

Towards a New Kind of Cognition

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To explore Chiara's cognitive proposal, this article takes a phenomenological and interdisciplinary approach in an attempt to give insight into the experience of cognition and offer a basis for understanding it within the context of human development. The article outlines three modes of cognition that can be seen in human being using a schematic understanding of childhood development as a basis. These modes of cognition are then looked at from an evolutionary perspective seeing how human cognition, from the arrival of representational thought, has developed under the influence of culture more than of biology. This provides instruments for understanding the kind of cognition present in the text of "Look at All the Flowers," showing its historical continuity with other forms of cognition and indicating the significant new elements that it contains.

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The importance of the act of knowing cannot be exaggerated. Not only is it fundamental to human survival, it is also basic to every kind of human endeavour. Chiara Lubich offers a form of cognition that builds upon and develops previous forms and this is exemplified in the text "Look at all the Flowers." To explore Chiara's proposal, I shall take a phenomenological and interdisciplinary approach as this gives an insight into the experience of cognition and offers a basis for understanding it within the context of human development. What I will say is necessarily schematic and, of course, reality is more complex and less ordered. Nevertheless while such a brief study cannot pretend to give an exhaustive account, it may suggest a useful interpretative key.

To begin with a definition: cognition, as I shall speak of it, is *the way in which the human subject acquires and uses knowledge*. It is thus never passive and merely receptive. It always exists in interaction with reality and is always within the total context of what it is to be human, which means especially the relational dimension.

Three Modes of Cognition

Looking at how a child develops is, of course, not the only way of looking at human knowing. But it is a strategy for seeing some of the basic forms of cognition present in human beings.¹ While each

1. This kind of psychological approach can also be complemented by philosophical inquiries. For instance, Bernard Lonergan in *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (1957) proposed a "generalized empirical method" which he referred to as "critical realism." This approach is indebted to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and, "fully cognisant of Hegel and Kant" (Brendan Purcell, *From Big Bang to Big Mystery* [Dublin: Veritas, 2011], 246), it grounds knowing (and valuing) in a critique of the mind similar to Kant's. Lonergan's method could in principle be applied to any of the three proposed modes of cognition.

mode of cognitive growth is in fact discernible once it has been achieved, in life the three modes are not discrete compartments and contain considerable variety and complexity.

Somatic or Enactive Knowledge

The first knowledge a child has of the world is through physical interactions with it: sucking, grasping, tasting, smelling, and so on. Jerome Bruner argues that while the initial form of action is “looking at,” these other actions allow the child to “objectify” and “correlate” the environment.² Thus a cognitive model of the world is constructed through somatic interaction such that “Children first understand objects as extensions of their own bodies.”³ Quoting Piaget, Bruner says things are “lived rather than thought.”⁴ The child, then, gradually learns not only to hold things, but to hold them in mind, forming representations or mental models that are either *of something*, or, as sensory motor skills develop, *of how to do something* (tying a knot for instance).⁵

2. Jerome Bruner, “On Cognitive Growth” in Bruner, Olver, Greenfield et al., *Studies on Cognitive Growth* (New York: Wiley, 1967), 16. Bruner, following Piaget (see Jean Piaget, *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* [New York: Norton, 1962]) develops a threefold classification of cognitive representation. This is the main source for the threefold schema set out here. As we shall see, it is largely similar to the work of scholars in other fields.

3. Robert M. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 18. Following Bruner, Bellah proposes three major modes of religious representation, in addition to another mode derived from religious experience, which he calls unitive events.

