V.—DISCUSSIONS.

SELF-KNOWLEDGE.

THE term self-sacrifice, as used by Green¹ in his argument against the Hedonists, contains an ambiguity which even he, strange to say, does not sufficiently observe, namely that the 'self' which is sacrificed is capable of being understood, according to the predisposition of the reader, in the higher or the lower sense. Of course what Green meant was the sacrifice of individualistic inclination for the sake of personal good, but in general the 'self' of which he writes is somewhat very different from 'inclination.' Again when defining Personality (which he does with avowed diffidence) as 'the quality in a subject of being consciously an object to itself' he involves himself in an analogous difficulty. His hesitation to offer this or any definition of self arose no doubt from his perceiving that the true self cannot be object. Dr Martineau, too, in his controversial chapter on Positivism and its prophet, A. Comte, shows but a feeble apprehension of the difficulty with which one has to contend when asserting the fact of self-knowledge. He asks², "Are we not continually *telling* our own thoughts and feelings and purposes? Then is it not ridiculous to assert that we *cannot know them*? And if we know them, it is assuredly not by outer testimony or any use of eyesight that we discern them, but by the inner vision of reflection. What then is the matter with this sort of apprehension? Are they not real *facts* that it shews us? &c. &c."

Arguing in this strain he seems to ignore the fundamental difference between self-knowledge and all other knowledge. The 'facts' referred to are 'real' enough, but they are facts of particular experience, what is vulgarly called 'inner' experience. Being facts of ordinary knowledge, objective events in time, they are not facts of self-knowledge. Knowledge of self is no more involved in the perception of pain or purpose than in the observation of a star. In short Dr Martineau attempts the impossible when he attempts the proof of self-knowledge by means of psychology. Plato³ and Aristotle had already distinguished various meanings of self;

¹ *Prolegomena to Ethics.*

² *Types of Ethical Theory*, II p. 6.

³ *Vide infra.*

and Aristotle¹ had pointed out the popular error of supposing that the morally unselfish man is one who cares nothing for himself. The man who 'sacrifices himself' in a noble cause is, according to Aristotle, in the highest and truest sense *φίλαυτος*: he acts for the sake of that in him which is best, that which is most himself; but his 'selfishness' is a blessing to his fellow men.

It is interesting to examine how the conception of self became progressively defined, and refined, in European philosophy. This process seems to have virtually begun with the enunciation of the famous *γνῶθι σεαυτόν*; and accordingly it is worth while to trace the history and influence of the precept from the earliest records to St Augustine, from him to Descartes, and on to Kant and his successors. The following pages contain a summary of the information we derive from Plato as to the origin and meaning of these two words which, rightly understood, contain the germ of critical philosophy.

Of all moral precepts *KNOW THYSELF* is perhaps the most remarkable for a twofold and somewhat paradoxical reason. None has more deeply impressed the imagination, while none has been understood, or misunderstood, in a greater variety of ways. In moral and theoretical philosophy it would appear to have been the root of controversy and disappointment. A cynic might compare it to an apple of discord divinely thrown among thinking men: others might liken it to a prism which decomposes the seeming-simple light of common sense, but into rays for whose re-composition thinkers have ever found themselves strangely unprovided. From the time when, according to the tradition, this precept was first issued by Apollo, and engraved above the portals of his temple at Delphi, to the present time, it has been a sort of moral shibboleth. Received at first with reverence by all, and better known to the ancient Hellenic world than the inscription on St Peter's is known to Christendom, it was long venerated as worthy of its divine authorship. It was adopted by Socrates as the foundation of his practical creed; it furnished Seneca with consolation in the presence of death; it became to St Augustine a strong defence against scepticism: it continued to be, in mediaeval times, a theme on which moralists dwelt with seeming profit and real delight; and it was finally rejected by Hume and Comte, and contemptuously dismissed, as impracticable, by Mr Carlyle. Now it is hard to conclude that a precept which has for so many centuries fascinated the intelligence or imagination is itself unintelligible and commands what is impossible.

For the Hellenes it appears to have originated in the worship of Apollo. At all events its origin was distinctly religious. We read² in the *Protagoras* that the seven sages, Thales, Pittacus, Bias, Solon, Cleobulus, Myson, and Chilon, customarily expressing themselves in pregnant apophthegms, assembled with one consent at Delphi, and dedicated to Apollo in his temple the firstfruits of

¹ *Nic. Ethics*, IX. viii.

