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Socrates and Self-Knowledge by Christopher Moore

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I must begin by thanking Christopher Moore for writing this stimulating book. I look forward to conversation about it that may bring us closer to self-knowledge. If it does not, I hope it will be pleasant. However, if Moore is right, I think perhaps we can't have one without the other.

Moore sums up the theses of his book this way:

Socratic self-knowledge means working on oneself, with others, to become the sort of person who could know himself, and thus be responsible to the world, to others, and to oneself, intellectually, morally, and practically. (6)

I think these claims about self-knowledge are not only important for readers of Plato's dialogues to consider, they are worthy of consideration for those of us who are seriously interested in the nature and *difficulty* of education, more generally speaking. I am quite sympathetic with Moore on a number of points: his approach to reading Plato; his emphasis on the value that self-knowledge has in Socratic inquiry and conversations; his point that the Delphic Oracle is an extremely important image throughout the Platonic dialogues. Moore's synthesis of these images especially in the *Charmides*, *Alcibiades*, *Philebus*, *Phaedrus*, yields a study of self-knowledge that is original and provocative that should prompt and guide continued further conversations about this important topic.

There are two features of self-knowledge Moore emphasizes that I find particularly interesting. The first is that *selfhood is aspirational*:

Something properly considered a "self" may not fully preexist any effort to know

it. The “self” may need to be completed, not just found... Selfhood would be aspirational, an accomplishment, where creative success would be determined by linguistic or moral convention, not by the already-established order of the world. (36)

Self-knowledge will have as its object the self that is constituted. The charge to “know yourself” will necessitate simultaneously constituting yourself. (40)

To know oneself is really to *become what one is*, or better, what one ought to be. It is also consistent with Moore’s claim that self-knowledge goes hand in hand with intellectual and moral maturation (57). In this connection, Moore gives us an illuminating explanation for Plato’s choice to title the dialogue *Charmides* for example, rather than, say, “*On Sôphrosunê*”. It is finally the coming into being of Charmides *as Charmides*, — it is the maturation of his character, intellect, and thereby his self-knowledge — that is of utmost importance and ultimately connected to the virtue under discussion.

A second interesting feature emphasizes this: Moore argues that the Socratic reading of “Know yourself” should be understood as “*Acknowledge yourself*” (35, 42). There is indeed an important difference between an act of knowing and an act of acknowledging. Most obviously, I can certainly know if someone near me is in pain, without acknowledging it. At least in this case and perhaps for most others (if not all), *acknowledgment requires an assent*. Self-acknowledgment therefore places one in the space of practical reasons. That is, it seems that reading self-knowledge this way shifts the kind of question one might ask about oneself. Rather than “What kind of thing am I?,” the

more apt question appears to be “What *ought* I to do?” or “Who ought I to become?”. The aspirational quality of selfhood and the notion that *self-knowledge is really self-acknowledgment* complement each other. In fact, these two notions are tied together via their ethical, practical, normative component.

But a question emerges here that, in various permutations, seems to run through the dialogues Moore discusses and the accounts he gives of these dialogues. I think the reason the question keeps re-emerging is that the thread that seems to tie the dialogues together concerns the *use or uselessness of self-knowledge* (cf. 187). I would therefore put the question, most simply, as: if selfhood is aspirational, towards what is it aspiring? (Would Moore agree with me that his book could be seen as *working out Socrates’ attempt to answer this question?*)

I think that both Moore and I are inclined to say that selfhood is aspirational toward the good, towards what is best for me as a human being. Moore himself says, “the Delphic injunction encourages recognizing oneself as (personally) responsive to the (impersonal) claims of truth and goodness. (42)” But I am less optimistic than he that the account he gives can resolve what might be an irreconcilable tension between what he calls our “personally responsive self” and “the impersonal claims of truth and goodness”. Put another way, I am not sure what the bridge is that Moore is offering between *the soul and the good*. I hope this will become clear in what follows. Let me first return to Moore’s explanation of the aspirational quality of selfhood.