4. Jean Piaget, *The Construction of Reality in Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1954).

5. These are stored as contrasting and discrete kinds of memory, either of episodes that are recalled in their specifics or in procedures, as an abstraction from episodes, that are recalled as general behavioural patterns. Merlin Donald argues that there are two kinds of memory in early forms of cognitive development, episodic and procedural. “Whereas episodic memory preserves the specifics of events, procedural memory

Symbolic Knowledge

Before complete linguistic mastery is achieved, another set of cognitive capacities begins to develop. These are ways of thinking about the world that represent it, with increasing competency, in symbolic forms: pictorially, musically, poetically, and narratively. They both communicate and make sense of experience, as Paul Ricoeur put it: “I express myself in expressing the world.”⁶ And, as such, they generate representations that the mind can use to model reality to itself and that can also create cultural artifacts (paintings, music, poems, stories) conveying these models to others. They are extremely powerful, and each in its own way contains meanings that cannot be fully captured by concepts.⁷ This excess of content is present in all forms of symbolic expression, but narrative is capable of explaining intent, motivation, feelings, personal value, and individual and collective identity. Each person or community is, as it were, the story about the self or the community.

preserves general principles for action, across events. Procedural memories must preserve general principles for action and ignore the specifics of each situation.” Merlin Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard, 1991), 150. Fascinatingly these two kinds of memory are stored in different parts of the brain (see *ibid.*).

6. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 13.

7. Susanne Langer says, “Artistic symbols . . . are untranslatable; their sense . . . is always *implicit*, and cannot be explicated by any interpretation. This is true even of poetry, for *though* the *material* of poetry is verbal, its import is not the literal assertion made in the words, but *the way the assertion is made*, and this involves the sound, the tempo, the aura of associations of the words, the long or short sequences of ideas, the wealth or poverty of transient *imagery* that contains them, the sudden arrest of fantasy by pure fact, or of familiar fact by sudden fantasy, the suspense of literal meaning by a sustained ambiguity resolved in a long-awaited key-word, and the unifying, all-embracing artifice of rhythm.” Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Penguin, 1948), 212.

Theoretic Knowledge

From about the age of seven, though not at the same time for all children, conceptual thought begins to emerge. This marks the end of what Piaget calls an “egocentric world” where, since the world and the child are not distinct, all things are understood to happen in relation to and as an extension of the child:⁸ the self and other things are now independent elements in the world. This leads to a greater capacity to objectify the world and, with that, the capacity to think abstractly. This is the basis for theoretical thought.

These three modes of knowing have in common several fundamental aspects. Three are significant in our context. Each models the world around it, forming a mental pattern of its knowledge of the environment that is used to interact with it. Each is part of a network of relationships with other human subjects in the formation of these mental models, that is, we know as part of a community of knowledge.⁹ And each forms representations (via gestures,

8. Piaget held a strong view of what, to use Lucien Lévy-Brühl’s term, could be called the child’s *participation mystique* with the world. Robert Bellah, however, notes: “On the basis of recent research, Piaget’s notion of dualism must be qualified, or even perhaps, applied only to the period before birth. George Butterworth has argued that ‘a boundary exists in infant perception between infant and the world such that the absolute dualism assumed by Piaget is not supported.’ But he adds, ‘On the other hand, it is clear that the very young infant has no objective, reflective self-awareness.’ George Butterworth, ‘Some Benefits of Egocentrism,’ in *Making Sense: The Child’s Construction of the World*, ed. Jerome Bruner and Helen Haste (London: Methuen, 1987), 70–71.” Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 614, note 21.

9. Bruner argues that there are two tenets to what he calls the “instrumental conceptualism” that he and his colleagues propose. The first is that “our knowledge of the world is based on a constructed model of reality, a model that can only partially and intermittently be tested against input.” (Bruner, *Studies in Cognitive Growth*, 319) He goes on to say, secondly, that the models contained in this constructed model of reality “develop as a function of the uses to which they have been first put by the culture and then by any of its members who must bend knowledge to their own uses” (Ibid., 320).

symbols, or theories) which give access to these models, allowing them to be developed, challenged, and communicated.

