THE SOCRATIC “MAN KNOW THYSELF” AND THE PROBLEM OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

When Socrates, an Athenian moral philosopher, cautioned “man know thyself” most scholars were inclined to have construed it from a banal perspective. Others saw his clarion call for knowledge of self as the basis for true understanding of self, a possible mastery of self, development of same and the society for the overall benefit of self and others. Theatetus saw it as a call for self perception. It suggests to us that, if perception is the gamut of knowledge, misperception can as well double for knowledge. John Locke sees it as the act of being aware of the existence of facts. This may have diverted the purpose of knowledge in general, leaving the major birth place which revolves around knowing one self as a spring board for knowledge of external objects. Descartes being cognizant of this, identified a way out of all the uncertainties, confusion and doubtful experiences. He opted for a complete beginning from his being. This was a radical approach towards self discovery and identification, perhaps in response to the Socratic bid. But we are left with these questions: how successful was Descartes? What is the extent of self knowledge? What is this concept of knowledge all about a person? Is it physical or metaphysical? What is the underlying benefit of self identity to self and others and lots more. These form the major constituents of this paper.

Key Words: Socrates, Personal Identity, Knowledge; Self, Person.

Introduction

The Socratic dictum “man know thyself”, is definite and distinctively an index to the human person. A classical definition of a person includes that advanced by Boethius, as an individual substance of a rational nature (33). He must be a rational being with the possession of reflective consciousness as the basis for emancipation and sustenance of self and others. In other words, he must be aware of his consciousness. Descartes lends credence to this in his "cogito ergo sum" where he becalmed conscious in all doubts that he exists as a thinking being.

He could have argued in this sequence. "I am thinking and I know that I am thinking therefore I am a person"! It could further be discerned that, non-rational being cannot be a person. Following this trend of argument, it becomes obvious that the concept of personality is inseparably linked with rationality, the same way rationality is linked with morality. One could make bold to say that only rational beings have the capacity of being moral. However, it need be understood here that, to say a person is a moral being does not connote that such a person always does what is morally right. Rather, it points to the fact, that, he is subject to moral law, and that, he is consequently liable to be held responsible for his actions whether they are good or bad. It could be argued plausibly that, knowledge or self consciousness is the substratum for self understanding and self identification. Underlying personality, are salient attributes such as rationality, morality and freedom. This command or benefit to a considerable extent excludes bodies who are though to human being (are yet becoming human persons), do not possess essential requirement of personality. He is not self conscious makes no free decision, nor is it morally responsible.

Our task here is to examine the extent of self-consciousness side by side the problem of personal identity. Who am I? How do I discover my authentic self? What is the "I" that abide forever or is it transcendental? Does anything dissolve into "self or the I"? Is the "I" Transient or permanent? Does the Socratic dictum “man know thyself” encapsulate and solve the problem of personal identity? And how could such knowledge help man to solve his social and political problems. It will also be of great importance to put our fingers tight in respects of the nature of the concept of the "I" whether it is a physical or metaphysical entity.
Knowledge

From a simple perspective, knowledge could be admitted as justified true-belief. Plato, Descartes and in contemporary times Roderick Chisholm see justified true-belief as the criteria for knowledge. Papas and Marshal Swain have in their book *Essays on knowledge and Justification* traced the root of Knowledge to Plato's Thaeatetus and in more recent times, it has been endorsed by a number of influential philosophers including C. I. Lewis, A. J. Ayer, and Roderick Chisholm. Keith Lehrer, Thomas D. Paxson Jnr. opine that if a man knows that a statement is true even though there is no other statement that justifies his belief, then, his knowledge is basic. And for them "basic knowledge is completely justified true-belief". If in the other hand, a man knows that a statement is true because there is some other statement that justifies his belief, then his knowledge is non basic because it is inferentially known and dependent on other statements or propositions. Following the trend of argument, non basic knowledge is contingent and not necessary truth. Basic knowledge is unmediated, direct, incorrigible and self evident (Keith Lehrer and T. D. Paxson, 145-148).

Following "justified true belief" as the traditional conception of knowledge with barrels of criticism against it especially the total one from Edmund Gettier shows that justification will not always reliably be a criterion for knowledge. He adds "we can be mistaken, deceived, misjudged or fail to appreciate the real justification anchor for our beliefs. Again, he adumbrates that our justification may be false and yet our knowledge is true. This means that evidence or justification is not a sufficient condition for knowledge but only a necessary condition. That notwithstanding, if we are to embrace the traditional definition or view of knowledge in-view of the task ahead of us, how do we justify the knowledge of ourselves or better put, How do I justify the truth of our being? What am I? What is the "I" or self in me? These questions, though simple, are not so in answer. The challenge for self knowledge (man know thyself), is the expression in many quarters which we must give a listening ear.

