KNOW THYSELF! What can Socrates tell us about this divine injunction? He would surely appear to take the Delphic oracle very seriously. How could anyone forget his claim, made at his trial and reported in the Apology of Plato, that the unexamined life is not worth living (Apology 37e-38a)? Indeed, an examination of his own life set him forth on his philosophical career, as he himself testifies at his trial. This examination even cost him his life when his jury condemned him.

But, unfortunately, an exploration of the Apology with our question in mind can be an occasion for philosophical frustration. One would think that a reasonable procedure for considering this monologue would be to ask, "How does Socrates implement his examination regarding his life?" But this procedure, ingenious though it appears, soon gives us grounds for further reflection. What we discover with it initially seems not terribly profound and not a little puzzling.

In the Apology we find Socrates recounting his attempt to understand another pronouncement made by the oracle at Delphi. He explains that a bold friend of his had asked the oracle whether someone was wiser than he, and the oracle had responded that no one was (Apology 20c-21a). He found this response to be less than credible, and he decided to undertake an inquiry and to see whether he could not find someone wiser. He actually thought, he tells us, that he might refute the oracle (21b-c).

He soon discovered, however, that the oracle was in fact irrefutable. He was forced to conclude that he was the wisest of all because he was unable to find anyone who was wiser. What was this great wisdom of his? His wisdom was merely that he did not know and did not think that he did! But this meager knowledge was sufficient to make him wiser than all the others. He sought out and tested numerous people who had a reputation for wisdom, among them politicians, poets, and handicraftsmen. He found that he was wiser than they because they each thought that they knew something though they did not (21c-22e).
Socrates, then, demonstrated with his examination that he was indeed wiser than anyone else. But he also showed that his wisdom was merely ignorance! This ignorance we have in fact come to know as Socratic ignorance. His example thus suggests that an examined life is worth living because it is one that we knowingly live in ignorance. I suppose that a life of this sort might be a smidgen better than an unexamined life, which, presumably, one ignorantly lives in ignorance. Yet one cannot but wonder, How worthy is any life of ignorance?

What is more, you may perchance have noticed that we have returned to the Delphic oracle and its now troublesome injunction. Our ability to know ourselves would seem to be rather dubious. Through Socrates the oracle is apparently telling us something about human knowledge. To the consternation of his jury, Socrates professes his belief that the oracle meant for him to be taken as an example for us all. What she appears to be saying, he asserts, is that our wisdom is worth little or nothing (Apology 22e-23b).

Let us persevere, nonetheless. We can learn another fact or two about Socrates and his wisdom even from Plato’s account of his trial. Socrates informs us that his knowledge is of one kind only. Eschewing divine wisdom of any kind, he asserts that he does not even know of any wisdom that might be greater than human. The knowledge that he himself claims to possess is merely human wisdom (Apology 20d-e). Wisdom of our sort it is which is worth little or nothing (23a).

Unfortunately, he does not bother to explain what the difference might be between wisdom of these two kinds. But we can see that the people whom he examined apparently thought that they had knowledge akin to divine knowledge. At least, they thought that they knew something beautiful and good (21d or 22b-c). Could divine knowledge thus be to know that one actually knows? And could human knowledge, again, be to know only that we do not know? That is, could our knowledge be to know that we are ignorant?

Perhaps we ought to ask, Have we ever encountered a similar distinction between these kinds of knowledge? I believe that we have. Where? In Plato’s Republic, of course! When he discusses the qualifications for an ideal ruler, Socrates obviously distinguishes several kinds of knowledge if we take the term in its widest sense. He recognizes a distinction between knowledge and opinion, and he further differentiates understanding from reasoning and belief from conjecture. With these distinctions, if analyzed carefully, we shall see what divine knowledge might be and, more important for us, what human knowledge is.