The Evolution of Human Cognition

The three modes of cognitive development suggest ways of understanding the gradual development of human cognition and the culture that accompanies it. Merlin Donald, for instance, posits three stages of cognitive evolution, developing out of pre-human cognitive processes similar to those of the great apes, which generate what he calls “episodic culture.”¹⁰ This is followed by the transition to early hominid “mimetic culture,” made up of gestures and pre-linguistic vocalizations. Archaeological and anthropological evidence suggest that as brain size grew and body structure altered, from *homo habilis* to *homo erectus*, new skills were being acquired. These show the development of new cognitive abilities in the emergent hominids. Enactment, for example, in the form of mime, can teach how to produce a stone axe, and this implies a mental model not only of what is to be produced but of the procedure to produce it.¹¹ It is not certain at what point this culture gave place to one where mental models were represented by meaningful and syntactically ordered sounds. In *homo erectus* changes in the vocal tract suggest at least the possibility that this species may even have developed language.¹²

Nevertheless, with the advent of *homo sapiens* a cognitive transition has clearly taken place and it is possible to discern in the cultural artefacts produced, the development of a complex culture that

10. Donald, 124–161.

11. Ibid., 162–200.

12. For a wide-ranging discussion see Purcell, 197–206.

uses symbols with semantic content, namely “mythic culture.”¹³ In his careful study of human origins and development, Brendan Purcell maintains that it is very likely that what is variously described as a “creative explosion” or a “human revolution” did indeed take place with the arrival of “intentional symbolic activity,”¹⁴ and it would seem that its origins go back as far as about 164,000 years ago in Africa. At this point, cognitive development begins to be dominated not so much by biological as cultural change. Mythic culture employs symbolic representations in the context of narratives (*mythos* is Greek for story), and these give human subjects powerful instruments to interpret and interact with the environment.¹⁵ Mythic cognition is not static and it did progress, using its narrative and symbolic methodology, to be self-critical.¹⁶

This self-criticism became acute in a further transition that took place in several cultures, in particular Greece, ancient Israel, Persia, India, and China, during what Karl Jaspers called the axial

13. Evidence of this continues to be found. In Europe, some of the most impressive creations can be seen, for instance, in the oldest cave paintings currently known at Altamira in Spain. The most ancient of them is a red disk dated at before 4800 BCE, considerably older than the Chauvet paintings in France dated as at least 3700 BCE. The artistry at both sites is superb, demonstrating a complex of skills and also strongly suggesting a socially advanced culture where people could be set aside to develop their artistic talents. See: <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2012/06/120614-neanderthal-cave-paintings-spain-science-pike/>

14. Purcell, 181.

15. The power of story should never be underestimated. One can return again and again to a story, especially if it is a good one, and it will render new insights. Mythic thinking, therefore, can do things that conceptual thought cannot.

16. An example is the first chapter of Genesis, where a story of the one God creating the world he utterly transcends was critical of polytheistic accounts.

period.¹⁷ The culture that emerged, which we are heir to today,¹⁸ can be called, in the pregnant expression of Giuseppe Zanghì, the culture of the *logos*.¹⁹ The *logos* is a form of knowing that attempts to achieve objectivity, that is, to see things without projections from the hopes, fears, fantasies, or preconditioning of the subject. It develops conceptual reasoning that produces theories, and so it corresponds to the acquisition of theoretical knowledge. But the *logos*-word can also be a word of command and so have ethical and existential implications. Furthermore, as the light of understanding it can also mean conscience or a profound spiritual intuition, which attempts to see things as they truly are.²⁰ As such it is the

17. Jaspers proposed the notion of an axial period in 1949 in his *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (*The Origin and Goal of History*). He sees it as having taken place “from 800 and 200 BC” (*The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. from German by Michael Bullock [London: Routledge, 2011], 23). Others date it slightly differently; Mormigliano, for instance, puts the axial period in “the classical situation of the ancient world between 600 and 300 BC” (Arnaldo Mormigliano, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* [Cambridge: CUP, 1975], 8). The idea of the axial period has been further developed by Eric Voegelin, who speaks of “multiple and parallel leaps in being” in the first millennium BCE, in *Order and History*, 5 vols (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956–1987) and by Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt in “Introduction: The Axial Age Breakthroughs—Their Characteristics and Origins” in *The Origins and Diversity of the Axial Age*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986).

