‘Know Thyself’
What Kind of an Injunction?

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To be told, ‘know thyself’ is to be told that I don’t know myself yet: it carries the assumption that I am in some sense distracted from what or who I actually am, that I am in error or at least ignorance about myself. It thus further suggests that my habitual stresses, confusions and frustrations are substantially the result of failure or inability to see what is most profoundly true of me: the complex character of my injuries or traumas, the distinctive potential given me by my history and temperament. I conceal my true feelings from my knowing self; I am content to accept the ways in which other people define me, and so fail to ‘take my own authority’ and decide for myself who or what I shall be. The therapy-orientated culture of the North Atlantic world in the past couple of decades has increasingly taken this picture as foundational, looking to ‘self-discovery’ or ‘self-realization’ as the precondition of moral and mental welfare. And the sense of individual alienation from a true and authoritative selfhood mirrors the political struggle for the right of hitherto disadvantaged groups, especially non-white and non-male, to establish their own self-definition. The rhetoric of discovering a true but buried identity spreads over both private and political spheres. The slogan of the earliest generation of articulate feminists, ‘The personal is the political’, expresses the recognition of how this connection might be made.

R. D. Laing’s seminal work of 1960, The Divided Self, did much to popularize the idea of a distinction between different ‘self-systems’, with the essential feature of schizoid disorder being defined as the separation of a ‘real’ ‘inner’ self, invisible to the observer, from the behaviour of the empirical (‘false’) self. For Laing, the clinical schizophrenic’s condition is an extreme case of the schizoid fantasies common in supposedly sane persons, whose behaviour and language betray a belief that they have an untouched core of selfhood which must not be compromised or limited by involved action, but which lives in a state of fictitious freedom and omnipotence—described by Laing (pp. 87–8) as the direct opposite of Hegel’s insistence in the Phenomenology that performance alone measures what is real in the life of an agent. Laing, in fact, is diagnosing the language of a ‘real’, non-appearing self as a sign of dysfunction; but already in The Divided Self and more dramatically
in some of his later writings, he is also suggesting that the dysfunction is virtually forced on vast numbers of persons because the public realm of language and action is systematically oppressive and distorting. From this aspect of Laing’s thought, reinforced by his abundant use of Kafka and Sartre, it is not difficult to slip into the view that the socially-constructed and socially-sustained self is indeed false in some absolute sense, and that authenticity lies in a hidden dimension, a core of uncompromised interiority. This is a conclusion which Laing himself is very careful not to draw; but a superficial reading, aided by existentialist and oriental ideas (imperfectly digested), could produce the paradoxical doctrine that the ‘true’ self is present but inoperative, and may be discovered by bracketing out large tracts of the social, the corporate, the linguistic. This is in some respects obviously the child of the classical project of psychoanalysis, the decoding of present linguistic and symbolic behaviour so as to uncover the conflicts which generate my current self-presentation. But the important difference is that, for the searcher for the lost, ‘true’ self, the business of penetrating behind self-presentation leads beyond buried conflict to an authoritative source or centre of energy. Self-knowledge thus becomes more than an acquaintance with the history of trauma and defense, and appears as the possibility of liberating contact with a power that can transform present performance, replacing a false system of self-representation with another system which does not systematically mask real desires and needs. This may be conceived, picking up the clues of eastern religious philosophy, as the Self, the divine undifferentiated reality within; or as an individual system of immanent forces in balance, a temperamental pattern of gifts, characteristic affective responses, undistorted desires. It is, in either case, habitually pictured as present but concealed. The archaeology of analysis reveals, eventually, a living subject with an agenda distinct from what has been the agenda of the habitual self-awareness. From one point of view, this scheme represents a quite remarkable rearguard action fought by romanticism against the dissolution of the autonomous agent threatened by analytic disciplines—remarkable because it leads analysis inexorably back towards a pre-Freudian mythology of unambiguous nature, the naked self, prior to history and conversation. The philosophical problems of this naked self are tediously familiar. In this particular context, we should have to ask: how can a present discourse, shaped by the history of my speaking and hearing, intelligibly claim to re-establish what is not so shaped? how could such a claim be tested? what sense can we make of the idea of a self with specific dispositions and desires prior to relationships if the self is self-aware only against the presence of a resisting or interrupting other? The archaeological analogy is question-begging (how does the compromised active self recognize what it discovers as its own truer real-


