of what I should count as health, is in the Socratic context formulated in terms of recollection: what I need to do is not to pursue some complicated investigation but to get to know myself better, realizing what I already know. That the conceptual question, which at the same time is a question of self-knowledge, is also a moral one is perhaps not immediately clear in the context of the concept of health, but becomes more obvious in the light of other concepts Socrates discusses: courage, virtue. This aspect is however there also in the case of health: ‘health’ does not refer to those more or less blurry examples of health we meet with empirically but to that ideal perfection which appears when we consider these empirical examples in the light of the good.¹⁴

This conceptual consideration, hence also moral and about self-knowledge, becomes for Socrates a pursuit of definitions – paradoxically enough, for stating a definition is an attempt at turning the result of the conceptual consideration into public knowledge, which we have seen would not solve the problem but only give rise to it again – a pursuit which fails. (We do not get a definition of courage in *Laches*, not of ἀρετή in *Meno*, not of knowledge in *Theaetetus*.) As an anti-sophistical point there may be something to this – if I do not know what it is I want there is no sense in engaging a purported expert, which it would be if I knew what I wanted – but the failure is in any case more a problem concerning the pursuit of definitions than showing an insurmountable difficulty in striving for self-knowledge. Is a definition of health at all needed? In a way the important point in Socrates’s discussions is that such a definition is, in fact, not needed. When the orator tries to convince the assembly, he may use general and abstract ways of speaking,¹⁵ in that way hiding his lack of knowledge. But Socrates wants us to see that these general and abstract ways of speaking are empty, and he wants us to realize this

without him telling us anything we did not know, but only by drawing our attention to things we already know but tend not to be attentive to, that is by means of a dialogical and recollective process.¹⁶ The difficulty of philosophy is hence not that it is an unusually abstract kind of thinking, but on the contrary that it, by wanting us to be attentive to what is concrete, stands in contradiction to our everyday tendency to think, and to be led into thinking, in abstract terms.¹⁷ In other words, it is in relation to what is abstract that Socrates's lack of knowledge stands out – he is not able to formulate any general definitions – and it is in relation to what is concrete that the recollected knowledge – the knowledge I already have, in some sense or other – stands out: I already know all those cases a successful definition is supposed to cover. This point becomes all the more obvious when we pay attention to the fact that it is precisely in those juridical contexts the orator / sophist is at home in and Socrates wants us to dissociate ourselves from personally,¹⁸ that a definition has a use.¹⁹

There is however more than this to be said about the attempt to remedy my apparent ignorance by recollecting what I already know. To Socrates this has a moral significance of a more immediately moral kind, when the concept of recollection is used to explain the nature of moral badness, as both known and not known. The famous geometrical example of recollection in *Meno* does not primarily enter as an attempt at characterizing mathematical knowledge, but as an attempt at characterizing moral knowledge.²⁰ If we want to say that the one who morally wrongs someone both is and is not conscious of what she is doing, the possibility of recollection is a way of describing someone as both conscious and not conscious of something. The paradoxical conclusion of *Protagoras* – that virtue is a kind of knowledge which cannot be taught²¹ – is in this light not at all paradoxical, or is only paradoxical if our understanding of virtue is modelled on our understanding of empirical knowledge.²² In contrast to empirical ignorance, moral badness is inadequate self-knowledge, and moral development comes about by reflecting upon oneself.²³

With the help of the above it is possible to come to an understanding of the dialogical character of Socratic philosophy.²⁴ Since what should be attained concerns self-knowledge, I must be involved. A non-dialogical form – such as making a speech – or a non-dialogical product – such as writing, no matter whether what it contains are dialogues or not – has a philosophical value only to the extent I enter into a dialogue with them and turn them into my interlocutors.²⁵ Self-knowledge means that I do not stand in an outer relation to what I possibly acquire knowledge

about;²⁶ it is only if I consider myself as just another empirical object that I can take a statement about myself on authority, as when a physician says that if I take this and that drug, I will get well. But the question about what I should count as health – a question I must answer, at least implicitly, in order for it to be possible for me to check whether this purported expert really has the knowledge she claims she is having – is a question I must consider myself. As Nicias says in *Laches*:

whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and associates with him in conversation must necessarily, even if he began by conversing about something quite different in the first place, keep on being led about by the man's arguments until he submits to answering questions about himself concerning both his present manner of life and the life he has lived hitherto. [...] the conversation would [...] be [...] about ourselves, if Socrates were present.²⁷

The need for dialogue might, however, be underestimated if I do not realize the difficulties of self-knowledge:²⁸ if these difficulties did not exist, a text, or me on my own, would be enough, then I could formulate definitions on my own and, by entering into a dialogue with the text or with myself, try to consider situations in which my suggested definition would be erroneous. But the difficulty, evident when the moral aspect is paid attention to, is that I do not, in a sense, *want* to know myself. The dialogue with another person is then the place where the problem of the will is sidestepped, the problem which arises when I only let pass what I want to let pass and keep away what I do not want to let pass. For if someone asks me something, I do in most cases answer her, even if the question is awkward. But even if I refuse to answer, I do not disregard the question: I may say 'I will not answer that question' (and nonetheless answer it, in a way) or think to myself 'to such an insolent person I will not give an answer' (and nonetheless give a kind of answer to the question to myself). I am touched, see myself as addressed, independently of any choices on my part. To myself I need not mean what I say. However, the question asked by the other person is alien enough to, possibly, be independent of my problem, but not so alien that I am able to ignore it or give it an answer which I know she will see through. I am not able to treat her and what she says completely instrumentally, and my philosophical interlocutor could be said to aim at this gap I am not able to close. In other words, the question asked by the other person is neither internal to me (in which case it would be part of the problem), nor external (in which case I need not care about it). For this reason it is