

Review of Knowledge and Ignorance of Self in Platonic Philosophy (edited by James Ambury and Andy German), Cambridge University Press 2018.

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It is surprising that self-knowledge remains a somewhat neglected topic of research in the secondary literature on Plato. Given the pedagogical aim of the dialogues, self-knowledge is clearly central to the task of the Platonic project, both for Socrates' interlocutors (especially) and for Plato's readers.

But as German and Ambury point out in their new edited volume, *Knowledge and Ignorance of Self in Platonic Philosophy* (Cambridge 2019), few scholars have devoted works solely to the topic. Notable studies have been undertaken by Ballard (1965), Griswold (1986), Tschemplik (2008), and Moore (2015), all of which inform the current volume. But the current book also expands on insights in these previous works, especially by treating dialogues not previously discussed (nearly every major dialogue is addressed) and extending the discussion beyond self-knowledge in relation only to Socrates.

The book gathers thirteen essays from prominent scholars that share "an openness to what Plato had to say, and what he chose not to say, about... our capacity for becoming, in some problematic way, an object of our own interior reflection and assessment... without our modern, now questionable, concept of subjectivity." (2) The book is organized thematically around self-knowledge and *theoria* (chapters 1-5) with entries by Lloyd Gerson, Thomas Tuozzo, Drew Hyland, Sara Ahbel-Rappe, and James Ambury; the practical dimensions of self-knowledge (chapters 6 -8) with entries by Brian Marrin, Sara Brill, and Jeremy Bell; self-knowledge and ignorance (chapters 9-12) with entries by Andy German, Marina McCoy, Eric Sanday, and Danielle Layne; the volume concludes with an essay (chapter 13) by Harold Tarrant that focuses on Plato's development in thinking about self-knowledge. The thirteen chapters do particularly well not only in taking up the task of "openness to Plato" and explicating what self-knowledge

might mean for him, but also in situating self-knowledge amidst other significant themes in the dialogues. Among other themes pursued, there are discussions of the connection between self-knowledge and the Forms (Gerson, Tuozzo), Socratic Questioning (Layne, Hyland, McCoy), Introspection (Ahbel-Rappe), Education (Ambury, Marrin), Mathematics (German), the Soul and Eros (Layne, Marrin, Brill, Bell, Sanday).

Ambury and German point out that the book presents a “plurality of views about the knowledge and ignorance of self in Platonic philosophy, some of which are directly opposed to one another. For students of Plato’s Socrates, however, such oppositions are pure profit.” (14) On this point, I must agree, and this is to be praised as a virtue of the volume. The work is at its best when it itself creates between its interlocutors a dialogue that inspires wonder about the intricacies and difficulties of the questions about self-knowledge that Plato presents to us. The editors set up such a dialogue in the very structure of the book and its selection of essays. The disagreement between Gerson/Tuozzo and Hyland in the opening chapters frames well the conversation of the volume. (It is thus appropriate that they stand as the opening chapters of the volume.) At the heart of their disagreement is the nature of the relationship between self-knowledge and theoretical knowledge. In claiming that self-knowledge is identical with theoretical knowledge, Gerson argues that human beings according to Plato are fundamentally *intellect*, and therefore to grasp intelligible reality is to know one’s truest self. Hyland disagrees with him (and Tuozzo) by claiming that theoretical wisdom is not at all the right model for self-knowledge and instead we must look to the aporetic, questioning stance Socrates takes in action to understand the ideal of self-knowledge in the dialogues. The disagreement forces readers to consider

the multilayered and multivalent answers Plato is pursuing to the questions: *what am I? what can I know about myself?*

Where we end in pursuing these questions depends upon which feature we take to be our starting point in discussions of Platonic self-knowledge. If we begin with the claim that the fundamental feature of Socrates is his knowledge of ignorance and if we assume that he does not have knowledge of the good (Hyland), then such a claim may turn out to be in irreconcilable tension with a claim that knowledge of the good undergirds self-knowledge (Gerson, Tuozzo). How then is self-knowledge related to knowledge of ignorance? How are either related to knowledge of the good? And how does either self-knowledge or knowledge of the good manifest itself in our lives, embedded as they are in time?

The remainder of the essays take their turns, from various perspectives, confronting these puzzles and they succeed in so doing. This does not mean that a univocal answer is ever achieved regarding the nature, possibility, and benefit of self-knowledge. The volume rightly and beautifully takes the questions seriously while at the same time leaving open the possibility for readers to ponder that Plato is not providing us one answer to the puzzles. Some of the volume’s essays attempt to spell out a connection between knowledge of Good and knowledge of Ignorance and Self-Knowledge while staying true to the initial demand – to hear what Plato says (and chooses not to say) without importing modern conceptions of selfhood alien to the dialogues. In this vein, McCoy, Layne, and Hyland make especially noteworthy and important contributions. A number of other contributors appropriately turn to the nature of *eros*, education, and psychic transformation in following up on this inquiry. The essays of Marrin, Bell, and Sanday are particularly helpful and provocative in this

regard. It seems that an investigation of *eros* is essential to the nature of self-knowledge, as these contributors to this volume have not only made clear but have also done outstanding work in exploring. Provocative, creative, and original chapters are written by German, Ambury, Rappe, and Brill.

The volume as a whole is illuminating. Ambury and German have provided scholars working on Platonic self-knowledge a comprehensive and stimulating conversation. It is a more than welcome contribution to the secondary literature. It will be a touchstone for further work.

