

Epilogue

Reflections on the Value of Self-Knowledge for Self-Cultivation¹

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The theme of self-cultivation closely relates to the theme of self-knowledge, a topic which has recently engaged many analytical philosophers. In these concluding remarks, we will discuss the connection of self-cultivation to self-knowledge, focusing especially on substantial self-knowledge: knowledge of such things as one's own values, character traits, and what makes one happy. Substantial self-knowledge is an important theme in ancient philosophy, and in the work of later figures such as Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Foucault. The main aim will be to clarify the relationship, if indeed there is one, between substantial self-knowledge and what the authors in this volume refer to as self-cultivation.

In *Self-Knowledge for Humans* (2014), Cassam argues that although contemporary philosophers often focus on what could be called 'trivial' self-knowledge (such as access to my current mental states, or the question of how I *know* whether I'm wearing socks), it is also possible to construct an account of 'substantial' self-knowledge which is philosophically interesting. When various contributors to this volume claim that self-knowledge is an important requirement for self-cultivation, they interpret self-knowledge as *substantial* self-knowledge, i.e. knowledge of one's own values, character traits, and what makes one happy, rather than the relatively mundane claims regarding my mental states. We believe these authors are right to regard substantial self-knowledge as meriting serious philosophical attention. The neglect of substantial self-knowledge in contemporary philosophy should therefore be deplored, and we should ask: how did this sad state of affairs come about? This question will be revisited at the end of this epilogue.

Understanding the connection between self-cultivation and self-knowledge requires us to address three clusters of questions:

1. What is self-cultivation? What is its point or purpose?
2. In what sense can we be said to *cultivate* the self? How can we do this?
3. What kind of self-knowledge—if any—does self-cultivation require?

Understanding the connection of self-knowledge to self-cultivation requires that we first directly address the notion of self-cultivation that features in

these questions. Ansell-Pearson gives a clear account of self-cultivation, which seems to fit well with the way the term is used in other chapters of this volume:

I take it that the basic principle of the school of self-cultivation is not to discover one's inner and perhaps hidden true and authentic self, but rather to become and fashion a self, one that is equal to the events that befall one in a life. This is what Foucault calls 'care of the self' and which he takes over from Socrates and the Stoic likes of Epictetus.

(Ansell-Pearson 2015)

On this view, substantial self-knowledge is necessarily bound up with the task of self-cultivation. As Ure writes in this volume the task is 'to reclaim self-cultivation as central to philosophy conceived as an art of living' (Chapter 5); similarly, in Ansell-Pearson's chapter we read self-cultivation concerns 'the task of giving style to one's character' (Chapter 4). More will be said about the notion of self-cultivation as follows, but we're primarily interested in the idea of tying self-knowledge to self-cultivation as characterised by Ansell-Pearson, Ure, and several of the other contributors to this volume.

Starting with the first question, the aforementioned authors concur that self-cultivation is, first and foremost, not so much about *knowing* the self as about *fashioning* the self. Self-constitution rather than self-discovery is the central aim, and the emphasis in this account is on the *practical* rather than the *theoretical* dimension of the project of self-cultivation. For example, when discussing the late Foucault's work on this theme, Sellars writes that 'Foucault claimed that [practices of self-cultivation] were not aimed at the recovery of some hidden, deeper truth within the subject but, rather, were part of a process designed to transform the self' (Chapter 1). Self-cultivation, therefore, isn't primarily about *knowing* oneself, but *preparing* oneself to negotiate the various challenges and demands of life. It is a kind of self-training whose point or purpose is care of the self. As Ansell-Pearson puts it, for the ancients, 'philosophy is not simply about knowledge but about living a certain kind of life and being a certain kind of subject. Knowledge is pursued to the extent that it aids this mode of life and taking care of self' (Ansell-Pearson 2015). Far from being an exercise in 'moral dandyism', then, self-cultivation is similar to how we cultivate ourselves morally in the tradition on which this volume focuses, even though the various chapters make clear that what is at stake is broader than our moral concerns.

Turning to the second question, central to the idea of self-cultivation is that it involves a set of 'spiritual exercises' whose aim is to enable us to master ourselves and make us better able to cope with events over which we have little or no control. As Mitcheson makes clear in her chapter, the aim of these practices is 'the cultivation of a relationship of the self to the self in terms of self-mastery' (Chapter 7). *Coping* rather than *transcendence*

is the aim: the key to living well is to learn to cope with the world as it is without relying on belief in the after-life or some other form of metaphysical transcendence. As Sellars' puts it, 'practices aimed at self-transformation' (Chapter 1), include attending to the present moment, memorizing key principles, and the 'premeditation of death and of evils'. Their aim is to 'make happiness available to all, within this world, which is not then opposed to any superior world'. What is on offer, then, is what Ansell-Pearson describes as a 'genuine release from a great deal of human unhappiness', which primarily involves practical exercises that are concerned with bringing about this state (Ansell-Pearson 2015).

