

## Self-Understanding as a Condition for Self-Education

### Poznanie siebie jako warunek samowychowania

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**Abstract:** This article aims to conceptualise self-understanding as a fundamental condition for effective self-education, with particular emphasis on the period of adolescence. The author invokes the Socratic maxim “Know thyself,” noting that self-understanding is not merely an intellectual act but also an existential practice that underpins personality development and moral maturity. The main contribution of the study is the presentation of an original typology of six complementary perspectives on self-understanding: introspection, alterospection, retrospection, propection, extrospection, and transpection. Organised along subjective, temporal, and transcendent axes, this typology integrates previously fragmented insights and provides a more comprehensive model of the dynamic processes of knowing oneself. During adolescence, self-understanding enables a realistic assessment of one’s own situation and facilitates the formulation of life goals. In conclusion, the author emphasises that effective self-education is possible only when a young person integrates diverse ways of reflecting on the self and the world. This creates conditions for the development of a mature, autonomous personality capable of consciously directing its own development.

**Keywords:** self-understanding, self-education, youth, personal development, autonomous attitude, mature personality

**Abstrakt:** Celem artykułu jest teoretyczne ujęcie samopoznania jako podstawowego warunku skutecznego samowychowania, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem okresu dorastania. Autor odwołuje się do maksymy sokratejskiej „Poznaj samego siebie”, wskazując, że samopoznanie nie jest wyłącznie aktem intelektualnym, lecz praktyką egzystencjalną, warunkującą rozwój osobowości i dojrzałość moralną. Głównym wkładem opracowania jest przedstawienie autorskiej typologii sześciu komplementarnych perspektyw samopoznania: introspekcji, alterospekcji, retrospekcji, prospekcji, ekstrospekcji i transspekcji. Typologia ta, uporządkowana wzdłuż osi podmiotowej, czasowej i transcendentnej, integruje dotychczas rozproszone podejścia, oferując bardziej wszechstronny model dynamicznych procesów poznawania siebie. W okresie młodzieńczym samopoznanie umożliwia realistyczną ocenę własnej sytuacji i ułatwia formułowanie celów życiowych. We wnioskach autor podkreśla, że skuteczne samowychowanie możliwe jest jedynie wtedy, gdy młody człowiek integruje różnorodne sposoby refleksji nad sobą i światem. Stwarza to warunki do kształtowania dojrzałej, autonomicznej osobowości, zdolnej do świadomego kierowania własnym rozwojem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** samopoznanie, samowychowanie, młodzież, rozwój osobniczy, postawa autonomiczna, dojrzała osobowość



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## INTRODUCTION

The maxim “Know thyself” (Gr. *gnōthi seauton*), commonly associated with the philosophy of Socrates – though also attributed to the Seven Sages of ancient Greece and inscribed on the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi (Wilkins 1929) – can be regarded as a starting point for reflection on self-understanding as a prerequisite of self-education. In the Socratic tradition, knowing oneself was not merely an intellectual act but also an existential practice – a process leading to a better life and moral improvement (Szwejka 2024, 120). It acquires particular significance during adolescence, when young people must define their identity, values, and life goals. Today, however, the process of self-education seems to unfold along different paths than in the past, when the boundaries of a stable and coherent identity were more clearly defined, and there was a commonly shared understanding of what kind of person one ought to be – and what kind one ought not to be. Nowadays, individuals are confronted with a broader range of possibilities and multiple criteria for evaluating both themselves and the surrounding world (Marmola 2023, 62). This situation encourages researchers to develop new theoretical models of self-understanding that can also demonstrate their practical value in self-education.

### 1. THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL NATURE OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING

The essence of self-education does not lie in action *per se*, but in taking responsibility for one’s own development. Otherwise, one may fail to develop as a person or simply succumb to external influences, such as fashion or social pressure (Łobacz 2023, 223). Every individual is capable of self-education, as the sources of growth lie within oneself, while the influence of educators can only support or limit this process (Śliwerski 2024, 17). Although every human activity has a personality-shaping dimension, even when not directed towards specific outcomes, self-education is not a random process but a deliberate one, for without active and realistic self-recognition, one cannot properly guide one’s own life.

