

1. Riddle Me This.

Cavell and the Structure of Socratic Ignorance

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1. Introduction

I want to talk briefly about the structure of Socratic Ignorance.¹

I start with Socrates' fateful visit to Delphi. Although I know the story is familiar to many, let's reorient ourselves on it, on the famous *Apology* passage, the passage in which Socrates reveals his ignorance. Socrates' story starts at Delphi, and with Chaerephon, always a headlong Peter to Socrates' Christ, foolishly rushing ahead when the wiser stop and put off the shoes from their feet.

Socrates tells the court about Chaerephon's impetuous question to the Oracle and the Oracle's initially impenetrable answer. Socrates calls the answer *a riddle*.

Why do I mention this? Because I am going to explain to you why I have such an evil name. When I heard the answer, I said to myself, What can the god mean? and what is the interpretation of this riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god and cannot lie; that would be against his nature. After a long consideration, I at last thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I should say to him, "Here is a man who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest." Accordingly I went to

1. I am not here concerned with the question of the historical Socrates. I am focused on the Platonic Socrates — as he is presented in Platonic dialogues typically grouped early, middle and late. The Platonic Socrates is likely the historical Socrates, but the Platonic Socrates is the Socrates that has mattered most to history.

one who had the reputation of wisdom, and observed to him — his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination — and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and wiser still by himself; and I went and tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is — for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have slightly the advantage of him. Then I went to another, who had still higher philosophical pretensions, and my conclusion was exactly the same. I made another enemy of him, and of many others besides him.

After this I went to one man after another, being not unconscious of the enmity which I provoked, and I lamented and feared this: but necessity was laid upon me — the word of God, I thought, ought to be considered first. And I said to myself, Go I must to all who appear to know, and find out the meaning of the oracle. And I swear to you, Athenians, by the dog I swear! — for I must tell you the truth — the result of my mission was just this: I found that the men most in repute were all but the most foolish; and that some inferior men were really wiser and better. I will tell you the tale of my wanderings and of the “Herculean” labors, as I may call them, which I endured only to find at last the oracle irrefutable....

This investigation has led to my having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind, and has given occasion also to many calumnies, and I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and in this oracle he means to say that the wisdom of men is little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name as an illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing. And so I go my way, obedient to the god, and

make inquisition into the wisdom of anyone, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise; and if he is not wise, then in vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise; and this occupation quite absorbs me, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of my own, but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the god.²

So there. Socrates reveals his ignorance — which is also, and paradoxically — his wisdom, and reveals it as embedded in a Delphic context, Apollo presumably stationed watchfully above the Oracle’s riddling words.

It’s worth stressing the religious context is neither accidental to the nature of Socrates’ wrestle with the riddle nor accidental to the nature of Socrates’ ignorance. Socrates was a religious man, if perhaps, among Athenians, unorthodox; he was careful of religious observance until the hemlock claimed him. Socrates spent his life on a mission for God.³

2. Double Ignorance

Now, what of the ignorance of those with whom Socrates talked and who, though appearing to be wise, were ignorant? How should we think about that ignorance, interlocutory ignorance?

I start with these questions because we can only appreciate the structure of Socrates’ ignorance by appreciating the contrasting structure of theirs. Socrates’ knowledge of interlocutory ignorance structures his ignorance.

When I am teaching, I often describe the ignorance of Socrates’ interlocutors as *Double Ignorance*: they are ignorant (Single Ignorance) of something — but are also ignorant of their ignorance (Double Ignorance). I owe this term, *Double Ignorance*, to the remarkable Platonist and Orthodox nun, Mother Maria. I take it from her masterful book, *The Fool*, and I commend that book to you.⁴

2. Plato, “Apology,” in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett, 3rd ed. revised and corrected (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892).

3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. J. Wild, J. M. Edie, and J. O’Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

4. Mother Maria, *The Fool and Other Writings* (Whitby: The Greek Orthodox Monastery of the Assumption, 1980), 11.

Anyway, I like the term *Double Ignorance* and use it. But, continued reflection on Socrates has led me to realize that though Mother Maria's term is helpful, it can also be confusing.

