

Self-Knowledge

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Self-Knowledge

The School of Life

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I

Self-Ignorance

One of the most striking features of our minds is how little we understand them. Although we inhabit ourselves, we seldom manage to make sense of more than a fraction of who we are. It can be easier to master the dynamics of another planet than to grasp what is at play in the folds of our own brains.

Instances of self-ignorance regularly surprise and perturb us: on certain days, we can be irritable or sad without any idea why. Or we may feel lost in our career, but be unable to say more than that we wish to ‘do something creative’ or ‘help to make the world a better place’ – plans so vague that they leave us vulnerable to the more robust plans of others.

It has been the achievement of psychology to instil in us a sense of a basic division between two parts of the mind: the conscious and the unconscious; between what is immediately accessible to us and what lies in shadow, and will surprise us in symptoms, dreams, slips of the tongue and diffuse anxieties, longings and fears. It has also been the work of psychology to insist that maturity must involve a constant drive to turn what is unconscious conscious; to help us master the art of self-knowledge.

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We need not blame ourselves for our poor grasp of our own minds. The problem is inherent in the very architecture of the brain, an organ that evolved over millennia for the sake of rapid, instinctive decision-making – not the patient, introspective sifting of ideas and emotions.

However, a degree of emotional squeamishness is also responsible for our failure to look inside. A lot of what is unconscious is tricky material that we shy away from looking at too closely. For example, we may feel troublingly angry towards people we thought we loved. We may be more ruthless and envious than nice people are ever meant to be. We may have to make enormous changes to our lives, but prefer the ease of the status quo. Across childhood, we may have had instilled in us, so subtly we didn't even notice, strong notions about what are normal and not normal things to experience. Traditionally, boys were not allowed to acknowledge that they felt like crying, and girls weren't allowed to entertain certain kinds of ambitions for fear of being unladylike.

We might not have such obviously naive prohibitions today, but other, equally powerful, ones may have taken their place. We may have picked up covert but forceful indications that no decent person (no-one loved by

their parents, at least) could be unable to cope at work, be tempted by an affair, or still be upset over a break-up that took place three years ago. Most of our sexual desires still have no place in our standard understanding of respectability.

When difficult feelings threaten to emerge, the light of consciousness can be counted upon to take fright and shine its beam elsewhere. By failing to investigate the recesses of the mind, we carefully protect our self-image and can continue to think well of ourselves. However, we don't escape from the job of introspection lightly. There is almost always a high price to pay for our reluctance to look within. Feelings and desires that have not been examined tend not to leave us alone; they linger and spread their energy randomly to neighbouring issues. Ambition that doesn't know itself comes out as anxiety. Envy comes out as bitterness; anger turns into rage; sadness evolves into depression. Disavowed material buckles and strains the system. We develop pernicious tics; a facial twitch, impotence, an incapacity to work, alcoholism, a porn compulsion. Most so-called 'addictions' are at heart symptoms of insistent difficult feelings that we haven't found a way to address. Insomnia is revenge for thoughts we have refused to have in the day.

Strangers to ourselves, we end up making bad choices: we exit a relationship that might have been quite workable. We don't explore our own professional talents in time. We alienate friends through erratic, off-putting behaviour. We lack insight into how we come across to others and appal or shock them. We buy the wrong things and go on holiday to places that have little to do with what we really enjoy.

It is no coincidence that Socrates should have boiled down the entire wisdom of philosophy to one simple command: Know Yourself. This is a distinctly odd-sounding ambition. Society has no shortage of people and organisations offering to guide us around distant continents, but very few that will help us with the arguably far more important task of travelling around the byways of our own minds. Fortunately, however, there are a number of tools and practices that can help us to reach inside our minds and move us from dangerous vagueness to challenging but redeeming clarity.