Moore suggests that “selfhood would be aspirational, an accomplishment, where creative success would be determined by linguistic or moral convention, not by the already-established order of the world. (36)” It is the word convention that I find striking. How far does

Moore want to push the claim that creative success in the accomplishment of selfhood is *determined* by moral convention? If I am reading Moore correctly here, it is not immediately obvious that moral convention has the robustness, universality, or justificatory power to be the kind of *good* that motivates the aspiration of Socratic self-knowledge. Would it not be fair to ask which linguistic or moral conventions *ought to determine my creative success in achieving selfhood*? I assume the answer to that question can't be *determined* by further linguistic or moral conventions, or we will be exposed to a vicious regress. Moore has suggested to me in conversation about this that we must not look to the world, but to the things we say we are responsible for in order to determine whether we have a self. But if that is true, how do I *evaluate these claims themselves*? Might we need knowledge of the good itself, which transcends all conventions, including all normative claims embedded in language-usage and moral instruction, in order to understand that towards which selfhood aspires?

A similar difficulty emerges when Moore claims that a key aspect of Socratic understanding of "Know Yourself" is that:

One should acknowledge others and oneself as persons worthy of conversational engagement. The recognition of personhood and one's suitability for dialectical exchange is a principal move in knowing oneself as an authoritative epistemic agent – that is, as a knower, and a self. (58)

Moore is suggesting here that the command to Know Yourself would have us endeavor to deem ourselves and others worthy of conversation. But is it again not fair to ask what makes one *worthy of conversational engagement*? And would that knowledge be essential to

self-knowledge? If so, there seems to be a judgment about good/bad conversation and good/bad conversation partners that is prior to the conversation itself. Or is it through conversation that one learns what a good/bad conversation or conversation partner is? If it isn't through conversation, Moore's thesis might be open to the objection that self-knowledge is obtained by some method outside of conversation and, if anything, only confirmed or strengthened by good conversations (whose goodness is not, in any case, known on the basis of conversation).

On the other hand, if conversations *are THE* method by which we come to deem ourselves conversation-worthy and thereby acknowledge ourselves, then it seems that we are saddled with some version of Meno's skeptical paradox. I still must know what the good is prior to recognizing (*acknowledging*) it, in which case, the conversation was either unnecessary or, at best, mere confirmation. In sum, it seems there is a troubling gap between 1) the activity of our souls engaging in conversation with each other in order to know themselves and 2) the *goodness of that activity*. It seems to me that closing that gap (or understanding why it can't be closed?) is essential to understanding Socratic self-knowledge.

It is surely related here that Moore claims that unless we understand our beliefs, they are not really ours (80). What are we committing to if we agree with this claim? What is it that makes our beliefs intelligible to us? It cannot be that we simply compare them to the moral and linguistic conventions earlier mentioned. For why is it *better* to abide by these conventions than my previously held beliefs? An alternative is that we are able to put them in the context of the knowledge of the good itself, if we have such knowledge. If this is right, beliefs can only be said to be ours after we have attained knowl-

edge of the good and have examined individual beliefs in the context of that knowledge. Does self-knowledge and ownership of one's own beliefs therefore require the practice of dialectic described in Books 6 and 7 of the *Republic*. Especially related here: Socrates' claims that the good would be an unhypothetical first principle [511b-c] beyond being [508b] that the battle-testing of dialectic separates out from other things [534c]? Moore seems to imply throughout that this is not necessary, or perhaps even desirable. But perhaps according to me, the gap between conversation and dialectic is as difficult to close as that between soul and goodness.

It is interesting to look at Moore's treatment of Critias with these questions in mind. Critias' interpretation of the Delphic Oracle has puzzled many readers of the *Charmides*, myself included. Moore's innovation is to read Critias' claim (that "know yourself" must be taken as a greeting) as an acknowledgment of personhood and as an introduction to conversation (65, 66). At first glance, some readers will think this is an odd message to put in the mouth of Critias, whose political history and relation to Socrates is unsettling, to say the least. Indeed, Moore seems to avoid bringing in Critias's political background into this pronouncement about the Delphic Oracle. Christopher is indeed cognizant of the abundant literature that takes Critias' reading of the Oracle with this political background as its starting point. But he argues that his view of the oracle is not unfamiliar or unfair. But Moore's own reading of this Critian reading of the Oracle *still* prompts us to ask: from whom does this acknowledgment/invitation come and to whom is it directed? Between whom is this conversation meant to occur?

It is odd, and perhaps noteworthy, that Critias seems to be claiming himself to know the purposes of a divine meaning and intention of the Oracle when his own conceptions of self-knowledge and *sôphrosunê* are shown to be deficient. It is noteworthy that Socrates in the *Apology*, in talking about another pronouncement of the Oracle (about Socrates' own wisdom), does this as well, but in a more paradoxical way. He tests the Oracle. He also says it is riddling, because it couldn't be lying. The Oracle thus speaks ambiguously – it praises Socrates at the same time that it belittles him. At the same time, Socrates is suggesting that the Oracle is subject to Socratic examination. I would suggest that no such paradox is evident in Critias's views, and on the contrary, that Socratic self-knowledge might be built around the very *embracing of such ambiguity*.

