

Pedagogy of “Midwifery” for Self-Knowledge: Meeting Confucius and Socrates

Rosa Hong Chen
Simon Fraser University

INTRODUCTION

The topic of self-knowledge persists as an enduring area of study for philosophers, educators, and men of letters, and as an existential question for laymen. Studies on self-knowledge are thus exhaustive in philosophy, educational philosophy, psychology, and other related fields.¹ The importance of self-knowledge and the difficulty of its acquisition are also found in profound expressions and sayings. Just to mention a few: the Greek Delphian inscription “Know Thyself,” Chinese proverbs, “mu bu jian jie” (The eye cannot see its lashes) and “zi zhi zhi ming” (Know yourself, and know your limits), Benjamin Franklin’s “Observing all men, thy self most” (in *Poor Richard’s Almanac*), Lord Byron’s “How little do we know that which we are! How less what we may be!” (in *Don Juan*). Such insights reflect how it is imperative for one not only to know oneself but also to have the ability to see things clearly and to discover what one may not know of oneself and, by extension, the outer world. A reflection on this ancient Greek injunction “Know Yourself” or the simple yet more baffling “do-I-really-know-myself” question imbues fresh reasons for bringing Confucius and Socrates into the discussion. Confucius (551–479 BCE) and Socrates (469–399, BCE), the greatest thinkers and philosophers of ancient China and Greece, have exerted the greatest influence, respectively, on Eastern and Western thought, particularly, in China and Europe. This influence reflects our fascination with both their characters and their philosophical conversations. Although few combined studies of them have been made in the field, what points to a meaningful comparison of these two great thinkers is their strikingly similar views on self-knowledge and its teaching.

In their two major texts — *The Analects* of Confucius and the *Dialogues* of Plato — Confucius and Socrates communicated their thoughts, through their students. There have been scholarly debates over the relationship of the historical Socrates and the figure of Socrates in Plato’s dialogues. The general consensus is that Plato may be reporting Socrates’s own thoughts in the early and some of the middle dialogues and developing his own in his late dialogues. For the purpose of this essay, I wish not to be confined by but to be aware of such a distinction, recognizing that the dialogues discussed here are mostly from early and middle Platonic dialogues.

In philosophy, self-knowledge commonly refers to knowledge of one’s particular mental states, including one’s beliefs, desires, and sensations. In addition to this primary definition, self-knowledge at times refers to its ontological nature, identity conditions, or character traits — a persisting self or ego.² No matter how we define self-knowledge, we cannot, I claim, avoid talk about the self and the other, the inner and the outer, knowledge and truth. Although both Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel called into question the possibility of having an “inner” without an “outer,”

a "self" without an "other," (particularly, Kant's idea of unknowable "things-in-themselves"),³ most twentieth-century analytic philosophers, as Andrea Tschemplik posits, still examine self-knowledge from an essentially Cartesian point of view.⁴ That is, self-knowledge is distinctly different from knowledge of the world external to oneself. As Renè Descartes's *cogito* argument aims to demonstrate, if one carefully attends to one's mental state (inner thoughts), there is a direct awareness of one's thoughts and therefore of one's existence. Consequently, different views of what self-knowledge is validate competing strategies for how we acquire it.

In considering Confucius's and Socrates's accounts of self-knowledge, we must therefore first rid ourselves of these modern conceptions of self-knowledge associated with the assumption that we possess direct and unmediated access to our mental states.⁵ Self-knowledge, for both Confucius and Socrates, is not easily identified as access to one's mental content. Confucius, for example, focused on how a person's self-knowledge is importantly related to the other, and his account of man's relations was crucial to formulating thoroughly the humanistic character of Chinese belief. Similarly, Socrates's primary concerns about self-knowledge "do not involve his own mental states; rather he is concerned with finding out what kind of a person he is."⁶ A comparative discussion of Confucius's and Socrates's ideas about "knowing yourself" obliges one to come to terms with how one acquires such knowledge.