Mother Maria's term makes it hard to realize that the two ignorances involved in Double Ignorance are not *the same*. Not univocal. There is a duplexity here, yes, and a duplexity of Ignorance, and so we might think her term unproblematic. But the duplexity is not a simple repetition of the same, *one, two*, but at, as it were, with two at a higher level: *one*, ignorance of Socratic topics, as we might call them, *courage, piety, friendship*, etc., the various values of *X* in Socrates' (in)famous *What is X?-questions?*, and then, moving up, *two*, the self-same ignorance — but this time ignorance of the ignorance of Socratic topics.

The same ignorance, but in the second case taking itself (but about a different object or objects) as its object.

But the ignorances are different, not the same. Equivocal. To understand the difference, we need to distinguish *knowing* from *acknowledging*. Socrates' decisive difference from his interlocutors is in his relationship to the ignorance he shares with them, his *acknowledgment* of ignorance they refuse to acknowledge. Better than saying that Socrates knows what they do not know, we should say that he acknowledges what they will not acknowledge.

I'm borrowing this distinction from Stanley Cavell. He distinguishes what we might call a simple failure to know from a more complicated failure to acknowledge. We can call each a form of ignorance, but they differ from each other. The first is a simple epistemic blankness, a simple *not-knowing*, for which the ignorant person is epistemically blameless.

Consider an example of such simple blankness.

You and I are passing acquaintances. You have a sister. But I do not know you have a sister. I have never had the opportunity to know that you do, and so I do not know her name. My ignorance of her and her name results neither from inattentiveness nor forgetfulness. You have never mentioned your sister to me; she has never been a topic even of momentary conversation. My ignorance is not something for which I could be blamed. My failure to know reveals nothing about me or my character. There's nothing present in me that explains my absence of knowledge. It is my impoverished

circumstances, not my impoverished character, that, as it were, conspires against me. I have simply had no opportunity to know, and my lack of opportunity is involuntary.⁵

But imagine instead that you are in pain, standing next to me, my neighbor, and you groaningly entreat me for help, but I do not react, not even to offer an excuse for being unreactive. — I stare past you, hearing, but unresponsive. I ignore you and your entreaty.

Now my ignorance is other than an epistemic blankness; it is not a failure to *know*, it is a failure to *acknowledge* you and your pain; it is a personal failure on my part. I am not simply epistemically blank, I am personally *lacking*; my failure to acknowledge you and your pain reveals a spiritual sclerosis in me — a lack of availability: call it a dearth of compassion, a hardness of heart. I and my character (or my want of it) are revealed in my ignorance.

So both knowledge and acknowledgment allow for ignorance, but in different ways; they allow for different ignorances. Cavell elaborates on the difference in this way:

The point [...] is that the concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success. It is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated. (It is the sort of concept Heidegger calls an *existential*.)

A “failure to know” might just be a piece of ignorance. A “failure to acknowledge” is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness.⁶

Acknowledgment is not a description of a given response but a category in terms of which a given response is evaluated. This is key. Note that in relation to knowledge (distinct from acknowledgment), ‘ignorance’ functions typically as a noun or adjective; it is something that befalls us, something we *are*. But in the context of acknowl-

5. Knowledge, typically, is an opportunistic business. We ask “How do you know?” but not “Why do you know?” because when we challenge or query knowledge, we ask, necessarily typically, about *opportunity*. If the opportunity is of the right sort, we normally withdraw the challenge, regarding our challenge met or our query to be answered. (We typically treat competencies and skills as providing opportunities or as forms of opportunity.)

6. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner’s and Sons, 1969), 263-64.

edgment, it functions typically as a *verb*. For the noun to apply, the person to whom it applies must satisfy the verb. It does not befall us, it is not something we are; we *do* it. The person who fails to acknowledge another's pain, as in my example, is *ignoring* something — and there will be a reason or motive for that ignoring, a presence (of something) that explains the failure to acknowledge. It will not be just a piece of ignorance. Socrates' interlocutors, especially the titular Sophists of many of the dialogues, like Euthydemus, but also other non-Sophists, for example, Euthyphro, are not simply ignorant of their ignorance: they ignore their ignorance. We might reckon (many of) the dialogues as investigations of the varieties of failures to acknowledge ignorance, the panoply of different motives or reasons, or the welter of vices, that mask the interlocutors' ignorance from them. They fight — sometimes almost violently — against owning it. They will not avow it.

