

Introduction to Philosophy (Ethics &?)
Self-Knowledge and *Shirley Valentine*

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Self-knowledge is not necessarily self-image. Self-image can be less or more than self-knowledge, less because *we think* that we are worse than we are, or more because *we think* we are more than we are. If self-knowledge is to be virtuous, self-knowledge must be balanced, as the Socrates of Plato's *Apology* reflected, "knowing that we do not know", or knowing self *as one is*, that is, as imperfect.

The *Shirley Valentine* movie writers encapsulate the "way things are" versus the "way we say/think things are" in the bloodhound at the beginning of the movie. Here are two human owners deciding that the bloodhound should abstain from the meat which they have decided is "bad" because such abstinence is "good" for them. Therefore, since they have become vegetarians so also must their dog. So, just as Ivan "changed" his natural self into a proprietary peer within Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, so in this film two humans decide to change the nature of a dog so the dog reflects their "nature". The dog pines. The owner then uses the clock to explain the bloodhound's complaints and disinclination to eat the "vegi-burger", rather than to admit that the owner seeks to substitute his/her conceptual view in place of the dog's nature. Shirley empathizes with the dog's natural frustration because she too suffers - she views herself as "other than she is" as her neighbor views the bloodhound to be a projected "self". The movie proceeds to detail how Shirley became "other than she is" and then she returned to "her is"; she encapsulates this return in her comment to her distraught husband in a telephone conversation:

"I have not fallen in love with him; I have fallen in love with life."

Notwithstanding the "fling", namely, a married lady having an affair, or, bluntly, committing adultery - better ways might have been sought to accomplish the same "change" - these words encapsulate the movie *Shirley Valentine*. Shirley Valentine has rediscovered herself and has broken out of the "other-self", her habitual living a "second nature" as "wife" and "mother" which suffocated her natural self - just as Ivan Ilych finally slipped through the "sack", or, second-nature habit of living according to propriety which had suffocated his natural self and occasioned his painful life and tragic death.

Maya Angelou wrote a poem entitled "Woman Work" wherein she states poetically what *Shirley Valentine* provides visually.

Woman Work

I've got the children to tend
The clothes to mend
The floor to mop
The food to shop
Then the chicken to fry
The baby to dry
I got company to feed
The garden to weed

I've got the shirts to press
 The tots to dress
 The cane to be cut
 I gotta clean up this hut
 And the cotton to pick
 Shine on me, sunshine
 Rain on me, rain
 Fall softly, dewdrops
 And cool my brow again.

Storm, blow me from here
 With your fiercest wind
 Let me float across the sky
 'Til I can rest again.
 Fall gently, snowflakes
 Cover me with white
 Cold icy kisses and
 Let me rest tonight.
 Sun, rain, curving sky
 Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone
 Star shine, moon glow
 You're all that I can call my own.

Shirley Valentine parallels this Angelou poem: "Why should I go back to being that woman when that woman isn't needed any more?" These lines provide all of us pause for reflection: who is reflected within the image in the mirror, in the bus window for Shirley, in the kitchen window for Joe? Is it someone whom we have become in order to function in life, or someone who lives and contributes self in the daily living of life - compare Frankl's distinction between the meaningless of one's life because the person "can no longer find any meaning in life" and injecting one's unique self meaning into life by living *as one is*? Does the reflection we see in any mirror provide us with an appearance of what we have become or the reality of who we are?

Shirley is a symbol for all of us; Joe is a symbol of the function which anyone of us has become. If being a woman or a man is based on some "need", that is, the need to be a mother, a wife, a husband, the owner of a business, of making a so-called living then this "need" becomes an obligation, something self-imposed. But, when that occurs the obligated person only performs a "function". The net result is that the children who are as sensitive as the bloodhound at the beginning of the movie, adapt to the mother Shirley and the father Joseph as "function" and become "child", as their daughter did, when she returned home to require her mother "to wait on" her, or as their son did, when he became the first to file for the occupation of a "street poet".

Again, Ivan Ilych provides a parallel since being a "judge" was his "function" in order to distance himself from the pain of not-being Ivan Ilych. Kostos also projected an image:

I don't ask to try to make fuck with you; I ask to come to brother's boat; it is a different thing: fuck is fuck; boat is boat.

However, Kostos' "come on" is as relevant for Shirley as it is for us: she found someone who "listened", someone who cared for what she thought and said, for who she was and she acted on his forthrightness - we all want to be appreciated for who we are, notwithstanding the fact that we alternately accept a "role" merely to find the comfort of companionship, perhaps a meaning which we lack within ourselves. Many seek "friends" because they do not find a friend within and, therefore, do not reflect friendliness to themselves as they look in a mirror! If one is not first a friend to oneself, then one creates a need which can not be filled except by living an artificial life!

