KNOW THYSELF
THE SOUL OF HUMANITY

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"Know Thyself"

The Soul of Humanity

The purpose of this essay is to address three things. First, where did the phrase "Know Thyself" come from? Second, what are the meanings of "Know Thyself" from Socrates' and Plato's perspectives? Third, why "Know Thyself" is to know the soul of humanity?

"Know Thyself" is "the inscription found on the temple at Delphi."¹ Delphi was viewed as "the naval of the earth"² and was "the ancient city state in Greece, near Mount Parnassus. The presence of the oracle of Apollo made it a sacred city. The Pythian Games, celebrating Apollo's destruction of the monster Python, were held at Delphi every four years."³

The Temple of Apollo was first built around the seven century B.C. to worship the Greek God Apollo, a god of spiritual light and healing. "It was sacked in Roman times, and the oracle closed (AD 390) with the spread of Christianity."  

The priestess of Apollo is the Pythia, the Delphic Oracle. The Pythia was "the medium for Apollo's prophecy". She responded "a wide range of religious political, and moral questions." "Know Thyself" was not an answer for a specific question that people asked Apollo, but a question for their questions.

It is the same critical thinking process that Socrates used to question his fellow citizens so that the truths and the reality that beyond human experiences can be revealed through the spiritual light. Therefore, "Know Thyself" is the only question and answer to comprehend many questions that human beings have been encountered. For example, What is truth? What is reality? What is soul? How to live happily? How to acquire wisdom? The answer for these questions can be concluded with one question: "Know Thyself".

"Know Thyself" is to understand our souls of humanity. Know means "to understand or comprehend." (OED). Soul is "the principle of life in man...."(OED) Humanity is "the quality of being humane." (OED) Therefore, to comprehend the soul of humanity is to understand the principles of being humane.

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4 ibid., "Delphi"
6 ibid., Delphi" The New Zealand Oxford Dictionary
"Know Thyself" is to discover who we are and what principles human beings should follow so we can take actions that can best serve other people and achieve genuine happiness in our daily life. We take actions through reasoning and knowing processes. As Tarnas (1991) said, "a truly happy life is a life of right action directed according to reason. The key to human happiness, therefore, is the development of a rational moral character." (p.34)

"Know Thyself" is to understand the goodness of our souls. When we see the goodness of other human beings, we see all visible things become beautiful and right. Tarnas (1991) pointed out that Socrates believed that happiness "is achieved through living the kind of life that best serve the nature of soul. Socrates believed that the goodness of soul can only be seen when human beings examined their daily consciousness through reasoning and questioning with other human beings. The truth that has been discovered through the knowing process became the spiritual light in the human soul.

As a result, a human being can recollect the wisdom within the soul that is immortal and has been living many life times. He will have the power to see the true reality that is beyond human experiences and to live happily in the life that is accordance with his soul of humanity. Like Socrates said, "in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in the visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that is the power upon which he would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed."7

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Happiness is the consequence not of physical or external circumstances, of wealth or power or reputation, but of living a life that is good for the soul." (p.33) Because "the innermost reality of human being is [our] soul or psyche"\(^8\), human beings can infer that if we as human beings could know our souls, we would see the true reality of world. Therefore, "Know Thyself" is the key to see the true happiness in life. Socrates said, "the life without examination [is] not worth living."\(^9\)

The knowledge we learn through knowing our souls is universal and eternal. When we understand our consciousness and the souls, we become immortal and live happily. As Tarnas (1991) said, the soul is "the seat of the individual waking the consciousness".\(^{p.33}\) The soul is also the seat of "the moral and intellectual character."\(^{10}\) Plato also said, "soul [is] immortal and superior to the physical things it animates...the heavens as divine bodies governed by supreme intelligence and world soul."\(^{11}\)

We should start to keep observing our states of consciousness and get to know the souls of humanities in every moment. As a result, we know that we are truly alive and can live happily each day. Tarnas (1991) said, "[Socrates'] mission to convince others of their ignorance so that they might better search to a knowledge of how life should be best lived." (p.33)

\(^8\) Tarnas (1999), p. 33
\(^{10}\) ibid., Tarnas, p.33
\(^{11}\) ibid., Tarnas, p. 52
In the Apology, Socrates said, "the greatest good for a man [is] to talk every day about virtue and the other things...about examine both myself and others."\(^{12}\) Therefore, human beings can understand the quality of being humane through observing our own consciousness and knowing who we are and what are the best actions to take based on the intelligence of reason.

"Know Thyself" is to recollect the knowledge we already have for the soul of humanity. Socrates said "knowledge is the food of the soul"\(^{13}\) In the dialogue with Meno, Socrates said "the soul has learned all things."\(^{14}\) because the soul is "being immortal and having been born again many times."\(^ {15}\)

In addition, Socrates demonstrated how a slave who did not know the mathematics equation can comprehended the knowledge of mathematics. Socrates asked the slave few questions and helped him to recollect universal mathematics knowledge that has been born with his soul without teaching him anything. Socrates believed the soul "[have] seen all the things that exist, whether in this world or in the world below, has knowledge of them all."\(^ {16}\)

"Know Thyself" is a continuous reasoning process and leads to be aware of our state of consciousness. Therefore, "Know Thyself" is to find out who we truly are as a human being so we can live happily. To find out who we truly are is only through self-knowledge.

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12 Socrates' Defense, Course Pack, 16  
14 ibid., Meno, p.27  
15 ibid., Meno. p.27  
16 ibid., Meno, p.27
Self-knowledge is the conscience. Conscience is an "inward knowledge or consciousness." (OED) We can attain such kind of self-knowledge "through intellectual and moral discipline"\(^{17}\), which is a process of knowing and recollecting what we have known about the souls and living the life that can be examined with reason.

Human beings all born with the reasoning capability, which can help us take actions without doubt and "reveal the mysteries of nature and the human soul."\(^{18}\) Tarnas (1991) said, "until Descartes, revealed truth had maintained an objective authority outside of human judgement, but now its validity began to be subject to affirmation by human reason." (p.279)

"Know Thyself" is to question your physical experiences with reason and to have dialogues with your fellow citizens so that genuine knowledge can be attained. Tarnas (1991) also said, "genuine knowledge was not something that could simply be received from another second hand like a purchased commodity...but was rather a personal achievement, won at the cost of constant intellectual struggle and self-critical reflection." (p.35)

But also, "Know Thyself" is to know our ignorance. Socrates said, "enquiry...is [the process of] recollection, beginning with that I know I know nothing".\(^{19}\) When we admit that we know that we know nothing, we can begin to wake our consciousness, morality and wisdom. Our journey of "Know Thyself" and enquiring the souls then begins. The reality and truth beyond human experiences then can be seen.

\(^{17}\) ibid., Tarnas, p. 46  
\(^{18}\) ibid., Tarnas, p.46  
\(^{19}\) Plato, *Meno*, Course Pack, p.26
In conclusion, "Know Thyself" is to understand the soul of humanity and live intelligently with doubt and reason. Knowing is a never ending process through our life time. With painstaking effort of "Know Thyself", we develop the abilities to discover "the true nature of what is was to be a human being." By achieving the genuine knowledge of "Know Thyself", we will not act blindly based on our sensations. We can then live happily to serve other human beings without making any harm to our souls.

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20 ibid., Tarnas, p.33
Bibliography