2 Their treatment more or less ignores the Lacanian emphasis on the analyst as catalyst of proper intersubjectivity, though it does identify elements of primitivist romantic pathos in some of Lacan’s discussions (pp. 197, 203).
hidden and uncorrupted subjectivity which is somehow present as a realm into which I can escape is the most fundamental of all misunderstandings because there is no desire which is not already mediated—i.e. in some sense alienated. My 'I' is given, learned from the other; beyond it stands not a coherent and unified selfhood but—for Lacan—something like a foundational absence, a state of death. The subject’s quest for itself is for him a desire for death. Yet this shocking recognition enables the recognition that the ‘satisfaction’ of the subject is not after all intrinsically at odds with the satisfaction of all subjects. The analytical conversation lays bare the fraudulence of the ego; the analyst’s minimal ego enables the analysand’s ego to be relativized, and intersubjectivity to appear, the reciprocal recognition of subjects (Lacan, pp. 84–5). The unclarities and points of strain in Lacan have been amply discussed, and I have no intention of simply presenting his account as incontrovertible truth (I find the status of the subject as primordial absence and Lacan’s thesis about the subject’s fulfilment in death especially problematic: Girard’s critique (1987, pp. 403–5) of Lacan on this point is pertinent, arguing that Lacan is still not free from the mythology of pre-cultural desire and primary self-constitution). But in so far as Lacan offers a uniquely full and acute critique of the Hegelian ‘noble soul’ as the terminus of self-knowledge, he makes it clear that, if self-knowledge is liberative, it is not because it issues in an authoritatively self-defining subject. The point applies politically as well as psychologically, and must stand as a question to (for example) essentialist and archaeological discourse within feminism. But the purpose of this essay is to look at the rhetoric of self-knowledge in the religious context; and since the language of ‘true selfhood’ and certain techniques of self-examination and self-appraisal, loosely grounded in psychoanalytical theory, are enjoying extremely wide currency in literature about Christian spirituality, it seems as well to begin with some general reminders of the current difficulties in discussion self-knowledge. What I propose to do in the rest of this paper is to look briefly at three ways in which the injunction to self-knowledge has been used in Christian tradition, so as to pose two questions: first, are the traditional usages vulnerable to the critique of a post-Lacanian (and post-Wittgensteinian) account of the self? and second, does the contemporary Christian interest in self-knowledge belong in the same frame of reference as the language of earlier writers? My tentative conclusion will be that the answer to both these questions is ‘No’, and that some aspects of earlier Christian language about self-knowledge leave open the possibility of a useful conversation with the recent discussion I’ve mentioned.

My first example is the rhetoric of self-knowledge and self-recognition in the Christian gnostic literature of the second and third Christian centuries, in particular some of the texts from the Nag Hammadi collection. Fundamental to the mythology of all groups using gnostic idiom is the belief that our present human condition is enslaved by forgetfulness of our origin. Thus the Apocryphon of John (Robinson, 1977, pp. 99–116) describes how the ignorant world creator, himself oblivious of his origins, is tricked into imparting some element of divine spirit to the primordial human subject, who thus excites the jealousy of the cosmic powers who imprison this subject in matter and mortality, ‘the bond of forgetfulness’. Adam is placed in Eden and told to eat and drink and enjoy himself (pp. 109–10). Divine grace hides in Adam the saving element of epinoia, intellectual grasp, but this has to be activated by a saviour who is first and foremost, ‘remembrance’ (p. 115). The Gospel of Truth (Robinson, pp. 37–49) accordingly describes the one who is saved from the wreckage of the cosmos as one who ‘knows where he comes from and where he is going to’ (p. 40). The sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas (Robinson, pp. 118–30) echo this frequently, but strikingly turn on the idea that the ‘hidden’ truth of who we are is in fact plain and obvious. ‘If those who lead you say to you, “See the Kingdom is in the sky, then the birds of the sky will precede you ... . The Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known ... Recognize what is in your sight”’ (p. 18); ‘What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it’ (p. 123); ‘The Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it’ (p. 130).

3 Lacan falls into the error that is shared by the whole psychoanalytic school when he writes about capture by the imaginary—a desire that is not inscribed within the system of cultural differences and so could not be a desire for difference, but necessarily bears on something like the same, the identical, the image of one’s ego, etc.’ (p. 404). The point is a crucial one: the Lacanian view of the subject as directed towards death is only intelligible if there is indeed some kind of reality prior to being spoken to, being engaged with, even if this is conceived only as a notional or regulative level of the psyche’s life. Even in such a minimal form, it affirms a priority of sameness over difference and nature over culture, which it is Girard’s aim (in his own terms) to demythologize.