Self-understanding begins with awareness of one’s intellectual abilities, talents, and predispositions. This knowledge is the starting point for further development. Research shows that identifying one’s strengths enhances both a sense of efficacy and motivation to learn (Linley et al. 2010, 8–17; García-Álvarez, Cobo-Rendón and Lobos 2024, 1490095). It is just equally important to recognise limitations and obstacles that hinder self-improvement, for knowing yourself means seeing both your good points and the things you need to work on. That is the only way to take conscious corrective actions (Polak 2023, 62; Rembierz 2023, 67–69). What is more, the process of self-education involves reflection on values and life goals. Self-awareness, therefore, not only entails knowing one’s own skills but also requires coherence between one’s decisions and sense of personal identity (Salovey and Mayer 1990, 185–211; Sheldon and Houser-Marko 2001, 152–165). Finally, self-understanding has a dynamic and communal dimension. It does not occur

solely through isolated introspection but also in relationships with others, through feedback, and by confronting one's attitudes with the experiences of the community. This means that self-education, while personal, develops through dialogue with others and learning from one's cultural tradition (Milcarek 2023b, 231).

One could say that the role of self-understanding in self-education is analogous to that of a pedagogical diagnosis in educational practice. Therefore, self-understanding appears as the starting point for authentic self-work, which allows a young person to realistically assess their situation in the process of finding their own path of growth (Mikiewicz 2024, 137–158; Tałaj 2024, 150). Over the long term, neglecting this dimension may return years later as the burden of unfulfilled potential and the awareness of missed opportunities. In this context, Socrates' maxim "the unexamined life is not worth living" (*Apology*, 38a) remains relevant as a firm call to self-knowledge. The process of self-education is best fostered through a multidimensional self-understanding, which progresses from introspection (looking inward) and alterospection (seeing oneself through others' eyes), through retrospection (looking back into the past) and prospection (looking ahead into the future), to extrospection (looking outward toward the world and its context) and transpection (looking beyond present experience and individual biography).

While this typology resonates with existing theoretical approaches to self-understanding, it goes beyond their scope by integrating their partial insights into a coherent framework. As such, it represents a novel perspective that clearly differs from concepts well established in the literature. For instance, Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000) focuses on human motivation and the fulfilment of universal psychological needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness), which influence well-being and engagement. In other words, it explains why we act and develop. McAdams' (2015) approach frames personality development as a narrative and identity-based process, involving traits, characteristic adaptations, and the life story, thereby addressing how personality and identity are formed over time. Likewise, Mezirow (1991) discusses the process of critical reflection, perspective transformation, and changes in meaning schemes that lead to profound shifts in understanding oneself and the world. On the other hand, Goleman's (1995) model of emotional intelligence emphasises emotional and social competencies, such as recognising, regulating, and using emotions effectively in one's own experience and in interpersonal interactions. In contrast, the typology proposed in this article maps the range perspectives available for self-understanding and thereby offers a pedagogically relevant model that better captures the multi-layered nature of personal development, particularly during adolescence.

This approach is grounded in a personalistic-constructivist theoretical perspective, which assumes that the developing subject is both an autonomous agent and a being-in-relation, constructing meaning through interactions with oneself, others, time, and the surrounding world. The typology operationalises these assumptions by transforming abstract theoretical premises into a coherent analytical framework. The study is primarily conceptual, aiming to interpret, integrate, and systematise existing

insights on self-understanding into a comprehensive model. Consequently, the analysis is not empirical in the conventional sense but analytical, drawing on literature, philosophical reflection, and pedagogical theory to construct a framework that can inform future empirical research and guide educational practice. Although some of the terms used reflect concepts already present in psychological and pedagogical literature, the overall structure and integration of these dimensions constitute the author's original contribution, providing a novel perspective on the multidimensional nature of self-understanding. This typology is organized along three axes: (1) the subjective axis (self/others), which includes introspection and alterospection; (2) the temporal axis (time), encompassing retrospection and propection; and (3) the transcendent axis (outward/beyond), which includes extrospection and transpection. For clarity, the typology is presented in Table 1, with the following paragraphs providing a more detailed discussion of its components.