The title of this essay, "Pedagogy of 'Midwifery' for Self-Knowledge," recalls the familiar Socratic method of "midwifery." This metaphor prompts an examination of the ontological and epistemological qualities and possibilities of self-knowledge. The ontological aspects of self-knowledge are first discussed in an exposition of Confucius's and Socrates's ideas, particularly their ideas on recognizing the limitations of the "self" and the "mirror-capacity" of self-knowing from the "other." A discussion then follows of the epistemological possibilities of acquiring self-knowledge by exploring pedagogical "midwifery" as an art of teaching. The conclusion presents the case for how the moral status of reciprocity between self-knowing and knowing-others is the true ontological nature of self-knowledge. This approach entails its corresponding means of acquisition, exemplified by the accounts of Confucius and Socrates, here the art of "midwifery" in delivering self-knowledge.

CONFUCIUS AND SOCRATES: "KNOWING YOURSELF"

"Know Thyself" (*gnothi seauton*) was a Greek injunction appearing above the gates of the ancient temple of the oracle at Delphi. This Western maxim for moral conduct meets its Eastern match in "It is valuable to know oneself," ("ren gui you zi zhi zhi ming"). This Chinese saying, which dates as far back as to Socrates's time in Greece, originated from the teaching of Laozi and Confucius and has since become a universal maxim that is popularly quoted and practiced in people's lives.⁷ The saying suggests that it is the most difficult thing to know one's self, but that once one does, progress ensues. Underlying this meaning is a process of self-realization and self-discovery, which implies how one not only learns about one's merits but

also discovers one's shortcomings. These two terse and memorable mottos, shared by both Western and Eastern traditions, became an important theme in both philosophy and moral education and continue to exert an influence on people's understanding. What role did Confucius and Socrates play in broadening our understanding of self-knowledge?

KNOWING THE LIMITS — A WISDOM OF IGNORANCE

For Confucius, knowledge simply begins with honesty in self-knowing. He said to one of his pupils, "Zilu, shall I teach you what it is to know? When you know something, you say so — it is because you know it, when you don't know something, you should say it, too — for the same reason. This is what knowledge truly means."⁸ Confucius's direct and simple teaching, relating knowledge to self-knowledge, is testimony to his pupils that only those who do not deceive themselves or others can continue learning. In other words, the only thing we "know" is that "we do not know anything for sure." When his pupil Fanqi asked him about farming and horticulture, Confucius said that he knew nothing about them. *The Analects* of Confucius provides many such instances that show Confucius's honesty in recognizing his own ignorance. One anecdote reads: one day Confucius went to a temple and "asked about everything," feeling no shame in asking questions (*TA*, 3:15).

Confucius was not only sensitive to the limits of what the human intellect may claim to know but also reluctant to make claims that were not securely grounded in what would commonly be referred to as experiential knowledge. Thus, when asked about supernatural powers, Confucius neither rejected nor acknowledged the possible existence of supernatural beings. He simply said that he did not have sufficient knowledge to extract any conclusions. On another occasion when a man was rashly offering his ideas, Confucius said, "Where a gentleman is ignorant, one wouldn't expect him to offer any opinions" (*TA*, 13:3). Self-knowledge, for Confucius, implies that when you recognize what you do not know, you start to learn and thus to know. Confucius was popularly regarded as "Confucius the Sage," and was followed as a good example as he often recognized his own ignorance. He said, "Do I regard myself as a teacher of wisdom? Far from it. When a peasant comes to ask me a question, I know nothing" (*TA*, 9:8).