4 I have in mind especially the varieties of popularized Jungianism now vastly influential in books and courses on spiritual direction—the Myers-Briggs personality typology, the categories of the ‘Enneagram’, and so forth. These techniques of analysis have great practical usefulness, as many experienced spiritual directors confirm; but presented in terms of theory, they have some very questionable elements, not least in the language sometimes explicitly used of a ‘purity of essence’ preceding socialization, and in the mechanical and fixed ways in which personality types are sometimes presented in the self-help books generated by the popularity of this style of interpretation.
Examples could be multiplied, but the sense conveyed is clear. As in the Greek mysteries in which the original gnōtī sautōn had its setting, I must recognize what kind of a being I fundamentally am: self-knowledge here is nothing to do with individual self-analysis, a particular history, but is the discovery of the history I share with all the children of light—a pre-history, rather, in which all that constitutes particular history is the creation of a cosmic resentment. I have lost nothing in being subjected to the indignity of incarnation, but I am separated from my true self and my true home by forces external to myself who have 'clothed' me in a false identity (hence the significance in Thomas of the metaphor of stripping, as in saying 37, p. 122). Thomas presents the most sophisticated treatment of the theme, in suggesting that enlightenment is not simply knowing the myth of your origins and destiny, but understanding that the state of the world before your eyes tells you the truth of your nature: you are the seer, not the seen, and the material world lies before you, passive, like a corpse (sayings 56 and 80, pp. 124, 127). Understand that you understand, that you are not bound by reaction to what is before you, and understand that you occupy a place beyond all worldly schemes of differentiation. You are the light in which things are seen. Where is the place where Jesus stands? it is the place from which light emanates, the interior of the enlightened person (saying 24, p. 121).

What we must recognize, then, is that our 'real' life is undifferentiated, a sort of Aristotelian self-noesis, indistinguishable perhaps from the life of what Thomas calls 'the All'. Gnostic self-recognition certainly deploys a rhetoric that has affinities with the romantic model of the buried, authentic self; but the buried self here is not the touchstone of authentic desire or unillusioned action, merely the purity of intellectual self-presence. In one way—unsurprisingly?—this veers towards the Buddhist ideal of self-knowledge, the dismantling of all specific desires, properties or projects so as to perceive the underlying absence of anything but the sheer 'thereness' of the empty abundance that is both blissful fulfilment and contentless void (nirvāṇa and śānti). At another level, the analogies with a Lacanian analysis are striking, especially in the virtual dismissal of habitual bodily and emotional self-presentation as the effect of 'captivity' or falsehood, and the ultimate identification of the subject as absence. The difference, though, is at least twofold: the gnostic subject may be an absence, but could not be called a lack; it is beyond desire, and so beyond history. And the intersubjectivity that can be created in the narrative encounter is no part of the gnostic hope, which looks to a recovery of non-differentiation, a divine sameness. From yet another perspective, however, gnostic rhetoric is indeed the distant parent of romantic mythology, in constructing not simply a picture of a world of error or misprision, but an actively hostile environment deliberately stifling the truth out of envy. The false and forgetful self is in no sense (as it would be for the Buddhist or the Lacanian) the formation, the responsibility, of the subject: it is wholly the creation of a hostile power. The forgotten self acquires the pathos of a victim—a move which decisively politicizes the language of gnosticism, giving the self a project of struggle against not alienated but nakedly alien force (though, once again, a document like Thomas shows how this language in turn can be demythologized and freed from the crude rhetoric of struggle against something external).

Gnosticism's difficulty is always in this last aspect of its schema. If history and the body are indeed radically alien to the spirit, the spirit is a stranger to guilt and division: it is not self-alienated but forcibly disguised from itself. Whence then comes the division? The problem is pushed back into the realm of the divine life itself, and there the same problems recur. Divine self-alienation (myths of the fall of Sophia) is no easier to theorize, and perhaps the only consistent solution to such a problematic was the absolute dualism of the Manichees. The rhetoric of gnostic self-knowledge represents a drastic working-through of certain features in the earliest Christian language we can trace—the summons to see one's ordinary self-presentation as deceitful (as in the synoptic Jesus' sharp antitheses between what is visible and what is 'in the heart'—Mt 5.21ff.—or the Johannine Jesus' allusions to the blindness of those who claim they can see—Jn 9.39–41—or Paul's regular opposition of 'flesh' and 'spirit' as moral systems); what it shows, though, certainly to the majority of writers in what was to become the Christian mainstream, is that to render the problem of self-deceit in such a way as to disclaim ownership of one's own deceptive history is to set up a problem as serious for metaphysics as for individual psychology. The isolation of the non-responsible, inactive and impassive self finally requires the postulating, at one and the same time, of an inactive and impassive God and a universe of uncontrollably delusory systems. Thus the relentless elaboration of the theme of self-deceit alone leads to the vision of a reality eternally and irreparably—and unintelligibly—