Consider the famous paradigm of the divided line, which Socrates uses to make his distinctions. With this figure Socrates represents indifferently our intellectual powers and their objects. But we need consider only our powers.
Socrates asks us to imagine a line divided into two unequal sections. These two sections, we may say, represent opinion and knowledge (Republic 6, 509d, 510a). Opinion, of course, concerns the multiplicity of visible and audible objects, and knowledge the unity of an intelligible object, which is an idea (Republic 5, 476a-b).

He asks us to imagine further each section subdivided into two unequal segments (Republic 6, 509d-e). To the lower segments he assigns conjecture and belief, and to the upper segments reasoning and understanding (511d-e). Conjecture and belief concern sensible images and their objects, but reasoning and understanding concern intelligible objects and their principles (509e-510c).

I want to focus not on the lower but on the upper portion of this figure. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the upper segments of the line both concern hypotheses and how to use them in intellectual inquiry. With these two segments Socrates illustrates two ways in which we can so use them. He is at some pains to show that one may use a hypothesis either to establish a conclusion or to establish a first principle.

Consider the use of a hypothesis to arrive at a conclusion. This usage is one familiar to any high school sophomore who has signed up for a geometry course. One starts from hypotheses, assuming them to be true without argument, and then one draws a conclusion from them. For example, our geometry might assume the definitions of a triangle and a square and then proceed to make an inference about these concepts. When we use diagrams for this purpose, we use them only as images of the concept under consideration (510b, 510c-511b).2

Consider now the use of a hypothesis for arriving at a first principle. We may find this procedure less familiar, but college students who have studied mathematical logic have an inkling of what it is. One goes from hypotheses, such as geometrical definitions, to a first principle that is nonhypothetical. One then goes back again to the original and other hypotheses. We might, for example, go from the postulates of Euclidian geometry to the concepts of set theory and then back to the postulates of Euclidian, Riemannian, and Lobachevskian geometries. We use no images for this purpose. Our thinking is “of ideas, through ideas, and to ideas” (510b, 511b-d).3

I would like to emphasize one point in particular about this analysis. Socrates suggests that we undertake an intellectual inquiry of either type only by hypothesis. We merely assume a hypothesis to be true for the purpose of drawing a conclusion from it. Or we can use a hypothesis as a "steppingstone" or "springboard" in an attempt to arrive at and to establish its truth with a first principle (Republic 6, 511b-c). That we can understand a hypothesis by means of a first principle, he explicitly asserts (511c-d).4

We may now distinguish, I think, human from divine knowledge. Divine knowledge I would take to be ultimate, nonhypothetical, knowledge of first
principles. If they have any knowledge, would not the gods have knowledge of first principles and not merely knowledge that they assume to be true? Indeed, they would presumably have knowledge of the one and only first principle of anything and everything.  

But human knowledge I take to be hypothetical knowledge. Following Socrates, I would argue that our hypothetical knowledge is of two kinds. We can not only reason hypothetically, but we can also understand hypothetically. That is, we can not only use our hypotheses to arrive at conclusions, we can also arrive at prior principles as best we are able with the aid of our hypotheses. Or dare we presume to do more than to aspire to a knowledge of a principle which is truly first?  

If there can be knowledge so wondrous! Socrates himself professes not to know if knowledge of a nonhypothetical sort is in fact possible. He actually expresses some skepticism about any knowledge of an ultimate first principle. His skepticism extends explicitly to the ne-plus-ultra idea of the good, which, he states, is “the last to be known and hardly to be seen.” “God only knows if it happens to be true!” he declares. This idea constitutes “for him appearances which thus appear” (Republic 7, 517b-c)!  

We have to admit, then, that human knowledge does amount to precious little. All knowledge that we might presume to possess is merely hypothetical, whether we use our hypotheses for understanding or for reasoning. Nor may we exempt this very distinction between hypothetical and nonhypothetical knowledge. We can know only hypothetically that we do not know nonhypothetically. Our knowledge is worth little or nothing, as Socrates declared. We cannot truly know a single thing.  

