Abstract
The notion of insight is at one and the same time central to psychoanalysis and to the self-understanding that is part of everyday life. Through clinical material and critical engagement with contemporary philosophical work on self-knowledge, this paper clarifies one crucial aspect of this key notion. Self-understanding of the sort we have in mind, while of course involving cognitive elements, is not sufficiently accounted for by cognition about one’s affects, motivations, or other aspects of the psyche, nor by the simple conjunction of such cognition with felt affect, motivational urges, etc. Nor is it best modeled in terms of internal self-observation. Rather, it is the product of an ongoing process of the unfolding articulation of one's psychic life. The notion of experience is important here in three ways. First, lived experience is that out of which the self-understanding arises. Second, this self-understanding is a development and articulation of these aspects of our inner lives; it is a part of that same lived perspective. And third, this understanding in turn shapes one's experience of one's inner world: as it is attained, one's experience of oneself thereby changes. Central here is the emphasis upon an unfolding, developmental process involving the ability to speak from one's subjective perspective while experiencing one's subjective perspective as the perspective that it is.

With the advent of psychoanalysis, Freud brought to our attention not only new knowledge but, and of course this is part of this new knowledge, an awareness of the extraordinary extent of our resistance to self-knowledge. In fact the whole of psychoanalysis could be described as an extended essay on the nature, extent and intractableness of human resistance. And the result of overcoming this resistance would be different from merely knowing more facts about oneself. As Freud puts it:

‘If knowledge about the unconscious were as important for the patient as people inexperienced in psychoanalysis imagine, listening to lectures or reading books would be enough to cure him. Such measures, however, have as much influence on the symptoms of nervous illness as a distribution of menu-cards in a time of famine has upon hunger’. (Wild Analysis (1910 p224).

Overcoming resistance is not a matter of providing new information but a project of helping the patient come to know himself in a different way. The aim of analysis thus centres much more on self-knowledge or self-understanding as a particular sort of function and process, rather than as the mere accumulation of facts.¹

¹ The difference at issue here can be seen by considering an example from Wollheim (1993, p.107) in his response to Grunbäum's critique of psychoanalysis. Wollheim asks us to imagine that a man after leaving his session talks with someone else (perhaps a relative) and learns of a forgotten or unknown aspect of his past. In the following session he recounts this episode to his analyst. Can we say he has recovered a memory? Clearly he now knows the fact and can repeat it in the session. But this is not the kind of self-knowledge that is psychoanalytically central. The same point holds if we imagine the patient simply believing a reconstruction offered by the analyst.
Crucial, here, is the different status of that which is remembered as purely fact, or one might even say dead fact or effigy, which has little therapeutic effect, and that which emerges as a living entity in the room. The latter creates the conditions for understanding of a different kind. It is the form this understanding takes, and the way it is reached, that has proved to be vital both in terms of the conviction that it brings for both analyst and analysand and in terms of the difference it can make for the analysand’s on-going functioning. If it is a mini-lecture then it is merely the accumulation of facts, but where this knowledge comes into being through the analysand’s experientially-based understanding of a real piece of archaic psychic life lived through in the present, then this is a different matter. Our aim in this paper is to attain an understanding of this difference, an understanding rooted in clinical experience and elaborated in relation to contemporary philosophical work on self-knowledge. There is wide agreement that the psychoanalytic process aims at psychic change through the acquisition of insight, but it is no easy matter to articulate precisely what the relevant form of insight amounts to. As we will argue, self-understanding of the sort we have in mind, while of course involving cognitive elements, is not sufficiently accounted for by cognition about one’s affects, motivations, or other aspects of the psyche, nor by the simple conjunction of such cognition with felt affect, motivational urges, etc. Rather, such self-understanding is the product of an ongoing process of the unfolding articulation of one’s psychic life, experiencing from the first-person position one’s subjective perspective as the perspective that it is.  

Background Assumptions

Our aspiration is to provide an approach to our topic that can gain wide agreement. Since our basic theoretical assumptions are widely though not universally shared, those with a wide variety of more particular theoretical commitments may be able to accept our overall approach. (Our clinical vignettes inevitably presuppose disputed commitments in clinical theory, but we take these to be ancillary to the points we wish to draw from them for the purposes of our project here.)

A framing assumption of our discussion is that truthfulness to psychic reality is centrally important in the analytic process. On this conception, conviction derives from the patient’s understanding of an aspect of his psychic life, unavailable as recollection but nevertheless rooted in his lived awareness of his repetition in the transference. This is a conviction that has a basis in reality – psychic reality rather than material reality, but reality nevertheless.

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2 This paper takes it origin from a discussion between an analyst, David Bell, and philosopher, Adam Leite, of a paper by David Bell (Bell 2012), material from which is incorporated into this paper. Both authors share the view that there is no distinction to be made at an epistemological level between the kind of self-understanding that psychoanalysis aims to provide and a kind of self-understanding that is central to everyday life, although of course psychoanalysis provides a very special context for the acquisition of this kind of understanding. As a result of this collaboration we recognised that the claims being made as regards the acquisition of self-understanding have implications that are of both psychoanalytic and philosophical import. This paper is therefore an attempt to show the value of this kind of collaboration.
We will assume a conception of transference, then, less as an enactment of the past and more as a living phenomenon where the patient's anxieties, conflicts, and wishes are brought into the analysis. This conception is now widely shared. As Busch has put it 'every aspect of psychic phenomena is brought into the room with the analyst, and this is articulated within the here and now of the session’ (Busch 2010, p29). The resulting enriched, deeper and more subtle understanding of the ways in which the analyst may be drawn into enactment needs to be distinguished from idealisation of such enactments, where a virtue is made of necessity. Working in this way, one strives for neutrality, whilst recognising that this is an aspiration which can never be fully realised.

The commitment to truthfulness within the analysis is not a commitment to omnipotent assertions of truth, but to the difficult and uncertain struggle to know as much as we can whilst recognising the limits that will always constrain us, what the philosopher Susan Hack calls ‘the ragged untidy process of groping for and sometimes grasping something of how the world is’ (Haack 1999). This approach is thus in contrast to a more relativistic approach where the idea of truth is regarded as pure illusion, there being only different perspectives none of which has any more weight than another, or a kind of pragmatism where ‘what is true is what works’ – views which are arguably logically incoherent. As Thomas Nagel has argued, the fact that there is ‘no view from nowhere’ (Nagel 1986), that is no uncontaminated perspective, does not release us from the struggle to get things as right as we can. Constructions and reconstructions, then, though narratives, are not ‘just ‘narratives’. Moreover, we are all both subjects and objects of experience, embedded in causal structures that we cannot control. Meaning and cause interpenetrate our life, are constitutive of what we are as persons, and we are compelled to live in a world in which there is always a view from inside and a view from outside. These facts ineluctably shape the struggle for truthful analytic understanding. The tension between the subjective and the objective is not one that can be transcended, and the capacity to live within that tension that is one of Freud’s great legacies.

