

It is commonly assumed that one has to know or understand oneself — at least to some extent — to live a happy and fulfilling life. “Know thyself” was, after all, already one of the three precepts welcoming guests arriving to the antique Temple of Delphi. But what exactly does self-understanding consist in, and how can it influence our well-being? These questions are especially pressing today, when more and more people are struggling with different kinds of mental suffering and illness.

The aim of this project is to offer a new, unified characterization of self-understanding, which can be used to explain the role self-understanding plays in our well-being and mental health. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to integrate topics belonging to at least three areas of philosophy: the philosophy of mind, epistemology, and the philosophy of psychiatry. However, it would be very difficult to answer the question of what self-understanding is and what role it plays "in general." Therefore, the key methodological move will be to look at what self-understanding is and what role it plays in psychotherapy — the process of mental healing and recovery — and use it to draw conclusions about the role of self-understanding in general.

The first stage of the research will be devoted to the nature of self-understanding. At this stage, the most important philosophical conceptions of self-understanding — as well as the philosophical assumptions regarding the nature and therapeutic role of self-understanding underlying the major psychotherapeutic traditions — will be examined and compared. As a result, a new philosophical account of self-understanding will be sketched. On this new account, self-understanding will be construed as what contemporary epistemologists call “objectual understanding,” i.e., the kind of understanding one might have of a subject matter in virtue of grasping a certain body of information regarding this subject matter. In the case of self-understanding, the subject matter is oneself, while the relevant body of information contains information about one’s mental states, bodily sensations, behaviors, and life events. Moreover, such self-understanding will be characterized as having four dimensions: richness (i.e., the amount of information one grasps), factivity (i.e., the information being true), consistency (i.e., the body of information being internally consistent), and flexibility (i.e., one’s ability to remodel one’s self-understanding or generate new self-understanding upon acquiring new information about one’s mental states, bodily sensations, behaviors, and life events).

In the second part of the research, we will look at the acquisition of self-understanding in the therapeutic process. In particular, possible tensions between the truth or richness of self-understanding and its practical usefulness will be explored, as well as the dangers that stand in the way of acquiring self-understanding, such as abuse of the therapist's authority.

The last stage will be devoted to testing and refining the newly developed account of self-understanding by focusing on three specific problem areas: the role of self-understanding (or lack thereof) in specific mental disorders and their treatments, the role of self-understanding in solving the problem of self-illness ambiguity (e.g., when a person does not know whether to blame themselves or an illness, they suffer from, for a given thought or behavior), and the role of self-understanding in novel therapeutic methods, i.e., AI-based psychotherapy and psychedelic psychotherapy.