5 Augustine in Confessions VII.2 summarizes the argument of his friend Nebridius about the difficulties of a thoroughlygoing dualist metaphysics: either God is vulnerable to change and chance—in which case, it is perfectly conceivable that good will be defeated in the universe, and that therefore the good is not identical with the real; or God and the good are not vulnerable, in which case there is no need for a properly dualist theory in the first place. Divine self-alienation and primordial conflict between equipollent powers are equally insupportable positions in any intelligible metaphysics.
split, and to something like a technically schizoid construction of the world of the subject. A truth that is strictly incommunicable in habitual (bodily/temporal) self-presentation is liberative only negatively, as a relativizing of all determinations: it does not modify our negotiating of particular determinations. Consequently, as Christian language develops, the idea of an independent spiritual core to the person, a self untouched by time and guilt, recedes further and further: even with the pre-existent nous of Origen’s anthropology, the present state of the self is intimately connected with the free self-determination of this primordial subject, which both is and is not involved in time and matter. The destiny of the spiritual subject is liberation, but, to arrive there, I must learn virtue in the school of the fallen soul and the empirical body. The nous is in principle independent of the body, yet it can only become what it should be—a spirit uninterruptedly contemplating God—through the life of material and temporal selfhood.

The difference between the language of gnostic ethics and spirituality and what finally became the normative idiom of Catholic Christianity is very clear if we turn to a second brief case-study, the discussion of self-knowledge in St Bernard’s homilies on the Song of Songs.7 Sermons 35 to 37 in particular deal with a text from the first chapter of the Canticle in the Vulgate, stignaras te...egredere (Song of Songs 1.7): the Bride is told that if she fails to know herself, she must leave the sweets of contemplation for the exile of a life dominated by gratifying the needs of the senses. This, of course, is what the fate of Adam was; and why does Adam fall? By misunderstanding the meaning of his human dignity (35.6). He forgets that he is a creature (and thus dependent on God), and is expelled from Eden, thus becoming subject to a second and more serious ignorance of himself, forgetfulness of his rational and spiritual nature (35.7). Not knowing oneself, then, and not knowing God are intimately connected: if I do not know that I am God’s creature, because I am hypnotized by the grandeur of the intellectual gifts given me, I shall not in fact know how to exercise those gifts, and I shall cease to be a rational creature at all (this rests on Bernard’s general belief that, since reason in us is God’s image, it cannot function when it does not have God for its object). Faulty self-knowledge has thus led to our present sad plight: what, then, does it mean to know myself truthfully now? It is to see my helplessness and loss, to discover that I now live in a region where likeness to God has been forfeited (regio dissilitudinis, 36.5). Yet simultaneously I must know that God continues to hear me and to give me grace: if I see myself as a fallen sinner, I must also see myself as a graced sinner, since I could not truthfully know my sin without knowing God (I couldn’t know what it was like to lose the image of God if I had no awareness of God). ‘Your self-knowledge will be a step to the knowledge of God; he will become visible to you according as his image is being renewed within you’ (36.6). Self-knowledge thus becomes the condition for repentance, prayer and practical charity (37.2): the Spirit of God begins to realize in us the dignity of God’s children by forming us in holiness. So by our penitent recognition of what we are, we ‘sow in tears’; but God’s mercy guarantees that we ‘reap in joy’ (37.4, quoting Ps 125.5).