3 Klein writes:

‘For many years—and this is up to a point still true today—transference was understood in terms of direct references to the analyst in the patient's material. My conception of transference as rooted in the earliest stages of development and in deep layers of the unconscious is much wider and entails a technique by which from the whole material presented the unconscious elements of the transference are deduced. For instance, reports of patients about their everyday life, relations, and activities not only give an insight into the functioning of the ego, but also reveal—if we explore their unconscious content—the defences against the anxieties stirred up in the transference situation. For the patient is bound to deal with conflicts and anxieties re-experienced towards the analyst by the same methods he used in the past. That is to say, he turns away from the analyst as he attempted to turn away from his primal objects; he tries to split the relation to him, keeping him either as a good or as a bad figure; he deflects some of the feelings and attitudes experienced towards the analyst on to other people in his current life, and this is part of ‘acting out’ (Klein 1952, p.436).

4 This is issue is explored in detail in relation to psychoanalysis in particular in (Bell 2009)

5 ‘This double aspect of human life, corresponds to the twin threads of causality and signification which are intertwined in reconstruction, the one thread representing man's natural history and the other his reflectiveness.’ (Friedmann 1983 p191).
We begin, then, with a discussion of clinical material to help identify the particular phenomenon we mean to illuminate and the role the analyst and the activity of construction may play in helping to bring it about.

**Understanding Lost**

Crucial aspects of self-understanding can be brought into focus by considering the ways in which self-understanding can be obscured or lost. Here, an increasing understanding of the complexities of the phenomena and the subtle differentiations in their character has been an important trajectory of research. There has been a major development of the capacity to become sensitive to the psychic moves and transformations that take place in any session, so that situations that appear to be similar can be differentiated from each other, for example distinguishing real insight from pseudo-insight, the latter being a manifestation of resistance. Here, the analysand’s relation to the content of the interpretation – the psychic processes in which it is caught up – is of fundamental importance.

Mr T., a patient of a marked manic disposition, developed some real understanding of himself in a Friday session, related to his intense sensitivity to feelings of exclusion and the way his life is dominated by this preoccupation, a moving and poignant moment for him and his analyst. On the following Monday he repeated the content of the interpretation, elaborating on it somewhat, but it soon emerged that this ‘understanding’ now had a completely different status. The analyst felt uninvolved, more like an audience, and remained silent. As the session continued the patient described his enjoyable weekend. He had met various friends and had been helpful to them. But the more the session went on, the clearer it became that the understanding he had been giving his friends was almost identical to that which he had reached in the Friday session. In other words what started out as insight and integration accompanied by awareness of dependence upon an object and imminent separation from it, had been transformed. It was he who was now the owner of the understanding, rather than being a person self-consciously living out a preoccupation with feelings of exclusion. That is, he had projectively identified himself with an omnipotent analyst, locating in his friends that aspect of himself which needed help and understanding. Although the words suggested the insight derived from the work of Friday, they now functioned in a completely different way. So, an understanding of the material presented on the Monday needed to take into consideration this change in atmosphere, particularly the sense that it is the analyst who is now the excluded party, an audience to the patient's happy weekend.

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6 The work of Betty Joseph has been the major influence here (see for example Joseph 1981, 1983, 1985). In her paper ‘Towards the experiencing of psychic pain’ (Joseph 1981) she makes a distinction “between ‘knowing about’ and ‘becoming’” (p. 95), which is very closely related to the distinction to which we will be calling attention.
To offer Friday’s construction in this context would be to say something true, something that captures part of Mr. T’s psychic reality and to which he might well assent. But the interpretation would make little sense, not only because in such a situation the interpretation would be unhelpful, but because in failing to take the full measure of the atmosphere, it would not be correct. For while the words describe the content of an insight which he attained on Friday, they now carry a very different meaning when he utters them: they have come to serve his resistance to self-understanding rather than to express self-understanding. The self-characterization he formulated on Friday had a trajectory, was caught up in larger psychic movements and processes, and as a result the insight was lost. He is no longer in touch with his feelings of exclusion and need.

On certain ways of thinking about the mental, ways perhaps more common in disciplines other than psychoanalysis, it would be tempting to explain this as a cognitive failing: the analysand had arrived at a well-grounded general belief about the significance feelings of exclusion have for him, but for defensive reasons he became unable to see how it applied to specific instances in his life. But while this may be what happens in certain cases, this conceptualization distorts cases such as the present one. As a result of the process of projective identification over the weekend, the patient’s restatement of Friday’s interpretation now expresses his resistance, not self-understanding even at a general level, insofar as what is expressed is identification with the analyst rather than that part of himself which is needy, dependent, and fearful of exclusion. It is not helpful to think that one cognitive state has remained constant throughout the period. What has remained constant is a form of words, but it has come to represent or express something entirely different than it did on the Friday. This is a particular instance of the general point that what a person is expressing at any given moment, and whether it is a manifestation of real self-understanding, depends upon the larger context.

Just as moments of self-understanding can develop into pseudo-understanding in a process of resistance, so too a patient’s understanding of himself in one session can quickly be put at the service of other needs. The patient discussed above, for instance, could quickly move from real understanding to the use of this understanding to serve his grandiosity, the motivation here being largely unconscious. This is well illustrated in the following dream.

I am on a hill. I come down and see the council tenants have nice gardens. I ask one of the council tenants to show me how to plant a garden, and he does so.

This was an extraordinary dream and was quite moving. He has come down from on high to ordinary life and from that position, was now able to ask for help without feeling humiliated. Further, he asks help from those who in ordinary life he treats with contempt, dreading being seen in their proximity, as this would cause the contempt he feels for them to spread to him.
The movement in the dream might have ushered in a real capacity to engage in a different way with others, allow himself to be helped etc. However the next moment in the dream reveals a movement that changes everything.

(He)suddenly turns to a kind of audience and says ‘look (isn’t that wonderful) even so important a man as me can ask help from a mere council tenant’.

In the first part of the dream there is a sense of a wish to allow a mother and father (a man planting the earth) to show him the fundamentals of life and so allow him to develop. That process is however suddenly destroyed by his going back up the hill, inflating himself whilst turning to the spectator (a part of himself). The very process of discovery had been perversely changed into a performance.7

Other processes can obscure understanding as well. Some patients are quick to pick up an analyst’s interest in a particular interpretation and will bring material which although apparently supporting it, at a deeper level serves as a vehicle for the patient to gratify the analyst’s need. Thus while appearing to support or elaborate the interpretation, the patient’s utterances may in fact serve other ends. This can happen in other ways as well. Ms H, a patient in analysis, having understood her tendency to debase herself, filled subsequent sessions with interesting examples of this from her current and past life. But what seemed at one level to both analyst and patient to be the broadening of understanding, was subsequently understood as the production of illustrations imagined as satisfying the analyst and, at a more subtle level, serving to further the project of self-debasement. Again, it would be a mistake to think that she had arrived at a correct general understanding of herself but out of resistance failed to see its application to certain particular moments in her life. Rather, her self-ascription of an urge to self-debasement, while correct, was part of a process expressing that very urge in ways that kept her away from experiencing its true nature. Although both this and the earlier examples are drawn from the clinical setting, these phenomena are of course familiar in ordinary life.