Proof of their masking is the anger, the enmity, Socrates's elenctic unmasking typically provokes in his interlocutors, an anger he mentions in the *Apology*. Hatred, he says. The interlocutors are invested in knowing, they regard themselves as knowing. But most of them betray a noticeable uneasiness about their self-regard — it is fragile. Under the steadily mounting pressure of dialogue with Socrates, it cracks and sometimes shatters. Think of Thrasymachus. Socrates relentlessly hounds both Sophistry and self-sophistry.

3. The Oracle

Socrates reckons ignorance of Socratic topics to be epistemically inevitable. Only the gods know the true nature of courage, piety, or friendship. We, humans, are ignorant of their true natures. This is not a *failure* on our part. Success is not a possibility for us. But acknowledgment of our ignorance is a possibility for us, as is failure to do so. But success here requires a humility that challenges us — an acceptance of a finitude, a narrowness, and a vulnerability that we cannot escape or manage. But we rebel against this humility. As Cavell often points out, nothing is more human than the desire to deny your humanity.⁷ And the refusal to acknowledge your ignorance is one

7. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 109. Cavell's reminder continues: "or to assert your humanity at the expense of someone else's." Socrates never aims to assert his humanity at the expense of someone else's — that is Calliclean power, not Socratic power. For more, see James Haden "Two Types of Power in Plato's *Gorgias*," *The Classical Journal* 87, no. 4 (1992): 313-26.

form of that denial. Socrates' human wisdom is an achievement not of knowledge but of acknowledged unknowing. He soberly faces his ignorance, owns and avows it. This makes him humanly wise, fully human. It is why his human wisdom counts for so little — but not for nothing, at least not in comparison to others of us, although it is nothing in relation to the gods, to Apollo. Socrates' entire life is an apology. Socrates is an abyss of negative capability.⁸

What does this teach us about the structure of Socratic Ignorance? *That it is not a compounding of single ignorance.* Rather it is a first ignorance, an epistemic blankness, that is topped by a second, *different* ignorance, a failure to acknowledge the first ignorance. Call it a complex of epistemic blankness and personal failure. Blankness compounded by failure. — This is why there is a discernable religious tone to what Socrates does, a tone that drives the dialogical investigation of Socratic topics. The person who is ignorant but will not acknowledge that ignorance is a person who has closed himself or herself from learning, from being taught, from remedying his or her ignorance. Such a person cannot only be said to *not-know*, but can be said willfully to not-acknowledge that not-knowingness. Such a person is invested in not acknowledging that not-knowingness.

Seeing this clarifies the Delphic command, “Know Thyself.” We best understand the self-knowledge Socrates valued so highly in terms of acknowledgment. After all, failures of such self-knowledge are not pieces of ignorance, epistemic blankness — simple failures to know. Such failures are ignorings. The opposite, as we might put it, *the opposite of the self-knowledge that Socrates seeks is self-deception.* Socratic self-knowledge is self-acknowledgment.⁹ Lacking it is not a simple failure to know, epistemic blankness.

8. I borrow Keats' term, and the understanding of it on offer in Walter Jackson Bate, *Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats* (New York: Contra Mundum Press, 2012). Both Socrates' irony and his ignorance are internally related negative capabilities. Plato's dialogue form is best understood as an extension of Socrates' negative capability: the form itself as Plato used it involves an exercise of such a capability. But it is crucial to remember that the irony of Socrates and Plato is (*qua* negative capability) still affirmative and constructive, not pessimistic and nihilistic — a point often lost in discussions of them, and often lost on Socrates' interlocutors in their discussions with him.

9. And this is why self-knowledge is so often bitter. We are called on to acknowledge what we typically would prefer to ignore.

