

**TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING AS *PERFORMATIVE ACT*:  
Concern for Students *as Subjects* --*That They Know, Not What They Know***

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What are you doing when you are **thinking**? The question puzzles my students. They invariably answer with a list of **thoughts** they call “knowledge” culled from every academic discipline: ideas from philosophy, concepts from theology, laws of natural science, theories of psychology, facts of history, etc. An analogy leads them to the compound act of thinking: what are you doing when you are *eating*? They offer a menu of *food*. Prodding gets them to identify the **actions** they perform in the compound act of eating: looking, smelling, putting in the mouth, tasting with the tongue, tearing, grinding, mashing with the teeth, swallowing, digesting—in that specific order. No one disagrees about the invariability and universality of the structured pattern of the compound act of "eating." Few, however, can or will ever agree about the best *food*.

Analogous to eating, **critical thinking** or **knowing** can be taught across disciplines and assessed as the conscious performance of a compound, cumulative, invariable and dynamically structured activity. It is **critical** when the student-knower as performing **subject** reflects on, and appropriates for her/himself the structure and operations of her/his own consciousness. It is **naïve thinking**—and not critical-- when knowing is a matter of taking a picture of an object “out there already now.” A robot can take that snapshot. My students smile when I call their attention to products of “picture-thinking.” They know what they are **doing** when they are naively thinking! The concern of teaching critical thinking as performative act of a person is the **person as subject** and **source** of revisions, additions, and development of all objects known or still to be known.

**Rationale: Why Teach Critical Thinking *as* Performative Act?**

Different academic disciplines teach critical thinking *as* content or specialties of thought. It is impossible for students to master how to **critically think** when a literature class defines it

solely in terms of objects of interest to its discipline, quite alien to the objects of interest to nursing or criminal justice. When students leave the halls of academe, will they retain the myriad thoughts that professors packed into their barns of consciousness? Is there something common and verifiable in experience that is **critical thinking** for our students' conscious lives beyond the classroom? The neglect of the **person as subject** continues inspite of the "turn to the subject."

I can only present here an outline of a theory of cognition (what am I doing when I am *knowing?*). There will be a hint of an epistemology (why is that *knowing?*), and a metaphysics (what do I know when I am *knowing?*). I direct the interested reader to the first *magnum opus* "Insight: A Study of Human Understanding" of the Jesuit philosopher-theologian Bernard Lonergan. In it, he analyzes the phenomenon of "insight" as an event. Lonergan's analysis reveals a pre-conceptual and permanent **cognitional structure** that provides for determinate conceptual content without determining it. The dynamic structure of cognition is **isomorphic** with the structure of the unknown or to-be-known or **being** (*reality, truth, fact*), and the structure of the concrete *good*. These structures are **heuristic** and **unrestricted**: they anticipate all the unknown or to-be-known in their terms and relations without determining them. Here lies Lonergan's genius: the natural and social scientist, historian, criminologist, poet, theologian and philosopher can intend all the objects of interest to their discipline. **It is critical thinking as performative act of the student as subject that remains their constant!**

[For purposes of this "in-house" article, I will conflate the generic term "thinking" with "knowing." I will make liberal use of my published work, "Conspiring Unto the Good: Bernard Lonergan's Critical Contribution to Theology of Religions," especially Chapter-3 on cognition and theological epistemology.. For a more recent work, see "Where is Knowing Going? : The Horizons of the Knowing Subject" by John Haughey, SJ of Georgetown University. Compare it with a traditional approach reflected on a title like "What Can We Know?" by Louis Pojman. ]

## A Classroom Experiment: Critical Thinking in Slow Motion

The purpose of this simple experiment is to make students aware of, and own the dynamic, structured operations of knowing as a compound act. I show them a non-descript object they had never seen before. I ask them to pass it around after inspecting it. I instruct them to write step-by-step what they do before they try to ‘guess’ what the object is. In a matter of minutes, the guesses come-- all wrong of course. (Unless they learned to smoke a pipe in The Netherlands, the chances are very slim that they can accurately name the object!) I ask the object to be passed around again. I redirect them to the **thinking activity they are performing**.

Slowly, and with infinite patience on my side, students identify the **operations of knowing** that they perform in order: (1) they touch and view the object carefully; (2) they describe it to themselves and compare it with similar objects from their memory bank, theorize what it is, formulate a hypothesis about its utility; and then (3) they decide which of many possibilities the thing is, and name it. Since human knowledge is by nature social capital, I direct them to compare their answers by discussing among themselves what they just did and where they ended. When I list on the board what they said they did (thinking!), the conscious operations they performed fit a structured pattern, some more clearly than others in the sequencing of the **series and cumulative performance of one compound act of knowing**.

