

PIAGET'S THEORY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to outline certain central ideas in Piaget's treatment of moral development which are expressed in his book :the moral judgement of the child. In investigating the growth of moral judgement in children, Piaget dealt with two separate topics : The child's understanding of rules, and the child's mode of moral thought. From the many observations and experiments with children, Piaget evolved a system of two major stages of moral development : 1. The stage of heteronomous morality and, 2. the stage of autonomous morality. The main characteristics of these stages are exposed in this article, as well as the principal criticisms levelled against Piaget's approach to moral development.

ملخص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى عرض بعض الأفكار الرئيسية لبياجية حول نظريته للنمو الأخلاقي كما وردت في كتابه الحكم الأخلاقي لدى الطفل. عند بحثه للنمو الأخلاقي لدى الأطفال، تطرق بياجية إلى موضوعين منفصلين : فهم الطفل للقوانين، ونمط التفكير الأخلاقي للطفل. ومن خلال الملاحظات والتجارب الكثيرة التي قام بها على الأطفال توصل بياجية إلى نسقين أساسيين : أطلق على النسق الأول إسم الأخلاقية خارجية المنشأ وأطلق على النسق الثاني الأخلاقية الذاتية المنشأ. وقد تعرض المقال إلى أهم مميزات هذين النسقين، وكذا أهم الاعتراضات التي وجهت لطريقة بياجية في دراسته لموضوع النمو الأخلاقي.

INTRODUCTION

The moral development of children and young people has always been a matter which has roved of interest and concern. For most parents and certainly for society too, the development of morality in children is of great importance.

Piaget's 1932 *The Moral Judgement of Children* has been the most influential in the study of children's morality. The present paper aims at exposing piaget's major contributions to our understanding of moral development in children.

According to Piaget, the essence of morality is found in the individual's understanding of and respect for rules of the social order, and his sense of justice in terms of concern for reciprocity and equality among individuals

Piaget's research investigated children's moral thinking in the following threebroad areas:

- their attitude to rules;

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- their judgements of right and wrong;
- their assessment of justice.

Piaget believed that children apply the same kind of reasoning to the rules of games as they do to moral rules. He wrote that: 'all morality consists in a system of rules, and the essence of all morality is to be sought in the respect which the individual acquires for those rules.' Piaget 1932.

Piaget made use of a clinical technique of inquiry. He introduced his method clinique while investigating the moral judgement of 167 children in Geneva. The children ranged in age from 6 to 13. It was from the investigation of the responses of the children to his method of inquiry that piaget formulated his basic theory of moral development.

To investigate children's conceptions of rules and conduct practice of rules, Piaget began not with explicitly moral rules but the rules of the game of marbles. He believed that children apply the same kind of reasoning to the rules of game as they do to moral rules. He selected rules children follow in playing the game of marbles since this kind of rules is one rarely passed on by adults but learnt from anther children during the game itself. Piaget's approach was to play the game with a child but pretend ignorance of the rules and to probe the child's understanding while the game was played. As a result of his conversations with children, Piaget 1932 discovered how their approach to rules changes as they mature. The youngest children play egocentrically and haphazardly with no consideration for rules at all. Later and up to the age of about six, children become aware of the rules of the game, regarding them as sacred and unchangeable, and follow them rigidly. se rules have to be obeyed without question. The older children gradually begin realising that the rules are not absolute, but are created by children themselves in order to regulate the game. Rather than being inviolable, the rules can be changed or modified by mutual agreement with the older players; and as Piaget 1932 puts it, 'the rule of a game appears to the child no longer as an external law sacred in so far as it has been laid down by adults; but as the outcome of a free decision and worthy of respect in the measure that it has enlisted mutual consent; (p. 57)'.

Thus, at this point children are concerned with complying with the rules rigidly to regulate the game and avoid any dispute and unfairness, but

are also ready to modify them by usual agreement. It is during this stage that children's heteronomy begins to give way to autonomy. Piaget attributed the emergence of autonomy to the children's growing co-operative activities and mutual understanding between them. In alignment with his general cognitive-developmental stage sequence approach, piaget outlined four successive stages in the marble play: 'The motor stage': (up to 3 years of age). In this stage the child plays individually and rules are irrelevant. The egocentric stage: (approximately from 3 to 7 years). The child still continues to play to a certain extent individually, and rules are followed to the extent that they can be recognised. The incipient-co-operative stage: (towards the age of 7 to 8).

In this stage the desire for mutual understanding appears in the sphere of play. They play by the rules and expect everyone to do the same. They play together as a team and their sticking to rules is quite literal, The codification stage: (11-12).

In this stage children appear to have thoroughly mastered the rules and also realised that there are occasions when rules can and should be altered.

Within the consciousness of rules, piaget outlines three stages:

1. The first stage is purely individualistic. The child seek merely to satisfy his motor interests and shows little interest if both players are declared to be winners.

2. The second stage emerged about the age of seven. In this stage the child appears to play in compliance with certain external rules. He shows a tendency to consider these rules as being sacrosanct and unalterable and to be obeyed rigidly. Any alterations in the rules would be wrong.

3. The third stage sets in around the age of 11 or 12 Rules no longer appear as an external force or sacred, but seen as the outcome of a decision which has enlisted their agreement and so are worthy of respect.