**Understanding Found**

Although attention to the kinds of phenomenological distinctions described above has been typical of the Kleinian approach since its inception, this kind of thinking is now part of the psychoanalytic mainstream (see Busch 2010). Fundamental here is the distinction Bion draws between words as *communications* of semantic contents and words as *actions*. It is of course true that all human communication is an interweaving of the dimension of semantic meaning and the dimension of action.8 However, where certain sorts of action predominate this must necessarily influence one’s attitude to the material and thus to the construction one might formulate.

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7 This process is manifested in the telling of the dream. In that sense it is a self-representing dream (Hobson (1985)). For the telling of the dream could have been an authentic expression of a dilemma of life but, in the very telling, the expressiveness is projected into the dream, evacuated from his mind as he goes back up the hill.

8 See the recent discussion by Rustin and Pick (2008)
Rosenfeld (1971) discusses related issues when he considers the important technical implications of the distinction between projective identification used as a vehicle for evacuation of intolerable mental contents and different situations where the primary motive is not evacuation, but communication not only through meaning but through action.  

The interplay between communication and action applies to the analyst as well. The same construction, the same words, may express very different phenomena. Where the analyst is still under the full pressure of the countertransference, then his or her words easily become vehicles for action. For example, in a session with a patient who projected his feelings of exclusion, the analyst had to bear this experience and resist the temptation to try to get the patient to recognise himself as the excluded party, that is, to attempt forcibly re-project the feeling of exclusion into the patient. Through the analyst’s bearing this experience, the patient was enabled to come into contact with his feelings.

Mr. K, a profoundly schizoid man arrived for his session one day and was upset to discover another patient, Mr. B, in the waiting room. Mr. B. had in fact made a mistake and had come at the wrong time for his session. It emerged that Mr. K. had felt very worried and vulnerable in this situation, fearing that his analyst would prefer to see the other patient instead of him. In the following day’s session, Mr. K. looked more bedraggled than usual and began his session in the following way.

‘I’ve been to see Dr. X. (his previous therapist). I get on with him. I liked him much better as a therapist than you. I am sure if I could see him three times a week, I’d make more progress than with you. I know things about him .... I don’t know anything about you’

The therapist, in discussing this session, described how he felt belittled and hurt, feeling himself to be much inferior to Dr. X with whom Mr. K had appeared to have a much more lively, fruitful, and open relationship. After a pause Mr. K said thoughtfully, in a tentative, questioning voice, as if checking something,

‘I don’t know if that’s hurtful. Is it? I don’t even know if it is true.’

He went on:

‘I saw this old woman in the street on the way here. I thought I could mug her or I could say “Hello”. I wasn’t sure which was best... but I didn’t put either thought into action.’

His therapist felt touched by this and replied:

‘You are trying to let me know how cast out you felt by seeing the other patient yesterday. You felt pushed into a relationship with me which you thought was second best to the one I have with the other patient, that I would rather see him than you.’

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9 Steiner (1994) has developed this theme.

10 This material has been used in a different context, namely discussing projective identification (see Bell 2001). We are grateful to Dr. Neil Morgan for allowing use of this material.
There is a moment of defensive projective identification in this material, but the patient isn’t fully immersed in the defensive process of making the analyst feel cast out and inferior. Although appearing superior, the patient was also communicating (saying ‘hello’) to the therapist his own experience of feeling left out and vulnerable. He had not lost touch with the experience and indeed seemed to be checking to see if his communication had been properly registered. The capacity of the therapist to take in the experience of feeling left out and belittled, was crucial to his capacity to communicate to his patient his understanding of what had taken place between them, suggesting that projective mechanisms had facilitated the capacity for empathy. Crucially, the therapist was really affected by the patient, he really felt left out and abandoned, but it was as he was recovering from this mental state that he made the interpretation. It was his capacity to bear the full impact of this state and emerge from it that enabled him to make the interpretation, and to make it in such a way that it was meaningful to the patient. This kind of process, taking place inside the analyst, is often crucial (B. Pick (1985) and Carpy (1989)). Central to this process is the analyst’s own ability to experience his or her feelings and responses as the feelings and responses that they are. By bearing the experience, the analyst was enabled to give words to what the analysand was feeling, enabling the analysand to reach deeper experiential understanding of feelings with which he had only been inchoately in touch.

An extended clinical vignette illuminates the subtleties that can arise here.

Ms. S was severely traumatized in childhood and the analysis has been dominated by terror. She looks at me furtively as she comes into the room, lies down and often cannot speak until I do. Her primary concern, dominating all others, in her life as in her analysis, relates to the state of her object. Her mother appears to have been quite unable to think about her and was extremely unpredictable. But my patient believed that if she attended especially carefully and spoke to her mother at the right time, in the right way, when her mother was in the right state of mind, then everything would be fine. With this omnipotent system she could at least create the possibility of a reasonable interaction with her object. When this failed, however, as it inevitably did, the result was that she felt it was completely her own fault, that is, she was persecuted with a sense of omnipotent responsibility. She felt totally unable to confront her mother with any criticism as this was thought to be dangerously provocative to an object that was felt to be both tyrannical and brittle (this combination is, I think, frequent in such cases). The result would be, at best, a torrent of

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11 At times the countertransference becomes so burdensome that it amounts to a countertransference neurosis. In this situation the analyst will need to free himself through an internal working over, often with the support of colleagues. Here it is more the interpretation that the analyst silently makes to himself that provides him with the necessary internal space for reflection and so arrive at a better position from which he can talk to his patient without his communications being saturated with countertransference. (see Britton 1989).
furious accusations and immediate ejection, and at worst the collapse of her object with all the persecuting guilt this would bring.

Ms S often talks of situations which cause her great concern but then, in a different voice, characteristically adds ‘I am sure it will all be fine, just fine’. She is very sensitive to separations but when she returns to analysis after a break, she feels herself to be confronted with an object that is potentially explosive. Interpretations that I thought made some sense of the situation were often met with silence and sometimes I would find myself saying, as if I needed some reassurance, ‘Do you know what I mean?’.

I said to Ms S as she left a Thursday session ‘see you on Monday’. I had mistaken the following day for a different Friday, one which she had cancelled. She turned to me and said ‘You mean tomorrow’. I smiled in a slightly sheepish manner, and said ‘Oh yes’. The following day when we discussed this, she was quick to point out how well we had handled it, wasn’t it good that she was able to correct me, she couldn’t have done that a year ago, and I, somewhat unwittingly, went along with this.

On the Tuesday of the following week I had left the door open, which is a signal for the patient to come straight in. As she came into the room I was smoothing the antimacassar. I must have looked slightly startled, and then, before I could think, found myself changing my expression into a rather indulgent smile.

