

Can We Really Know Ourselves?

"This above all: To thine own self be true." – Polonius (From [Hamlet](#))

"Every man has forgotten who he is. One may understand the cosmos, but never the ego; the self is more distant than any star. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God; but thou shalt not know thyself." – G. K. Chesterton

About 10 days ago on this very site, in an article on "[The 'Morality' of Modern Education](#)," I quoted Polonius' famous advice to his son that, above all else, he should be true to his "own self". I stated that such a maxim "serves as the motto for all modern secularized and relativized education." Objecting to this assertion on my part, someone commented that Polonius' words were merely a reiteration of the ancient Greek aphorism to "know thyself," which was seen by Plato, amongst others, as being the beginning of wisdom.

Time and space do not afford us the opportunity to discuss what exactly the Greek sages meant by "know thyself," and, as invigorating as such a discussion would no doubt be, I'm more interested, at present, in illustrating that Polonius was indeed a relativist and that his advice to his son was foolish. Furthermore, I wish to show that we cannot "know ourselves" by pursuing the path that Polonius prescribes.

First, we need to see Polonius within the context of his character, as painted by Shakespeare. He is a fool and a rogue, and, more to our present point, is a spymaster, a man who plies his trade through treachery and deception. In short, he does not deal in truth but in falsehood and betrayal. His advice to his son, of which the above line is plucked, is full of pragmatic precepts concerning how to get on in the world but is completely devoid of anything that might be called

moral virtue.

There is no mention of the love of God or neighbor, the first being apparently irrelevant and the second being someone to be used for our own self-serving purposes and not someone to we are commanded to love self-sacrificially. To see anything Polonius says as signifying true wisdom is akin to seeing the nihilistic words of Macbeth at the culmination of his treacherous, murderous and self-destructive life as signifying the wisdom of nihilism. If Shakespeare puts a maxim into the mouth of a serial killer, we should think very carefully about ascribing the words of the blood-soaked villain as signifying the beliefs of the playwright. Similarly when a dealer in deception and lies, such as Polonius, lectures his son about "truth," we should think twice before ascribing any authentic truth to his precepts.

I would argue, therefore, that Shakespeare is showing us that prideful souls cannot truly know themselves. In making themselves gods of their own egocentric cosmos, placing their "own self" above all else and seeking only to be "true" to themselves, they are blinding themselves to the reality of which they are a part. I would argue further that Shakespeare, in showing us the relativism of Polonius and its destructive consequences within the play, is reflecting the truth that Chesterton would elucidate three centuries later.

Self-centeredness, or egocentrism, or what the theologians call pride, blinds us to reality. It's only selflessness, or what theologians call humility, which opens us to the goodness, truth and beauty which is outside ourselves. Chesterton is right. We can understand the cosmos but never the ego. The egocentric self is more distant than any star. It cannot be reached or fathomed, not least because its "truths" are self-deceptive lies.

If we wish to know ourselves, we need love, which is only possible if we give ourselves sacrificially to the beloved.

Love and the ego are incompatible.

If we wish to know ourselves, we need truth, which can only be gained by kneeling before the objective reality outside self-centered subjectivism, however painful such truths might be. Truth and the ego are incompatible.

If we wish to know ourselves, we need to see beauty, which is only perceptible to those humble souls whose eyes are opened in gratitude to the wonders of the cosmos. Beauty and the ego are incompatible.

Can we know ourselves? Yes, but only if we spend less time looking in the mirror and more time seeing the miraculous wonders which surround us.