Moore, indeed, goes on to quote the passage in the *Alcibiades* in which Socrates explicitly contradicts Critias's reading of the oracle. Critias's view of the Oracle depends on his contrast between a greeting and advice. But Socrates clearly suggests to Alcibiades that "Know Yourself" is both exhortation and advice (132d). If Moore is aiming for consistency across these pronouncements about the Oracle, how do we reconcile the different emphases here? Indeed, to remain consistent, Socrates might also be implying that the advice from the Oracle to "Know Yourself" could indeed be a riddle and one that needs to be examined.

I cannot help but wonder if we are not meant to see Critias as more like Typhon, whom Moore discusses at length in his elaboration of the Delphic image in the *Phaedrus*.

Typhon is hundred-headed and morphologically complicated, with human and animal qualities. He speaks in animal and human voices. He fathered Gorgon and

Chimera...We might conclude from the traits given to Typhon by Greek mythology that being like him preempt the transformative possibility of self-knowledge. Typhon would get no benefit from the Delphic inscription's charge. He is too hubristic, too complex, and too stubborn to improve himself. (148)

I conjecture a connection in the Athenian mind between Typhon and the *gnôthi sauton*. The temple of Apollo at Delphi included a Gigantomachy...These battles could have included or implied the battle between Typhon and Zeus... the "Know yourself," the Typhon painting battle scene, and the saying could have become linked. (150 n23)

Given what Moore says here, it is hard for me to disentangle the notion of avoiding *hubris* from the exhortation to know oneself. It seems to suggest that Socrates is talking about the Oracle to say that the self I ought to become is guided by and even constrained by *a certain kind of moderation of a deep inner ambition for tyranny*. Socrates's image of Typhon and his question to himself about being like him could then be tantamount to the question "Do I have the courageous humility to acknowledge my limitations, or do I want to be master of my own fate and overthrow the gods?"

If this were the question, and if *Critias* could perhaps be seen as (in a sense) Socrates gone "Typhonic", one might then "look again" at Moore's account of looking into others to see ourselves in the *Alcibiades*. I think Moore is right that the *Alcibiades* seems to be offering an avenue towards self-knowledge. I would add that Socrates puts it forth as, hopefully, a corrective antidote to the failures of both *Critias* and *Alcibiades*, whose hubris (or at the very least, whose *pride*

and ambition) prevents their coming to know themselves. Moore himself seems to be suggesting that overcoming such hubris, if it exists, is essential in engaging in what we might call a good conversation. (118-119, 150)

Given this, why are *Alcibiades* and *Critias* such failures? Moore wishes to argue that this has something to do with the ongoing, arduous process required of self-constitution that can be seen in the *Phaedrus*. (But it would be interesting to know who Moore would count among the good conversation partners of Socrates and why. Most importantly, do they help Socrates achieve self-knowledge in the way described by the *Alcibiades*? What is the evidence that Socrates himself seeks the self-constitution that Moore describes?) But is self-constitution via Socratic conversation not only arduous? Is it even possible for *Critias* and *Alcibiades*?

I very much agree with Moore's emphasis throughout that Socrates is concerned with the particularity of self-knowledge for particular individuals in their uniquely relevant, particular circumstances. But I am, once again, more pessimistic than he regarding the tension between the particularity of selfhood and the universal, eternal, permanence of goodness itself.

For instance, Moore claims that the *Alcibiades* discussion reveals a divine element to self-knowledge.

Self-knowledge might have two conjoined aspects, a knowing of oneself *qua divine matters* and a knowing of oneself *qua human stuff*; the two sorts of mirrors are individually necessary and only together sufficient for self-knowledge. (125)

Moore is prompted to make this "theological speculation" (which Moore says is foreign to the

dialogue) by the puzzling claim made by Socrates that “looking to the god we would make use of that finest reflecting surface, and of human matters, to the virtue of the soul and in such a way we would most see and know ourselves” (133c).