She started by telling me about her baby who had been stung by a bee the previous day (which had been a cause of great concern). She talked about how quickly the baby recovered, isn’t it amazing; she wouldn’t have thought it possible, etc.

She went on in this way for a while.

I thought my impulse to quickly smooth the antimacassar was connected with what was taking place between us. There had been a sting, the evidence of other patients which I was smoothing away, and also my startled look when she came in, which I thought she was now smoothing over. She, I think, must have thought that I was behaving in a very odd way. But now I was being encouraged to be relieved of any concerns, to accept the quick recovery and not think about the sting; we could both reassure each other that everything is so to speak, ‘Fine, just fine’.

When I put these considerations to her, there was a very marked change in atmosphere into something quite sombre as she said:

‘You don’t know how difficult it is for me to come here.... to analysis. It’s such a terrible place. I never really know what I am supposed to do.’

She later talked with feeling of how difficult it is to tolerate not looking at me in sessions, or not having her fairly straightforward questions like
‘How are you?’ answered (of course such a question is laden with meaning for her).

This material highlights both the form of self-understanding that we are aiming to identify and the role the analyst can play in helping to bring it about. Although the analyst had some sense of the way he felt the urge to smooth things over or reassure himself (that he was not the terrifying object his patient took him to be), and of the temptation to seek reassurance from the patient that she had understood him, he had not really been aware of it sufficiently, nor taken in its significance. The reconstruction in the analysis was based not only on an intellectual understanding of the transference situation, but on the way it was lived out between analyst and patient as a ‘total situation’. What is brought into the transference are living internal situations, here a terrifying internal figure, tyrannical and brittle, linked in complex ways to her history. Note, it is not only the anxiety situation that was lived out between analyst and patient but also the defence against it (the smoothing over). And for the analyst’s reconstruction, his lived experience of this “total situation” was pivotal.

Freud is clear that we can only get a measure of the correctness of an interpretation by seeing what happens next. The sudden shift in atmosphere, following the interpretation, was also accompanied by the patient’s ability to express something, that she found analysis so difficult, which up to then had to be smoothed over. This suggested the analyst was in the right area, both because it brought this new material which supported the interpretation but, further, the emotional contact between the two parties felt broader and deeper. This understanding is not the giving of knowledge of facts but represents an evolution of thinking and is an evolution in the analyst as well as the patient. Crucially, in both of these examples the analyst’s own experiential understanding of the situation – his experience of his own responses and the urges and motivations at play in them – was central to his ability to provide words that helped the patient to give voice to his or her own experience, feelings, and motivations.

**Having and Being**

As these examples have suggested, psychoanalysis is less concerned with patients having knowledge than with providing the conditions for the continuing development of a mode of being, a way of coming to know. This view is becoming increasingly common. As Busch writes, ‘Simply put, we have come to realize that the process of knowing is as important as what is known. What is accomplished in a relatively successful psychoanalysis is a way of knowing and not simply knowing.” (Busch 2010 p24-25 italics in original) From this perspective an interpretation is both the giving of knowledge but also aims to support a way of coming to know, and it is the latter.

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12 The fact that the door was open is of importance here symbolising a sense of an object, mother, totally unprotected from her intrusions.

13 This distinction between ‘having’ and being’ is drawn beautifully by Erich Fromm in his book ‘To Have or to Be’ (Fromm 1976)
function which is crucial. Our talk here of “a way of coming to know” is meant to refer not just to a process, but also to highlight something pivotal for the mode of understanding itself. The self-understanding is of course nominally distinguishable from the process by which one arrives at it, but in this case there is an internal relation. Self-understanding that is itself a development and articulation of one’s lived perspective cannot be adequately theoretically understood except in relation to this process of development and articulation.

It may be helpful here to think in terms of a distinctive function. Bion has drawn attention to the distinction between identification with an ‘object’ and identification with a ‘function’. For example, the ‘breast’ may be considered as an object or alternatively we can specify a particular function - in this case it might be its psychic function of provision, containment, understanding etc. Foregrounding the function here draws attention to something that is both more specific and more dynamic. But there may also be a sense in which identification with an object is more suggestive of an unconscious phantasy of possessing it; in the case of identification with a function this is less so. Where identification with a function cannot be made then ‘having’ will have to substitute for ‘being’. Bion (1962) described certain kinds of mental state where the capacity for receiving love and understanding is severely compromised, resulting in a state of mind where there is an endless greed for material goods coupled with a complete lack of satisfaction. Psychoanalytically this might take the form of a patient’s endless greed for interpretations accompanied with a lack of capacity for the sort of self-understanding we have been calling attention to.

Acquisition of this function is by its nature gradual and developmental. In the case of Mr T, the patient who spent the weekend in projective identification with his analyst, the process of ‘coming to know’ was hijacked by a kind of take-over interrupting the evolving process. The result was that by the weekend he “had” the understanding, as an idea to be given to others, but he could not experience and live out of what he had supposedly understood. If he had been able to, then he could not have reported his weekend of sharing his understanding with his friends as simply “enjoyable.” The interactions in that case would have been fundamentally different in flavour, since he would have been living out his sensitivity to feelings of exclusion, recognizing it for what it is, both on his own and in sympathy with his friends. Such a weekend might be poignant and fulfilling, but not simply “enjoyable.” Although a response such as his may have an important defensive function, it also opposes development. Contemporary psychoanalysis has yet to find the proper vocabulary for describing the developmental, evolving identification.

In the case of Mr. K, by contrast with that of Mr. T, we see the initial steps in a positive development, as he retains a connection with his feelings and communicates them to the analyst, not in fully articulate verbal terms, but through projection in a manner that enables the analyst to give words to what Mr. K is feeling. (Of course, this positive development might be undermined or hijacked in the future.) In the case of Ms. S, this development proceeds further: rather than simply coming to possess
knowledge of a fact, her self-understanding develops as a process culminating, on this occasion, in her ability to give voice to her feelings about the analysis.

In these positive cases, as in the experience of the analysts involved in them, it is the lived experience of the feelings and motivations at issue that is crucial. (It is important here not to reify the notion of experience: we are calling attention to a certain kind of process or activity, not to an item which is itself the object of a person’s awareness.) This notion of experiencing is important here in three respects. First, the lived experience of one’s feelings, motivations, and the like is that out of which the self-understanding arises. Second, this self-understanding is itself a development and articulation of those very feelings and motivations -- that is, it is part of this same lived perspective. And third, this understanding in turn shapes one's experience of one's feelings and motivations: as it is attained, one's experience of oneself thereby changes. Such "experiential self-understanding", as we will call it, can be the basis for knowledge of further facts about oneself, and knowledge of a fact about oneself (say, the acceptance of an interpretation) can help support the development of this kind of self-understanding. But what is fundamental here is the development of the function, the ongoing capacity.

Comparison with the literature

The phenomenon that we are attempting to identify is both narrower and more specific than what is often termed “the analytic function”. Experiential self-understanding, and the developing capacity for it, is at most one component of the complex of capacities that comprise this function.