We can see, too, that an examined life is more worthy for us than an unexamined one. An examined life is a life not without some diffidence about our intellectual powers, which are rather fallible. At least, a life examined in Socrates’ manner is. To know that we do not know is to know that we are apt to err. But an unexamined life is a life of foolish confidence. To think that one knows when one does not is to court disaster. A life of this sort can only be the stuff of tragedy, or, if we happen to be lucky, the stuff of comedy.  

But what about moral knowledge? you may ask. If our knowledge is nothing more than ignorance, how could we poor mortals ever hope to live a good life? Could we ever expect to ascertain our goodness, let alone aspire to attain it? Let us conjure up dear old Socrates once again. At his trial Socrates claims to be possessed of a spirit or daimon. More literally, he informs us that within him something divine and daimonic comes to be. This something, he says, is a certain voice, and this voice, he explains, has a curious function. When it comes to him, the voice does not persuade him to perform any action, but it only dissuades him from performing an action that he intended to do (Apology 31c-d).
This spirit, I wish to suggest, is sufficient to provide Socrates with a foundation for his ethics. But I ought first to acknowledge that this spirit comes bearing fresh paradoxes. The foundation that it provides is justice itself, to be sure. This proposition should be no surprise. But the proposition has an epistemological peculiarity that might be surprising. If I am right, justice of the Socratic variety can only be hypothetical!

But we soon face another paradox. Socrates actually asserts that he is possessed of moral knowledge! At his trial he makes not one but two assertions about his knowledge. He famously professes to know that he does not know. But he also proclaims, astonishingly, to know what he ought to do or, rather, what he ought not to do (29b). The assertion that his knowledge is really ignorance would seem to deny him the claim that he has moral knowledge. As if to draw our attention to this apparent contradiction, he admonishes us on the very same breath that to think one knows when one does not is most reproachable (29b).

We shall find, however, that these two paradoxes are not entirely unrelated. But to see how they are related, we must first ask, What moral knowledge does Socrates claim to possess? His claim is that someone about to act ought only to consider whether he engages in actions which are just or unjust and whether he performs actions which are the work of a good or bad man (28b). But what would be the work of a good person? we must ask. Surely, anyone who is good performs just actions. But, then, what would a just action be? These bare assertions seem at best platitudes.

Fortunately, Socrates does go on to explain what he means by goodness and justness. These concepts he defines in a way not at all unfamiliar to those familiar with Plato's more ambitious dialogue about justice itself. We are just, he states, when we stay where we find ourselves stationed by a ruler or where we think that we might best station ourselves (Apology 28d). A just action, he implies rather strongly, is to do the work appropriate for us. Or, more colloquially, it is to mind our own business (see Republic 4, 433a-b).

He again uses himself as an example. His station is to philosophize and his work is to examine himself and others (Apology 28d-29a). His work, more particularly, is to show others that human wisdom, especially if compared to divine wisdom, is worth little or nothing (22e-23c). This he does by showing others that he is wiser than they. The paradox of moral knowledge aside, he professes to know only that he does not know. But the others pretend to know when they do not (21b-e).

Yet how can we know what our station might be? Socrates finds that his daimon indicates to him what it is. This spirit simply dissuades him from leaving his philosophical post. That is why he does not participate in politics, he explains, except when required by law. He would have been unable to
philosophize and of no service to the Athenians if he had entered politics. Any attempt to oppose their unjust and illegal actions would have meant that he would have been put to death long ago. To fight for justice, therefore, he had to refrain from becoming a politician and to remain a private person (31d-33a).

Not to mention similar examples that he offers to show how his spirit twice prevented him from acting unjustly as a councilman and a citizen (32a-e). And how he remained at his post as an infantryman during the early campaigns of Peloponnesian War (28d-29a).