This is quite a complex depiction of self-knowledge. If we had to identify its focal themes, we could say that they are (i) the need throughout for a recognition that we are constituted ‘rational’ or ‘spiritual’ or whatever in virtue of relation to the creator, not as self-sufficient individualities, and (ii) the priority here and now of recognizing fallibility and failure as the self’s truth, while perceiving also that such a judgment presupposes relation to God even in the acknowledgement that no proper relation yet exists. Thus there is no selfhood prior to the address or gift of God: reason responds to this, rather than having a simple primacy or autonomy. Even as a Godless and forgetful sinner, I am called into being as a self by the prior love of God. Self-knowledge makes no sense except as achieved in the face of God, in the light of God, and truthful self-knowledge establishes itself as such by incorporating recognition of the divine love; this is as true for Adam in paradise as for us now. The ‘authentic’ self is what I acknowledge as already, non-negotiably, caught up in continuing encounter with or response to divine action; and the acknowledgment is inseparable from converted behaviour. The person who knows him- or herself is manifest as such in the practice of prayer and almsgiving. Or, in short, the meaning of self-knowledge here is displayed in the performing of acts intelligible as the acts of a finite being responding to an initiative of generosity from beyond itself, an initiative wholly unconditioned by any past history on the self’s part of oblivion or betrayal.

This is a model very nearly at the opposite pole from that of gnostic language. What to the gnostic is the terminus of the search for a true identity is here, in effect, the most lethal of errors: we do not arrive at a subject functionally identical with the worldless divinity, essentially indeterminate, but at a point of primitive determination, an irreducible status as hearer and recipient. The capacity to make sense of the world follows not from identity with the light of reason or order beyond the contingent present, but from grasping one’s own contingency, articulating dependence (reason as imago dei). Identifying the substance of the self with a non-relational intellectual power is the pride which exiles us from Eden, and constantly pulls us to the sub-rational level of

7 Translated by Kilian Walsh, OCSO, in the Cistercian Fathers series (Kalamazoo, 1971 and 1976).
serving pure appetite (which we may successfully disguise as reasoning). Furthermore, our condition is historical, in the sense that, since there is no essence prior to relation with God to which we can have recourse, we are always what we have made of ourselves in encounter with God—not imprisoned angels, but struggling and inept conversationalists, whose errors and self-delusions build themselves into a formidable carapace of unreality, reinforced by every fresh stage in our self-representation unless interrupted by awareness of God—which is necessarily a silencing of our self-projecting. Thus there can be no authentic image of the self that has definition and fixity of itself (which would be another projection of the futility of Adam's originary misperception)—there is the recognition of a history of error and failure to respond to what I now see or hear afresh (God), and the adoption of the kind of practice that militates against error about my metaphysical status—prayer and charity. There can be no ressentiment against the cosmos, since the imprisoning illusion is self-generated—reason's attempt to reflect on itself without the mediation of God's creating love. If there is a 'politics' to this account of self-knowing, it is not based on a rhetoric of reclaiming what has been taken away, or identifying a guiltless and uninvolved victim at the centre of my identity, but is orientated rather towards the suspicion of claims for the finality of self-definition, reasoned defences of the pursuit of interest and appetite on the part of a pseudo-self (individual or collective?) denying its contingency. The mistaken subject here is constructed as possessing, not lacking, power in the world of negotiation, and needing to recover a fundamental perception of limited power rather than a primordial liberty. That there is an ambivalence to this also is evident; more of that later.

Bernard's theology is decisively shaped by the heritage of Augustinianism, and it is to Augustine himself that we turn for a third and final perspective on the language of self-knowing. The *Confessions* is a work permeated on practically every page by the acknowledgment that true knowledge of self is inseparable from true knowledge of God. *Cognoscam te Domine cognitor meus*, writes Augustine at the beginning of Book X, and, a little later (X.5), *quod de me scio, te mihi lucente scio*. As Book VII in particular makes clear, the recognition of God's absolute transcendence is a crucial moment in liberating Augustine from a crude and sterile picture of the self and its moral world: the problem of evil is reconceived, as a problem of the variability of the will in a contingent environment, rather than a question of how a substantial alien force could intrude itself into the world's fixed territory; the mind's evaluating and connection-making activities are seen as intelligible only if they take for granted an independent (non-worldly) measure of value and coherence. It is the utter and irreducible difference between God and the human mind that frees the mind to recognize itself and to be itself—to know that it is not a sort of material object, but is simply the activity of making sense of the world and of its own history: memory, says Augustine (X.17), *animus est et hoc ego ipse sum*. I 'am' the recollecting and ordering of my past.8 This is, by definition, an endless labour, and it can be carried forward only in the belief that there exists a full and just perspective on my history, not dependent on my own fallible perception. 'Truthful self-knowledge thus entails a constantly self-critical autobiographical project, striving to construct the narrative least unfaithful to the divine perspective. It will, of course, never be the divine perspective, because what God sees, I learn (and constantly, with every new action, must relearn). *Confessions* X describes vividly how the present awareness of what distorts judgment and desire enforces humility and a certain provisionality in our accounts of ourselves: what we can be certain of is not our own perseverance but the mercy of God, who alone sees what we are and what we need.