4. Philosophers

Socrates stations philosophers, himself as a philosopher, midway, Janus-like, between his typical interlocutors and the gods. The gods know and acknowledge that they know. They do not pursue wisdom because they possess it, and they acknowledge that possession. Socrates' typical interlocutors (the educated and the educators of Athens and Greece, note) do not know and fail to acknowledge that they do not know. They do not pursue wisdom because they will not acknowledge that they lack it. Philosophers do not know but they acknowledge that they do not know. That acknowledgment creates desire, love — the philosophers do not possess wisdom but love that which they lack, desire it. This makes them philosophers. The acknowledgment of ignorance is necessary to be a philosopher. It is not what he knows or does not know that makes Socrates a philosopher, but what he acknowledges. What he acknowledges both makes Socrates a gadfly to his interlocutors and makes him a chosen son of Apollo. He is the movable Oracle-at-Delphi, a barefoot demand for self-acknowledgment, a Riddle of Self-Respect.

5. Conclusion

Consider this passage of Johann Georg Hamann from his *Socratic Memorabilia*.

The opinion of Socrates can be summarized in these blunt words, when he said to the Sophists, the learned men of his time, "I know nothing." Therefore these words were a thorn in their eyes and a scourge on their backs. All of Socrates' ideas, which were nothing more than expectorations and secretions of his ignorance, seemed as frightful to them as the hair of Medusa's head, the knob of the Aegis.

Hamann links Socrates' ignorance, Socrates' wisdom, to faith, to its midway, Janus-like character, its already-but-not-yet character.

For the testimony which Socrates gave of his ignorance, therefore, I know no more honorable seal and at the same time no better key than the oracles of the great teacher of the Gentiles:

If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him.

— just as Socrates was known by Apollo to be a wise man. But how the grain of all our natural wisdom must decay, must perish in ignorance, and how the life and being of a higher knowledge must spring forth newly created from this death, from this nothing — as far as this the nose of a Sophist does not reach.¹⁰

In seeking to expose unacknowledged ignorance, and, after exposure, to bring the ignorance to acknowledgment, Socrates attempts to make his interlocutors more disposable, more available, and so *handier*, both to themselves and to others—sometimes, as when talking to Theaetetus, he calls this making the person more “sober, humble and gentle.”

But if, Theaetetus, you should ever conceive afresh, you will be all the better for the present investigation, and if not, you will be soberer and humbler and gentler to other men, and will be too modest to fancy that you know what you do not know. These are the limits of my art; I can no further go, nor do I know aught of the things which great and famous men know or have known in this or former ages...¹¹

Ending with the *Theaetetus* seems appropriate. After all, that is the dialogue devoted to both *knowledge and ignorance* (remember the midwifery) — and it ends with Socrates confessing his ignorance and praising Theaetetus for Theaetetus’ confession of his. Confession, in this context, is a form of acknowledgment. Early in the dialogue, Socrates notes that Theaetetus resembles him, his bulging eyes, his pug nose, and his

10. Johann Georg Hamman, *Socratic Memorabilia*, trans. J. C. Flaherty (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 109 and 111.

11. Plato, “Theaetetus,” in *The Dialogues of Plato*, 210c.

duck-like gait. And indeed, Theaetetus does: but the resemblance is not only skin-deep, as the dialogue reveals by its end.¹² Socrates models sobriety for Theaetetus, a sobriety Theaetetus already has but is still inheriting, mastering — sobriety as Soren Kierkegaard understood it.

To become sober is to come to oneself in self-knowledge, and before God, as nothing before Him, but infinitely, absolutely, under obligation.¹³

12. The prelude to the *Theaetetus* is set many years after the dialogue between Socrates and the young Theaetetus (who looks like Socrates) reported in it. In the prelude, we are told that Theaetetus, a grown man now and a soldier, has returned seriously wounded and sick from a battle, close to death. His plight reminds the speakers of his past, youthful promise. At the end of the dialogue, Socrates takes his leave from the young Theaetetus, telling him that he is headed to the porch of the King Archon to meet the charges brought by Meletus. — So, for the entire reported dialogue, although revealed in different ways and at different times, both the look-a-likes' lives are in the balance.

13. Soren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination/Judge for Yourself*, trans. H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 104. Sobriety neither demands solemnity nor rules out irony.