That knowledge begins with knowing what one does not know — a frequent theme in early Chinese texts of Confucianism and Daoism — calls forth Socrates's similar claims about self-knowledge. Acquiring self-knowledge, for Socrates, is the most worthy of endeavors. As he asserts in the *Phaedrus*, no other knowledge matters unless it is grounded in self-knowledge.⁹ He states that, "I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things until I have understood that."¹⁰ Socrates was said to have been the wisest Athenian, because he recognized his ignorance. This Socratic character is clearly expressed in many of Plato's dialogues, professing ignorance on the part of Socrates (for example, in both the *Theaetetus* and the *Apology*).¹¹ A famous statement of Socrates's from the *Apology* is, "One thing I know is that I know nothing." Such a direct statement implies that knowing what one

does not know in itself is a forward step in the direction of human wisdom and self-knowledge. Here Socrates admits to "a certain kind of wisdom," or "human wisdom," as he knows that he does not know.¹²

What is indicated in both Confucius and Socrates is the wisdom of acknowledging ignorance — the human ability to know the limits of one's knowing. The main aim of self-knowing is, therefore, to master this "ignorance," and knowing what we do not know represents a form of knowledge. This is an admission that is rare, even among philosophers. Confucius and Socrates were such distinguished philosophers because they were not afraid to confess that they knew nothing and were troubled by that fact. Self-knowledge in this context means knowing one's ignorance and learning from not knowing.

KNOWING OTHERS — A SELF-REALIZATION

Knowing ourselves and in particular our limits of knowledge is not easy, while knowing others from within ourselves is equally difficult. Confucius said, "I'm not bothered by the fact that others don't know about me, but I'm bothered when I don't know about others" (*TA*, 1:16). In this statement, Confucius implied that we do not need to worry about our own merits being recognized by others or how others understand us, but rather, there is a need to try our utmost to understand others, putting ourselves in their positions, in order to truly know ourselves. Thus, it follows that we acquire a true self-knowledge through knowing others. This realization not only is important to our knowledge of the self but also divulges something about ourselves. Confucius said, "When we see a good person, we should emulate him. When we see a bad person, we should ask ourselves if we have the same shortcomings" (*TA*, 4:17).

Setting a good example in taking every chance to learn about himself from others, Confucius famously said, "Whenever I walk with two other people, I find a teacher among them. I learn from their strengths, and avoid their shortcomings" (*TA*, 7:22). Confucius illustrated an effective approach to self-revelation. Here, others can serve as a "mirror" or exemplar for self-discovery and self-scrutiny: learning from the good examples and alerting one to the bad ones. This "mirrored" knowledge represents an interaction that amounts to both knowledge and ignorance. Once, Confucius asked his pupil, Zigong, "Which do you think is the better, you or Hui?" Zigong replied saying, "I'm no equal to Hui. Even if by knowing one thing, Hui can understand all of the ten things; but if I hear one thing, I wouldn't figure out more than two." Seeing himself "mirrored" in Hui and Zigong, Confucius said in response, "True, both of us are not equal to Hui!" (*TA*, 5:9).

Similarly for Socrates, who is himself anxious to learn anything from anybody, self-knowledge is possible only upon the encounter with an "other" in whom we see an instantiation of ourselves. In Tschemplik's interesting assertion, Socrates perceives "self-knowledge as the analogue of self procreation: just as procreation requires an 'other,' so too does self-knowledge."¹³ This vividly describes the inherent connection of self-knowledge between the self and the "other" mirrored-self. When Theaetetus is anxious about finding a satisfactory answer to what

knowledge is, Socrates explains to him that he is in labor, saying, “you have something within you which you are bringing to the birth,” and which requires the assistance of the “other” — the midwife.¹⁴

In the *Symposium*, Socrates states that he learned about *eros* (the primordial god of sexual love and beauty in Greek mythology) from Diotima of Mantinea — ancient female philosopher and tutor of Socrates.¹⁵ That is if *eros* itself means love of wisdom, Socrates’s knowing of *eros* attains a kind of self-knowledge, which represents a kind of ignorance too. In the dialogue, Diotima’s instruction of the young Socrates points to the relation of *eros* to knowledge and the search for knowledge. Her teaching to Socrates can be seen as an explanation of the status and condition of *Theaetetus* as a pregnant young man.

