

Gnōthi sauton — “Know Thyself”

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Greek Spelling, Transliteration, Pronunciation, Translation

- γνῶθι σαυτόν (σεαυτόν without contraction — σαυτόν blends the epsilon into the alpha-epsilon sound)
- Upper-case with letter names:

Γ Ν Ω Θ Ι
gamma nu omega theta iota
Σ Α Υ Τ Ο Ν
sigma alpha epsilon tau omicron nu

- Pronounced *gnōthi sauton* (or *seauton* — “au” as in “ouch!”)
- Translated “Know thyself!” (*gnōthi*, a command form, = “get to know,” “become acquainted with,” “learn [about],” “know”)

Basic Information

- Along with *mēden agan* (“Nothing to excess!”), often treated, as a defining byword 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 either Socrates or Plato, with whom the saying is, nevertheless, closely associated

Mini-Essay

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 teipsum,” which is a translation of *gnōthi sauton*, Greek for “Know thyself,” from the temple of Apollo at Delphi. (Link [here](#).) In context, the fitness of the proverb (whether for Neo or for the oracle’s ancient clients) seems fairly obvious. Those seeking Apollo’s guidance (through his mouthpiece, a priestess called the Pythia) needed first to know themselves before they could fit that guidance to their own situations. Just so, Neo must know himself first before

he’ll ever understand his destiny in relation to the situations fortune has placed him in. Or, as Socrates might put it, “the unexamined life is not worth the living” (Plato *Symposium*).

As originally written in a local script, the saying could perhaps have looked somewhat as follows:



though that’s really only a guess, nor is that my field. (For more on archaic Greek letter forms, visit the Poinikastas site.)

At all events, this saying, which neither Socrates nor Plato came up with originally, plays an important part in the Socratic writings (ancient writings featuring/focused on Socrates) of Plato. (What little Socrates wrote, none of it philosophy, has not survived.) For Socrates, the most important knowledge to be pursued was *self*-knowledge. As for his *own* self-knowledge, what set him apart was that he knew that he didn’t know, that he that he had much to learn.¹ He could, therefore, boast — and we’re told that the Delphic Oracle backed him up on this — of being wiser than anyone else: no one Socrates knew was as willing as he was to own up to his or her own ignorance. To face one’s ignorance honestly becomes, then, the beginning of true knowledge.

This theme of self-knowledge comes vividly 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 events unfold as the title character gradually learns the horrible truth of his own identity. Thus Oedipus the arrogant tyrant can see with his eyes but not with his mind. Not only can’t he “handle” the truth of what he’s done; he can’t even handle the truth of who he really is: killer of his father, husband of his mother. Enlightenment comes hard for Oedipus, and when it does come, he gauges out his eyes and gives up the throne.

Maybe, though, the effort to know oneself is self-indulgent, narcissistic. Or maybe not. Paradoxically, self-knowledge cannot be gained but through others; it is a crucially *social* form of knowledge. So, for instance, in Plato, by gazing into the eyes of your lover, you gaze into a window of the self. “I” turns out, then, to be

¹ “That fellow thinks he knows something, though he doesn’t know it. Whereas I, just as I *don’t* in fact know, neither do I *think* I do. At any rate, it seems that I’m wiser than he at least by just this tiny little bit: in that I do not think I know what I in fact do not,” Socrates in Plato *Apology* 21d.

just another word for “we.” (For more on Greek wisdom and Greek studies generally, visit <http://classics.binghamton.edu/greek.htm>.)