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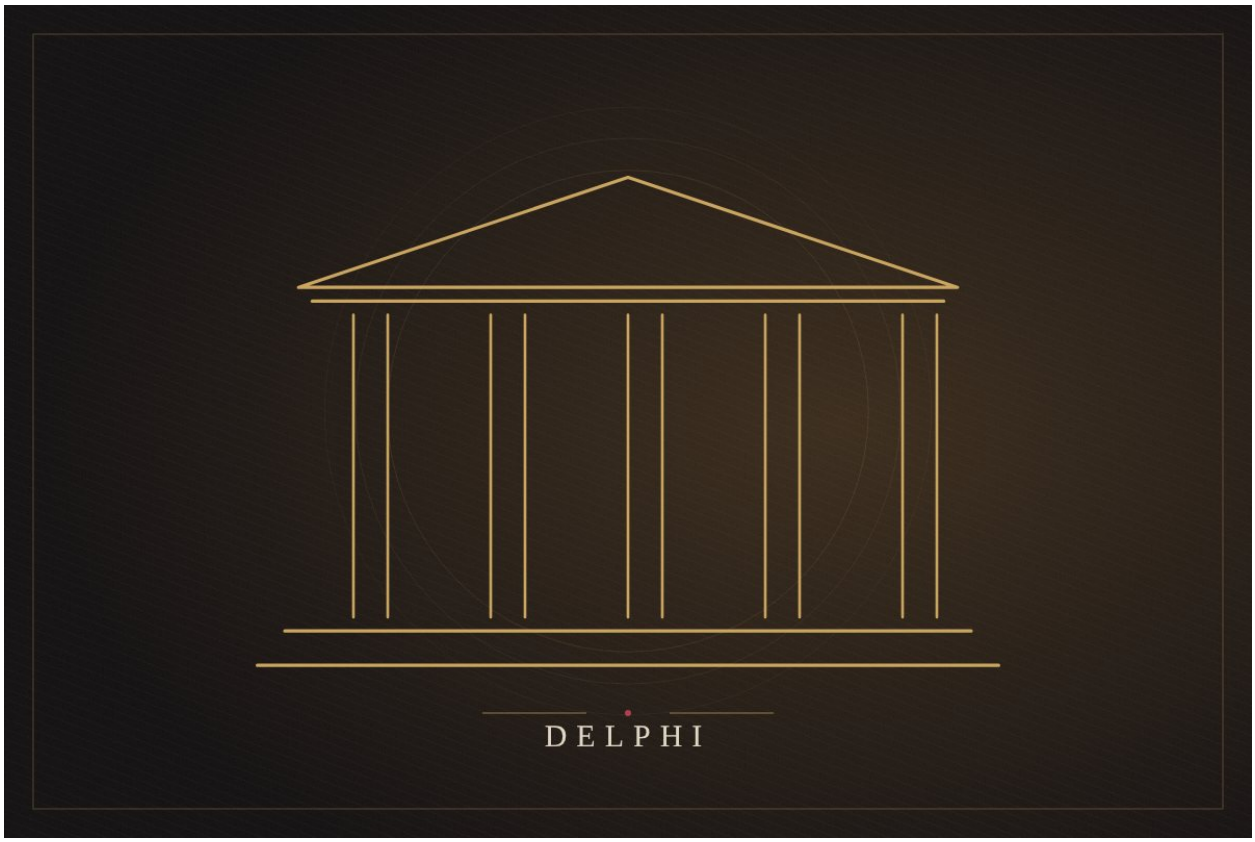
Wisdom

"Know thyself": the Delphic inscription and why it is harder than it looks

The words in the temple of Apollo, why Socrates said he did not yet know himself and what psychologists have found about what others see in us better than we do

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In the mountains of central Greece stood **Delphi**, the place where the ancient Greeks came to consult the oracle of the god Apollo. According to ancient authors, several short sayings were carved in the forecourt of the temple. The best known was *gnōthi seauton*: "Know thyself". Another was *mēden agan*: "Nothing in excess".

Who wrote them?

The ancient sources do not fully agree. Plato, in the dialogue Protagoras, links these sayings with the "Seven Sages" of Greece, who by tradition dedicated them to the temple as an offering. The traveller Pausanias, in the second century CE, writes that he had seen them carved there. We do not know for certain who invented the saying; it seems to have been shared wisdom.

Socrates and "Know thyself"

For Socrates this saying was central. In the dialogue Phaedrus he says he has no time to busy himself explaining myths, because he has not yet managed to know himself, as the Delphic inscription commands, and it would be ridiculous to study other things while ignorant of this. Self-knowledge, for him, also meant knowing the limits of our knowledge.

> *Knowing yourself is not only knowing what you like. It is also seeing what you would rather not see.*

What psychology says

In 2010 the American psychologist Simine Vazire proposed a model called SOKA, the "self–other knowledge asymmetry". According to her research, we know ourselves better on traits that are internal and not very visible, such as anxiety. But on traits that show in behaviour and carry an evaluative charge, such as intelligence or creativity, our friends often judge us as accurately as, or more accurately than, we do. The reason is that the wish to look good distorts our self-image.

Other studies have shown that most people see themselves as "above average" on many qualities, which cannot be true of everyone.

Know yourself as mortal

In ancient Greece, "Know thyself" was often understood differently from today. For many authors it was a reminder of human limits: know that you are a human being and not a god, and do not overestimate your strength. In Plato's dialogue *Charmides*, the character Critias suggests that the inscription is like the god's greeting to visitors, meaning "be temperate". So the first meaning of the saying was closer to humility than to the exploration of personality, as we often understand it today.

From heaven

The saying remained famous in Rome too. The satirical poet Juvenal, in the second century CE, wrote that "Know thyself" had come down from heaven, using it to advise readers to know their own means, for example before spending more than they had. In the centuries that followed, Christian authors, Renaissance philosophers and modern moralists used the saying in different senses. Few ancient sentences have had such a long and varied life.

As far as Afghanistan

The Delphic sayings spread far beyond Greece. In the 1960s, in the ancient Greek city of Ai-Khanoum, in what is now northern Afghanistan, archaeologists found an inscription from the third century BCE with some of these maxims. According to the French epigraphist Louis Robert, the inscription showed that a certain Clearchus had carefully copied the sayings at Delphi and brought them all the way there, about five thousand kilometres away. It contains maxims for childhood, youth, adulthood and old age, like a short guide to the whole of life.

More than we can know

Modern psychology has shown that self-knowledge has surprising limits. In 1977 Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson described a series of experiments in which people were influenced by small factors, such as the position of an item on a table, but when asked why they had chosen, gave reasons that sounded convincing and never mentioned the real factor. The authors concluded that we often have no direct access to the processes that influence our behaviour, and that our explanations are partly theories about ourselves.

How it can be improved

In a 2004 review, Timothy Wilson and Elizabeth Dunn examined how we might know ourselves better. They suggested that simple introspection, asking ourselves "why", often does not help much and may lead us to mistaken explanations. It may be more useful to observe our own behaviour as if we were an outside observer and to listen carefully to how others see us. This comes close to Socrates' idea that self-knowledge requires dialogue, not only solitude, and that the people around us are part of the mirror in which we see ourselves.

How to know ourselves better

1. **Ask people who know you well** and have the courage to be honest. Listen without defending yourself.
2. **Observe behaviour, not only intentions.** What do you actually do when you are tired, angry or free?
3. **Write regularly.** Patterns that repeat in a journal stand out over time.
4. **Remember the other Delphic saying:** nothing in excess. Neither harsh self-criticism nor self-praise.

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