This “other” (the teacher in this case) contributes to the student’s self-understanding and self-discovery. In his defense (in the *Apology*) against the charges of corrupting the young and of not believing in Athenian gods, Socrates declares that he is wiser than others: at least he knows that he does not know. But that sort of knowledge can be had only from encounters with these “others.” That these “others,” as our mirrored “selves,” help us to attain both wisdom and ignorance is reflected in the Socratic method — a sort of philosophical dialogue and examination, which takes the form of a *dialektike*. Dialectic method involves some “other” (self or idea) — some sort of opposition or contrariety, between the various thinkers in the process. It is reasonable to say that both Confucius and Socrates presented their quest for self-knowledge as a task that necessarily involved others or an interlocutory interaction. How can, then, such a dialectic way of self-knowing be taught?

“MIDWIVING” SELF-KNOWLEDGE

For both Confucius and Socrates, teaching young people consists in understanding the nature of self-knowledge and ultimately how they should come to know themselves. The point of departure for effective instruction, therefore, is to take the learners as they are and guide them toward a better understanding of themselves. Socrates, whose mother was a midwife, compared his way of teaching with the “art” of the midwife — vividly noting the likeness between the two kinds of “artisans” — both there to help during the “delivery.” Indeed, like that of a midwife, who does not herself give birth to the child, a teacher’s task is to help students to “give birth” to the correct insight, because a real understanding must spring from within. This implies that insight cannot be imparted by someone else, as in the case of childbirth. Only the understanding that comes from within can lead to true knowledge.

The “delivery” of knowledge, metaphorically, is a process of self-realization; it is, in part, a free act of gradual and conscious realization. By “delivery,” I mean “bringing forth,” such as the midwife undertakes, but not like the view of educators as “delivering” by imparting knowledge to their students. This process culminates in both internal and external workings, like labor. Put more precisely, the ability to give birth is an innate characteristic, in the same way that we can all grasp, to some extent, philosophical truths if we utilize our innate faculties; namely, we must reach inside ourselves and use what is there within us. This pedagogical “midwifery” links

the learner and what is to be “delivered” from within, connoting a process of intuitive “pregnancy” and practical “labor” of thought. This metaphorical means of teaching helps bring about what is (or may be) always within each learner.

“CONCEIVING” KNOWLEDGE FROM WITHIN

When it comes to acquiring knowledge, a common view holds that knowledge comes from outside and that schooling is the particular “apparatus” that helps transmit various kinds of knowledge. Confucius and Socrates, however, viewed knowledge as emanating from within. The key to Socrates’s art of midwifery is that he did not appear to want to instruct people. Contrarily, he gave the impression that he desired to learn from those with whom he spoke. Thus, instead of lecturing in the manner of a schoolmaster, he discussed and asked questions, mostly in the marketplace of Athens. Similarly, Confucius’s teaching was all dialogical with and among his pupils, asking questions and holding discussions with them in various settings: in courtyards and under trees. This conversational “delivery” of knowledge emphasizes that our learning does not actually transpire when transmission of “preconceived” knowledge is forced on us, especially when we are reluctant to receive it at all. Whenever we truly learn something, it is somehow when we have contributed to it, just as the pregnant woman needs to “push” by herself in order to complete her labor.

Knowing ourselves and knowing others implies that we carry the ability to direct our efforts toward working on what can be improved. The point here is that a personal inner connection is fundamentally important, because the knower is as important as what is to be known. Diotima’s insistence that knowledge is ever changing with time and space and that the preservation of such knowledge requires study and care, reveals the necessary presence and involvement of the knower. What is known may originally have been within us (or be exterior to us), but it must be appropriated by us, made our own, and “internalized:” in the way we make it *explicit*, so that we can make it again *implicit*. What is known must exist within. Coming to know the knowable is self-reflective and an exercise involving self-knowledge, because probing the limits of what one can know is a necessary part of the question of what can be known in general.