Table 1. Typology of Approaches to the Process of Self-Understanding

Axe	Term	Direction of view	Characteristics
Subjective	Introspection	Inward, toward the self	Self-knowledge, awareness of one's inner states
	Alterospection	Inward, through the perspective of others	Reflected self, one's image as perceived by others
Temporal	Retrospection	Backward, toward the past	Memories, analysis of experiences, personal biography
	Propection	Forward, toward the future	Anticipation, imagining scenarios, goal-setting and planning
Transcendent	Extrospection	Outward, toward the world and its context	Perceiving oneself through social and cultural frameworks
	Transpection	Beyond present experience and individual biography	Perceiving oneself through an axiological or spiritual lens

## 2. THE SUBJECTIVE AXIS

The subjective dimension of self-understanding includes introspection and alterospection. Introspection (Lat. *intro*, "inward" + *specere*, "to look") covers a wide range of mental phenomena that a person can observe and reflect upon consciously. It primarily concerns emotions, allowing individuals to recognise their own feelings, moods, and typical affective responses (Łukasik 2023, 11–28). It also encompasses cognitive processes, in which a person examines thoughts, beliefs, attention patterns, and decision-making strategies (Nichols and Stich 2004, 297–339). Equally important is the motivational and volitional dimension, which involves exploring the sources of one's actions, the hierarchy of goals and

values, and the degree of perseverance and self-control (Smółka 2023, 39). Yet, it is important to acknowledge that introspection has limitations – much of mental life remains inaccessible to consciousness, and individuals may suppress or repress certain internal contents, consciously or unconsciously, potentially leading to a distorted self-image (Wilson and Dunn 2004, 493–518). Therefore, introspection does not always guarantee full insight, although it can still facilitate constructing a personal narrative, integrating experiences, and fostering a sense of coherence.

Through introspection, adolescents can examine their self-image, sense of identity, and life purpose – elements that underpin self-education. Daily behaviours, habitual responses in social interactions, and patterns of action can also be analysed (Hixon and Swann 1993, 35–43). To overcome the limits of introspection alone, it is beneficial to complement it with other forms of self-understanding. This combination allows for a deeper comprehension of both conscious and partially hidden motives and mechanisms guiding behaviour. When introspection is supported by such complementary reflections, it becomes a tool for holistic self-understanding – encompassing both transient experiences and stable personality traits – and facilitates conscious shaping of attitudes, decisions, and personal development.

Alterospection (Lat. *alter*, “other” + *specere*, “to look”) refers to knowing oneself through the perspective of others – understanding how we are perceived, evaluated, and interpreted in social interactions (Yue et al. 2020, 553585). It involves both direct feedback (such as praise, criticism, or emotional reactions) and subtle social cues that reveal how we appear in the eyes of those around us (Wallace and Tice 2012, 124–140). Alterospection is particularly valuable when introspection is insufficient, as it uncovers aspects of personality and behaviour that may be inaccessible to consciousness – for example, how we affect others, the roles we play in a group, or the emotions we elicit. In this sense, alterospection not only complements introspection but also serves as a corrective, reducing the risk of a one-sided or distorted self-image (Sokołowska 2023, 200–201).

In the context of self-education, alterospection helps adolescents compare their self-perceptions with how others see them (Wakulska 2014, 25–26). This process allows for the refinement of subjective self-evaluations, the development of empathy, and a deepening of social awareness. However, it does not mean unquestioningly accepting others’ judgments – meaningful alterospection involves reflecting on others’ perspectives and treating them as material for further work on oneself (Milcarek 2023a, 65). It is precisely this interplay between internal reflection and external feedback that allows a more complete understanding of oneself to emerge, fostering an authentic process of self-education.

### 3. THE TEMPORAL AXIS

The temporal dimension of self-understanding is revealed through retrospection and propection. Retrospection (Lat. *retro*, “backward” + *specere*, “to look”) refers to the way individuals come to know themselves by deliberately reflecting on their

past. It is grounded in the interpretation of events, experiences, and memories that have left lasting traces and shaped identity in different ways. This includes both ordinary, everyday situations and pivotal life moments that later come to be seen as turning points in a personal biography (Łukasik 2023, 22; Krok 2023, 109; Horowski 2023, 227–240). Through retrospection, people can perceive the continuity of their development, trace the origins of present attitudes, and recognise patterns of behaviour that tend to reappear in similar circumstances (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000, 261–288). In this sense, it is not merely a “review of past events” but also a critical tool for understanding oneself in the present.