The Nature of the Human Person

In attempt to unveil the apparent difficulties associated in knowledge of "self", appeal to demonstrate an understanding of the nature of the human person becomes necessary. Our philosophical disposition enlightens us that man is not just a physical being but spiritual also. Descrates sees the human person as a thinking being or substance. According to him, the human person is essentially a mind which happens to have a body. The characteristic of the mind is thought or essentially thinking. While that of the body is extension. At death, the mind survives the body. Consequently, Philosophers like Plato, St. Augustine, St. Bonaventure, St. Thomas Aquinas, and others subscribe to the immortality of the soul (Omoregbe, 40). Man is a multi-dimensional being, a complex being whose self is never fully understood by the being himself, let alone an external observer. He is distinct from all other creatures in intelligence, physique, beauty, religiosity, sociality and so on. (Uduigwomen, 283). Still on the nature of man, we shall consider few schools of thought as touching human nature.

Naturalism

This school sees man as a highly developed organism that evolved out of earlier and simple forms of life as a result of natural processes working upon the matter of which the universe is composed. To this view man is thrown into existence and it behooves him to try to make the best out of it within the limits of his stay on earth.

Ethical Theism

Sees man as the steward of the universe endowed by his creator with an immortal spiritual soul and destined to give account of his stewardship. Accordingly, man is accountable to his maker God.

Transcendentalism

Sees the human person as a physical entity illuminated by the spirit of consciousness. Also man is a bearer of hopes, fears, dreams, and aspiration.

Existentialism

This school parades the view that man carves his own destiny throw his actions and behaviour. He is a free moral agent who chooses what he wants and bears the consequences.

Having previewed the nature of man, one begins to ponder in the wake of challenges to knowing oneself. A common question may be, is there any sign of hope in knowing authentic self?
When Socrates cautioned for self knowledge, was the concern about cognitive, affective or psychomotor ability? Is it in the thrasymachean sense of 'might is right' or the Protagorean view of man becoming 'the measure of all things'? We could continue on and on. This is so because his dictum "man know thyself" is as ambiguous as it is difficult to pin down to a precise interpretation or clear cut definition. It suffices to say that self identification is problematic to philosophers.

Knowledge and liberty

Berlin an advocate of positive liberty says it involves being motivated by purposes which are rationally self-determined, as opposed to one's irrational passion, false consciousness, or outside manipulation of others. Liberty is contained in the answer to the question such as what or who is the source of control or interference that determines someone else's action? (7). Accordingly, liberty is seen as the ability or activity or process of choosing for one self, and acting out of one's volition. One could see a resounding importance of knowing one's self no matter how remotely, if not for anything else, knowledge of one's interests and activities struggles for liberty. Little wonder Berlin defines positive liberty as comprising self-determination of self-demand for self control and mastery tied logically to notions of autonomy and authenticity. It could be added here that, liberty without knowledge is not only window dressing but sophistry. It could be further argued that knowledge of self, and the environment one finds himself pathfinds his freedom. Again, to be free from restraint means to be free to choose between different courses of action or from different alternatives open to him without coercion. In this sense, knowledge of oneself is pivotal in directing his choice of likes and avoidance of dislikes. However, we cannot claim to have resolved the perennial question of the "self or I", so, we may be exposed to the question of how well do we know ourselves to be definite about our being disposition, temperament and inclinations with exactitude? Is there any area of self we are ignorant of? Do we not think knowledge of self or man in definite term could result in making man in similitude of robots? Again, does knowledge of self in definitive sense agrees with the view that man's actions are driven by the values they attach to that thing? To drive home our point, the researchers wish to explain here that the idea of "I" or "self" is invariable concerned with the element of man that is, in the Parmenidean sense of "being is", and non being is not, in the sense of necessary being as against contingent being. This suggests to us that the "self" must be constant not transient.