18. Karen Armstrong, however, argues that a new axial period took place during the enlightenment in *The Great Transformation* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007). Others say that the modern age displays the characteristics of a new axial period; see Yves Lambert, “Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?” in *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999): 303–333.

19. See Giuseppe M. Zanghì, “Quale uomo per il terzo millennio?” in *Nuova Umanità* XXIII (2001): 247–277 and “Il pensare come amore: Verso un nuovo paradigma culturale” in *Nuova Umanità* XXV (2003): 1–19.

20. It is impossible not to recall the *logos* in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel which is said to be “The true light, which enlightens everyone” (Jn 1:9; see also Jn 1:4).

capacity to engage in what Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt calls “reflexivity,” that is, examining one’s own assumptions.²¹ In Greece, for example, this was undertaken by theoretical discourse in the development of philosophy; the ethical-existential dimension was developed in the light of Transcendence by the Hebrew prophets; a transcendent spiritual intuition (*bodhi*) was at the root of the new conceptual thinking that arose with Buddhism. These are three instances of a cultural shift that privileged a form of cognition that challenged, radicalized, and went beyond mythic thought—not that mythic thought disappeared or lost its intrinsic value, but it was reformulated in *logos* culture.²²

The axial period had a number emblematic figures: Plato, Isaiah, Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tzu, for instance. Jesus, who is so important for Chiara’s life and thought, was outside the axial period as usually defined. Nonetheless, what he brought or, perhaps better in this context, the culture that came about as a result of him, while being a development of the Hebrew axial breakthrough, was rooted in a transcendent spiritual intuition that critiqued the culture from which it developed and laid the basis for a culture that, in dialogue with Greek philosophy, tended to privilege theoretical discourse. As Chiara shows, however, Jesus was more than just a synthesis of what arose with *logos* culture.²³

21. See Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, “Introduction: The Axial Age Breakthroughs.”

22. Nothing is ever lost. Somatic forms of cognition also remain, though reformulated in the light of later cognitive evolutions.

23. Indeed, Giuseppe Zanghi says, “I have called this cultural paradigm: ‘logos,’ thinking specifically of the Logos of God. He is, in the Trinity, the one who stands *before* the Father, *before* God, revealing him in himself-Word, in himself-Logos, to be the power that that does not repressively hold on to the other but that distinguishes itself from the other: the Father as Love.” (“Il pensare come amore,” 9). (Translation mine.)

Chiara Lubich’s Cognitive Proposal

As cognition acquires further capacities, so the relationship of the subject to the known changes. In somatic knowing, present in mimetic culture, the subject sees itself as part of its environment, with only a very limited sense of its distinction from it. A crucial development of selfhood comes with the emergence of symbolic cognition and mythic culture, since the subject becomes aware of the difference between its group and the environment. Nonetheless, here the subject, while it may be aware of its distinction from the group, functions almost exclusively as a member of the group.²⁴ It thinks in traditional ways, according to symbols and stories that have been handed down. The great acquisition of *logos* culture is awareness of individual selfhood, even at the risk of losing awareness of the subject’s participation in its human and natural environments. It is the “objective” stance given by this perception that gives the human subject the acute reflexivity that makes it capable of constructing conceptual theories as mental models to interpret and interact with reality.

Chiara, applying in an original way Jesus’ synthesis and challenge to *logos* culture, proposes a different kind of subjectivity. The individual remains but it is now in a relationship of profound mutual involvement with other individuals, a form of recollection both within self and within the other person insofar as empathy,

24. Giuseppe Zanghi says, “In mythic culture, *who is the thinking subject?* It cannot be the individual as such (the individual is always a ‘laceration’ of the whole): it is ‘the group,’ with which the individual is identified. And the unity of the group preserves the unity of the Beginning: it is the group which preserves the individual in the divine, in the Origin” (ibid., 4) and “Mythic culture is fundamentally memory of the original unity but wounded by the painful perception of having in some way lost that place” (ibid., 5). (Both translations mine.)

sensitivity, and attentive listening and communication (the apotheosis of the *logos*-word) will allow: “Yes, you should always recollect yourself also in the presence of a brother or sister, but not avoiding the created person, rather recollecting him or her within your own Heaven and recollecting yourself in the Heaven of the other.”