² Plato, *Protagoras*, 343.

their wisdom ; inscribing there two maxims 'now on the lips of all men,' viz. 'know thyself,' and 'nothing in excess.' In the *Charmides*¹ we have another reference to the tradition which ascribed the maxim to some of the Sages. But this tradition had, even for Socrates and Plato, no assured foundation : it had gained favour with the 'rationalists' of the time, but failed to displace the common belief that 'know thyself' was originally uttered or inspired by the god.

Stobaeus² aims at collecting the principal sources of information respecting the Delphic precept. This author quotes, among other writers, Porphyrius, whose words may be freely rendered as follows : "Whether Phemonœ or Phanothea, the daughter of Delphus, enounced this oracle : whether it be the dedicated offering of the Sages, or we must accept the statement of Clearchus that, when Chilo enquired of the god—what was best for man to learn ? the Pythian returned 'know thyself' as his answer ; or whether (as Aristotle says) the maxim stood inscribed in the temple before Chilon's time : whoever was its author—for this is matter of dispute—unquestionably its utterance was due either to the god himself or to his inspiration." From this we gather that all was uncertainty as to the origin of the celebrated saying. If Plato and his contemporaries had, as they really had, lost the clue to its source, it was not likely that their successors should be in this respect better off. Accordingly we must be content with what little knowledge of its origin we gain from the Platonic dialogues. But we know from them, and from a host of witnesses, one thing for certain, that this piece of counsel, know thyself, stood conspicuously engraven over the entrance of Apollo's temple at Delphi.

As regards its interpretation, it was accepted, apparently, at first in a purely ethical signification. Heraclitus, the earliest Greek philosopher whose remains contain any allusion to it, seems to have given it a moral import. In fragment 106 (Bywater) he says : "It behoves all men to know themselves and (I thereby) to exercise self-control." Thus γνῶθι σεαυτόν was for Heraclitus, as afterwards for Socrates, equivalent to σωφρόνεια.

Its influence upon philosophy, however, did not become in any degree marked, until it awakened the reflection of Socrates. For his views of its meaning we must look to Xenophon and Plato.

In Xenophon³, Croesus tells how he had consulted Apollo at Delphi as to his family, and received advice from the oracle. He proceeds with the story thus :—"Sons were born to me, and therein Apollo's word was not false ; but nought did these sons profit me. For one was dumb, and the other was cut off by death in the prime of manhood. Whereupon I sent again to ask the oracle what I should do to enable me to pass the remnant of my days most happily. He replied :—

'Know thyself, Croesus ; then happy wilt thou live and die.'

¹ 164, d.

² *Flor.* XXI. 26.

³ *Cyropaedia*, VII. 20—25.

"I rejoiced at hearing this, for I thought surely Apollo offers me happiness on the easiest terms. Other men, indeed, one might or might not know : but each must know himself." Croesus then goes on to describe how far he was mistaken, and the disasters which in consequence befel him. He engaged with enemies for whom he believed himself a match, because he did not really, as he had imagined, know himself ; and the result was his defeat and captivity. He concludes by saying : " Now at length I do know myself, and have been righteously punished for the self-ignorance whereof in former time I was guilty." Thus for Croesus here, i.e. for Xenophon, to 'know oneself' meant 'to know how much, or little, one was able to do,' 'to know one's own power.' That in this Xenophon represents the teaching of Socrates is probable, and the more so because in the *Memorabilia* he brings Socrates himself before the reader as thus interpreting the Delphic maxim. Conversing with Euthydemus, Socrates is there made to enquire if the latter had ever gone to Delphi and seen, written over the temple-gates, the two words 'know thyself,' and if so, whether he had considered them seriously, and tried to understand them. Euthydemus replies that he had of course seen the words there, but had made no great effort to understand them, their meaning having seemed so manifest as to demand no such effort for its discernment. "If I did not know myself," he says, "what on earth should I know?" Socrates, as usual with him making the seeming-easy appear difficult, goes on to show that the fact is not as Euthydemus supposed ; until the latter at length confesses that the maxim is one which demands the most serious attention, not only because of its importance but of its intrinsic difficulty. He asks Socrates to explain how he must begin to know himself, and is told that the maxim enjoins the knowledge of one's powers, as well as the discrimination between good and evil. Thus the interpretation given to it by Croesus is adopted and amplified. Here we in all probability have before us the interpretation placed upon 'know thyself' by the historical Socrates. But the Platonic Socrates pushed his enquiries deeper. For while the ethical bearing of the maxim is never quite lost sight of, it is connected with, or made to rest upon, a metaphysical exposition.