Does it matter *what* the object really is? Yes and no. Yes, because it draws their attention. The students *as knowing subjects* consciously intend something outside of themselves. (Did Kant ever cross the chasm between *noumenon* and *phenomenon*?) **Critical knowing is an act of conscious intentionality by the knower qua subject**. And, no, it does not matter their answer was incorrect because they can revise what they know. They can obtain more data to get a better grasp of the object. In fact, they all know one thing for certain: *that* they did not know the object.

## A Precis from *Insight: Knowing as Intentional Performative Act*

What am I doing when I am *knowing*? The question is one Lonergan himself poses. By “knowing,” Lonergan means a whole structure in all its operating parts. He posits in a theory of cognition the dynamic, invariant, and transcultural structure consisting of three sets of ascending and cumulative, conscious and intentional operations: (1) **experiencing**, (2) **understanding**, and (3) **judging**. The cumulative ascent of the operations is driven by different **types of questions**. The first three sets of operations are “cognitive” arising from rational consciousness. When rational consciousness becomes self-consciousness at the existential or moral level, a fourth operation unfolds (4) **deliberating** or **deciding value**.

The cognitive structure is dynamic materially because it is a pattern of operations "like dance is a pattern of bodily movements" and it is dynamic formally because it is "self-assembling," putting itself together, one part summoning forth the next. It is "self-constituting" because it proceeds consciously and intentionally, driven by questions of intelligence and reflection. The structure is “invulnerable” because one cannot repudiate the structure without employing the very same structure to undermine itself. It is also "irretrievably habitual" since we can make acts of judgment only one at a time. It is "trans-cultural" because it is a structure of human acts or performances, not culturally conditioned concepts.

### Fully Human Knowing: One Act in 3 Levels

The dynamic structure of a single, whole act of knowing consists of all three component levels of operations—**experiencing**, **understanding**, **judging**— coalescing cumulatively into one. They correspond to three levels of consciousness: **empirical/biological**, **intellectual**, and **rational**. Different **types of questions** drive the lower level to the next higher level. Each level consciously intends a different object, cumulating into a “known” (or, “unknown”).

None of the three operations in the structured process of cognition on its own is human knowing, nor a combination of any two. Fully human knowing is all three.

- (1) **Experiencing** is on the first level of empirical or biological presentations. Operations of experiencing include sensing, perceiving, and imagining. The operations attend to the **data** given in sense and in consciousness as “raw material” presupposed by the next level of intelligent consciousness. Experiences are empirical, merely given to sense, open to understanding and formulation, but in themselves, they are not understood.

**Questions for intelligence**—what, where, when, how, why, how often—drive human knowing to the second level of the structure. This type of questions acts as “operator” promoting consciousness from sense experience to "insight" in an effort to understand.

- (2) **Understanding** is on the second level, presupposing and complementing the first. It involves inquiring and thinking, making distinctions, naming, grouping, and correlating the data of experience. They intend **intelligibility** by discovering "insight" into the data, discovering relations within and between different sets of data, systematizing these relations, then formulating ideas, theories, hypotheses, and concepts (the combination of ideas and images), and systems. There can be understood more than one insight or discovered more than one intelligibility intrinsic to a set of data.

**Questions for reflection**— Is it so? is it correct? Is it adequate? Are you sure? — drive human knowing to the third level in the mind's exigency or *eros*, in the words of poet Marianne Moore, for "truing by regnant certainty" its “iridescence, inconsistencies and confusion.”

- (3) **Judging** is on the third level, presupposing and completing the first two. It involves marshaling and weighing the evidence understood, then critically reflecting on the correctness of the understanding. It seeks to give a ‘yes’ to the question for reflection. If it is a ‘no,’ then more pertinent questions for intelligence are raised and explanations that leave too many unanswered questions are weeded out until one explanation practically accounts for all data.

Judgment is judgment of what **is** or what **is not**, i.e. **fact**, not fiction; the **real** not the imaginary. Notions of truth and falsity, certitude and probability emerge here. Personal commitment is involved; one becomes responsible for one's judgments. At this level, statements and utterances express affirmation or denial, assent or dissent, agreement or disagreement.

Fully human knowing, then, consists of the unity of all three levels of experiencing, understanding and judging. It is a compound act of different operations, each contributing only a part to the whole. It is a cumulative process, every stage sublating the earlier one, adding new elements provisionally for insight to occur, until something distinctive emerges that makes the

level different from the previous one, and the process comes to term. The entire dynamic structure of knowing intends what it is that *is*, or what it is that *is not*, that is, *being*.

