

Self-Knowledge Key to Ethical Relationships

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As human beings we have the wonderful gift of being able to be conscious of ourselves. That is, we can reflect upon our own existence in an effort to be aware of who we are. It is a good idea to “take stock of our lives” and to consider our place and our actions and thoughts as we go about our daily tasks of relating to other humans.

Since we are social beings, who deal daily with moral issues, we need also to be conscious of our own individuality. In order to understand better how we relate to those around us, self-awareness can help us communicate more fully to our family, our friends, and our colleagues. The more we understand our own uniqueness, the more we can understand how and why others relate to us as they do. In ethical questions, it is important to be as clear as we can about our personal thoughts and convictions on moral issues. In fact, we should not offer ethical advice to others without first clarifying our personal convictions.

In this process each person will have her or his own story. If our picture of ourselves is fairly accurate it is likely that others will relate to us in more or less the way we expect and hope they will. If others surprise us or seem disappointed in us or are confused by us, this may indicate that we don't see ourselves as others do. Other people may be holding up a mirror of our lives that does not look familiar or consistent with our own self- image.

In early Greek philosophy, Socrates, and later, Plato, spoke of the wisdom of the old Delphi maxim, “know thyself”, before giving advice to others about what would be the correct course of ethical action. Another simpler interpretation of “know thyself” is that people should know their place, or their importance in society. They should learn to keep silent on important moral questions when they

might learn from those who are better informed. But either way we interpret, “know thyself”, it seems to be good advice.

When we criticize others for their ethical decisions, or lack of them, we first need to try to put ourselves in their place. To do that we ought to be informed about who the other person is and what motivated them to choose as they did in a certain situation. This is what we would hope others would do before judging us concerning our own decisions. The old adage of, “not judging others until we have walked a mile in their shoes”, comes to mind. But even then, we have to think carefully about what we might choose to do in that particular situation.

Are there times when we might, with a clear conscience, tell a white lie? Might we cross the street to avoid the awkwardness of passing by a beggar without offering assistance? When we experience a mediocre theatre performance would we stand up with the rest of the audience and join in a rousing round of applause for a performance when we were actually hoping for a quicker end to the program? Can we make accurate and fair judgments about the size of charitable contributions made by others without first knowing the financial situation of the person being solicited?

Before we judge the ethical behavior of those in our society we should reflect on what we would personally do in their situation. And if we are judging people outside our social group, perhaps even those from far away countries, and far away customs, accurate judgments will be harder to understand and to arrive at what is appropriate for their situations. Even then, do we know our own selves and how we would act in such unfamiliar surroundings?

In summary, before we judge others, try to understand ourselves. Test the accuracy of your self-evaluations by the manner in which others relate to you. In dealing with unfamiliar cultures be slow to judge and quick to forgive. Finally, be open to learning and changing your ethical judging of those who are not familiar to you.