Kostos is the symbol of the honestly new situation which opens the door to hope, but becomes a trap, yet, one from which we can learn. (Mistakes, by definition are the best lessons, if and when we learn from them, provided, of course, we do not repeat them.) Thus, Kostos becomes an instrument through whom Shirley discovers her being-alive and thereby recovers her love of living, of making her own decisions, of being herself, Shirley Valentine. The experience with Kostos allows her to reenter herself as being-alive - perhaps we might view this "experience" as the good to come out of a bad action, namely, committing adultery. So begins Shirley's romance with her newly discovered self-knowledge which has reintroduced her to Shirley Valentine, the very foundation which is necessary to give meaning to wife, mother, or anything else a person "does" in life. A human being must built his or her life upon a solid foundation. Such a solid foundation is self-knowledge and without self-knowledge one can not live securely, happily or lovingly. Without self-knowledge one lacks the perspective to access what life offers to one or what others say or think about one. e e cummings emphasizes the precarious problem facing any unique human being living within our contemporary world in the sixth of his i six nonlectures:

To be nobody-but-yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight and never stop fighting.

Shirley's response to her husband's accusation and "generous" offer of "forgiveness, if you come home" illustrates the solidity of her newly found self-knowledge and this response is central to the movie: "The only holiday romance I've had is with me-self and I think I've come to like me-self really. I think I'm alright. I think if I saw me-self, I'd say: 'that woman is o.k.'" Maya Angelou again gives us this other side of "Woman's Work":

Phenomenal Woman

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size
But when I start to tell them,
They think I'm telling lies.
I say:
It's in the reach of my arms,

The span of my hips,
 The stride of my step,
 The curl of my lips.
 I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That's me.

I walk into a room
 Just as cool as you please,
 And to a man,
 The fellows stand or
 Fall down on their knees.
 Then they swarm around me,
 A hive of honey bees.
 I say,
 It's in the fire of my eyes,
 And the flash of my teeth,
 The swing in my waist,
 And the joy in my feet
 I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That's me.

Men themselves have wondered
 What they see in me.
 They try so much
 But they can't touch
 My inner mystery.
 When I try to show them
 They say they still can't see.
 I say,
 It's in the arch of my back
 The sun of my smile.
 The ride of my breasts,
 The grace of my style.
 I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That's me.

Now you understand
 Just why my head's not bowed.
 I don't shout or jump about
 Or have to talk real loud,

When you see me passing
 It ought to make you proud.
 I say,
 It's in the click of my heels
 The bend of my hair,
 the palm of my hand,
 The need for my care.
 'Cause I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That's me.

ee cummings writes the following words for the contemporary American “woman” within his poetic play “Santa Claus”, the sixth of his *i six non-lectures*, given at Harvard University.

Knowledge has taken love out of the world and all the world is empty empty empty; men are not men any more in all the world for a man who cannot love is not a man, and only a woman in love can be a woman; and, from their love alone, joy is born - joy! Knowledge has taken love out of the world and all the world is joyless joyless joyless. Come, death! for I have lost my joy and I have lost my love and I have lost myself.

Irony reigns here. Here is *homo sapiens*, literally, *human wise-one*, usually, but wrongly translated as *rational animal*, someone who strives to know and define everything (perhaps the result of *Genesis*' Adam and Eve trading innocence, that is, knowing themselves as the *zelem* or *image and likeness* of *Yhwh*, for knowledge of the tree of good and evil!? *Genesis*:1:26-31.). Then this so-called *rational animal* discovers that knowledge is not love and love of a good-self is more important than knowledge of the good because the former is a practical experience of being good and becomes the very basis of one's ability to distinguish the “good” from the “bad”- indeed, although knowledge of the good leaves us mentally more fulfilled yet, such mental knowledge accentuates us being more empty and desirous at the same time. Therefore, love of *being good* far surpasses any “knowledge” of “the good”.

So, love of *the way things are* is more important for humans than *knowledge of the things which are*, the good as well as the evil and only love can fill the emptiness which knowledge creates. Therefore, to be a *rational animal* is not to be a knower but to be a lover! How curious!

However, these two human actions and efforts, *to know* and *to love* find both their basis and their fruit through self-knowledge, since the only meaning on which all subsequent meaning depends is that the knowledge of self reveals the good who we are and results in love of this good-self, enabling us to experience the value of being-alive so each might project that love into a world empty with knowledge. Therefore, though Francis Bacon might have coined the motto for occidental society, namely, that *knowledge is power*, that very motto is the source of the emptiness occasioning both the thirst and hunger reflected in contemporary occidental frustration

and violence, namely, the lack of a stable basis of human action, self-knowledge because only self-knowledge can empower a human being! ©Rgb 6/94;10/97;6/99;3/2000;7/00;05/01;09\05;10/05