The first passage of Plato to which I shall refer for his view of the meaning of the oracle is in the *Philebus*¹, where Socrates declares unhappiness to be due to self-ignorance, 'the state antagonistic to that prescribed for men by the Delphic inscription.' We here learn that all who are ignorant of themselves exhibit this ignorance in one or other of three ways, i.e. as regards their minds, their bodies, or their estates. It is in the first respect that most men fail ; ignorance of their minds being characteristic of the multitude, who for that reason are easily entangled in the meshes of false philosophy. 'This condition is one of utter wretchedness.'

¹ iv. 2.² p. 48.

Next I return to the *Charmides*¹, where Critias insists on the urgent necessity of self-knowledge, as the essential feature, or factor, of self-control. "This," he says, "is what the god at Delphi enjoins upon his worshippers in the words 'know thyself'; χαῖρε, the ordinary salutation which bids 'rejoice,' not being the best, as the god well knows, and shows by this inscription. Different in form as the two expressions—'have self-knowledge,' and 'have self-control'—are, still in substance they are identical." At this point Socrates takes him up and asks, what is the good of self-control, or temperance, thus understood? And first, what is meant by the knowledge of self? Temperance or self-control is, he admits, a good thing: but he doubts whether if regarded as equivalent to self-knowledge it would be of any service to us; and raises the question, to begin with, how self-knowledge is possible. Thus we find initiated the long debate continued down to our own day over these words and their meaning. In the dialogue before us the conclusion at which Socrates arrives in his argument against Critias is that self-knowledge is, if possible, unique and utterly without analogy. He does not pronounce dogmatically that it is impossible. His respect for Apollo prevents him from going so far. But he unhesitatingly declares his complete inability to see *how* it is possible. As a corollary (with which we are less concerned), he shows that the interpretation of temperance as identical with self-knowledge would have the effect of rendering this virtue inconceivable, or useless.

He argues as follows:—The sciences and arts are not forms of self-knowledge. No form of knowledge with which we are acquainted, or which is of any profit, is of this sort. Each science or art is directed to an object, to be known or produced, quite different from itself. If self-control be a form of knowledge comparable with any of these, it must be knowledge, not of *self*, but of somewhat else. Critias admits that it is indeed peculiar, but asserts that, while all other forms of knowledge refer to objects distinct from self, this (σωφροσύνη) refers to self directly. He further says that self-knowledge involves all other branches of knowledge².

Socrates, having gained some dialectical advantages over Critias on side-issues, resumes the main question, and again calls attention to this strange peculiarity of self-control as identified with self-knowledge, viz. that while all other forms of knowing have objects distinct from self, this alone is directed upon self. Compare the exercise of the perceptions of sense. When one sees, he sees some colour, not his own seeing, which, in fact, he cannot see at all. When one hears, he hears a sound of some kind; his hearing does not hear itself; and so with the other special forms of sense-perception. None is object to itself. The case is similar in desiring. Desire is directed to some form of pleasure or pleasurable

¹ 164, *seqq.*

² I desire to call attention to this remarkable statement, the importance of which will hereafter appear more fully.

activity, not to desiring itself, as its object. Fear is to be regarded in the same way. Of fear which fears no formidable object or event, but only fears itself, we can form no conception. In short, there is no such thing. Nor is there a form of opinion directed to itself, and to no object beyond itself. Yet, according to Critias, when we come to knowledge we find a form of this which is the knowledge of no fact, no truth or object, in particular, but is a knowledge of itself and of other knowledges. This, says Socrates, is astonishing. To find a parallel for it, we should be able to point to a faculty of seeing, which sees itself, and is therefore coloured; or to a faculty of hearing, which hears itself, and is therefore sonant, and so on.