In a recent discussion, Busch characterizes self-observation as “the capacity to consider a thought as a mental event” (2007, 424). Busch may well have in mind the capacity we are calling attention to. However, ambiguity can easily arise here. Taking Busch’s characterization literally, “self-observation” is not the equivalent of what we are terming “experiential self-understanding,” in part because “self-observation,” so defined, can take place from a detached stance, disengaged from lived experience in the here and now. Consider, for instance, Busch’s example of a patient who comments, “I had an odd experience. For the first time ever, as I was coming from outside, I noticed that I started to reach for the glove in my pocket. It was like I was going to put it on to protect myself from any germs that might be on the door” (424). We can easily imagine a patient who characterizes his motivation in this way (i.e., “it was like I was going to put it on to protect myself …”) merely as the result of an inference from his behaviour and the ascriptions given to this behaviour by his analyst. It would still be true that such a patient is considering one of his thoughts as a mental event (unlike if he had simply voiced his thought by saying, eg, “

\[14\] This is a dialectical relationship, in one familiar sense of that term: the developing self-understanding and the attitudes understood are merely notionally separable aspects of a single developmental process.

\[15\] For this to happen a change often has to take place not only within the analysand, but within the analyst as well.
“I had to protect myself from any germs that might be on the door”), and so this would still count as “self-observation” of the sort Busch has characterized. But for this reason self-observation, as Busch here defines it, is importantly different from what we are terming “experiential self-understanding”. When understood in these terms, “self-observation” is a necessary but not sufficient condition for experiential self-understanding.

Of the many common uses of the term “insight,” experiential self-understanding is closest to what is generally meant to be captured by the term “emotional insight.” However, care is also needed here. In a discussion that provided a conceptualization that still shapes much the literature, Reid and Finesinger characterize insight as “any cognitive act by which we grasp the significance of some pattern of relations” (1952, 728) and then go on to characterize “emotional insight” as insight that is either about emotional responses or that releases or sets off an emotional response (730). On this conception, the cognitive act is one thing, the emotional response it is about or releases is quite another. Experiential self-understanding, however, is not the release or triggering of an emotional response as a result of a cognitive act grasping a truth about oneself. But nor is it simply an intellectual grasp of a truth about one’s emotional life. What Reid and Finesinger’s characterization misses is the possibility of an integration of understanding and lived experience that is not merely the co-incidence of the cognitive and the emotional in an intellectual grasp of a truth about one’s emotional state.

In a widely cited paper, Richfield (1954) aptly comments “to understand what an insight concerns does not explain as much as knowing how this knowledge is possessed” (407). However, Richfield attempts to improve upon Reid and Finesinger’s characterization by conceptualizing “emotional insight” as cognition resulting from “direct presentation” of the relevant psychic materials “to the patient’s awareness” (401). He writes, “Insights which incorporate the actual, conscious experience of their referents can be termed ‘ostensive’ insights. These are obtained through the direct cognitive relations involved in the acquisition of knowledge by acquaintance” (405, following Russell’s (1905) distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description). The emphasis here upon conscious experience is a helpful development, but difficulties arise from modelling the phenomenon as a cognitive relation of acquaintance. As we discuss below, cognition arising from direct presentation of or acquaintance with a psychic item is not the same thing as the integration of one’s emotions or motivation and one’s self-understanding in a single perspective, a single lived experience.

It should be noted, too, that experiential self-understanding is not “emotional awareness” (Dowling 1990, cited in Joyce & Stoker 2000) of one’s psychic states, if that term means emotional responses about one’s psychic states. One might, for instance, fear one’s motivations, and although this may arise from experiential self-understanding, it is not equivalent to it.

Abend (2007) writes, “Insight may be generated by the analyst’s interpretations, by the patient’s self-discoveries, or both, but it is now widely agreed that this insight must be emotionally convincing to the patient, not merely intellectually apprehended” (1437, cited in Smith 2007, 1746). This is surely right. A crucial question, however, is what it is for something to be “emotionally convincing
to the patient,” if it is not simply for the patient to feel conviction, or to have an emotional response to the conviction, or to arrive at the conviction through direct presentation with an emotional response – none of which, separately or together, suffice for what is covered by the concept of “experiential self-understanding”.

What is needed, if we are to adequately understand both the negative and positive developments highlighted in the above clinical material, is a conceptualization which neither treats the self-understanding as simply cognition about one’s mental state nor treats the emotional side as simply being the object of or reaction to a cognitive state.16

**Three Philosophical Models**

We have characterized “experiential self-understanding” as a distinctive way of coming to knowledge of oneself, and we have offered clinical considerations to help characterize both the phenomenon and the process through which this form of knowledge (and the capacity for it) can be developed through the interaction between analyst and analysand. We would now like to consider several models from recent philosophical work on self-knowledge in order to shed light on this distinctive way of knowing about oneself.

Consider, to begin, the “agreeable patient” who accepts the analyst’s constructions about his unconscious states, but does so motivated by a wish to maintain his relationship to the analyst in a particular form.17 Though such a patient accepts all sorts of true things about his psyche, he could not be thought of as understanding himself, at least not in the way we have been discussing in this paper. One might recall here an important epistemological distinction originally drawn by Plato, namely, that knowledge is something other than mere true belief; to be knowledge there is a further requirement, that is, there has to be the right sort of connection with what is known. In the case of the “agreeable patient”, what is lacking is the right sort of connection between his acts of ascribing various mental states and the mental states these ascriptions refer to. His words are indeed about his own psyche, but insofar as his acts of self-ascription aren’t rooted in the mental states he ascribes to himself, the relation exhibited to his mental states is, in a certain sense, external. He speaks about them, but not from them. A similar point would apply in those situations where an individual may learn to ascribe to himself certain mental states by observing and interpreting his own behaviour. In that case, his relation to his own mental states is, structurally, like his relation to another person’s: a matter for inference and report. An important task, then, in clarifying “experiential self-understanding” is to articulate more fully what is lacking in these and similar situations.

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16 Here we have been importantly influenced by Britton’s (1989) suggestive formulation in terms of a capacity to “observe oneself whilst being oneself”, though as will be discussed below the relevant notion of “observing” has to be handled with great care. Britton (1989) links the development of this capacity to the concept of the depressive position.

On one philosophical model of self-knowledge, what is missing in these sorts of cases is most importantly direct “inner” awareness of one’s mental state, something comparable to the way in which one might directly scrutinize and describe a physical object that is right before one’s eyes. This model runs through central strands of Twentieth Century philosophy (e.g., Russell) and is often said to have its roots in 17th century thought, particularly in Descartes, but makes its appearance in the psychoanalytic literature when it is suggested that insight is crucially a matter of “acquaintance” with one’s own mental state (Richfield (1954), Ahumada (1991), Kennedy (1979), Joyce & Stoker (2000)). On this way of thinking, “experiential self-understanding” would be self-understanding grounded in direct internal observation of one’s states; the direct internal observation would be what “connects up” one’s beliefs about oneself and the states those beliefs are about.