### **The Critical Knower: Self-affirming, Self-Possessing**

**What am I doing when I am knowing?** I am knowing when I am performing the full range of cognitional operations: being attentive to the data of my experience, being intelligent by asking questions about it, and being reasonable by judging my understanding of my experience.

**Why is that ‘knowing’?** It is knowing because until I judge if something *is* or *is not* so, I only understand what may or may not be; before I understand, I only experience data of sense and consciousness. **When do I know *that* I know?** Once I judge, I know. (Caveat

Is that so? Isn’t all this merely theory? Philosophers will cite many theories of cognition. Is Lonergan’s theory just one more? Lonergan invites the practical engagement of the knowing subject in an exercise to affirm or deny his theorem of a dynamic structure. One must try judging for oneself by answering the question “**Am I a knower?**” In the subject’s performative act of “self-affirmation” lies the grasp of the fact that, even if I did not know that I performed activities of knowing, I would still be a “knower” by having raised the question and answered with a denial. Silence would be my only alternative. If I deny that I am a **knower**, I would be affirming in performance what I am attempting to deny (retortion). I contradict myself in performance.

Judgment is, therefore, a **self-constituting** performance. I may indeed not be a knower, I may be other than I am, but as things stand, my self-assertion as a “knower” -- I perform activities of knowing-- possesses “conditional necessity.” One concrete instance of knowing has taken place. If one instance of it can happen, so can others. The “knower” as *subject* makes himself or herself the reference point of all other instances. I /we can know! I/we do know!

## The Objects Known/To-be-Known: Identical Heuristic Structure of Knowing

Once students grasp and self-affirm that they are *knowing subjects*, then I can direct their attention to objects or contents of thought. Intended objects of interest will vary from discipline to discipline, like food and menus of the act of eating. But their structure is **isomorphic** to the levels and operations of conscious intentionality. Below is a table of some examples of known/to-be known objects that consume the interest of the usual approach to teaching critical thinking. The first three levels are cognitional. (The fourth is existential or moral. The moral peaks into or is crowned by religious consciousness, where the act is loving.)

<b>OPERATIONS of CRITICAL THINKING</b>  (Levels of Consciousness)	<b>OBJECTS of INTENTIONALITY</b>	<b>METAPHYSICS</b>	<b>RELIGION &amp; THEOLOGY</b>	<b>CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY &amp; VALUES</b>
<b>EXPERIENCING</b>  (Empirical or Biological)	<b>DATA  of Sense &amp; Consciousness</b>	<b>MATTER</b>	<b>EXPERIENCES of FEAR &amp; AWE, ULTIMATE CONCERN</b>	<b>ECONOMIC &amp; VITAL</b>
<b>UNDERSTANDING</b>  (Intellectual)	<b>INTELLIGIBILITY  of Data</b>	<b>FORM</b>	<b>NARRATIVES, MYTHS CODES, TEACHINGS, CODES, DOCTRINES</b>	<b>LEGAL &amp; SOCIAL</b>
<b>JUDGING</b>  (Rational)	<b>REALITY  or Fact, Truth</b>	<b>EXISTENCE</b>	<b>DOGMAS &amp; CREEDS</b>	<b>ETHICAL &amp; CULTURAL</b>
<b>DELIBERATING &amp; DECIDING</b>  (Moral)	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>The GOOD</b>	<b>MORAL PRACTICES</b>	<b>DISCRETIONARY PHILANTHROPIC &amp; MORAL</b>

## Final Word: Assessment, Assessment, Assessment?

Where would teaching be without assessment? When we strip the work of assessment of all “needless aporia,” we find that it arises from the immanent demand of reason for the whole in knowledge: knowing subject and known/to-be-known object. Alas, until educators make **a turn to students as subjects** who perform the **basic act of human self-transcendence in performing question-driven knowing**, then assessment will concern itself with less-than-the-whole. It will obsess with *what* to count as objects taught and learned, and *how* to measure them. But, what about the common and permanent base that revises and develops all that is known or to be known? If we only realized how few objects of thought students retain in their “barns of consciousness” once they leave our classrooms, we would spend as much effort in making them more self-conscious, self-possessing, self-transcending **critical thinkers**. Lonergan offers this slogan-sounding line in his introduction to *Insight: Thoroughly understand what it means to understand, and not only will you understand the broad lines of all there is to be understood but also you will possess a fixed base, an invariant pattern, opening upon all further development of understanding.*

P.S. We have constructed in the Theology Department rubrics for assessing student learning that take into account the performative act of knowing by the subject. Lonergan’s work in *Insight* developed into a second opus, *Method in Theology*. I have also constructed an unofficial assessment rubrics for my Business Ethics class.