SELF-EXAMINING

Self-examination or introspection is important for both Confucius and Socrates. Introspection is essentially another way of knowing what grounds us, what guides us, and identifies what we know or do not know. According to Socrates in Plato’s *Apology*, the life of philosophical examination is the best life.¹⁶ Socrates emphasized that the unexamined life is not worth living; Confucius invariably reflected on himself, on his encounters with others, on things around him, especially by examining his own shortcomings whenever and wherever possible. He explained the need to examine ourselves and to ask whether we have shortcomings, and how we should overcome them. In his old age, Confucius had a student, Zengzi, who later became a teacher himself and believed in teaching by words and personal examples. Zengzi said, “I examine myself three times a day asking: Have I been faithful in doing things for others? Have I been trustworthy with friends? Have I reviewed and

practiced what my teacher has taught me?" (TA, 1:4). This may imply that when we examine ourselves, we follow some invisible but socially acceptable norms. Through this approach we tend to measure ourselves against our understanding of others with whom we share such norms. To this extent, our self-knowledge is morally embedded in knowing what we are and where we stand, regardless of whether we are aware of it or not. Thus, there is a need to become aware through introspection.

Confucius's own character, his modest wisdom and his dedication to teaching others, have been compared with the similar characteristics exhibited by Socrates and the Socratic Golden Rule of conduct which enjoins one "not to do to others what one doesn't want done to oneself." In teaching, Confucius focuses on the *Dao* (Way) of one's own knowing that is reflected through conduct: if one understands oneself as a "*junzi*," ("gentleman," virtuous man) for example, one will remain so and behave accordingly. Such permits one to be true, upright, and strong, and not to be bent when blown by the wind (TA, 12:9). In the Confucian sense, Socrates, too, is a *junzi*, an exemplary person.

Echoing this model for human self-understanding and conduct, an idea that emanates from Socrates's own thinking is that one cannot knowingly do wrong. If you know what the right thing to do, then you will do right. It is worth noting that many may counter this form of moral determinism by criticizing it as being naïve or by arguing that one can knowingly do wrong, because one might be morally weak (as did Aristotle). However, there is no need to pursue this argument about moral determinism in this essay. For Confucius and Socrates, self-examination is important for self-knowledge; it is the *Dao* of discovering the soul or the virtue of a "gentleman," to which deeds are to conform accordingly.

DIALOGUING IN THE "LABOR" OF DIALECTIC

For Confucius and Socrates, acquiring self-knowledge does not need to be an isolated task of one mentally working out specific ideas or beliefs; rather, it involves a relation of value, with which one may interact dialogically and dialectically. Confucius's and his student Zengzi's exemplary practices of self-examining indicate that proper introspection is a certain kind of dialectic self-examination, in which one seeks oneself out by seizing on things at issue, great or trivial. The Socratic dialogue also illustrates the "art" of midwifery in guiding the "pregnant" person in putting outside what is within, accompanied by the pangs of labor. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates put the definition of love to the test by means of a dialectical interrogation of his fellow Athenian citizens. Considering the pedagogical implications of this dialectic interaction, the teacher is there to help the students respond during the dialogue; while the students are extracting by themselves what is actually "there" from within, because there is always a part of ourselves that others cannot know unless we choose to reveal it. Diotima's teaching reveals to Socrates that *eros*, as desire for the beautiful and for immortality, signifies the acknowledgement of incompleteness, the awareness of a deficiency within. What is known or perceived is instantiated through pushing, course directing, evaluating, and selecting. This dialectical interaction evolves an awakening of the spirit that gives rise to reflective thinking (that is, the dialectical), as a mirror possibly does to a reflected image.

Consider a dialectic case of what we learn of Socrates through Plato’s *Phaedo*. Socrates desired to try death to learn about the nature of the afterlife. Socrates died thirty days after his trial, a period that allowed his friends to argue with him and to discuss many ideas. *Phaedo*, one of Socrates’s students, related the dialogue by engaging in dialectic with a group of Socrates’s friends. As a result, Socrates’s noble bearing and death prompted the Athenians to regret their decision. This extreme case of dialectic manifests the value of relation to self-knowledge and self-realization, the kind that has an inherent need for an “other.” In this dialectic relation, a teacher helps students respond to and extract from what is examined and discovered in developing a novel self-understanding.

