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## Reflections on truth and self-knowledge in psychoanalytic psychotherapeutic practice

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### Abstract

*Determining their epistemological stance on therapeutic matters is a common challenge faced by psychotherapy practitioners and psychologists. Psychotherapy encompasses a wide range of techniques and theories, providing an integrative and fertile space for exploration. Feyerabend suggests that adopting the guiding principle of "everything is good" in research, regardless of the theory being considered, can be a beneficial approach to enhance our understanding of complex phenomena. However, this consideration could become into a mess and confusion, facing psychotherapeutic exercise.*

*In Peru, there is a famous saint named Martin de Porres, who is associated with various miracles. One such miracle is the story of De Porres bringing together three natural enemies: a dog, a cat, and a mouse and making them live peacefully.*

*Therefore, the coexistence between the scientific and non-scientific positions, those which come from a formal statement of the science and those coming from other approaches, questions not only the way to build knowledge but what we assume is truth.*

*Particularly intuitive reasoning based on singularities and the illogical aspects can contribute to the understanding of human psychology, but it needs to be supported by deeply thinking and fundamentals.*

*This article, framed by, but not restricted to, the epistemological ideas of the Peruvian philosopher Pablo Quintanilla about the relations between the self-knowledge and another kind of knowledge, aims to provide for the psychotherapeutic field, some further insights about the truth coming from the patient's natural nuclear self-consciousness knowledge that is built by the interaction of three elements: the subject (patient) himself, the relation between the subject and subject (patient with himself) and the relation between the subject with a third party (patient with the psychotherapist and the world).*

**Keywords:** *self-consciousness, epistemology, truth, truth in psychotherapy.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the initial segment, I present a few vignettes by Quintanilla [2], which were also incorporated into the teachings of Quintanilla as a component of the Interdisciplinary Psychoanalytic Institute's Epistemology formation. Next, I analyze clinical-psychotherapeutic experiences and explore the potential for fallibility in self-awareness and interpersonal understanding. To summarize, I suggest employing triangulation to get a level of certainty about our inner world and identity.

After answering the question of the purpose of self-knowledge which for the mentioned author lies in the nosology of the mental states, dispositions, abilities, narratives, identities, actions, intersubjective links and their social, physical or purely psychic causes, Quintanilla advances in the greater purpose of understanding how the mind is constructed, reflecting on the elaboration of the objective, the subjective and the intersubjective, and how it differs from other types of knowledge.

The author argues that self-knowledge involves understanding one's own identity and the ability to envision oneself in past and future situations. Quintanilla's inquiry about self-knowledge always centers on the "self" and its capability to engage in different scenarios (simulation) and act (agency). Currently, I am inclined to acknowledge that it arises from a triangular situation: the objective conditions of existence, external to the individual.

### Answering to self-knowledge according to Quintanilla

The Peruvian scholar suggests a five-step approach to answering this question. Initially, there is a distinction between self-knowledge as a direct and error-free experience (internal, Descartes) and self-knowledge as an ethical and analogical experience influenced by others (Socrates). The latter option also enables a stronger self-relationship. [2] [3]

Another relationship with an external character is present, as it promotes the distinction between intersubjectivity and objectivity by placing the object outside of the individual. As individuals engage in self-knowledge, their agency increases. Ultimately, each person becomes an authority on their own internal experiences. [2] [3] [4]

Quintanilla proposes another internal approach to self-knowledge, involving three perspectives or persons. The first person, within the self, refers to the subject's own experiences and how they describe themselves. The "self" can incorporate "you" as an intimate and subjective dialogue partner. The third individual, serving as the neutral ethical standpoint, becomes part of the analysis and evaluation process, moving away from "objectivity" towards subjectivity.

For Quintanilla, [3] social factors influence to self-knowledge and by the synchronistic participation of the other forms of knowledge (intersubjective and objective) with which it has an intimate relationship. According to the author, understanding oneself requires knowledge of the external world and its influence from others.

The cited author emphasizes the relevance of Plato's triadic intersubjective model in understanding our own selves and the objective reality not only from our beliefs but from our mental states and levels of intentionality. Quintanilla suggests that to achieve self-knowledge and understand others, one must simulate

various states and imagine different scenarios using counterfactual questions. [If I were... I would have...] [2] [3]

### Some idealistic possibilities to reach the truth

Thus, following the Platonian logic, rationality criteria have been respected in its statements to forge the knowledge. Knowledge is more complicated as it transits from the phenomenal experience to beliefs. In addition, self-knowledge requires information of mental states (e.g. beliefs) both conscious and non-conscious and even unconscious ones. [2]

To continue with, another strategy is the "transparency method" as cited by Cassam [3] that affirms because oneself knows what oneself believes about something when oneself asks what is reasonable to believe. If the belief is well justified, we do not have to doubt or regret. Thus, in both cases, one or other model or strategy, knowledge is accurate when it is reasonably justified.

