

BOOK REVIEW

Socrates and Self-Knowledge. By CHRISTOPHER MOORE. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xviii + 276. Hardcover, \$99.99. ISBN 978-1-107-12330-4.

“Know yourself” (*gnôthi sauton*): the Delphic maxim seemingly cuts to the quick of ancient Greek wisdom. Yet, like much that is proverbial, the precept runs the risk of escaping our grasp. Where does the *gnôthi sauton* come from, and what exactly does it mean? How does one respond to this command, and what difference does it make?

In *Socrates and Self-Knowledge*, Christopher Moore takes up these weighty questions, arguing that *gnôthi sauton* touches the heart of the Socratic project. Many scholars have resisted this claim, which is a challenge Moore surmounts in his Introduction (Chapter 1). In terms of scope, Moore limits himself to Socratic literature that explores self-knowledge explicitly in connection with the Delphic precept (xiv). Naturally, this delimitation excludes several key Platonic texts (*Republic*, *Theaetetus*) and includes some of Xenophon’s corpus. Although prepared from the Preface, this shift from Platonic to Xenophonic sources may feel lopsided, especially given the discrepancy in length. The penultimate chapter on *Memorabilia* 4.2, for example, seems scanty (19 pages, 16 footnotes) when compared to Moore’s robust reading of the *Phaedrus* (48 pages, 93 footnotes). Far from flagging a limping finish, however, this distribution actually reflects the extent of Moore’s interpretive success. By laying solid foundations and tackling the toughest questions early, his argument comes to a smooth, easy landing. Moore’s unique contribution is to privilege the importance of self-constitution in Socratic self-knowledge. The self that we are commanded to know cannot simply be discovered; it must be actively constructed through serious reflection and continuous examination with conversation partners. The dialogue form aptly serves this Socratic pedagogy. Instead of doling out easy answers, Socrates cultivates in his interlocutors an awareness of and responsibility for their deepest convictions and commitments.

In terms of analysis, Moore reads the relevant Socratic texts as consistently working through the challenges posed by the Delphic precept. The *Charmides*

(Chapter 2), for example, does not write off the *gnôthi sauton* as impossible or useless. Rather, it models an aspirational understanding of self-knowledge, based upon shared conversation. The Alcibiades (Chapter 3) presents three complementary discussions of the *gnôthi sauton*. Together, these passages cast Socratic conversation as a mirror, mediating personal integration. In Chapter 4, Moore tackles the difficult puzzles of self-knowledge in the *Phaedrus*. The interpretive knots loosen by approaching self-knowledge as a labor-intensive, life-long process of patient self-rectification. Moore then considers the *Philebus* (Chapter 5), which is not usually read in this vein. Rather than pitting the hedonistic and intellectual lives against one another, the dialogue suggests that self-knowledge comes from reason's ability to appropriate personal pleasure. In Chapter 6, Moore turns to Xenophon, rehabilitating *Memorabilia* 4.2 from its philosophical insignificance. Like Plato, Xenophon presents Socratic self-knowledge as an urgent summons to self-ownership. Finally, Moore concludes (Chapter 7) with a brief *apologia* for Socratic self-knowledge, as optimistically embodied in the *Rival Lovers* and skeptically questioned in the *Hipparchus*.

While its many virtues are apparent, the text does invite a few critiques. Moore dispatches rather quickly of some hefty hermeneutical problems, such as the historical Socrates and the Platonic dialogue. Indeed, his decision to treat the dialogues as "discrete literary and philosophical productions" (xii) often forces him to "leave the historical questions aside" (107). The issue of target audience also looms large. Throughout, the text assumes familiarity with basic philosophical and Platonic terminology (e.g. the Euthyphro problem). Without this background, a general audience will struggle with recurrent philosophical jargon (first and second order knowledge, intentional attitudes, transparency, reflexivity, etc.) At the same time, experts in ancient or contemporary philosophy may take issue with Moore's tendency to paraphrase certain arguments—presumably, for a more general audience. Such an audience, however, is not likely to understand why "Phaedrus has aged out of the appropriate cohort" for an amatory rapport with Socrates (145). Unfortunately, Moore's repeated discussions of the lover and beloved lack much of the expected *erastês-erômenos* scholarship. Philologists will hunger for more primary text, and all readers of Greek will lament the diacritical errors increasingly discovered along the way¹.

¹ See pages 73, 111, 114, 117, 121, 158, 180, 183, 218, 220, 225, 228, 229, 231.

In the end, Moore easily meets his goal of contributing to Socratic studies and to the philosophy of self-knowledge (xiii). If anything, Moore modestly understates the full reach and relevance of his contribution. With the current “crisis of the liberal arts,” humanists are often faced with delicate questions about the utility and the future of their respective crafts. Happily, Moore’s philosophical study of Socratic self-knowledge reminds us of certain fundamental truths. Although the brick-and-mortar classroom may seem to some passé, Moore makes a very compelling case for the fact that people still “learn and think best in the most familiar situation, talking to someone in front of them” (130). Though susceptible, like the young Alcibiades, to distraction by “external stimuli” (121), students today—perhaps more than ever—need trained interlocutors who can facilitate those meaningful conversations that foster self-knowledge. What’s more, these ancient insights dovetail very nicely with contemporary research in the social sciences.² In reconstructing the Socratic response to the Delphic precept, Moore brilliantly displays both the formative role of a liberal arts education and the multi-disciplinary synergy of serious classical research.

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² Compare, for example, Sherry Turkle’s research at M.I.T., especially her *New York Times* bestseller, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (Penguin Press, October 2015).