We see, then, that Socrates has a spirit that provides him with a foundation for morality. This foundation turns out to be nothing other than justice, though he gives us only an adumbration of it. We moderns might say that his spirit works in a manner almost Kantian. As Immanuel Kant argues that whatever is not consistent with his concept of the categorical imperative is impermissible, so too Socrates argues that whatever is inconsistent with the concept of his function is not just. Kant, in fact, uses the concept of his categorical imperative to define for us a moral function, which is for him merely autonomy or self-legislation.

But one might still wonder, How could justice be hypothetical? Even today the mere question might be disconcerting not only for any Platonists among us but also for others as well. One cannot help but again feel some sympathy for Socrates' jury. How could anyone claim that the foundation for morality is so shaky? Surely, only the very firmest foundation would account for Athenian society and its many fine achievements! Not to mention our own fine society and our grand accomplishments!

This more troubling question we can answer by staying with our example. Socrates leaves little doubt that his concept of justice provides him with a rather firm conviction about his own work. He avers that he cannot break faith with the god of Delphi, and that he cannot keep quiet but must continue to practice philosophy. He actually declares, often to the dismay of younger readers, myself once included, that he could not stop philosophizing even if he were offered an acquittal on condition that he would (Apology 29b-30eb, 37e-38a).

How, then, could his concept be hypothetical? Indeed, he defends literally to the death his concept of justice. How many of us would have the courage to defend so valiantly a mere hypothesis? And yet we might very well harbor a suspicion that justice so defined must be only hypothetical. We know already from Socrates that all human knowledge is of this kind. But all our knowledge would include our moral knowledge, would it not?

Those readers who remain skeptical may wish to recall the paradigm of the divided line. Only with hypotheses can we understand or reason, Socrates argues. We can have no nonhypothetical divine knowledge, and our hypotheses, however we use them, remain nothing more than hypotheses. They are merely
assumptions from which we attempt to arrive at a first principle or from which we draw a conclusion.

Yet our little syllogisms may not be entirely convincing, especially if our lives were at stake. Can we find a more persuasive argument? I believe that we can. If we consider why he practices philosophy, we can see not only that Socrates knows what justice is by hypothesis. We can see also that he tests his hypothesis about his own function to the very best of his ability. Indeed, he tests it in a manner that we even today ought to find quite acceptable.

Socrates' experience with the oracle was what lead him to the realization that he ought to philosophize. He was so at a loss with the utterance of the oracle that he had to examine it. How did he undertake his examination? With reluctance he hypothesized that the assertion about himself was true, and he attempted to refute it by discovering counterexamples! He turned to those who seemed to be wise with the expectation that they would prove to be wiser than he (21b-c)." But he found that his hypothesis withstood its tests, despite his efforts at refutation. He was not able to refute the oracle because he was unable to find a single counterexample. He failed to find someone wiser than himself, though he continues his search (23b-c). Because he could not refute it, he simply had to conclude that the oracle meant for him to serve as an example of the fact that human wisdom is worth so precious little (23a-b)."

In a similar way Socrates takes on the job of wakening us up to the fact that moral knowledge is not worth much, either. His work, in other words, is to teach us that all knowledge, even of the moral variety, is merely hypothetical. In this capacity Socrates likes to refer to himself as a gadfly. His function, he says, is to awaken the Athenians, as a fly might awaken a lethargic horse, and to urge them to care for their virtue, as would a father or a brother (30d-31b).

His work regarding knowledge in general and moral knowledge in particular is thus the same. As he examines and refutes those who think that they know when they do not, so he examines and rebukes those among the Athenians who state that they are virtuous when they are not (29e-30b; also 41e-42a). Indeed, one might imagine that many people who are conceited in their ignorance would in fact be numbered among those conceited in their virtue or lack thereof.

Socrates argues, accordingly, that he would make the Athenians not seem but be happy (36d-e). Unfortunately, he does not at his trial elaborate his concept of happiness, either. He tells his jury only that his greatest benefit to them was his attempt to persuade them to take care to be their best and their most prudent. That is why he deserves to be boarded at the Prytaneum, he contends (36c-d).