However, these models seem to be not so useful when referring to unconscious, irrational beliefs, so rehearsing the interpretation with the available information turns out to be already a good attempt to approximate the knowledge of oneself, which will be perfected as we have more information, because the most significant thing in this task is the ability to question about oneself and to interpret ourselves. In this process the principle of charity [which has as its starting point to believe in what the other says, trying to find his points of rationality and not invalidate them *a priori* unless he does not resist this analysis] towards the other also applies to the principle of charity about our beliefs about ourselves, validating the good reasons to support what could be perceived as irrational (unconscious). [2] [3]

Regarding intersubjective understanding, the practice of interpretation is also relevant, which in self-knowledge can occur asynchronously or synchronously and in the search for knowledge of the other can also entail, as in oneself, diachronic corrections when by our own means (or with psychotherapist's I would say) help we provide new interpretations to events of the past, exercising a corrective action on them [this is precisely the purpose of therapy by placing the patient in scenarios that transcend the present by exercising the corrective action through interpretative ethics, not possible in the incorrigible condition of the phenomenal experience. If this is correct, it is possible as well to get to know the other person as oneself].

The fifth way developed by the author (internal also in my reading) starts by differentiating self-knowledge from self-awareness. This is related to the ability of someone to identify and differentiate oneself from other entities and to recognize that some mental states belong to us; while self-knowledge is linked to information [about himself and, as noted above, the environment and intersubjectivity]. Self-knowledge is not possible without self-consciousness, although self-consciousness is possible without self-knowledge. [2] [3]

If consciousness is organized by levels of cognitive complexity, the most rudimentary level would be given by the phenomenal consciousness [based on basic sensations and perceptions on which self-consciousness will be built]. At this level, the individual starts identifications and interpretations of mental states and the first narratives about oneself and its existence. Subsequently, a more complex level will be reached, which is self-knowledge, where

narratives become more complex, placing oneself as an object of knowledge. [3]

## Types of knowledge and configuration of mental state

The epistemologist continues to develop three canonical theories about self-knowledge: the theory of familiarity (of Cartesian orientation), the theory of inner consciousness (Locke), both pose the infallibility of introspective knowledge, because it allows the direct (not mediated) awareness of something and that self-knowledge is, an internal sense, dependent on the object, respectively. This argument could be refuted from the possibility that the subject has basic interpretations that allow the individual to remember, name, classify facts, it refers to [the mentalization] of objective experience that allows us, for instance, to interpret any pain as serious or not serious, but pain after all. We interpret the objective reality in every presentation.

The Bion's rêverie is a sample of the tripartite and simultaneous concurrence of the three forms of knowledge, because the baby [even with the basic structures], has the experience of the other, usually his mother, who assists him, takes care of him, making sure that nothing is missing or even sensing the need and desire of the baby while he develops language. This is how the baby increases his self-knowledge by creating the first configurations of mental states of others [the baby is recognizing himself thanks to the recognition of the others].

Therefore, for Quintanilla, both theories refer not exactly to self-knowledge but to forms of nuclear knowledge. The third theory emphasizes the need for action in self-knowledge [that is, besides the knowledge of mental states, identities, narratives, abilities, etc., self-knowledge requires active movement as organizations, reorganizations of the inner world that the mind performs not only of what it has but of what it should have, being indelible from praxis]. For the author, the rationalist theory seems to be more suitable than the two preceding ones, because they do not properly account for unconscious mental states. This part of the cognitive task calls for the self-interpretation of which is indelible, as it is of the other two processes that intervene concomitantly (the knowledge of the others and of the objective world). For our author, there is no self-knowledge without the knowledge of the others or of the intersubjective process of knowledge where feedback occurs by the constant and permanent inclusion of information according to the, I would say, progressive biopsychic resources that individuals are generating and this situation allow them to also constantly change the interpretations about themselves and about others, even about the objective or external material world. [2] [3]

## DISCUSSION

### Helping patient to find the truth

After having carried out the reflective route proposed by Quintanilla regarding possibilities that intervene and allow self-knowledge, it is evident that knowledge and particularly self-knowledge begins with more sensitive ways of understanding existence through phenomenal, immediate and direct elaborations provided by sensitive analyzers and that fact fosters certainties that allow individuals to interact with the environment and with themselves, then moving on to more complex and elaborate forms of self-knowledge, where the precedents could be insufficient when the individual tries to mentalize his existence conditions.