Now that we have summarised the conception of self-cultivation with which at least some of the authors in this volume are working, we are ready to tackle the third question. But before doing this we should make some remarks about what makes self-knowledge valuable, because this will shed light on the activities and practices of self-cultivation itself. It is clear that many of us tend to think of self-knowledge, and in particular substantial self-knowledge, as worth having, pursuing, and even paying for (for example, in the psychoanalytic or self-help industries). Nevertheless, the view defended here is the view that the value of self-knowledge is extrinsic rather than intrinsic, by which we mean that self-knowledge is not valuable for its own sake, without reference to anything else. It is only valuable to the extent that it promotes other things we value. This is what we could call a 'low road' account, that is, to say that self-knowledge is valuable because it promotes well-being: by and large, having self-knowledge makes one's life go better than not having it. This contrasts with what one could call 'high road' accounts that explain the value of self-knowledge by reference to abstract, high-sounding ideals such as unity and authenticity (Cassam 2014: 211–212). In line with Brunning's conclusion, it makes most sense to take the low road given the dubious value of such high ideals and because it is doubtful that a life that is low on substantial self-knowledge could not be authentic (Chapter 10, this volume).

Perhaps this distinguishes Cassam's position in *Self-Knowledge for Humans* from the other contributions, insofar as at least some of them appear to suggest that self-cultivation, and the self-knowledge upon which we view it as grounded, is intrinsically valuable. These authors would surely question whether worries over the wisdom of high road arguments would apply to explanations of the value of self-knowledge by reference to 'the values and virtues of self-cultivation'. In other words: suppose one explains the value of self-knowledge by reference to its role in self-cultivation, and one thinks of this as a 'high road' story about the value of self-knowledge. Would one want to object to this story in the same way that we object to other high road explanations of the value of self-knowledge? If not, then one should concede that there is nothing wrong with high road explanations *per se*, even if they are objectionable for the reason Cassam offers in *Self-Knowledge for Humans*.

We can make a couple of observations about the story so far. Suppose, as many of the contributors to this volume seem to think, that it turns out that self-knowledge is somehow implicated in self-cultivation, and derives its value from the value of self-cultivation. But self-cultivation is worthwhile because it is necessary for activities that promote well-being, insofar as it is about ‘making happiness available to all’. In that case, it’s hard to avoid thinking that the value of self-knowledge derives, at least in part, from its happiness-enabling role. If this is right, then if someone were to ask whether the objections to high road explanations of the value of self-knowledge also apply to self-cultivation based accounts, the answer is simple: the objections do not apply to such accounts because what they are in fact offering when they discuss the role of self-knowledge in relation to self-cultivation and self-care is a ‘low road’ rather than a ‘high road’ explanation. Self-knowledge matters because self-cultivation matters, and self-cultivation matters because it promotes happiness or well-being.

No doubt there is much more to be said about all this, but we need to move on to what appears to be the key question for present purposes, and that is question 3 concerning the link—if any—between self-knowledge and self-cultivation. We can see three views, and we can find traces of all three in the articles in this volume:

The Identity View: self-knowledge is self-cultivation: to know yourself is to cultivate yourself, and this is the point of what Ansell-Pearson describes as the ‘ancient teaching on self-knowledge as self-cultivation’ (Ansell-Pearson 2015).

The Linking View: self-knowledge and self-cultivation are different things but linked in the following way: substantial self-knowledge is necessary for self-cultivation, and makes self-cultivation possible. The reverse may or may not be true.

The Replacement View: self-knowledge and self-cultivation are different things, neither requires the other, and philosophy should concern itself with self-cultivation *rather than* self-knowledge.

Of these three views, the first is hardest to understand. It seems clear how one might think that fashioning or cultivating a self enables one to know oneself, and that self-knowledge is, in this sense, active and not purely theoretical. This would be to represent self-knowledge as a kind of ‘maker’s knowledge’, and, although this is at odds with the account of how one can know oneself given in *Self-Knowledge for Humans*, the thesis is at least understandable. Nevertheless, it’s not clear how self-knowledge in this sense can actually *be* self-cultivation. Self-cultivation, in the sense it is used in this volume, is all about preparing oneself to face the challenges that life throws up, and while the exercises by means of which the self fashions itself might conceivably *presuppose* self-knowledge, it is unclear how this can *amount to* or *constitute* self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is a *cognitive* achievement,

but fashioning a self that is equal to the events that befall one in one's life does not seem to be a cognitive achievement.