Socrates will not declare self-knowledge impossible. He feels himself to be but a human being, and too weak to decide such a mighty issue. We notice a slight irony in his tone at this point. But he is resolved not to grant that self-control or temperance consists in self-knowledge until he can ascertain of what use it would be if so constituted. Accordingly he challenges Critias to prove 1st that self-knowledge is possible, 2nd that if it be identical with temperance, this virtue is of any service whatever. Needless to say, after this, that Socrates vanquishes his opponent; overwhelming him with arguments to show that knowledge which is merely of self is of all knowledge the emptiest, and is in fact no better than sheer ignorance. It is also as practically fruitless as speculatively hollow. Socrates has too much respect for the virtue of temperance or self-control to allow, for a moment, its identification with a hollow sham like self-knowledge.

Here we find some of the cardinal difficulties of the precept 'know thyself' pointed out by Plato with unsurpassable clearness and force. The investigation of its meaning, commenced in the interest of morality, is promptly extended to metaphysics. And in this dialogue we are taught that self-knowledge, strictly taken, involves a difficulty insurmountable by human, or at least by Socratic, intelligence.

Plato's attitude towards the question would seem to have somewhat changed, if we may trust the evidence of the first *Alcibiades*¹ where (as in the last passage) special prominence is given to the metaphysical, or rather psychological, bearings of the precept—'know thyself.' Starting from the expression to "take care of oneself," Socrates endeavours to sound the full meaning of this expression. And first, what is self? If one does not know this, how can one take care of himself? Or, if one tries to do so, without knowing what self is, may he not make some gravely disagreeable mistakes? To take care of ourselves rightly we must obey the Delphic maxim which commands us to know ourselves. Now what merely *belongs* to me is not myself. So with my clothes; and so, also, with my limbs and body. When one takes care of his clothes,

¹ 127 *seqq.*

or of his limbs and body, *e.g.* by gymnastics, he does not thereby take care of himself. Hereupon Alcibiades breaks in with the remark that sometimes he had supposed the Delphic injunction to be the easiest ever given, but that there had been moments in which it seemed to him most difficult. Both he and Socrates agree that obedience to it is indispensable if one is to rightly take care of oneself. Hence the maxim requires study. In the course of the succeeding discussion they agree that self is identical with mind, or soul. It is the first personal self, the I or You who converse together. I when I converse with Alcibiades address myself to himself—not to his clothes or body or other belongings. I address myself to his mind—his intelligence. It appearing plainly to Alcibiades as to Socrates that a man himself is distinct from his clothes &c. and from his body, the question is raised—What is this self? In the negative proposition, as to what self is not, they agree. But to this question of Socrates, asking for a positive definition of self, Alcibiades replies that he cannot answer. Socrates coming to his aid defines self as the agent who employs the body as instrument.

But how to *know* this self is the next question. Now it cannot be known directly, but it can be known indirectly. This Socrates explains and illustrates as follows. The eye cannot see itself directly, but may do so indirectly by looking into another eye, and beholding its own image reflected in the pupil of that other eye. In a way analogous to this the soul can know itself, *i.e.* not directly, indeed, but indirectly. It can look into another's soul, and there behold its own reflection. And as it is in the pupil (which to Plato was the seeing part—the part of the eye most immediately concerned in vision) of another's eye that one's own eye sees itself reflected: so it is in another's faculty of knowing and reasoning that we best discern the reflex of our true selves.

In this passage Plato has evidently not surmounted the grave difficulties expressed in the former, but merely evaded them, by substituting indirect for direct self-knowledge and contenting himself with the former. That he only evades in this way the difficulties he so clearly saw I need not stop to show. I am not now criticising Plato, but merely relating his attempts to construe the Delphic maxim, so as to render it first intelligible, and then practicable.

The above passages are those in which Plato officially addresses himself to the discussion of the precept. They virtually contain all—or at least the basis of all—that he has to say of its interpretation. Self is for him the soul: and soul expresses itself in the first personal pronoun—the I, by the thought, or energy of which a man distinguishes himself from other persons, and from all the world. That a man should know this self, in the obvious sense of the word 'know,' *i.e.* as object, is, Plato concludes, impossible. This conclusion appears in the *Charmides*. For though Socrates there seems to hesitate about pronouncing it, the effect he leaves upon