This does not mean to deny the value of the first one, but these are the basic points on which everything begins and in the light of what is known today in neurodynamic, neurotransmitters and brain architecture, to mention just a few aspects, sensations and perceptions can alter the phenomenal experience, limiting or altering the relationship of the individual with his environment (the others and the objective world) and with himself, the alteration of alter and self-knowledge, the alteration of the internal and the external. Such a disturbance is likely to send the individual into a parallel, partial, concomitant or alternate reality, because human life requires a minimum level of certainty about what is seen, heard, felt and, for example, what oneself knows about oneself.

Without this minimum level of certainty, social life would not be possible, not even life with oneself, at least in a functional sense. From this phenomenal certainty, as I have mentioned lines above, the complex interpretations of inferred and reinterpreted mental states that lead the individual to make sense of his own experience or, as Frankl [5] pointed out, to search for it. And it is that the individual can merge the concrete experience of self-consciousness with the concrete experience of transcendental consciousness or self-knowledge.

For Quintanilla there is no way to know oneself without taking cognitive and affective references, etc., without no references to the mental states and other objects of self-knowledge inferred from others and from what others infer about us. The reading of the mind of one and of the others then exercises metallization a unique faculty of human beings, developed in their phylo-ontogenetic becoming.

Unlike Carruthers, quoted by Quintanilla [3], considers self-knowledge as an asynchronous and asymmetric evolutionary product in human beings' origins, since one component of the triangle develops more influence on the other two ones, or the problem of consciousness as an evolutionary product of different non-specific physiological and functional structures that make this faculty possible [6]. Self-knowledge for our author is eminently adaptative and superior to its prerequisites (consciousness).

The ability to simulate is unique to the human being and allows him, as it allowed him from the beginning to be aware of what he needed: to warn of danger, prepare for war or promote peace by responding through planning, etc. A special section concerns emotional and affective knowledge and how it is controlled, channeled and distributed in interpersonal relationships and with oneself, a capacity that Gardner knows as multiple intelligences and Goleman as emotional intelligence [7] that ultimately theorize not only about the possibility that consciousness and more than this self-knowledge can influence behavior, regulating behavior through the voluntary variation of the "inputs" in a complex phenomenological neurodynamic that contributes in the attempt to tame the limbic brain discovered by McLean [8]. Then the concomitance of the other ways of knowing is taken as clear, because after all, recognizing the others and the reality where oneself develops with the others plus the animate and inanimate external world, is a way of recognizing oneself within the objects of knowledge put at the epistemic service of the knowing subject in a space-time location that is allowed by the elaboration of interpretations and self-interpretations translated into the narratives that the "self" elaborates on its existence.



## Warning some biases and distortions in the psychotherapeutic self-understanding

But, on a more internal level, this does not exempt us from not knowing ourselves in a true and infallible sense, moreover we could be self-deceiving, because in my understanding it is not enough the perspective of the self or of the alter or even the mediation of the third person when one tries to get to know oneself, since the human being has an unconscious and performs his acts not only consciously but unconsciously in an elusive self-interpretation or even with the interpretation coming from a subject (the other) that gives us appreciations such as *it seems to me that you have a problem* or *I think you are worried about not having a good job* and so many others coming from those who practice psychotherapy.

Although the level of success of this mentalization exercise coming from the intersubjective world can lead to levels of truth, to which the other rises by the symptomatologic manifestations of the cognizable subject or by what he tells him consciously or unconsciously (free association) because it is possible that one and the other are mistaken or are openly incomplete. If so, everything that would happen in the psychotherapeutic relationship would be reduced to the suggestion that has precisely been one of the staunch criticisms that have been made of psychoanalysis and its effects. Regardless of whether an interpretation is incomplete or inaccurate with its “positive” repercussions on the symptoms, sometimes the apparent remission of these is nothing more than the substitutive effect that the therapist's narrative produces on what the patient clings to defend or repress [9].

In psychology there are several evidence of the Coué's placebo effect, for instance, the well-known Forer effect started from undifferentiated personological interpretations could gain truth status for those who receive them [10]. The situation is by far more complicated when, as Chomsky says, the human being is the only one who can consciously distort his emotions or falsify his mental states by pretending to be happy (by a social convention) when he has a deep sadness. Here, at least the corrective modification coming from the alter ego as a regulating language of our “self” with our “other self” can contribute to genuine self-knowledge.