Within the process of self-education, retrospection plays a significant role, as adolescents learn to interpret earlier choices, acknowledge mistakes and successes, and assess the consequences of their actions. This reflective work supports the development of responsibility and strengthens the capacity for self-examination, which is essential for conscious self-formation. Retrospection also protects against the uncritical repetition of past errors, while at the same time allowing individuals to recognise their achievements and consolidate a sense of agency. For this reason, it becomes not only an exercise of memory, but above all a key instrument of self-education (Nowakowski 2024, 85–92).

Prospection (Lat. *pro*, “forward” + *specere*, “to look”) refers to directing one’s attention toward the future: imagining possible scenarios, planning actions, and anticipating outcomes. Through prospection, individuals formulate short- and long-term goals and confront them with their own capacities and limitations. This process combines a realistic dimension (planning concrete steps) with an ideal dimension (articulating hopes and aspirations), making it a powerful source of motivation and life direction (Szpunar, Spreng, and Schacter, 2014, 18414–18421). It allows people to guide their actions, transforming the future from an unknown space into a domain that can be actively shaped. A significant challenge arises when adolescents adopt a predominantly “here and now” orientation, restricting their perspective to the present and avoiding both reflective engagement with the past and anticipatory thinking about the future. The absence of this temporal dimension often leads to a fragmented sense of self and hinders the development of a coherent identity (Sztalt 2023, 113–128).

Prospection strengthens a sense of responsibility for one’s own development and enhances the capacity to make deliberate choices. By asking themselves who they want to become and which values they wish to pursue, adolescents lay the foundations of their identity and autonomy (Gałkowski 2023, 27–40). In this way, prospection is not only an act of imagination, but also a formative practice that supports the process of self-education and prepares young people for responsible participation in adult life (Domeracki 2023, 87–106; Wojtkowiak 2023, 247–249).

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#### 4. THE TRANSCENDENT AXIS

The transcendent dimension of self-understanding comprises extrospection and transsppection. Extrospection (Lat. *extra*, “outside” + *specere*, “to look”) involves understanding oneself in relation to the external world – including social situations, cultural contexts, roles one assumes, and institutional conditions (Chrost 2023, 140). In this way, a person can identify their traits, abilities, and limitations not merely through internal reflection or the perspectives of others, but also by observing how they operate within specific environments such as family, school, peer groups, or cultural communities (Daszykowska-Tobiasz 2023, 153–154; Gątarek 2023, 99; Botwina 2023, 155–156). Extrospection allows one to understand that the “self” does not exist in a vacuum but is always shaped by dynamic interaction with the surrounding world.

Through this perspective, adolescents gain insight into their position in the social sphere and how cultural factors influence their choices. Analysing one’s roles and life situations becomes a starting point for consciously accepting or rejecting certain patterns, which strengthens the sense of agency and autonomy (Smolka 2023, 42). In this sense, extrospection complements the previously discussed perspectives, extending the process of self-understanding and guiding individual development. Still, a notable challenge is that some adolescents focus solely on direct experiences, neglecting historical and cultural connections, which can limit the developmental potential of extrospection (Sztalt 2023, 116).

Transsppection (Lat. *trans*, “beyond, over” + *specere*, “to look”) moves beyond the individual, addressing questions about life’s meaning, transcendence, and universal spiritual values. It entails reflection that goes beyond immediate experience and personal biography, directing attention toward what is absolute, eternal, or shared by all humanity (Dłubacz 2023, 15). Transsppection combines elements of philosophical contemplation and spiritual inquiry: individuals explore the ultimate sources of existence and seek what gives life direction and purpose (Kuncewicz 2023, 16–20). As such, transsppection represents the deepest level of self-understanding.

In the context of self-education, transsppection encourages adolescents to look beyond short-term goals and fleeting desires, opening up an axiological and spiritual dimension. By engaging with questions of meaning, moral responsibility, and goodness, young people lay the groundwork for their own value system and identity formation. Transsppection does not necessarily imply religiosity in the strict sense: it may take the form of ethical, philosophical, or existential reflection, but it always serves an orienting and stabilising function (Reed 2015, 411–420). Through transsppection, self-education acquires a truly holistic dimension: adolescents not only learn to manage themselves in daily life (introspection, retrospection, propection) and interact with others and the world (alterospection, extrospection), but also explore the deeper significance of their own existence.

