

The fear of knowledge

by Carla Weber

Au fond de L'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!
Charles Baudelaire, Les fleurs du Mal

For the one who experiences it, any knowledge involves the distressing crossing of an inner space/time dimension with an uncertain outcome. The knowledge of the new is a trial, it forces us face to face with an element of reality (internal or external to us) that exposes us to crisis; it interrupts our certainties and measures our emotional and cognitive capacity to sustain conflict and creatively develop it. The conflict of knowledge is about the experience of lack, the frightening oscillation between all and nothing; it implies coming face to face with the power of knowledge and bearing the inextricable dynamic recursiveness of the experience of dependence and autonomy that is characteristic of individuation and socialization.

I refer not to learning that is adaptive as in an accumulation of knowledge aimed above all at affirming socially consolidated knowledge but rather *transformative learning* of reality, which calls into doubt the very model of knowledge utilized up to that point.

As we have discussed elsewhere (Morelli and Weber 1996)¹, every change in the autonomy of the individual's knowledge is the result of a tension, a conflict between desire, the need for knowledge and the challenges or restrictions that hamper the development of consolidated knowledge. The obstacles to learning relate to restrictions that impede change; it involves the restructuring of the certainties of the consolidated heuristic model or the abandoning of these certainties in the hope of finding other sources of reassurance. From this perspective, knowledge emerges from the *back* and *forth* between distinction, separation, integration and re-formation of the whole. As each element changes, all of the associated connections change as well, and the subject's emotive and cognitive experience coincides with the dynamic in-and-out game of relations that are simultaneously internal and external in a context where mind and culture cannot be separated.

The fear of knowledge therefore emerges as the anxiety of losing the world that we have helped to define through reciprocal relational experiences, a world that includes us in a narrative recognized and recognizable by both ourselves and others. The process of destabilizing relations with the known, with that arrangement of objects and relations that renders us capable of moving and operating in relative security, threatens the very stability of the inner arrangement of the knowing subject. When faced with the sensation of losing the unity of the whole, the knowing-subject and known-object integration, what emerges is the need to control the parts that appear to be headed for disorder and confusion.

The defense of consolidated knowledge is the defense of an arrangement that subjects have given to reality in order to guarantee their access to the complex relationships among the elements of that reality and to develop the countless combinations of that reality in an active and project-oriented manner.

"I don't know how to understand what's happening to me, I can't stand it, it seems like the symptom of some cognitive deficit, I'd like to find a *solidity* so that I can *grab hold of it* in order to understand," a university student once told me as she struggled to define herself amidst this crisis. The countless possible modes of being and the process of defining oneself imply actively grasping the time of knowledge in a frightening, dark space of transition that is simultaneously saturated and empty.

Facing another mode of exploring reality and taking on a different method, imply the reorganization of the self in relation to a project and, in doing so, it is even possible to discover that the given project is someone else's, that it lacks the pressing desire that would be necessary to mobilize one's physical and intellectual energies in a specific direction given the restrictions and obstacles that must be faced. At the same time, however, all individual agency, understood as the power to performatively enact oneself (Butler 1997)², is

¹ Morelli Ugo, Weber Carla, *Passione e apprendimento*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 1996

² Butler Judith, *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997

inextricable from the other; it is formed in the very confrontation with alterity, in the conflictual experiences that were successful in terms of allowing us to creatively modify frustrating reality. It is essential that we acknowledge that our agency is based on the primary relationship, the passionate attachment toward those who took care of us as infants delivered into the world with an incomplete brain and nervous system, and that it develops through the multiplication of relations with others, ourselves and the environment, within the space-time and cultural contexts of our life experiences. The kind of position that we take on in relation to knowledge and the extent of discontinuity and incompleteness of the cognitive processes we undergo reveals the nature of the relationship we have with ourselves in terms of our emotional and cognitive autonomy when thinking of our own existence. Accessing new knowledge implies the emotional and cognitive freedom to bear the fear of isolation and exclusion from others' way of thinking, from the community of belonging. All knowledge connects us to the knowledge of a group or a collectivity, which exists at both the physical and psychological level. Such knowledge takes shape in a given thought developed by individual subjects, in that thought needs a body to exist and connect itself to a collective think-ability. Through this belonging, individual subjects acquire both social and personal think-ability at the same time.

There is a well-known Italian proverb that says, "those who leave the old road for a new one know what they are leaving behind, but not what they will find." Reflecting on this saying, we note how important it was in a patriarchal society to consolidate knowledge to be passed on and to warn individuals about the danger of departure from it and the risks of autonomous exploration. Even as it underlines the value of the security of consolidated knowledge, popular wisdom also stresses the existence of the human drive to look for something else, to discover the new by walking new pathways of knowledge.