To explore the nature of children's judgements of right and wrong, piaget presented children with pairs of brief stories and asked them to comment on the behaviour of the character portrayed in the story. An example is the item, now well known, in which children are asked to judge who is naughtier a boy who accidentally breaks 15 cups as he opens a door or a boy who breaks one cup while trying to steal some jam out of the cupboard. In

another example children are asked whether a well-meaning boy who accidentally gave wrong directions to a man who then got lost was naughtier than a boy who deliberately gave wrong directions to a man who found his way anyhow. In this fashion, Piaget discovered two clearly distinct forms:

a- Younger children almost without exception judged the first as more severe and more deserving punishment. The child bases his judgement solely upon the material consequences of wrong doing. Piaget termed this stage in the formation of moral judgements 'moral realism'; Piaget 1932 refers to moral realism as 'the tendency which the child has to regard duty and the value attaching to it as self-subsistent and independent of the mind, as imposing itself regardless of the circumstances in which the individual may find himself (pp. 5-6).'

b- The older children, though they may still take some account of the material consequences in forming their judgements, now take cognisance of intention or motive. Thus, the first stage is superseded when children begin to take the motive or intention to be of prime importance.

To investigate the children's sense of justice, the third field of investigation in Piaget's work, Piaget used essentially the same technique as in the second field, i.e. children were presented with hypothetical stories and asked which adults asked them to do. In the early years, children viewed justice as what was commanded. Breaking or losing something deserved punishment which could take an arbitrary form. For the young child what matters was that the aggressor must pay for his offence with suffering of some kind. The young child believed in the principle of immanent justice. Immanent justice is a belief in the inevitability of punishment to a transgressor even though no one else could possibly know what has occurred. As Wright 1971 comments referring to the principle of immanent justice 'natural forces are somehow in league with people in authority and ensure that the disobedient suffer. The older children viewed punishment in a different way. Fairness involved being given equal shares even if needs differed.

Throughout these procedures, Piaget evolved a system of two major stages of moral development which embodied the characteristic feature of children's moral thinking suggested both by the respect for rules and sense of justice. The first major stage is referred to variously as moral realism, morality of constraint, or heteronomous morality. The second major advanced stage is called autonomous morality, morality of co-operation, or reciprocity.

Heteronomous Morality:

During this stage the child tends to obey adult commands and adhere to rules without questioning them. The child feels an obligation to comply to rules because they are sacrosanct and unchangeable. He judges the lightness or wrongness of an act on the basis of the magnitude of its consequences. He believes in 'immanent justice', that is, violations of social norms are followed by physical accidents or misfortunes emanating from some inanimate force or object or from God. At this stage, the child is a moral realist and considers rules and regulations as absolute in application. This attitude is believed to be supported by two major cognitive limitations in the young child's thought. These are egocentrism and realism. Egocentrism means that the child is really interested only in himself and his own concerns and is indifferent to the concerns of his peers. He does not take the others point of view into consideration and does not understand reciprocal relationships. Realism means the child's inability to distinguish between subjective aspects of his experience. This is exemplified in his perception of dreams as external events rather than mental phenomena. As a result of these two cognitive limitations the child assumes there is only one view, which is shared by all, about whether an act is right or wrong, and he sees moral rules as fixed and unchangeable.

Autonomous Morality:

In this stage the child does not view rules as sacred or unchangeable but as established and maintained through reciprocal social consent. The child gives up his moral absolutism and recognises a possible diversity in views of right and wrong. This stage is marked by stress on the importance of intent; the subject is able to consider the many mitigating circumstances that influence actions and intentions. Transition to this level is assumed to develop out of peer group interaction with the growing awareness of the need for mutual respect or reciprocity. 'All children make the transition from constraint to co-operation unless the development is retarded by deprivation of the opportunity for reciprocal interaction'. (Lickona, p.221).

Evaluation of piaget's work:

smith 1978 points out that piaget's stages are too broad in the sense that the thinking seems to cluster into two major stages and cover only the

years of childhood. Most of piaget's early work on the development of moral judgement is in fact concerned with children rather than adolescents. Piaget has done very little subsequent work beyond his early tests of concepts of moral intentionality in children. In his theory Piaget puts great emphasis on the interaction of peers. Relations with parents are not as crucial except in the negative sense where by authoritarian parents may impede the emergence of co-operative morality. A major limitation of piaget's theory, from the empirical point of view, is the inadequate treatment given to elements of emotion and motivation in moral behaviour. Hoffman 1970.

However, despite these imitations, piaget's publication in 1932 of the moral judgement of the child marks the beginning of the cognitive-conceptual approach to morality and is a major landmark in the history of psychology. By establishing the stage theory of moral development, piaget has laid the foundation for later investigators to build upon. Throughout the years following Piaget's 1932 publication, as is evidenced in the flood of the literature, moral development has not essentially digressed from the piagetian framework. Weinreich 1975 notes throughout the last forty years research on moral development has not departed in any significant sense from the piagetian framework. Kohlberg 1963 points out that the greater part of the developmental research on morality has stemmed from piaget's theory of moral stages. The great value of piaget's work on moral development rests mainly on the methods he employed in his investigations of children's thinking processes, and on his being the first psychologist to view moral thought as a developmental and restructuring process largely based on the child's growth towards abstract thinking and interaction with the environment. Downey and Kelly 1978.

Rest 1979 identified four specific contributions of piaget to later moral development research: first, piaget defined the problem area and provided a theoretical construct of moral judgement; Second, he introduced a method of studying moral judgement; the use of hypothetical moral dilemma stories and the clinical observations; Third, he identified some of the specific features and mechanisms of moral thinking. And finally, and most importantly, he made moral development a more important area by proposing a paradigm for research in the area of cognitive moral development. In addition to these contributions, important questions left unanswered by his own work, have stimulated further research

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