

Recognizing When You Don't Know

Plato

[After being informed that the oracle at Delphi had stated that no one is wiser than Socrates, Socrates wonders how this can possibly be true.] “After puzzling about it for some time, I set myself at last with considerable reluctance to check the truth of it in the following way. I went to interview a man with a high reputation for wisdom, because I felt that here if anywhere I should succeed in disproving the oracle....”

“Well, I gave a thorough examination to this person...and in conversation with him I formed the impression that although in many people’s opinion, and especially in his own, he appeared to be wise, in fact he was not. Then when I began to try to show him that he only thought he was wise and was not really so, my efforts were resented both by him and by many of the other people present. However, I reflected as I walked away, Well, I am certainly wiser than this man. It is only too likely that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of, but he thinks that he knows something which he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate it seems that I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know.”

After this I went on to interview a man with an even greater reputation for wisdom, and I formed the same impression again, and here too I incurred the resentment of the man himself and a number of others.

From that time on I interviewed one person after another. After I had finished with the politicians I turned to the poets... I used to pick up what I thought were some of their most perfect works and question them closely about the meaning of what they had written, in the hope of incidentally enlarging my own knowledge. Well...it is hardly an exaggeration to say that any of the bystanders could have explained those poems better than their actual authors. ...And I also observed that the very fact that they were poets made them think that they had a perfect understanding of all other subjects, of which they were totally ignorant...

Last of all I turned to the skilled craftsmen. I knew quite well that I had practically no technical qualifications myself, and I was sure that I should find them full of impressive knowledge. In this I was not disappointed. They understood things which I did not, and to that extent they were wiser than I was. But, gentlemen, these professional experts seemed to share the same failing which I had noticed in the poets. I mean that on the strength of their technical proficiency they claimed a perfect understanding of every other subject, however important, and I felt that this error more than outweighed their positive wisdom. So I...asked myself whether I would rather be as I was--neither wise with their wisdom nor stupid with their stupidity--or possess both qualities as they did. I replied...that it was best for me to be as I was. (Plato, *Apology*)