I shall simply assume for now that to be happy is to enable our spirit to function well. Indeed, the ancient Greek word for being happy means
etymologically to be well in spirit. More specifically, I assume that to be happy is to act on the basis of a moral hypothesis about our function. My assumption carries the implication that to refute old moral hypotheses and to formulate new ones would be to become our most prudent and our best.\footnote{10}

The Socratic daimon, we may conclude, is an intellectual power by which we accept hypotheses as true, even moral ones, and refute and revise them when we encounter evidence to the contrary. These hypotheses would include even our most cherished and hallowed concepts, such as justice itself. In this very way Socrates was able to discover his own function of philosophizing as well as the value of our all-too-human knowledge.

And so Socrates may claim both that he knows nothing, and that he has moral knowledge. When he claims to know nothing, Socrates claims not to have divine knowledge but only of human knowledge of his ignorance. He knows humanly that he does not know divinely. We should, I submit, take his claim about moral knowledge in a similar way. When he claims to have moral knowledge, he claims to have merely human knowledge of what he ought or ought not to do. To have human knowledge, of course, is to know hypothetically.

We find, then, that Socrates can indeed help us understand the Delphic injunction to know ourselves. We are obliged to conclude that we can know ourselves only by hypothesis. If we had other than hypothetical knowledge, we would know who we are through divine eyes. But only through our own eyes can we come to know who we might be. Our self-knowledge can be only hypothetical.

But we now find that we must accept yet another conclusion. Self-knowledge turns out to be merely self-ignorance. We have seen that we must acknowledge our ignorance about the objects of our intellectual endeavors. But our ignorance about these objects surely entails an ignorance about our very selves. Or may we presume to know ourselves in some way other than that by which we know any and every other thing? Our self-knowledge, too, is worth little or nothing!

No wonder Socrates had such a difficult time with his jury! His jurors would appear to lead lives unworthy of human beings, thinking that they know themselves when they do not. He more than once becomes the object of their indignation when he asserts that the certainty of others about themselves makes them less wise than his ignorance about himself (Apology 20c-21a, 29b-31c). He must admonish the jury even when he reminds them of his penchant for dialectics (17c-18a, 27a-b).

Perhaps we can now better understand the accusation of impiety (24b-c, 26b-c). What becomes of our traditional gods if we have no divine knowledge of them? Socrates argues that he is following the divine oracle when he practices
philosophy. But he also avers that he must test the utterance of the oracle to see for himself whether or not it might be true. Stop and think for a moment. If we have only human knowledge of our gods, we are in effect left on our own with the dreaded, dialectical, daimon whom Socrates claims to serve (31c-d). A strange divinity, indeed!