Knowledge is, in fact, highly alluring; to see this we need only observe children. They cannot stop moving, they use their whole bodies to explore objects, their environments and the nature and shape of existing relations. All this curiosity and activity of children, which naturally develops through play, coincides with the children's very lives in that they experience themselves and others in a continuous approximation and regulation of reciprocal influences. This co-evolutionary dynamic is expressed through moving closer and pulling away, through tests of strength in the face of obstacles, through simulation of what is not present, through interrupting and postponing when persisting does not achieve the mentally anticipated objective or proves emotionally unbearable. Today we have a scientific understanding of how important it is to undergo such experiences of ourselves. We understand the importance of individual and group history surrounding the regulation of emotions and the arrangement of such experiences into cognitive systems that bring together ourselves, others and the life setting. Multiple perceived, dreamed, imagined, fantastical and symbolized worlds co-exist without mutual interference and can simultaneously comprise multiple possible and credible narratives. Luigi Pagliarani³ has coined an effective phrase to designate a process as complex as it is vital to our ability to creatively live under present conditions, in the experience of beauty. He imagines the pathway of transformation from *emotional reason* to *poetic reason* through a composition of life that is ethical and aesthetical at the same time. Taking advantage of empirical research, Wilfred R. Bion introduced a highly formulated theory of knowledge to the field of psychoanalysis; he located the subject's own self-construction in the origin of thought and the need for knowledge, thus introducing a very fertile matrix of individual and psychological organization to the clinic setting. He recognized the origins of symbolic thought in the processes of transforming from a state of pre-conception (dominated by sensory, psychomotor, perceptive and emotional data) to conception. Neuroscientific research went on to confirm Bion's insight about the powerful connection between corporeal forms of data and those typical of an imaginative, symbolic and idea-oriented production. Today, Bion's expression "thoughts in search of a thinker" seems less enigmatic than it did in the past, referencing as it does the process through which subjects recognize and distinguish themselves from the multiplicity of ourselves. He explored the complex dynamics of the transformational processes involved in the primary relationship and social relations by highlighting the

³ Pagliarani Luigi. "Postfazione e Appendice" in Basili et al, *Glossario di psicoterapia progettuale*, Milano: Edizioni Angelo Guerini e Associati, 1990

tension between conflictual processes of individuation and socialization. He grasped how valuable it is for the development of thought to have coherence between the contents and the container of a relationship; he also recognized John Keats' poetic phrase "negative capability" as expressing the psychological space of crossing the fear generated by the unknown and the unknowable in a conceptualization capable of offering a ray of light in the darkness of knowledge. He indicated the time and method required for transformation that, beginning from an initial fissure, temporarily illuminates this cognitive process. The capacity for containing undifferentiated and uncertain feelings is related to the emotional dynamic and the relational outcomes that such emotional topics achieve.

Individuals' ability to produce new knowledge cannot therefore be separated from their relationships with the groups involved at various levels and their relations with the nature of the content itself. We are indebted to Pichón Riviére (1971)⁴ for the discovery and operational description of the psychodynamics of the relationships that affect the individual's emotional and cognitive capacity in relation to a content or object of study and work for a group to which he or she belongs. He identified the presence of *epistemophilical anguish* in the subject who is learning and explored this anguish to the extent of considering these neuroses and psychoses to be learning disabilities. For Pichón Riviére, this anguish was a specific anxiety, that is the danger perceived by the individual when faced with new learning. What subjects experience when facing a new object of learning is involvement in an emotional field of opposing forces, and they struggle to take on a role or position that allows them to choose. This anguish produces a visible impasse that affects not only individuals but the whole working group. The forces of the emotional field generate an implicit object that tacitly regulates the relationships among subjects and obstructs the relation between the individual subjects and the object of knowledge itself. The object of knowledge appears difficult to recognize or understand and our own cognitive abilities seem to become ineffective or at any rate frustrated by the learning environment. Within the field of knowledge, according to Pichón Riviére, the object of knowledge almost appears to be the subject's enemy, to become an "epistemophilical obstacle"⁵. What is threatened in such a condition is the ability to think and, even before emotively grasping a meaning, to recognize what is happening. Even though the individual does not find a reliable correspondence between what he or she perceives and the real and actual state of things, this does not change the dynamics of the emotional field. Comparing one's thoughts about the definition of new knowledge with others' conceptions thus involves crossing a psychological space-time dimension that is so frightening that it generates an attack on thought and cognitive ability. The group offers the opportunity to co-participate in the object of knowledge and achieve a shared common object, as if the group were able to divide up the anguish brought about by the search for such an object. By enquiring into the constitutive nature of epistemophilical anguish, Pichón Riviére found the co-presence of two forms of anguish, a discovery that has been supported by Melanie Klein's clinical work and theorizing. He discovered that, during the learning process, individuals experience a first form of anguish related to the fear of penetrating a new field of knowledge and changing it as a result of the exploratory presence of the self and his or her procedure of rearrangement. Besides the frightening fantasy of destroying the object of knowledge, Pichón Riviére pointed out the presence of a second type of anguish: the fear produced by the fantasy of remaining inside the object of knowledge after it has been penetrated and emptied out.

These forms of anguish trigger processes of resistance and detachment from knowledge as natural processes of safeguarding the objects to be protected in order to preserve individual and group integrity.

⁴ Pichón Riviére Enrique, *El Proceso Grupal. Del psicoanálisis a la psicología social*, Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1971

⁵ For this concept, Pichón Riviére takes advantage of Gaston Bachelard's contribution, borrowing the concept of *epistemological obstacle*.

The state of balance required for a unified perception of the self that is strong enough to allow access to the sense and meaning of one's own presence can be exposed to stress and lead to entirely different outcomes. This transition requires the livability of in-between spaces, a combinatorial game within a range of multiple possibilities, and the exchange of symbolic objects that can help us cross the thresholds of the various meaning domains.

All this relates to the simultaneousness of psychodynamic movements and the adaptive state of balance in the subject-other-world relationship that is possible in such a contingency. It is about the experience of the self when facing a situation that necessitates the development of a knowledge that can be enacted with others in a given reality. As Baudelaire writes, "To the bottom of the Unknown, to find Something *new*." We see in the poet the maximum exploration of his own individuation through the coming and going from the unknown to the known, with all that such a movement involves. He teaches us about the importance of allowing oneself to be exposed to emptiness, non-differentiation and ambiguity without definitive loss, bearing the anxieties generated by the new in order to engage in giving one's own individuation an aesthetic form, particular and universal, individual and collective. The poets therefore offer us empirical proof that our own existence can be found precisely in the crossing of this epistemophilical anguish.

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