CONCLUSION: SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

If self-knowledge is defined by both the “self” and the “other,” and the possibilities of its attainment are along the lines I have just explored, then surely there is a need to know how one responds to this characteristic of reciprocity in self-knowing. This understanding, I believe, resonates in a form of moral relationship and shared responsibility that serves as a means to attaining one’s moral awareness and to ethical action. In his conversation with Theaetetus, who is satisfied with the knowledge he has gained, Socrates teaches him to recognize his ignorance. Such teaching reveals the taking of the crucial initial step of a humble searcher but a profound knower, because wisdom begins in one’s ignorance. To discover the limits of our understanding, and the extent and nature of our faults, is to know how we can do better or discover our place in the world. There is a fundamental human need to develop moral acumen, where one can recognize what is unalterable in life and distinguish it from what may be changed by one’s endeavors. At the end of *The Analects*, Confucius said, “A man has no way of becoming benevolent unless he understands destiny” (*TA*, 20:3). Destiny has to do with acknowledging the unalterable, such things as lifespan and mortality, for example. Reflection concerning these unalterable necessities, therefore, makes a person recognize the limits and futility of trying to change them.

The exposition of Confucius’s and Socrates’s accounts of self-knowledge necessarily has a strong moral and practical bearing. The emphasis of their ethical intellectualism associated with the internal and the external, the self and the other, derives from and amounts to knowing and caring for the soul. This stance assumes that knowledge and virtue are one (for Socrates) and that the knowledge of others embodies the person’s benevolence (for Confucius). Knowing oneself and knowing others require, so to speak, an ability to direct effort toward working on what can be improved, namely, one’s moral capacities and understanding. This ability exists in a reciprocal relationship with self-knowledge, involving “learning and thinking” or “knowing and introspecting.” Confucius said earnestly in his teaching: “He who learns without thinking will be bewildered; he who thinks without learning will be in danger” (*TA*, 2:15). For both Confucius and Socrates, self-knowledge is imperative for wisdom; thinking and learning are thus intertwined in “knowing yourself.” And the pedagogy of “midwifery” explored in this essay can be viewed as a method for combining learning and thinking.

-
1. See David Jopling, *Self-Knowledge and the Self* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Andrea Tschemplik, *Knowledge and Self-Knowledge in Plato's Theaetetus* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2008); and Lucy O'Brien, *Self-Knowing Agents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
 2. Brie Gertler, "Self-Knowledge," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Spring 2011 edition*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/self-knowledge/>.
 3. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1993); and G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).
 4. Tschemplik, *Knowledge and Self-Knowledge*.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Ibid., 4.
 7. Laozi (c. 580–500 BCE), Chinese philosopher and founder of Daoism. The famous saying in his *Dao De Jing* (Cha. 33): "zhi ren zhe zhi ye, zi zhi zhe ming ye" ("It is wise to know others; it is enlightenment to know one's self").
 8. Confucius, *The Analects* (Beijing: Beijing Publishing House, 2006), 2:17 (translation by author). This work will be cited as *TA* for all subsequent references, in the form (*TA*, chapter: verse). For an English version, see *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Arthur Waley (Beijing: Foreign Languages Teaching and Research Publishing House, 2006).
 9. Plato, *Phaedrus* (1914), trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).
 10. Ibid., 229e–230a.
 11. Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Rockville, Md.: Serenity, 2009); and Plato, *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 1981).
 12. Tschemplik, *Knowledge and Self-Knowledge*, 3–4.
 13. Ibid., 41.
 14. Plato, *Theaetetus*, 95.
 15. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Rockville, Md.: Serenity, 2009).
 16. Plato, *Five Dialogues: Apology*, 38a.