In this context one’s individual mental models are challenged, broadened, and deepened by contact with the other. While this builds upon the cultural and relational dimension of all cognition, it demands a greater detachment from all mental models than is the case with any of the three modes. In relation to the other person, everything can be reframed or rethought; even hard-won theories cannot be defended by the ego that generated them. Gesture, symbol, theory are all offered, not imposed, within the context of a deep meeting. In this way it is the very social nature of this process that offers the participants an intensified reflexivity, an extra possibility of using critical reasoning to challenge their presuppositions. Ideas are seen as instruments of a mutual reflection, engaged in together, so that out of the meeting of persons emerges a new act of cognition, one based on but not bound by any of the previous mental models. It thus has creative potential and is capable of thinking thoughts not had before in an act of cognition that is not closed and which, at least in principle, can be developed in further encounters.

The key to stopping this from becoming a constant change with no fixed points is its openness to transcendence. There is a recognition by all parties that “truth” lies not only in the partial perceptions of individuals, but also beyond them. Dialogue is, in fact, triadialogue. It is possible, therefore, to perceive things that have

validity outside of, or not dependent upon, the act of cognition itself. In their mutual openness generated by love, individuals begin to discover another vision. It is what Chiara calls: “Jesus’ vision, of Jesus who, besides being head of the Mystical Body, is everything: all the Light, the Word, while in the Word we are words.”

Indeed, in the experience described by “Look at All the Flowers,” this vision is lived as an opening up to a transcendent experience²⁵ that is a radicalization of the *logos* as spiritual intuition, hence the apt language of “recollection.” It is, furthermore, also fully able to use the various forms of somatic, symbolic, and theoretical representation (as shown, for instance, in the text “Look at All the Flowers” itself). What these modes now provide, however, is more than simply enhanced models. Rather, they convey a sapiential reading of reality: “. . . and the *Light* that you have given me I have given them.”²⁶ This sapiential reading opens up cognitive

25. The transcendent experiences of the axial period were manifold. With various intents, various taxonomies of mystical, numinous or spiritual experience have been essayed, starting from William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Longmans, first published 1902); and going to other seminal texts such as Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: OUP, 1923), first published as *Das Heilige* in 1917; or the work of Robert Charles Zaehner, especially *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957); or of Walter T. Stace, especially *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1960); and more recently Louis Roy, *Transcendent Experiences: Phenomenology and Critique* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2001). While different theories can be constructed to relate such experiences to one another and bring them to form a consistent whole, phenomenologically they are distinctive. Using a term like “transcendent experience” does not prejudge their interpretation or presuppose any particular classification.

26. This is how Chiara quotes Jn 17:22. In fact the text from the Fourth Gospel does not use the word “light,” but *doxan* (glory). It is significant because Chiara, in following the Vulgate’s *Et ego claritatem, quam dedisti mihi, dedi eis* is highlighting the cognitive aspect of glory.

possibilities beyond the strictly religious or spiritual realm.²⁷ Meeting together in a shared transcendent experience, the human subjects both feel themselves united with Jesus and find that they are seeing things (nature, humanity, indeed all creation), as it were, from Jesus.

Chiara's cognitive proposal, therefore, is in continuity with other forms of human cognition, especially as related to non-biological change. But, following Jesus, it radicalizes the cognitive forms of *logos* culture. In doing so it also reframes the context of symbolic and somatic cognition, making them also vehicles of sapiential discourse.

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27. Giuseppe Zanghì puts it thus, "*It is Jesus*, then: the reality thought cannot but be Jesus, the man-God (let us recall St. Bonaventure and his *reductio artium ad theologiam!*). That Jesus in whom all is recapitulated (see Eph. 1:10). That Jesus in whom the human—every human—and the divine—with all its infinite riches—are One" ("Il pensare come amore," 17). (Translation mine.)