Some of these themes recur in the masterwork of Augustine's maturity, the *De trinitate*, whose eighth to tenth books are very largely devoted to a complex and subtle discussion of self-knowing. A full treatment would be difficult in the space available here,9 but the salient points are these. Self-knowledge and self-love are brought into close connection, because of the recognition that the self is in motion to the Good (or at least what it thinks is the Good), that it cannot avoid making judgments of approbation and disapprobation: the self operates as if it knew more or less what it wanted to be like (De trin. VIII.iii–vi). We love good people, and part of what we love in them is their own love, their will that goodness be accessible to all (VIII.vii). So to know ourselves is to recognize our involvement in moral process by way of desire: we want to be just and loving, we learn justice and love from the just love of good people, and so we must understand ourselves to be so constituted as to be in love with loving (and so, ultimately, with the unreserved generosity of God). Book IX spells out some implications: we can't love ourselves without knowing ourselves, but we can't know without desire (IX.ii–vii). Consequently, in Book X, the paradox is stated in full force: 'total' self-knowledge is precisely the knowledge of

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8 Cf. R. Williams (1982), p. 29: 'The self is . . . what the past is doing now.' This formulation was criticized as fanciful and imprecise, but I should still want to defend it in so far as it represents the sense to which Augustine witnesses that present 'selfhood' is not an arena of open choices confronting an abstractly free volition, but a territory marked out by preceding determinations (by self and others), which mould, in ways frequently inaccessible to us, what can be and is done.

9 I have attempted a slightly more extended discussion in Williams (1992).
the self as incomplete, as seeking (X.iii). Because it makes no sense to split the mind into the bit that knows and the bit that is known, then if I know myself as questioning and incomplete, as wanting to know, I know all I can know of what I am (X.iv). I know, very importantly, that I am neither God nor beast; a creature, but a reasoning creature (X.v: here is the theme of self-knowledge as knowing one’s place in the order of things, which is found elsewhere in Augustine, and is obviously seminal for Bernard). I know too that my mind cannot be a material object, cannot be comparable to one of the things I think about (X.ix-x), because knowing the mind is always knowing from within a fluid activity, not a fixed external object.

I have tried to argue elsewhere that Augustine’s account here of the indubitability of self-knowledge may be closer to Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* than to Descartes, since it is above all an attempt to show that knowing the self is something quite distinct from any processes of ‘coming to know’ in which questions of evidence and relative degree of certainty can properly be raised (you couldn’t be fairly sure you knew yourself on Augustine’s account). Its most significant contribution to our present discussion, though, is the insistence upon the *unfinished* nature of self-knowledge (a theme that can be paralleled, incidentally, in the Christian East, particularly in Gregory of Nyssa). The self is in construction; the relating of a history is not the fixing of the self’s definition or the uncovering of a hidden truth, but part of the process of construction, a holding operation. Furthermore, the process is bound up with the desire for the Good, for *iustitia*: the self in construction is a self whose good is understood in terms of a universally shareable good, and the self is not known adequately without a grasp of the inseparability of its good from the good of all. If there is a ‘secret’ to be uncovered by the search for self-knowledge, it is perhaps this unconscious involvement in desire for the common good; and if there is a ‘politics’ of self-knowledge in Augustine, it lies in the dissolution of any fantasy that the good can be definitively possessed in history by any individual or any determinate group in isolation. The distance between God as *sumnum bonum* and all creatures means both that there can be no settled state of absolute good for this world, and that there is (effectively) unlimited time for the working and reworking of corporate movement towards the Good.