his hearers' minds is this. He saw that neither by introspection (as it is called) nor by any other form of observation can self—the true subject—be directly apprehended. All attempts at direct self-knowledge are doomed to disappointment. Negatively they are of use. In the effort to know himself one at least may determine what he is not. But positively such attempts lead only to the vain iteration—I am I. Consequently the god at Delphi could not (Plato reasoned) have meant 'know thyself' to be understood of direct knowledge—objective knowledge—of self. There remained only the indirect. Hence it is by knowing the selves of others that we best come to know ourselves. This admission of indirect self-knowledge is of the utmost importance. We shall not here enquire how, if it be impossible to know our very selves, it is possible to know the selves of other persons. But we may see in the admission—that indirect self-knowledge is the only valuable or feasible form of self-knowledge—a germ of thought which afterwards grew and flourished. For the avenue of speculation thus opened up by Plato is much wider than appears from the terms of the dialogue from which we have quoted. Man comes to know himself, not only by the study of other men—their thoughts or acts—but by all methods of study in which any objective truth is attainable. He attains self-knowledge in the highest possible degree when he comprehends the world as the revelation of a system of ideas, which are ultimately but phases of self. This doctrine was otherwise developed by Aristotle. It enters largely into his treatise *De Anima*, but finds its culmination in his *Metaphysics*. It is the legitimate outcome of a train of reflection (first on Plato's, then on Aristotle's part) which was originally started by an impulse derived from the Delphic maxim—know thyself. This doctrine we shall not here examine, but continue our review of the precept to which it owes so much. Consideration of the doctrine itself will require a fuller and more searching study of the writings of Plato and Aristotle. For with these authors it began in the history of philosophy: nor have any of their successors added in this direction much, except explicitness, to their speculations.

To prevent misconception of Plato's attitude we must observe that while (as we have seen) he dismisses as futile every attempt at direct self-knowledge, he is far from suggesting that self is a 'fiction.' The passages already referred to, as well as his writings generally, prove how earnest and deep was his assurance of the reality of the personal self. But the *Phaedo* particularly demonstrates this. Here he undertakes formally to establish the doctrine of immortality, *i.e.* to vindicate for the soul a reality not merely empirical but transcendent, and not merely after death, but before its connexion with the body has begun. And at the close of the dialogue a most interesting passage seems to have been introduced for the special purpose of showing that the soul which had been proved immortal is no other than the personal 'self' of each man. Fearing that a long discussion

occupied with the notion of a third-personal entity called Soul—*Ψυχὴ*—might, however formally conclusive, fail nevertheless to come home to the personal convictions of his auditors as something of nearest and dearest concern to each of them: and knowing the feeble, or misleading, effect of merely logical discourse, as well as of the associations connected with the words and idioms of common language: Plato appears to have devised and introduced the following dramatic episode for the very purpose of finally driving his conclusion in upon the hearts of his hearers, and correcting their lingering doubts and misconceptions. Crito has asked him how he wishes to be buried for he is now just about to drink the hemlock. Socrates replies thus:—"I cannot make Crito here see that I, who have been and am conversing with you all, am the veritable self of Socrates. He still thinks me identical with this body, which he will shortly behold a corpse; and this is why he has asked how he shall bury *me*. All the long discourse I have held with him and you to prove, that when I have drunk the hemlock I shall be no longer with you, but shall have gone to the happy abode of the blessed—all this discourse seems to him to have been but idle words, spoken in the idle wish to comfort myself and you. Give him then my best assurance that when I have died I shall be no longer here, but shall have departed; in order that he may bear my death with more composure, and may not, when he sees my body buried or consumed by fire, weep for *me*, as though *I* suffered this cruel treatment; or say—'I am now laying out Socrates,' or 'carrying Socrates forth to burial,' or 'heaping clay over Socrates in his grave.' For indeed Crito, my friend, I want you to lay to heart this truth, that the use of such incorrect terms is not only wrong, but engenders a peculiar evil in our souls. Be of good cheer, therefore; speak of burying my body, not me; and pray dispose of it in the way you think best, and most usual."

The incorrect use of terms here referred to is that which represents Socrates himself as identical with his body. This indeed is a use of terms common to all times and idioms. But that it was understood and its fallacy exposed by Plato, we learn from this quotation. The dramatic power and propriety of the scene from which it is taken is equalled only by the keen practical insight which thus makes Socrates finally and feelingly declare that the soul of which he has hitherto spoken is Crito, is Phaedo—is each friend in turn—the personal existence—the very self of every one of them.

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