I would suggest that such speculation is not wholly out of place, if one recalls that it is in the context of asking Alcibiades how we could make ourselves better that Socrates invokes the Delphic Oracle and investigates what the *self* is (128e-129b). This discussion of the self determines that the nature of man is *soul* (130c). And it is in this very context, after Socrates realizes that they have to go back and *re-examine* the Delphic oracle, that the tension between soul and good is again adumbrated. (132c) What finally does it mean to take care of the soul – to make the soul better? It seems to come about through a dialogic activity on the particular, human, relational plane. But why is that good? Because it seems to be mirrored by another dialogic activity between the particular and the universal, divine plane at the same time. But what is not how such conversation between the divine and the human is possible. Nor is it explained why is it good. Perhaps then it is not accidental or a manuscript error that Socrates praises *moderation* right after this discussion of this divine mirroring. Perhaps we must recognize our limits as *seeking*, but not knowing ourselves, and others, and our good the way that a god does.

In discussing the *Phaedrus*, Moore presents an illuminating account of myth rectification that is meant to stand in as an analogy for Socratic inquiry into self-knowledge. I would again raise the issue here that has emerged before. By what standard(s) external to myth rectification itself, am I judging that my process of myth rectification constitutes improvement? (cf. 177, 186)

To this question and its various permutations that I have already brought forth, I believe Moore finally proposes what looks to be a *pragmatic* solution, relying on the notion of what is *plausible*.

The myth-rectifiers bring their beliefs in line with the plausible (*kata to eikos*). On the analogy proposed here, so do those seeking self-knowledge... The person seeking self-knowledge wants to bring his beliefs in line with what is actual and true. Unfortunately, he can rely only on himself and himself and his conversational partners, and even then he must rely on himself when deciding what to accept from his conversational partners. So he must rely on what appears to himself so. The plausible – what appears so to him – is his only standard of judgment. (179)

If Moore intends this conclusion to apply to Socratic inquiry into self-knowledge, then I must ask why self-knowledge is really knowledge at all, and whether it is really a knowledge of the object of we would call a self. If the only standard we are left with is what appears so to myself, then how can I know that I have ever made any progress at all? Why is my claim about myself any more *real* than another *apparent* claim, which I myself must also decide on, not on the basis of truth but again, on what *appears to me be so*? It seems here that the self-knowledge finally has no footing.

Perhaps in responding to this, Moore might say more about on the role that “knowing what one does not know” (cf. 80) plays in Socratic self-knowledge seen as self-constitution. For while I agree from the outset (as I have said) that Socratic conversations bring us to self-knowledge, I wonder if Moore and I see Socratic conversations differently. I would propose that

Socratic conversations operate on these three assumptions:

- 1) We act based on our beliefs.
- 2) Our beliefs are not transparent to us.
- 3) We don't know, much less own, our beliefs until we engage in conversation.

I think Moore must agree with 1 and 2. I also suspect he might claim that assumption 3 is not an assumption but something that is demonstrable in the action of conversation. (About that I would agree, but I would still call it an assumption.)

But I would be hesitant to add more assumptions than these. Given these three assumptions, and only these, the purpose of Socratic conversation would seem not unlike *making the unconscious conscious* (though not wholly like it either). As they stand, the three assumptions are neutral on the subject about whether it is good to know oneself. In other words, though it may seem that self-knowledge is aspirational towards knowledge of the good, it may very well be that the assumptions that underlie the very activity of Socratic conversation are *neutral about the ethical status of self-knowledge*. One can imagine at least three responses to this:

- 1) The goodness of self-knowledge/self-constitution/Socratic conversation needs to be assumed, externally to the activity of such conversation/self-constitution.
- 2) The goodness of self-knowledge/self-constitution/Socratic conversation is demonstrable, either in speech or in deed, after one takes the courageous leap of faith into such conversation/self-constitution.
- 3) There is finally a tension or a gap between knowing oneself and knowing the

good, that Socratic conversation neither assumes nor demonstrates but continually recognizes as a problem.

I myself incline towards the third response, and see in it not only a potential connection between Socratic self-knowledge and “knowing what one does not know”, but also connected to the failures of Alcibiades and Critias to come to self-knowledge. In my view, Socratic conversations and Socratic self-knowledge appear, importantly, to do with the recognition of our *epistemic* limitations and acknowledge ourselves (perhaps importantly) as seekers of knowledge, rather than knowers. I expect Moore can give reasons for inclining towards another reading of Socratic conversations, if his view is different from mine.

Let me emphasize that I have dwelt only on a part of what is a comprehensive, meticulous, and illuminating work of scholarship. Although I have raised questions about Moore's conclusions, I have no doubt that his book will be a supremely important reference point for future discussions of Socratic Self-knowledge and the Delphic Oracle, in particular.