The idea that self-cultivation presupposes self-knowledge points to the Linking View, which seems to be the most promising positive account of the relationship between self-knowledge and self-cultivation. Consider, for example, knowledge of what lies in our power and knowledge of the sources of our own unhappiness. This would rightly be described as forms of *substantial* self-knowledge, and it's not implausible that a person who has these and other forms of substantial self-knowledge is better equipped to cope with the stresses and strains of life than a person who is self-ignorant in these respects. For example, taking care of yourself means removing sources of discontent from your life, and how can you set about doing this if you don't know what those sources of discontent are? Imagine being someone who finds it a ghastly ordeal to give talks and answer questions in public. Assuming, not uncontroversially, that your aversion to giving talks is unalterable, concerns pertaining to one's well-being in these circumstances might be thought to require taking steps to avoid giving talks as much as possible. However, you are more likely to avoid giving talks if you are willing and able to acknowledge to yourself your own aversion. To do that you need to *know* your aversion and that looks like a piece of non-trivial self-knowledge.

Although this line of thinking has some plausibility, it faces the objection that it over-intellectualises self-care and self-cultivation. The person who hates giving talks might take steps to avoid giving talks, and thereby remove one source of unhappiness in his life, just because giving talks does in fact make him miserable. If his aversion to giving talks causes him to avoid giving talks, then he has in this sense taken care of himself regardless of whether he has a reflective understanding of his own aversion. Maybe he just finds himself declining invitations but confabulates his reasons for doing so. So the question is this: why must you *know* what makes you unhappy in order for you to avoid what makes you unhappy? Knowing that giving talks makes you unhappy is an intellectual achievement that requires reflection on the sources of your own unhappiness. But why think that such reflection is strictly necessary for the purposes of self-cultivation and activities that promote well-being? No doubt you cannot be said to be avoiding giving talks *with the aim* of removing a source of discontent from your life unless you realise that giving talks *is* a source of discontent, but it's not obvious that self-cultivation and activities that promote well-being must be reflective in this sense.

If this is right then the next part of this story needs to address whether the notion of self-cultivation at work in this volume endorses the Linking View and, if so, is that because its conception of self-cultivation is more reflective than the one we've just sketched? Imagine a person who does some or all of the spiritual exercises authors like Sellars, Ure, and Sharpe describe in this volume, and who is thereby better able to cope with the life events that befall him or her. It would be possible to take the view that this is not

self-cultivation in the sense of the Linking View unless the exercises are reflectively grounded. For them to be reflectively grounded is for them to be undertaken with a reflective understanding of their role. You do not just do the spiritual exercises without any understanding of their point, any more than people typically do specific physical exercises without any understanding of their point. Self-protection is the point of the spiritual exercises, and you wouldn't be able to understand their self-protective role without self-knowledge. It is because you *know* the things that make you unhappy that you take steps to avoid them, like the reluctant speaker. Again, the parallel with physical exercise is instructive: you do not exercise because being physically inert makes you put on weight but because you know, or at least believe, that being physically inert makes you put on weight.

On this conception, self-cultivation does indeed require self-knowledge, just as the Linking View says, but this should come as no surprise because self-knowledge has been built into self-cultivation. The reflective self-cultivation that is now at issue is *knowing* self-cultivation, and the necessary conditions of knowing self-cultivation include substantial self-knowledge. Nevertheless, this is in no way a threat to the position taken up in *Self-Knowledge for Humans* since, as indicated above, this defence of the value of self-knowledge is in my terms a 'low road' defence, and none the worse for that: self-knowledge is valuable because it promotes well-being. Perhaps *Self-Knowledge for Humans* says too little about exactly *how* self-knowledge promotes well-being, and the contributions to this volume could deepen its account on this point: well-being requires activities that promote it, such activities require self-cultivation, which in turn requires self-knowledge. The worry about all of this is that one can have well-being without activities intended to promote it or, at any rate, without the kind of activities that depend on reflective self-cultivation. Even so, self-knowledge might still be thought to *promote* well-being by enabling more reflective varieties of self-cultivation and self-care than would otherwise be possible.