But when we are at unconscious levels, as Freud pointed out, the material is not accessible to consciousness, we are in deep ignorance, where precisely the epistemological model of Platonian certainty or the model of transparency mentioned by Quintanilla, that says the “good reasons of the self” might not be enough before, then raising the need and possibility of reaching a true knowledge of the same intersubjective interaction, getting out of oneself to include interpretations of others about ourselves, which is possible by psychoanalysis or, by intuitive levels full of information and subjective processing of those around us. This is the case of maternal Bion's reverie.

Here, the triangular proposition of Davidson or Cavell and even Quintanilla is updated, regarding the need for a subject, intersubjectivity and the context made up by the external world we share [11] [3], but perhaps the emphasis is different for one or the other author. Expressed in another way, it can be said that human language transitions towards the symbolic that at the same time is held in minimum rules of the interlocutor and the medium as a transitional space between the subject and the object. [12]

The semantics is not reduced to naming the object but extends to

the possibility of knowing and feeling that something exists, and while this happens in the first Saussurean verbalizations of signifiers, they come based on previous ones as the feeling of omnipotence that features infants experience to be alive, thanks to the knowledge of being cared (or in relationship) by someone from the outside.

As soon as the child tries to utter the signifier or just cries, the mother has already understood him, but either way or another, this asymmetrical relationship is horizontal at the level of wanting and receiving, giving a meaning to the relationship. For Wittgenstein, repetition is important in this communicative relationship [11], I would say, repetition builds patterns to establish communicative rules that allow the anticipation of the infant and a previous cognitive elaboration. In therapy, something similar happens, especially when the patients, unlike the infant, have a well-established language at the semantic and syntactic levels, but even so their problem and its causes are not clear.

Moreover, language can be a means of creating “language artifacts” and distractions to evade the unconscious material, the access to the real problem where there could be difficulties in one or various ways. It is something like *jouer à faire semblant* (as it is said in French) by analogy to part of the lyrics of a famous Claude François' song *Comme d'habitude* in which the monotonous life living together makes the couple pretend to love each other by playing the vacuum role that was assigned to them as a husband and spouse, with no meaning, and transcendental emotion. That is like pretending for others, and for themselves, to be a couple or a good couple.

As Cavell [11] points out, it is possible that in the analytical process there is a kind of distortion of the relationship [*italics are mine*], when communication develops only on the mental plane, on intersubjectivity, disdaining or dismissing the third component of triangulation: the environment, the world, the spatial scenario that Cavell proposes to recover and give it the importance it deserves. Additionally, this starts from the minimum conditions of positive transference of the patient (eros) that motivates him to come for therapy and to continue it. [13]

## Achieving certainties in psychotherapeutic interchange

Following Quintanilla [3] a prerequisite for achieving knowledge and self-knowledge is information from different levels that are constantly fed back and expressed in the interpretations that provoke internal and external actions that human beings elaborate of the world and of themselves.

The reflex arc [14] processes such neurophysiological actions with the senses, enabling the first sensory innervations and the cerebral representation constantly providing feedback on this relationship. Then, the information gets translated into the form of, for example, “I have a toothache.”

That the perceptive identification [nuclear self-consciousness for Quintanilla] has a part that goes through the consciousness and nominative decoding of language and another of which the individual is not aware but continues to operate from the body and the autonomic nervous system, among others. In my understanding, this is a precondition as the first informational step, because if it is altered, hallucinations or other perceptual alterations could appear. It refers then to another scenario: psychosis and psychopathology, which is not the reason for this analysis, but

which is established as a reference assumption. Reaching self-knowledge requires the minimum and shared nuclear processing means, understandings and common scenarios represented on these interactions based on sensor perceptual objectivity.

This would be a kind of nonspecific internal organizing thought of the phenomenological experience or high order experience and high order theory positions, according to Alarcón Zambrano [6]. This aspect is significant, because it is possible that new psychotherapists confuse a psychosis with a neurosis or even arrive at “possibly plausible” interpretations without realizing that the patient's speech is marked by a delusional clinical entity of plausible appearance, whose content may be coherent and feasible, such as some jealousy paranoia (for example, *he/she is unfaithful to me*) without significant functional alterations or with enough preservation of higher psychic functions.

For further development of delusional disorders can be revised American Psychiatric Association manual [15]. To continue with, Quintanilla [4] highlights the capacity of free will and agency human beings have; Hermoza [14], on his side, emphasizes the condition of psychology as an intermediate and especial science stood between the biological and the social. Campos Roldán [16] underlines a multiparadigmatic character of the psychology, where theories with different epistemological foundations coexist. Given these circumstances, a way out, probably in a very pragmatic perspective, can be inferred from Feyerabend [1] in the legitimization of *anything goes* or probably in Seguí's therapeutic of love [17] (the most important in therapy, according to Seguí, is to foster a true intention to help the patients). However the patient has the right to know the true and not just believe the one proposed by the therapist.