Personhood and Personal Identity

Definition of the term 'person' varies. Some scholars define a person as a rational being or substance (Uduigwomen, 101). Omoregbe extends the boundary of person, as being a rational being with reflective consciousness to that of his being conscious of his consciousness like the Cartesian "cogito ergo sum" where Descrates was aware of the fact that in his Methodic Doubt, he was thinking (36). To John Locke, a Person is a thinking intelligent being that has reason, and reflection and considers itself as itself (76). Somehow, it could be this quality of being conscious of the world and of themselves if not for any other reason at least to differentiate the human person from all other animals that may have necessitated Socratic bid "man know thyself". "Personal identity", Lacey sees "the attribute of being a single thing or a simple kind, may be in type or species" (87). Logically, law of identity is expressed as A is A so in the same manner comes the question what is the "I" or self that remains the same from year to year? What is that impression or disposition that is constant and for ever abiding? As could be discerned, it is difficult to find anything in body or in mind that has the necessary persistence. Identity does not lie in the body which undergoes changes nor in the mind since the mass of feelings and ideas forming consciousness are in constant flux. David Hume in his Treatise of Human Nature, edited by Oswald in his book Fundamental Problems In Philosophy remarks: "if any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same through the whole course of our lives, since self is supposed to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable, pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passion and sensations succeed each other and never all exist at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be that the idea of self is derived and consequently there is no such idea (61)"

To Plato, permanence is associated with the soul and change with body. In this angle of reasoning, then personal identity is assured but one foresees difficulties to ascribe a value like permanence to an unknown entity like the soul. So Hume will dismiss the identity ascribed to the mind of man as sophistry or illusion (Uduigwomen, 48). He adds, likened to that possessed by successive frames in motion picture (cited in Anders, 104). To the transcendentalists, like Immanuel Kant, self is that which lies behind experience. However, he erred by not making lucid how his noumenal self relates to the phenomenal or empirical self with its changing nature? Also, the question of
authenticating the noumenal self becomes even a more demanding task to us since we may claim knowledge of empirical self in JOSEPH, GABRIEL, EPHRAIM and so on being typical of fleeting individuals whose "authentic" identity as I or self must at all times and season remain, is lacking except we opt to subscribe to the Heraclitaen self as in constant flux. This idea of personal identity does not submit itself to a homogenous conception. Rather, it varies with their school of thoughts and their attendant philosophers. The idea of self is better authenticated by individual mind though it alone acquaints us with the continuance and extent of this succession of perceptions that account chiefly as the source of personal identity (Hanfling, 66). The Human view finds support in Bergson who also believes that if the past memory is ingredient in the present, then identity is assured. The difficulty with this theory may stem from the fact that, there seems not to be persisting self to compare present and past, and as such, resemblance cannot be perceived (Uduigwomen, 49).

However, Philosopher like John Locke, on the problem of personal identity, asserts that solace can only be found in compatibility of sameness and change. In his explanation, he sees memory and physical body as the yardstick for self identification. This position could not assuage the dissenting views on the subject of self identity. Rather, this stance could on its own provoke another question as which one is fundamental, necessary and sufficient for the re-identification of the human person, is it memory or physical body? Is memory super-ordinate or subordinate to the body? Dependent or independent of the body? One could continue in barrels of questions until we end perhaps in the same oblivion that surrounds mind-body problem. In view of the foregoing, before we attempt a conclusion, it will be pertinent to appraise the issue of self knowledge which pathfinds and allegedly authenticates the human person. It may be true perhaps, to parade self knowledge as the theory of self identity but the unanswered question is how well do we know ourselves in definite terms? It could be acknowledged that facts about a person's thoughts, feelings and intentions with references to external records about him, may only push forward efforts towards self identity but may not be conclusive without falling into the web of induction or hasty conclusion seen as fallacious.

Conclusion

To drive our view, we appreciate the challenges to self knowledge as the substratum for individual development, mastery and participation, but to the idea of self identity pointing to that self that is sacrosanct at all time and season is yet to be attained. Even the statement "I know myself" is quite inconclusive since such knowledge could be said to be limited to an aspect of the self not in totality. Therefore, the line to personal identity is not a straight one. To make the debate of personal identity more interesting as inviting, an ecclesiation of memory and bodily appearance could offer some tint of satisfaction while advance researchers on personal identity continues. The body and memory have been suggested, but none on it's own is faultless. For instance, the idea of bodily transfer in death or metempsychosis knocks out the bodily criterion, much as instances of inaccurate memory also counts against memory criterion. Consequently, we may unanimously agree that knowledge of self is a sure grounds for emancipation as it to say that, given the complexity of human nature, it remains perennial task to attempt a full understanding of human person. No man knows himself sufficiently. Hence, idea of knowing oneself fully is unattainable, only that which enables him function within the limits of his composition and ability. It therefore suggest that the problem of personal identity is, may so remain a fundamental one.
Works cited