Talk of “direct inner awareness” may capture something important, but when understood on the model of observation, it fails to capture the relevant phenomena. If someone’s relation to his mental states is modelled as an observational relation, then it is a relation which we could perfectly well imagine the person having to someone else’s mental states – not in the sense that we have to think it actually possible for someone to directly observe in this internal way another person’s mental states, but rather in that this model figures the sense in which these mental states are “mine” as nothing deeper than the fact that I can have this special inner observational awareness of them. In this regard, the model presents an alienated conception of our relation to our own minds, since it imagines the contents of my mind as never having a closer connection to me as psychological subject than as mere objects of observation and report. A person who generally regarded her own mental states this way might be suffering, among other things, from a particularly debilitating form of resistance; she would be treating herself from a third-person perspective, as though her mental states were merely something for her to observe. We could put the point by noting that merely forming correct beliefs about one’s unconscious states doesn’t make those states conscious – doesn’t enable them to function in the distinctive way characteristic of conscious states; why then should “direct observation” be any different? It would be a particularly direct way of attaining beliefs about one’s states, but it doesn’t thereby transform one’s relation to them. The observational model thus fails to illuminate the way in which the belief about one’s mental state and the mental state itself are related when there is what we are calling “experiential self-understanding”. What it misses is that one’s relation to one’s own mental states when one attains experiential self-understanding is a distinctively first-personal relation, something fundamentally different from one’s relation to another person’s mental states in ways far deeper than the fact that one cannot become aware of another person’s mental states through “inner observation.”

How might we best understand this idea of a first-personal relation, that is, a distinctive stance one can take towards one’s own mental life, different from a third-personal stance in which one attempts to discover, describe and report facts about

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18 This paragraph articulates and summarizes a central lesson to be learned from reflection on Richard Moran’s important discussion in Authority and Estrangement (2001), chapter 1.4.
oneself? According to one prominent contemporary philosophical view, the 1st-person relation to one’s own mental states is fundamentally practical and deliberative. It is concerned primarily with determining how one shall orient oneself towards the world, not with discovering something about oneself that was already the case (Moran 2001). What is central to this view is the way in which one can, when all is well, modify one’s beliefs, desires, intentions, and feelings by asking questions such as, “What shall I think, do, feel, desire here?” and reflecting on the reasons that would justify thinking, feeling, desiring, or doing certain things. This view then proposes to account for self-knowledge in terms of this deliberative relation: a person has ordinary 1st-person self-knowledge of her belief, feeling, desire, or intention - and her belief, feeling, desire, or intention is conscious – just if she is able to self-attribute it, and endorse it, by reflecting on the relevant reasons. So, for example, she would have 1st-person self-knowledge of her belief that she has been betrayed just if reflecting upon the reasons for and against thinking that she has been betrayed would put her in a position to affirm that she believes she has been betrayed. This view connects with an important tradition in philosophy, running back from Sartre at least to Kant, which understands the “I” as referring primarily to that which deliberates, reasons, and undertakes commitments, so that autonomy and self-understanding are fundamentally connected with the ability to shape oneself through reasoning and commitment.

On one way of understanding Freud’s aspiration, “Where id was, there ego shall be,” this view can be seen to be in line with Freudian thinking. However, it is a mistake to understand the 1st-person relation to one’s own mental states as primarily a matter of a deliberative relation or an ability to shape them through reflection upon the relevant reasons. Consider, for instance, the case of ordinary, garden-variety irrational fears. A person might feel overwhelming fear at a certain prospect and yet recognize perfectly well that she cannot modify her reaction by reflecting on the relevant reasons. Her relation to her state is thus not primarily the practical and deliberative one typified by the question, “What shall I feel here?” However, her relation to her fear still is not a disengaged, purely observational one. When she says, “I feel terribly afraid,” she is not just describing and reporting her state from the same sort of stance that she might take up when describing and reporting someone else’s state. She is speaking from or out of a 1st-person relation to her fear: that fear is her current perspective on the world, shaping her felt desires, evaluative reactions, and motivations, and her self-attribution of her fear arises from her experience of that perspective as the perspective that it is. So in understanding the 1st-person relation to one’s own mental life as consisting primarily in a deliberative stance of reasoning and commitment as distinct from a disengaged, 3rd-person stance of description and report, this view misses a crucial possibility: that one can have a uniquely 1st-person awareness of one’s mental states that does not involve a stance of deliberation, endorsement, or commitment. The phobic finds herself feeling fear which she might well not endorse, and she need not be committed to the judgment that there is something here to be feared, but her awareness of her fear is nonetheless fundamentally different from her relation to someone else’s fear or to a mental state of hers that she knows about only through being told by her analyst or through inference from her behaviour.
Recognizing this form of awareness is important for understanding the clinical setting. When an unconscious state becomes conscious, it does not follow, at least it does not follow necessarily, that the person is now in a position, by rational reflection, to self-attribute the state through consideration of what the relevant reasons would support. For the mental contents that have been brought into mind do not sit there easily. They have been held in unconsciousness, that is repressed, because of the disturbing conflicts that, on entering consciousness, they bring. Further, they often conflict with what the person regards as reasonable (and so prefers), and it may well be that even upon careful reflection the person will continue to think them rationally unsupported. In such a case the person cannot simply self-attribute the relevant state by asking himself what there is reason for; following ‘reason’ in this way leads not towards the disturbing new content of consciousness but away from it. In this sort of case, then, the task is to allow the state to come to be experienced as part of one’s current perspective -- to live one’s experience of the world through it -- even though it clashes with one’s avowed sense of what there is reason for and what one endorses. This is part of why working through can be such a difficult and painful process: it often involves experiencing thoughts and feelings as one’s own even though one takes there to be no good justification for thinking or feeling in these ways and has a significant emotional investment in not accepting them as one’s own. Working through thus often involves living through a process of tension, inconsistency, and incoherence in the analysand’s 1st-personal lived experience of his or her world. This is part of the sense in which formerly unconscious material’s becoming conscious is disruptive: it brings to the fore tensions, fractures, and conflicts in the analysand’s perspective.19

Imagine, for instance, that the patient (discussed earlier) with an unconscious urge to debase herself came to be consciously aware of this urge. This would involve actually feeling the motivation to say and do certain things, understood as ways of degrading herself, and thus experiencing her motivations as the motivations that they are. But this need not involve her taking there to be any good reasons for debasing herself; in fact, if she were to consciously reflect upon her situation, she might well conclude that there is no good reason for her to debase herself. The urge to debase herself might be held in place by psychic forces of a very different sort. (It is true that in experiencing the motivation to debase herself as the motivation that it is, she would also experience it as a motivation with some reason in its favour, because it is part of experiencing the world through an evaluative, desiring, and motivationally-rich perspective that one’s responses are presented in one’s experience as if there are reasons in favour of them, even if one can’t identify what those reasons might be.20 This is part of what can exert pressure towards a rationalizing response when formerly unconscious states become conscious: when a motivational orientation comes into consciousness, it brings with it a disposition both to consciously judge in accordance with it and, in order to evade dissonance, to give up opposing evaluative judgments

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19 Joyce and Stoker (2000) comment, “We argue that even in a session where many of the interpretations are vehemently defended against, the conflict that evoked the defence becomes more conscious and the child’s internal representations of the analyst and of the parents change” (p. 1145-6).  