## 5. METHODS OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING

Although self-understanding takes place against the backdrop of exploring the world and remains closely connected to it (Dłubacz 2023, 15), it differs from the knowledge of external reality. In this process, a person assumes a dual role – being both the knowing subject and the object of knowledge (Smółka 2023, 39). Knowing oneself is neither a spontaneous nor an obvious process – it requires the use of appropriate methods and tools that enable the deepening of self-awareness. In psychological and pedagogical literature, several paths are distinguished that lead to a better understanding of one's abilities, limitations, values, and motivations:

1. **Self-reflection.** The primary method of self-understanding is systematic contemplation of one's thoughts, emotions, and actions. Self-reflection allows the examination of one's successes and failures and the drawing of conclusions from them (Duda-Machejek 2023, 90). It leads to the identification of behavioural patterns and the conscious adjustment of actions in the process of self-education (Zimmerman 2002, 64–70).
2. **Keeping a journal.** This practice helps organise thoughts, emotions, and goals. Research shows that regularly recording experiences increases self-awareness and helps individuals better understand their own reactions (Smyth and Pennebaker 2008, 1–7). Examples include a “journal of positive events” (Sokołowska 2023, 208–209) or a “gratitude journal” (Duda-Machejek 2023, 100).
3. **Feedback from others.** Self-understanding is often limited by the so-called blind spot – the areas of our personality and behaviour that are visible to others but inaccessible through introspection, as illustrated by the Johari Window model (Luft 1961, 6–7). Therefore, an invaluable method of self-understanding is seeking and utilising constructive feedback from family, friends, teachers, or colleagues (Duda-Machejek 2023, 90–91; Szast 2023, 104).
4. **Dialogue and interpersonal relationships.** The development of self-awareness and self-education occurs in a communal context – through dialogue, collaboration, and the confrontation of one's own attitudes with those of others (Herzig and Kowalczyk 2010, 91–100). This is, among other things, one of the functions of friendship, through which deep interpersonal bonds are formed (Mendelson and Aboud, 1999, 130–132).
5. **Psychological tests and tools.** Contemporary psychology offers various instruments for self-understanding (Szcukiewicz 2024, 55–56). For example, Stefan Pacek (1977) developed an interview questionnaire concerning ways of self-improvement and experiences related to personal work. Andrzej Januszewski (1988) published a standardized tool for studying the capacity to understand oneself and others. Meanwhile, Violetta Rodek (2014) proposed a scale that enables the analysis of goals formulated and pursued by an individual in the process of independent work on oneself. Such instruments can complement personal observation.

6. Engagement with philosophy, literature, and art. This practice fosters self-reflection, as encountering cultural texts allows one to shape oneself in relation to universal questions about the meaning of life, values, and the limits of human experience (Gadamer 2004, 102–130). However, a significant challenge is the visible estrangement from the written and spoken word observed in some members of the younger generation (Tałaj 2023, 95–112).

The methods of self-understanding mentioned above can be understood as supporting the process of self-education. Each of them – from self-reflection to engagement with literature and art – reveals different aspects of the “self” and fosters more integrated personal growth. However, a prudent combination of these methods and their alignment toward the harmonious development of personality are crucial.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have demonstrated that self-understanding is the foundation of self-education; it enables realistic goal-setting, harmonious personal development, and the formation of a mature, autonomous attitude toward life. The typology discussed, in turn, shows that self-understanding is a dynamic, multifaceted process that cannot be reduced to a single perspective. It combines elements of internal, interpersonal, social, cultural, spiritual, and temporal reflection. In the pedagogical context, this means that conscious and responsible self-education is possible only when a young person integrates diverse ways of “looking at oneself.” Only such comprehensive self-reflection creates conditions for shaping a mature personality capable of authentic self-formation.

The proposed typology carries significant pedagogical implications, emphasising its practical relevance. Each dimension of self-understanding corresponds to competencies valued in contemporary education: introspection strengthens the individual’s ability to recognise their strengths and supports self-regulation in the learning process; alterospection develops social awareness and communication skills based on interaction and feedback; retrospection involves critical analysis of past experiences to shape future actions consciously; prospection motivates the setting of life goals and future-oriented thinking; extrospection enables the contextualization of knowledge within social and cultural frameworks; while transpection opens the individual to axiological and spiritual dimensions.

Implementing these perspectives in the school environment can transform education from a transmission-based model into an approach that engages learners in actively taking responsibility for their own development. This typology, therefore, serves as a valuable tool supporting pedagogical strategies that foster autonomy, critical reflection, and identity formation.

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