Concerning that point Cavell [11] highlighted, what I will call triangulation balance, without this equilibrium among internal, external and third person point of view, I mean if we forget the context and objective reality that the participants (patient-therapist) share in a frame of togetherness with the positive transference disposition proposed by Freud [13] the regulation of the intersubjective interchange therapeutic relationship would be impossible.

Particularly, when subjective perspectives enhanced by the information that the patient has and to which the patient accesses, we will be lost in the patient's reasons and making self-understanding difficult and slowing down the process of moving forward in self-knowledge, where free will and agency capacity will be vital (making decisions about his life, following Quintanilla [4]), to know oneself and feel better. If this is the case, the patient would also have the right to question the truth that is proposed/imposed on him in therapy and seek a second opinion.

Then again, the Davidsonian principle of charity would come into force [3] otherwise we would live in permanent uncertainty if we would doubt every interaction, every evidence, and every communication. This principle can be applicable in psychotherapeutic treatment. What happens in psychoanalysis is that it works for one and not in the same way for the other, because when dealing with the tyranny of the unconscious, the analyst must be cautious about the verb of the conscious (that is, about what patient says and the possibility that what he says could be a form of “*the analyst's desire*”); and the patient, about his feelings towards the person of the analyst (transference). In either case, it will be the psychoanalytic doubt that is at stake to neutralize as much as

possible this potential bias that is common in psychotherapy and psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

Freud [18] prescribed floating attention and the principle of abstinence for anyone who aspires to practice this type of therapy and research method based on a theory of mind. Then he will provide fundamental recommendations in the training of analysts and triangular recommendations such as the need to take a theoretical training, the attention of cases supervised by a didactic analyst and, of course, be analyzed.

In the fusion of these prescriptions, it is precisely the approximation to the understanding of patients in their mainly unconscious mobility that is sought with greater certainty. Despite this, we know that psychoanalysis requires time and repeated immediacy with patients, avoiding precipitations in interpretations, returns and misunderstandings, because each reconstructive exercise of interpretation of the past, incomplete or complete transference, are them all steps towards the truth that is unknown and a starting point for other interpretations that will contribute to self-knowledge, what always transits for the other or one who responds to the effort of elaborating a genuine and honest opinion, regardless even of theoretical orientation, according to Seguí. [19]

Beyond this, it becomes clear the need for methodological triangulations to always promote a creative and permeable sense to understand the past, the unsaid, the blur lines of conscious and spoken language and the double bind messages, the meaning of the dreams, and all of this not only in the patient but in the analyst himself.

The sense of reality (reasoning) should be present in any consultation, allowing psychotherapist to take position before what is and is not psychopathological, ungraspable to the conception of the patient, because their subjectivity could dominate patients. The psychotherapy summons at least two people that can mentalize and be mentalized in a psychotherapeutic relationship.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, Quintanilla's concepts on mind self-awareness and self-knowledge were explored within the context of psychoanalytic psychotherapy, highlighting the role of two individuals in facilitating healing and enhancing mutual understanding. The complex aspect of human subjectivity can impact a therapist's inaccurate suggestion, resulting in potential mistakes in therapy. Nonetheless, there are opinions indicating that if done in a collaborative and honest manner, it may not be detrimental to the patient. Over time, the truth gradually emerges and takes shape in a psychotherapeutic bond. Additionally, it often includes various elements organized around the conscious experience. It relates to the exchange within the psychic universe of those seeking therapy to alleviate suffering or gain insight into the unknown. This fact is not solely based on the patient's ego or alter ego, but also on the therapist's otherness.

Psychoanalysis, which relies on the patient's unconscious mind, aims to uncover hidden truths through self-knowledge and interaction with the therapist and the context. The therapist's subjectivity is essential in psychoanalytic research to reconstruct the past and uncover the unconscious.

The mentalization of patient certainties should be included in psychotherapeutic work, not just assumptions, allowing the informational flow to demarcate the spaces of the unconscious, of the pathological, of the fantasy, of the desire, where the first step is

given by the assessment of nuclear consciousness until reaching complex forms of knowledge and mentalization.

The adaptative and evolutionary traits of humans facilitate this process, as advised by psychoanalysis and clinical practice to adopt methods that promote openness to third-party participation.

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