20 This point shows up in contemporary philosophical talk of emotions as involving an “evaluative presentation” of the items they are about or in response to.
(rather than face severe dissonance). None of this means, however, that the analysand’s distinctively 1st-personal relationship to her perspective on the world is forged through her rational endorsement of it or commitment to it.)

We see something similar in the earlier clinical examples in which analysands struggle to maintain self-understanding. Mr. K, the patient who projected feelings of exclusion onto the analyst but then succeeded in remaining in touch with those feelings, may well have come to experience his feelings of exclusion as his own as a result of the analyst’s construction. But this transformative process in his relation to his feelings has nothing to do with the deliberative standpoint or with his endorsing reasons for feeling excluded. In fact, if he endorsed reasons for feeling excluded, it would likely be a further transference phenomenon having to do with the way in which he relates to the analyst’s having presented the interpretation. The shift in the situation which this case illustrates rather has to do with coming to give apt names to his emotions even as he experiences his world from their perspective.

So it isn’t only through taking up a practical stance towards one’s mental states -- a stance aimed at shaping or modifying them through rational deliberation and commitment -- that one gains a distinctively 1st-personal relation to one’s state. In fact, focusing on that question prematurely is as likely as not a defence. Openness to an experience of a state as “me” despite its being ego dystonic is often a crucial part of the therapeutic task. In cases of the sort we have been focusing upon, this requires a 1st-person stance that is not focused in the first instance on endorsement and the question of what there is reason for. The question isn’t yet, “What is there reason for here?” but rather, “How am I experiencing myself and my world?” And if under such circumstances one attempted to answer that latter question by focusing on the question about reasons, one might well be led into a false self-conception: something defensive and self-denying.

Now to turn to a third important approach on the current philosophical scene. Here 1st-personal psychological self-ascriptions (in thought or in speech) are not thought of as descriptions or reports of the inner psychological facts, nor as commitments taken up from a deliberative stance concerning reasons and endorsement, but rather as direct expressions of one’s psychological states. On this line of thought, saying “I’m happy now” is like laughing, only more articulate (Bar-On 2004, Finkelstein 2003). According to this so-called “expressivist” view, a mental state is conscious if one is able to express it simply through self-ascribing it (Finkelstein 1999). It should be emphasized that this view has a reductionist aspiration: it aims in effect to provide an explanatory account of first-personal self-knowledge without postulating any special inner subjective awareness of one’s mental state; in the account, such special inner awareness gets replaced with an ability, namely the ability to express one’s state through self-ascribing it.

The emphasis here on the ability to express one’s mind through self-ascription is helpful and important. But that ability cannot be parlayed into a full account of the transformation that takes place when a formerly unconscious state becomes conscious in what we are calling “experiential self-understanding.” To put the point archly and in an extreme way: all the view appeals to is the ability to express through self-ascription, which (for all the theory says) one could have even while consciously
feeling nothing at all. This point can be developed into something less starkly unrealistic by considering some psychoanalytic examples. An analysand, letting his mind freely drift, said “I want to be the greatest painter since Picasso,” but immediately followed up by saying things like, “Why did I say that? I can’t believe I said that. It’s so grandiose. It sounds like my dad. It’s not at all who I am.” For the rest of the session, he insisted that he just wanted to have a successful artistic career, and by the end seemed to have forgotten his earlier expression of desire. Here we see the expression through self-ascription of a desire that isn’t yet fully conscious: it is plausibly a derivative of deeper repressed material and able to come to the fore only briefly. It doesn’t function in the way conscious states function. So the fact that a person can express a desire through self-ascribing it doesn’t make that desire conscious.21

Another telling example is provided by the analysand who was motivated by an unrecognized urge to debase herself. When she said, “You are right, I do desire to debase myself,” and then went on at length providing examples, she was expressing her desire to debase herself, and she was doing so by self-ascribing it. But that didn’t mean that her desire to debase herself was itself functioning consciously. The desire motivated the self-ascription that expressed it, but she had no understanding of what was taking place. If the project of self-debasement had called for the denial of that urge, she might well have offered that instead. So while her state was expressed through her self-ascription, her state wasn’t conscious, at least in the sense we are using this term, for all that.

What the expressivist view gets right is the importance of being able to speak from one’s state and not merely describe it. This ability is essential in making the connection between the self-ascription and the state itself; it is what ties them together in the way that they aren’t when an analysand simply believes her analyst or draws an inference from a pattern she can see in her behaviour. At the same time, however, it is essential that one be able to speak from the state in the right sort of way. It isn’t enough that one simply be motivated by it. The analysand with a standing desire to debase herself does speak from her state, insofar as that desire motivates and gets expressed through her self-ascription. But at the same time, she doesn’t speak from her state in the right sort of way. She doesn’t express her state through self-ascribing it as a result of experiencing her emotional and motivational perspective as the perspective that it is. And the marker of this has to do with the other things that she is or isn’t feeling at the moment, the motivations that are or are not in play, and how things unfold in the future. Suppose, by contrast, that she feels her desire to engage in a particular sort of interpersonal manoeuvre as an urge towards self-debasement – that is, feels it as her urge with that aim, where that characterization of the aim is internal to the experience of feeling the urge – and speaks from that complex position. In that case she doesn’t merely recognize something as a fact about herself, but rather actively experiences herself and her world through the vantage point of an urge to

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21 The theory isn’t helped if we add that the person has to be able to self-ascribe the desire sincerely, since both the initial self-ascription and the evasive follow-ups could have been perfectly sincere. The problem in such cases is not that the person is insincere, but rather that the momentary expression of the desire is caught up in larger defensive processes.
debase herself. It is the ability to speak from one’s state in this way that is essential for what we are calling “experiential self-understanding.”

