

# Why Socrates was right; recounting the case for self-awareness

By Steve Parker

“Know thyself” said Socrates. Regardless of what he actually meant,<sup>1</sup> the modern case for “knowing thyself” (self-awareness) is well established – at least for most of us. Of those spheres of life where self-awareness is embraced, one of the foremost would have to be the business world where it is used to improve teamwork and boost productivity via various self-awareness assessments. Here too however, opinions vary widely as to the usefulness of these tools. It is in working in this sphere and with one of these tools myself however, that I have become privy to a significant benefit of these assessments to the distinctly Christian act of co-operating with God in one’s own sanctification.

## What is Self-Awareness?

Self-Awareness can mean a number of things but what is in mind here is simply “knowing what one is feeling.” In the ground-breaking book Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman argued that this knowing was the foundational skill in developing strong Emotional Intelligence. Furthermore, Goleman argued that Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is more influential in our success than our IQ and the skills we’ve acquired by it. These days this point has been widely accepted and thus confirmed the need to develop good EQ. The argument goes that those who know their feelings are in a position to do something about them, and conversely that those who don’t are not. Emotional Intelligence is therefore a key attribute in character formation as NT Wright makes clear, is a key component of sanctification.<sup>2</sup>

That our feelings rule so much of both our conscious decisions and automatic behaviour throws up an important question however; do our feelings just happen or do they come from somewhere? In other words, do we need to be aware of more than just how we feel? In the psycho-analytical tool The Frame, something happens before feeling...



The order of events begins with ‘seeing’, then moves to ‘feeling’, to ‘doing’, to ‘getting’, and back to ‘seeing’. In other words how we see something affects how we feel about it; on a hike in the woods I see a massive hill climb that is hard and complain “why couldn’t we find an easier walk?” You see an opportunity to get some great views and test yourself. We each then feel a certain way, act in accordance and get a different experience. This then influences what we will see next time.

But now we’re at another question; what influences the way we see? Here the answer is “almost everything;” our upbringing, our culture, our experiences earlier today and throughout our life, our personality, our beliefs, and so on. All of this coalesces together to produce certain tendencies to see things a certain way. Yes it’s that complicated, and this is why it’s difficult for the various self-awareness assessments to be ‘right-on’ with their results. But asking these tools to describe one’s self fully and completely is like asking healthy eating to keep us out of the doctor’s surgery whilst ignoring healthy exercise and healthy sleeping habits. The reality is, healthy eating affects our whole body (100%), as does exercising (100%) and our regime of rest (100%). Similarly, our personality affects 100% of behaviour, as does our character (100%), our upbringing (100%), our beliefs (100%), and so on. This is an argument against the idea that our behaviour is the sum of a little bit of this and a little bit of that (eg. 30% personality, 20% character, 50% upbringing). It’s not “nature or nurture,” its nature *and* nurture.

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Know\\_thyself](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Know_thyself)

<sup>2</sup> NT Wright “After You Believe; Why Christian Character Matters”.

That we each have these tendencies to 'see' things a certain way goes a long way to explaining how and why two people can read the Bible and come away with two different understandings. Theologians have been forced to accept that we can never be unbiased interpreters of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> Seemingly echoing Socrates, but placing self-awareness within a pursuit of God, John Calvin himself observes; "Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."<sup>4</sup>

### [Back to assessment tools...](#)

It is my experience that the coaching conversation that follows the self-awareness assessment goes a long way to unpacking how people 'see.' Like our God, there is a part of us where we just are who we are (referring to God's great self-disclosure to Moses, Exodus 3:14)... it is our personality to be extroverted or introverted or a bit of both... to be a people person or a task person or a bit of both. As much as we might try to beat a certain trait out of our children, ourselves or each other, if it is a personality issue – how we are made – the trait remains... we are who we are. What is really needed is this self-awareness we've been talking about, and then also acceptance of ourselves and those around us and a commitment to making these traits be a proper win/win.

Admittedly self-assessment tools are seldom used for helping with sanctification and so these sorts of conversations are scattered at best. The potential is somewhat latent, but it is a potential I have become privy to – one of the benefits of being a coach I guess.<sup>5</sup>

### [Should the church use self-awareness assessments?](#)

No, but clearly I believe it would be helpful. The provisos would be; getting a good process, a good coach, and being in the right place to engage in such work.

There is another option however, a tried and true way to self-awareness, it is an ancient way, and it is the original way; live in community... be committed to a local church. I don't mean to pick a fight – I'm not naïve about people's difficulties and troubles – and I will let the definition of "local church" be broad, but I do want to be clear that I believe self-awareness was in mind when God created mankind to live in community. Indeed, it's this awareness of how we're made that facilitates getting in behind the "image of God" we are made in – to live into that image fully for His glory. Yes living in community is tricky, and no, your local church may not be getting it right –but if you're willing to align yourself with God's original intentions for how to live, this living in community part does bear benefits for self-awareness.<sup>6</sup>

Either way – by self-awareness assessment and an ongoing process thereafter or living in community, or both (now we're talking...!), I want to [highly] commend the work of self-awareness; to understand what's behind why you feel a certain way – why you 'see' things a certain way.... And in so doing may your Emotional Intelligence be boosted, and likewise the corresponding character strength you'll need to grow rightly. As you mature in this way, pray as David did "But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults" (Ps 19:12), continue to study his word (Ps 19:7-11) and seek to get on with living the Christian life, serving God and His church in your own unique ways (eg. Rom 12:3-8). And finally, remind yourself that in all your hard work, it is God who works in you both to will and to act in order to fulfil every good purpose (Phil 2:13). And in time I trust that you too will see that after all, Socrates was right.

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<sup>3</sup> I realise that for some this assertion that "we can never be unbiased interpreters of Scripture" may shake their faith. I won't fully address this problem here suffice to say that we seek a kind of truth that leads us to a person rather than a black and white list of rights and wrongs. Moreover, this person is sovereign and good and therefore sufficient to handle – or better, weave – our short comings into a bonafide pathway of legitimate, Christ honoring sanctification.

<sup>4</sup> These are the opening remarks of his Institutes of the Christian Religion. Arguably, Calvin was pitching for a more intimate awareness of our sin, but this too is tied to how we're 'wired', or in other words, our personality.

<sup>5</sup> I use the Clifton StrengthsFinder

<sup>6</sup> Even without self-awareness assessments (or "spiritual gift questionnaires"), there is great opportunity for churches to be thoughtful and purposeful in helping people get to know themselves properly and living it out for the glory of God.