Notes

* This paper is based on excerpts from my book Human Goodness: Pragmatic Variations on Platonic Themes, which Cambridge University Press published shortly after the ISSEI conference.
1 More literally Socrates asserts that an unexamined life is one not to be lived by a human being. The implication is that an unexamined life is less than human!
2 Incidentally, the divided line itself functions as a geometric diagram does. It serves to illustrate epistemological and ontological concepts.
3 Nagel is a contemporary philosopher who expresses this concept quite succinctly, though he does not connect it with Plato. “An advance in objectivity,” he asserts, “requires that already existing forms of understanding should themselves become the object of a new form of understanding, which also takes in the objects of the original forms.” See Nagel, The View from Nowhere, 74-77.
4 Few contemporary translators would appear to translate these passages consistently with the term “hypothesis.” But Reeve did in his recent revision of Grube’s translation. See Cooper, ed., and Hutchinson, assoc. ed., Plato: Complete Works. So did Lindsay and Bloom before him. See Lindsay, trans., and Irwin, ed., Plato: The Republic and Bloom, trans., The Republic of Plato. Most contemporary philosophers, however, would agree about these two functions of a hypothesis. Irwin does, for example, though he uses both the terms “hypothesis” and “assumption.” See Irwin, Plato’s Ethics, 274. Anna also agrees about these functions. See Anna, An Introduction to Plato’s Republic, 277-78.
5 Contemporary physicists would call knowledge of this sort a Grand Unifying Theory (GUT) or a Theory of Everything (TOE). In their hope to develop a theory of this sort, they are currently attempting to reconcile the hypotheses of general relativity with those of quantum mechanics. Their general theory would advance a principle concerned with only a single science, however.
6 With a different method we thus arrive at a distinction very similar to that which Vlastos makes between knowledge that is certain and knowledge that we attain by elenctic. Vlastos argues that certain knowledge absolutely cannot be otherwise, and that elenctic knowledge depends on our dialectical skill and on our opinions. See Vlastos, Socratic Studies, 48-58. Socrates, Vlastos also points out, relies on an assumption that elenctic knowledge is a consistent set of beliefs. But need Socrates assume that our beliefs, though shown to be consistent on a given occasion, are true, as Vlastos argues? See Vlastos, ibid., 25-28. Not in any absolute sense, I would think. Human knowledge, if open to dialectical challenge, can be true only by hypothesis. Our knowledge must remain hypothetical whether we attempt to reason or to understand.
7 Brickhouse and Smith argue that Socrates does have divine knowledge, revealed to him not only by the oracle but also in his dreams. See Brickhouse and Smith, Socrates on
They allege two facts in support of their claim, that Socrates trusts the oracle because a god would not lie, and that he evidenced his trust in divination when he concludes that the poets produced their works through divine knowledge. See Brickhouse and Smith, ibid., 105-106. I can only respond that Socrates explicitly denies himself any grand claim to wisdom greater than human (Apology 20d-e). More particularly, he implies that he did doubt the veracity of the oracle when he undertook to disprove it (21b-c), and he in fact criticizes the poets and others for their very claim to possess knowledge of the beautiful and good (22a-c; see 21c-e).

Brickhouse and Smith agree, however, that Socrates also possesses human knowledge, which they, too, call elenctic knowledge, and that elenctic knowledge is less than certain. Knowledge of this kind has its limitations, they argue, of both an inductive and a deductive nature. Brickhouse and Smith, ibid., 133-35.

Shorey wryly remarks that Plato is "much less prodigal about metaphysical ultimates" than his interpreters sometimes are. See Shorey, trans., Plato: The Republic, 130, n. b. He also argues that the nonhypothetical first principle is not to be taken in an ontological sense, but that this principle is for us only an ultimate hypothesis. It is "an unrealized methodological ideal." Shorey, The Idea of the Good in Plato's Republic, vol. 1, 229-32.

I take his argument to be a reminder that the nonhypothetical can be for us merely a dialectical assimilation of our hypotheses. It only appears to be nonhypothetical, as Socrates says.

Oddly, Popper does not appear to consider Plato's methodology as such. At least, I have been unable to find a passage in which he does. When he discusses method, he invariably turns his attention to Plato's ontological assumptions. See Popper, The Open Society and its Enemies, vol. 1, 31-32.

With his distinction between certain knowledge and elenctic knowledge Vlastos would agree. Elenctic knowledge, he argues, includes moral knowledge, and moral knowledge in its turn includes presumptive knowledge. Knowledge of the presumptive sort is not self-evidently true and is always subject to elenctic confirmation or refutation. See Vlastos, Socratic Studies, 73-75, 138-39. Yet Vlastos would distinguish mathematical from moral knowledge on the grounds that mathematics is certain knowledge and contains no presumptive knowledge (83-86). NonEuclidian geometries, however, suggest that all disciplines contain knowledge subject to further scrutiny.

The very word "eudaimon" is a compound of "eu", which means well, and "daimon," which means spirit.

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