Although there are traces of the Linking View in the discussion of many of the contributors, it could be that what they actually have in mind is much more radical, namely, the Replacement View. This view is suggested by the passage we quoted from Ansell-Pearson earlier in which he says that the basic principle of the school of self-cultivation is *not* to discover one's inner and perhaps hidden true self but *rather* to fashion a self that is equal to the events that befall one in a life. According to the Replacement View, self-cultivation should replace self-knowledge as our central concern as philosophers, which means conceiving of philosophy as a 'way of life' rather than 'an abstract, theoretical discipline'. Philosophy embodies wisdom but its role is therapeutic and the wisdom it embodies is practical rather than theoretical. As Nussbaum put it, on this view philosophy is not conceived of as 'a detached intellectual technique dedicated to the display of cleverness but as an immersed and worldly art of grappling with human misery' (Nussbaum 2009: 4). It makes us *be* in a different way, and if done well

offers a way of ‘grappling with human misery’, thereby releasing us from a great deal of human unhappiness. By concentrating on self-knowledge rather than self-cultivation, so the argument goes, philosophy has lost sight of its therapeutic role.

There are clearly attractions of the Replacement View but three issues speak against it. The first is that this view cannot jettison self-knowledge if, as the Linking View claims, self-cultivation presupposes self-knowledge, that is, if recognition of our own foibles and limitations plays a key role in preparing us to meet the challenges of life. So instead of talking about a concern with self-cultivation *replacing* a concern with self-knowledge perhaps it would be better to think in terms of a shift in emphasis. Self-knowledge remains of philosophical interest but only in the service of self-cultivation. Self-knowledge is to be studied and pursued not for its own sake but rather to the extent that it helps us to live a certain kind of life and to take care of ourselves. This seems to be what, for example, Ansell-Pearson has in mind when he says that he favours a certain conception of the philosophy of self-knowledge in which ‘it is bound up with the task(s) of self-cultivation’ (Ansell-Pearson 2015).

The second reservation concerns the ability of philosophy to help us live more contented lives and offer a genuine release from human unhappiness. Can philosophy really do that? Is there any evidence that philosophy promotes the happiness or well-being of those who do it, let alone the happiness or well-being of anyone else? This is doubtful. In fact, one could easily argue that the reverse is true and that philosophical reflection is singularly ill-equipped to deliver the benefits promised by the ancients. Of course, this could be a reflection of the way philosophy is done today but we cannot rule out the possibility that we will need to look elsewhere if self-care is our concern. This brings us to the final reservation, which is that if we take the Replacement View seriously then it is not clear why we wouldn’t be better off reading self-help books than philosophical texts. For example, the advice not to worry about what does not reside in one’s own control, which is one of ‘spiritual exercises’ mentioned by Sellars (Chapter 1), Sharpe (Chapter 6), and Mitcheson (Chapter 7) seems fair enough but there does not seem anything particularly *philosophical* about it. Perhaps this worry will seem less serious once one gives up the idea that philosophy is an abstract theoretical discipline, but we find this idea harder to give up than, for example, Nussbaum does.

Where does this leave the earlier idea that philosophers of self-knowledge should have more to say about substantial self-knowledge? The key questions about substantial self-knowledge are abstract and theoretical questions. For example, what are the means by which substantial self-knowledge is possible and what are the obstacles to its acquisition? As argued in *Self-Knowledge for Humans*, the answers to these questions are far from obvious once one abandons the crude behaviourist models associated with substantial self-knowledge. Substantial self-knowledge matters in a practical or

even a moral sense, but the extent to which this is so is a philosophical question that calls for empirically informed reflection rather than a distinctive mode of being or way of living. So perhaps the difference between the contributors' position and the one defended in *Self-Knowledge for Humans* is this: the latter sees *having* substantial self-knowledge as potentially beneficial, but wants to distinguish sharply the possibly genuine benefits of having substantial self-knowledge from the possibly illusory benefits of *philosophising* about self-knowledge. For many of the contributors there is no such separation, and the philosophy of self-knowledge has the potential to do as much for human well-being as self-knowledge itself. This is where they part company with *Self-Knowledge for Humans*. But on one point they are all in agreement: the recent philosophical obsession with trivial self-knowledge, though in a way understandable on its own terms, perfectly illustrates the narrowness of focus that blights so much contemporary philosophical writing.

Note

- 1 This article is based on a presentation by Quassim Cassam at a symposium on *Self-knowledge for Humans* (Cassam 2014) held with Keith Ansell Pearson at the University of Warwick in 2015. Cassam and the editors have revised this presentation to respond to the articles in this volume. Citations of Ansell-Pearson's unpublished contributions to this symposium will be referred to as 'Ansell Pearson 2015'.

References

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