It is time now to attempt some drawing together of the threads of this diffuse discussion. I have suggested that the rejection of gnostic language about the hidden self left ‘mainstream’ Christianity with the task of dealing with its own fundamental vocabulary of self-deception and restoration without endorsing the mythology of a supra-historical subject, a self prior to and untouched by a history of interrelation and of determination by that interrelatedness. Bernard and Augustine present us with a self constructed in and only in contingency, and intelligible only as responding to address from beyond itself, never self-creating. For Bernard, if we do not see our rationality as tending Godwards, we become sub-rational: we need a de-mystifying of our intellectual and spiritual powers and an acquaintance with our powerlessness to avoid error, left to ourselves. For Augustine, we need to come to terms fully with our finitude and to recognize that our rationality is always enmeshed in desire—most primitively, that desire for the good or the just that is obscured by our habitual misidentification of what we want, which results from the fictions of rivalry that corrupt the common life of human beings and reinforce an image of the self as an atomistic subject orientated to an endless series of specific gratifications (a consumer, in fact). For both Bernard and Augustine, the inaccessibility of the divine perspective is paradoxically liberating: there is always a resource for the renewal or conversion or enlargement of myself independent of what may happen to be my resources at any given moment, and there is always the possibility of more adequately ordering the telling of my life as I draw towards a perspective on myself undistorted by my self-interest—a perspective never possessed, never simply mine, but imaginable as a horizon against which other perspectives may be tested. And none of this would be conceivable if God were the occupier of a ‘point of view’ comparable to my own, a positional perspective like that of an ordinary subject, only larger.

There may, then, be a convergence of sorts with the picture outlined at the beginning of this paper. Self-knowledge is a practice of criticism, specifically the criticism of the way the subject distorts its self-perception into fixity by fixation upon the meeting of needs in the determinate

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10 Williams, 1992; for a perspective on the Wittgensteinian approach to self-knowledge, there is a useful article by Godfrey Vesey (1991).

11 See the celebrated section in Gregory of Nyssa’s *Contra Eunomium* II.107ff. (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 45,945Dff.; in the more recent edition of Jaeger, which corrects the numbering of the books in Migne, vol. 1, pp. 258ff.) on our inability to give an account of what our own souls actually are in any finished way—a point designed to reinforce Gregory’s insistence that the knowledge of God, in whose image the soul is made, is similarly unfinished, eternally open or expanding.

12 ‘Unlimited’ time not, of course, in the sense that Augustine did not believe in human mortality or the end of the world at a determinate point; but in the sense that no term is fixed to the work of individual or society in the attainment of the good *taethin* history. We could never claim to have reached a plateau, nor is the failure to realize the fulness of God’s justice within history an irreparable or unforgivable delinquency. All human achievement is provisional, all is therefore capable of flux for better or worse; there is, from our point of view in history, ‘always’ a future.
form in which they are mediated to us in the perception of the Other; and the ego- less interlocutor whose non-intervening presence exposes to us the possibility of this critical practice is identified as one who holds not even a residual position in the world where desires are negotiated. Theology’s query to the Lacanian analytic project might be whether anything short of this horizon (of the essential absence from the world of the liberating interlocutor) enables us fully to see the possibility of a state of non-rivalry among human claims for satisfaction (Girard, Bk II, Bk III, ch. 1). Theology also assumes, however, that the subject’s unthematized desire to return to itself is not a desire for a ‘foundational absence’, for death, but for a mindful standing in its basic position of creatureliness (unfoundedness in oneself), a standing before what always precedes it: neither the birth orifice nor the phallus, as in Lacan’s orthodox Freudian idiom, but the intelligible Word that precedes even biology. Lacan’s own regular ad ventures to the religious repertoire of images, Christian, Jewish and oriental, suggests that this parting of the ways is not a simple matter of one party taking a rationalist option for the clarities of natural science. There is more to be said from both sides.

I have hinted at a further convergence. Lacanian analysis goes a long way to removing the pathos of the victim from the destiny of the self, and Bernard and Augustine concur. But does this mean that the injunction to self-knowledge is primarily addressed to those who must be dispossessed? Both feminist and black theologies have often interpreted the summons to repentance, provisionality, the unmasking of pride, as inappropriate as addressed to them, as ideological commendations of passivity in an intolerable situation. The point is significant. We noted earlier the ambivalence of Bernard, if read as the language of the powerful (the male clerical ideologue) to the powerless—though we should remember that he is addressing male intellectual/contemplative hearers in the first instance. It is proper that any rhetoric of humility and dispossession should be subjected to suspicion. But this does not wholly turn aside the force of the Augustinian/Bernardine commendation. The style of talking about self-knowledge here discussed assumes that the most pervasive false construction of the self is an ego around whose specific satisfactions the world is to be structured. Hence: (i) this analysis is empty if it is not a tool for the questioning, by the disadvantaged as well as by the powerful themselves, of illusory (and thus oppressive) constructions of the world, (ii) if liberation is not to be a mere reversal of master–slave relationship, it must recognize what it is in human self-perception that generates and entrenches illusion and slavery, and (iii) liberation as overthrowing the bondage of the other’s (oppressive) desire remains determined by that desire so long as it remains primarily negative and does not move on to address the ques-