We have shifted in the above paragraph between talking of one’s “state” and one’s “perspective”. This shift is important, even though these two terms are intended to pick out one and the same phenomenon. My state, so described, is always an object to me as subject; to talk of a “state” is to describe it from the position of a third-person observer. But a perspective is something I can stand within and articulate from that position. The shift to conceptualizing matters in terms of the person’s lived perspective is thus important for making sense of the phenomenon of experiential self-understanding. Intriguing issues arise here in relation to the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis, “Say whatever comes into your mind.” “Describe your mental state to me” differs from the request that you give voice to your perspective, and so there is a difference between asking the patient to report what is going through her mind and asking her to give voice to what is going through her mind. At the extremes, the former can lead to detached reportage, the latter to mere unreflective expression and fully-voiced immersion in one’s emotional and motivational states (typified perhaps by the borderline patient and what Fonagy, Target, et al. (2004) call “psychic equivalence mode”). Ambiguity here is fruitful, clinically, because there can be psychodynamic reasons why a particular patient favours one position over another; further development of the ability to move flexibly on this dimension can be an important step. What is aimed at here is the ability to take up a position that is neither too far in nor too far out, as it were: neither detached nor so immersed that one’s perspective does not show up for one as a perspective at all but rather as simply a description of how the world is.22

When one becomes able give voice to one’s desires, emotions, motivations, and the like – that is, to one’s subjective perspective as such – the self-attribution is born out of the increasing sophistication and articulation of that perspective itself. This is a moment in its developmental history with important ramifications and consequences. The disposition to judge, “I am…”, “I feel…”, “I desire …”, etc., arising as a component of one’s perspective on the world, is partially constitutive of one’s state, insofar as it refines and articulates it, bringing about shifts in one’s patterns of feeling and response. At the same time, however, there are standards of correctness here; this is a matter one can get wrong, for instance as a result of defensive forces in the psyche. The self-ascription is correct to the extent that it meshes properly with connections between the self-ascribed state and one’s other states, dispositions, and patterns of feeling and action. The person who sincerely describes her need for immediate gratification as love is getting it wrong, and this will show up in her behaviour, thoughts, and feelings at key moments. That she can give voice to her state at all may be progress, but she still isn’t experiencing her perspective as the perspective it is. When she gets it right, by contrast, that is a further development and articulation of the state itself, transformative of it in various ways and giving rise to further possibilities of thought and feeling.

On this view, the interpretive work of the analyst looks less like acquainting the analysand with facts about herself, and more a matter of helping the analysand

22 This is, again, what Britton (1989) attempts to capture with his evocative phrase “observing oneself whilst being oneself”.

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acquire the capacities that will enable her to develop, articulate, and speak from her own perspective, in part by helping her find or learn apt words. This may be thought of as enabling the general abilities and processes required for and involved in experiential self-understanding. But the general acquisition of these capacities is not enough: one’s particular mental states will need to undergo the process of development and articulation involved in coming to experience one’s perspective as such. And as the earlier examples of lost self-understanding reveal, any particular moment in which someone experiences her perspective as the perspective that it is will also be bound up in larger psychical processes. What is sought is a moment of understanding free from processes that hijack it, undermine it, or cover it over by replacing it with something serving very different needs – or at least, if such defensive processes are in play, some experientially-based understanding of them in their own right as expressions of one’s perspective. As discussed earlier in relation to the clinical material, the internal process of the analyst often involves the very same abilities and difficulties that are at issue for the patient, and the analyst’s way of dealing with this situation can be pivotal for the patient’s development.

“Experiential self-understanding” in relation to psychic change

A certain degree of “psychic distance” is involved in being able to speak from one’s perspective while experiencing it as the perspective that it is. This isn’t the distance that arises from a third-personal relation of observation, inference, or reportage, however, nor is it dissociative or a split between an “I” that is observing and a “me” that is being observed. It is rather the distance that appears when one is not immersed in a perspective to such a complete extent that it becomes an entirely transparent, invisible lens through which one experiences the world, other people, and oneself. To continue the metaphor: it is like seeing a lens while you see through it. Plausibly, a crucial part of what enables this distance is the ability to express one’s perspective by naming it verbally or in thought.

Any time a person’s beliefs about herself change, this will bring about related changes in her psychic functioning more generally, because a person’s beliefs cannot but have an impact of some sort or another on her motivations and emotional responses. But the “psychic distance” brought about by what we are calling “experiential self-understanding” bears a more particular relation to psychic change. The person who is no longer so immersed in her perspective because she can experience it as the perspective that it is, thereby gains new possibilities for thought, feeling, and action. Questions, thoughts, emotional reactions, and motivations become possible that were not previously possible, and all of this cannot but have repercussions in her psyche. The same point applies regarding the way in which her perspective becomes increasingly developed and articulated through her increasing ability to put it into words. For instance, suppose the woman with an (unconscious) desire to debase herself came to experience that desire, in the moment with the analyst, as an urge to debase herself. New possibilities of thought, feeling, and action could then open up, starting with the possibility of feeling further things in response to feeling such an urge, and these possibilities would have important further

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23 This understanding is particularly suggested by O’Shaughnessy (1983).
consequences. In this sense, it seems right to use phrases such as “less rigid” and “an increase in psychic freedom” to describe this process. For instance, consider the example of Ms. S above. Once she came to experience as such her urge to remove the “sting” and smooth over the situation, she found herself able to express difficult feelings about the analysis itself. For a rather different sort of example, consider a person who had been projecting her anger into others. As she comes to experience her anger as such, she will no longer be driven to experience others as angry. Such changes are obviously deeper than the changes that arise merely from acquiring a new belief about herself.

For these reasons, we contend that the processes involved in experiential self-understanding cannot but involve further psychic change. Insofar as a person’s psyche constitutes a complex system in which certain elements function in certain ways, changes in how some elements function cannot but have consequences elsewhere. This is just to restate, from a different point of view, what has been described, from the perspective of the analysand, in the previous paragraph. Of course, we do not claim that all significant psychic change in analysis arises in just the particular way we are calling attention to.

**Conclusion**

We have attempted to identify a particular form of self-understanding, different from a mere knowledge of facts about oneself and distinctive in the process through which it arises. This form of self-understanding is central in psychoanalysis, but also familiar in ordinary life as expressed by such terms as “being in touch with” one’s beliefs, emotions, desires, and the like. Reflection on this form of self-understanding as it arises in the psychoanalytic context, on the ways in which the analyst might aid its development, and on the vicissitudes and obstacles it inevitably encounters sheds light on the phenomenon as it appears in ordinary life, just as reflection on philosophical models aimed at illuminating ordinary self-knowledge helps pinpoint aspects of the phenomenon relevant in the psychoanalytic setting.

Experiential self-understanding is not best modelled in terms of internal self-observation, nor is it best thought of as simply a form of cognition about one’s affects, motivations, and the like. The notion of *experiencing* is important here in three ways. First, lived experience is that out of which the self-understanding arises. Second, this self-understanding is a development and articulation of one’s very feelings and motivations; it is a part of that same lived perspective. And third, this understanding in turn shapes one's experience of one's feelings and motivations: as it is attained, one's experience of oneself thereby changes. Central, we have urged, is the emphasis upon an unfolding, developmental process involving the ability to speak from one’s subjective perspective while experiencing from the first-person perspective one’s subjective perspective as the perspective that it is. When all is going well, a moment of this sort of self-understanding is thus part of a larger process of the unfolding development and articulation of one’s lived perspective. This process has additional important consequences for the person, opening up possibilities of thought, feeling, and action that otherwise would not be available. Whether any particular moment is
part of this process, part of opposing processes, or part of a complicated interplay between positive development and forces of resistance may not be readily apparent. The verdict depends on ‘the course of future developments’ (Freud, 1937).

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