

What does Portraiture have to do with the Oracle of Delphi?

On the Human Need — and Necessity — to ask Questions of Ourselves

Human beings repeatedly seek answers outside themselves, only to discover that the question ultimately concerns the questioner. Delphi was one historical form of this encounter. Portraiture is another. In an age of instantaneous AI-generated images and answers, portraiture may matter not because it provides complete knowledge of the human — a portrait can represent a person without fully explaining it — but because it preserves a space in which the human being can still encounter itself through uncertainty, attention, and the other. An even deeper connection between the Oracle of Delphi and portraiture will emerge in the lines that follow.

Anyone who has ever stood on skis for the first time knows that fear has a paralysing effect. Instead of allowing the body to assume a relaxed position oriented towards forward movement, fear throws us backwards into a rigid posture. Fear paralyses. We experience fear whenever we are unable to tame the unknown or exercise control over it. This applies above all to what we call the future. For it is within the future that our capacity for action unfolds — the space in which existence can develop.

It was precisely this desire to tame the future that led countless people in ancient Greece to the Oracle of Delphi. Questions that many might today discuss with an AI chatbot were then addressed to the oracle. Yet the questioner would often receive nothing more than an ambiguous answer. Of particular significance in this process was the period of waiting before the sanctuary of Apollo. At the entrance to the Temple of Apollo stood the famous inscription: "Know thyself." Thus, while the questioner waited for their moment, they might have encountered these words and had the opportunity to approach their carefully prepared question within an entirely different context.

Our desire to control the future — a desire reflected in the questions we formulate — was confronted at Delphi, through the presence of this significant inscription, with an invitation to recognise the meaning of limitation. Human beings were called upon to recognise their mortality and finitude, and not to mistake themselves for the gods. Yet the injunction does not merely warn against overestimating oneself. It equally demands that one refrain from underestimating oneself. To know oneself, in this sense, means to recognise the limits of oneself — and, ultimately, the existence of boundaries or limits as such.

Socrates brought this tension into philosophical discourse. In Plato's account of Socrates' trial, the Delphic oracle is said to have declared that no one was wiser than Socrates. Socrates eventually came to understand that his particular form of wisdom consisted precisely in knowing that he did not know. The boundary to be recognised was thereby extended into the realm of knowledge itself. In Plato, the question was pursued further and became entangled with the philosophical problem of determining which "I" it is that is supposed to be known in the first place. What constitutes the self? The body, character, reason, the soul, a social role, one's abilities and desires? What, precisely, is *the self*?

The Delphic inscription "Know thyself" therefore demands a form of knowledge in which the object of knowledge is simultaneously the one who knows. The knowing subject and the object to be known coincide. A problem emerges here that remains unresolved in modern philosophy: Can consciousness ever make itself fully into an object of investigation, or does there always remain a remainder that eludes self-knowledge?

Delphi may belong to history, but the human impulse that brought people there has not disappeared. It continually re-emerges in new forms. The thinking human being projects themselves towards the future, seeks to gain a sense of mastery over it, and is thereby necessarily confronted with the demand to recognise both the self and its own limits. But where within the modern world remains enough time, to engage with the self?

Especially in an age characterised by unprecedented technological transformation, human beings are confronted with a profound sense of powerlessness. This loss of agency is accompanied by an anxiety about the future that can, at the same time, become paralysing. What are the new boundaries of the human? What becomes of the human being — a being that has grounded its understanding of itself for centuries in the exercise of reason — at a moment when rational activity in so many domains is being rapidly taken over by a new form of intelligence? Do new technological developments grant us greater control over the future, or are they increasingly narrowing the scope of human agency?

This raises the question of what significance portraiture might have in this context.

Figurative art, and portrait art in particular, asks the viewer to place the human being at the centre of their gaze. The human being once again becomes the object of investigation and is confronted with the reflective question of self-knowledge, as well as with the philosophical problem of whether the self can ever be fully experienced or made accessible to itself. The human being encounters itself through the image of another human being. A portrait does not confront us simply with the idea of the human, but with the irreducible presence of a particular person. Furthermore, the painted portrait records not only a face, but the limits, choices and duration of a human act of looking. The process of portrait painting itself becomes an essential part of the encounter, shaped by both the act of creation and the materiality of the work. The painting works not only as a window, but as a mirror as well. Both, the oracle of Delphi and portraiture, create situations in which the human being is confronted with a question that ultimately turns back upon the one who asks it. And not least it creates a situation of slowing down, similar as the inscription "Know thyself" at the Oracle of Delphi was deeply intertwined with the experience of waiting before the oracle.

The present moment is not merely a particular challenge to our understanding of what it means to be human. A return to traditional forms of self-inquiry — such as those embodied in portraiture — may itself become an essential part of this process of redefinition. Particularly amid the overwhelming proliferation of AI-generated images, attending to the finitude of human making, as embodied within a work of art, acquires a particular significance. Looking at a portrait painting generates a fundamentally different question concerning our understanding of ourselves from anything that scrolling through a digital sequence of images could ever allow the human mind to experience in quite the same way. The technologically saturated modern world, in contrast to the experience of waiting before the oracle, offers increasingly few spaces for thought in which the possibility of self-knowledge and experience of the self can unfold at all.

Portraiture is not the answer to the contemporary challenge of human self-understanding. It is an essential contribution to the emergence of new questions. In becoming conscious of the limits of human existence, these limits must not be understood as diminishing our value when measured against something presumed to be greater — whether the divine, as in antiquity, or a new technology that has already begun to appear in our collective imagination as *superintelligence*.

The experience of diminished agency can force us into a paralysing state of "leaning backwards", insofar as it generates fear. Where the visual arts, on the one hand, make visible the sphere of human agency and, on the other, simultaneously provide a space in which new questions can emerge, they become essential to moving beyond a passive

anxiety about the future. They allow us, as human beings have done repeatedly throughout history, to redefine the scope of our agency within a new reality. If we might otherwise ask why human beings need art, perhaps the question at this particular moment should instead be: Why do we need art — and portraiture in particular — now more than ever?

To ask questions of ourselves — just as we do when we turn towards God, or, as in ancient Greece, towards the gods through the Oracle of Delphi — is both a human need and a human necessity. The continual transformation brought about by the act of questioning itself is fundamental to what it means to be human. Fundamental to this remains the recognition of limits, of not overestimating but equally of not underestimating the self. Insight of any kind requires a space in which a question is not immediately answered.

Art, and portraiture in particular, is one of the most powerful means through which this process of self-knowledge can take place. Portraiture does not answer the question. It keeps the question alive. It can help us move from a paralysing position of looking backwards into one of relaxed, forward-oriented movement — and, together with the other spheres of human agency, begin to navigate new paths into an altered reality.