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...tion of how we might now imagine shared satisfactions. In other words, victimage is a dangerous rhetorical instrument, if it means that a language of primitive innocence violated is allowed to distract attention from the vulnerability of all historical schemes of self-presentation, particular and corporate, to the seductions of self-finalizing, closure to criticism. The recovery of an oppressed, victimized history is a profoundly necessary moment in so many enterprises of self-knowing—whether black history, workers’ history in Britain, or the individual and terrible histories of abused children. Isolated from any energy in asking how present reciprocities might be turned toward shared goods, how desire becomes more than desire for the end of the oppressor’s desire, the language of the victim can become sterile and collusive. The personal is not the political if it is stops at being a programme of negation and the reinstatement of an injured ego; and the political remains tribal if dominated by resentment. In establishing this, the project of a self-knowledge that emphasizes contingency and the non-finality of our ‘constructions’ of self-hood may have its place, even when all allowances have been made for the danger of this language in its turn.

Two concluding reflections. The first has to do with the more strictly philosophical import of all this—and, less directly, with the popular contemporary rhetoric of self-discovery. If we were to ask, ‘How might we “test” for self-knowledge in ourselves or others?’ it looks as if the answer might lie in trying to deal with questions like, ‘Is there a pattern of behaviour here suggesting an unwillingness to learn or to be enlarged?’ or ‘Is there an obsessive quality to acts of self-presentation (in speech especially) that would indicate a fixed and defended image of needs that must be met for this self to sustain its position or power? or ‘Is there a refusal to deal verbally or imaginatively with the limits of power—ultimately with mortality?’ In other words, we do not look first for acquaintance with any particular vocabulary of ‘self-analysis’ (we don’t test for information). This may be a rather banal observation, so philosophically obvious as not to need saying; but in a culture where self-help books about self-knowledge, not least of a religious tinge, abound, we may well need reminding that a person may be possessed of a fluent vocabulary, well able to plot him- or herself on the charts of temperament and attract and to retell their biography in the idiom of fashionable psychobabble; and yet continue to act in a way that seems to deny the recognition of mortality and the necessary ironies that go with it. And in so far as the present vogue for a religious rhetoric of self-awareness relies heavily on this kind of technology of rescription, it is indeed at odds with what the Christian spiritual tradition (and others) has meant by self-knowing. This is, of course, perfectly compatible with saying that, when we recognize a crisis of truthfulness, the power...
of our habitual self-deceits, there is a place for theories of trauma, repression, the characteristic patterns of personality type or whatever, in unblocking certain channels and diagnosing the scale of our defensiveness; all this (a good servant and a bad master) has its role in becoming reacquainted with our contingency, even if it cannot deliver everything. The religious believer and the analytical or therapeutic theorist, however, will have different things to say about what more than theory is required.

And last when is the injunction, ‘Know thyself’ likely to be uttered, and who has the authority to utter it? When it can be shown that my actions are at odds with what might be expected of an agent both reasoning and mortal. When King Lear’s daughters agree, ‘He hath ever but slenderly known himself’, they are pointing to the tension which his behaviour exhibits between verbal recognition of mortality and the obsessive clinging to the image of a royal self. Yet their own frightening egotisms disqualify them from having the right to execute judgment on his self-deceit. His eyes are opened in two ways: by the naked madman on the heath and by Cordelia; by Poor Tom to mortality and impotence, by Cordelia to the need of love. Who or what can command us to know ourselves? The dispossessed life—whether Tom’s utter lack of standing and pride (itself in the play, of course, a strategy of dispossession on the part of Edgar), Cordelia’s abnegation of revenge (‘No cause, no cause!’). The injunction is there for us in the way in which the holy life interrupts our habitual constructions (an echo of Kierkegaard’s Philosophical Fragments here) by making for me in the world the room I thought I had to conquer and possess.

References


13 On Lear as a text about knowledge and self-knowledge, about the knowledge we need and the knowledge (of mastery, of information) that must be foregone in the process of moral maturation, even salvation, see the brilliant essay of Stanley Cavell, ‘The Avoidance of Love: a Reading of King Lear’, in Must We Mean What We Say? (Cambridge 1976), pp. 267-353. My debt to this and other works of Cavell will be evident.