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The Psychology of Moral Development: Its Implications for Education.

A child's idea of morality grows with him. Piaget set the ball rolling by a serious study of this subject in 1932. Work based on his ideas has continued ever since till today the study of moral development invades the educational field.

In this paper, originally given to the Victoria Institute 6 Feb. 1971, (enlivened by entertaining tape recordings of the childrens' conversations!) the author, who is Head of the Education Department of Trent Park College of Education, Cockfosters, brings the subject up to date and asks what use teachers ought to be making of modern findings.

The writer's three children were recently playing bagatelle. Five year old Ruth fired the balls with glee but little concern for her score: sometimes she demanded an extra turn if a shot was unsuccessful. Martin (9) was obviously interested in the score and argued about whether or not his sister should be allowed an extra turn for her 'misfires' Andrew (13) suggested that as Ruth was so much younger allowances should be made for her.

This incident illustrates the main stages of moral development as propounded by Professor Jean Piaget of Geneva (1932); ¹ stages of egocentricity, equality and equity respectively. The value of this work in the field of education has been increasingly appreciated, particularly over the past decade. ²

In all his studies into the cognitive development of children, Piaget stresses that the child is not just a miniature adult but

employs thinking which is different in kind from that of his later adult self, for example in the difference between thinking in concrete and abstract terms. As Piaget himself puts it, 'Because children talk like us we assume that they think like us'.

Although other and often more sophisticated models have been suggested to explain the moral development of children,^{3, 4, 5} later workers owe a great debt to Piaget whose ideas were seminal and initially simple.

Piaget's Theory of Moral Development

His theory is based upon observations of children playing the game of marbles (an apparently simple model yet one which, he suggests, is at least, as complex as spelling) and upon his conversations with them in which he feigned ignorance of the rules. He first investigated the childrens' conformity to rules as seen in actual play and, later (in much greater detail) their verbal descriptions of the nature of the rules.

Observed Conduct. In the practice of the rules Piaget noted four stages; the *first* based on the pleasure/plain principle, the *second* on egocentricity (compare the bagatelle incident in which the youngest child played, to use Piaget's words, 'in an individualistic manner . . . learning the rules but applying them as suited her own fantasy', and producing a caricature of the proper game); the *third* (from about seven years old) based on a mutually agreed but often inflexible set of rules but with gradually increasing grasp of their complexity, and finally, a *fourth* in which the rules are complied with fully and understood to a degree which enables the child to revise and modify them with confidence as did the older of the two boys in the incident described at the outset.

Two Moralities. But Piaget's main concern was less with the social conduct of children than with their verbalised ideas. At the outset he states, 'It is moral judgment that we propose to investigate, nor moral behaviour or sentiments'. In this sense his theory is 'value neutral'. As Kohlberg⁶ points out, the 'level of moral judgment is quite a different matter from knowledge of or consent to, conventional moral clichés'.

In fact Piaget proposes two moralities, the morality of constraint or *heteronomy* and the morality of co-operation or *autonomy*. This last is subdivided into the stages (a) of equality or reciprocity and (b) equity. 'For the very young child, a rule is a sacred reality because it is traditional: for the older ones it depends on mutual agreement. Heteronomy and autonomy are the two poles of this evolution'.⁷

The child is influenced socially in two ways: he is subordinate to adults and constrained by them: he also has a social relationship with his peers. It is this latter peer group morality which Piaget sees as the chief formative influence upon the development of morals; the constraint of the former, he suggests, merely serves to retard the development of the morality of co-operation. Unlike some other developmental theorists he does not see the second morality maturing or growing out of the first but coming from within the child and supplanting the morality of constraint. Perhaps the growth of a child's second teeth replacing the earlier set would be an appropriate if only a partial analogy.

Stage Development

The answers of the children to his questions led Piaget to discern three main stages in the growth of moral judgments, parallel to, but not identical with the earlier four which referred to their observed conduct.

Stage 1 - Egocentricity. As in the initial stages of his behaviour, the child has not really absorbed his notions of morality as part of his conceptual understanding. It is a time when 'feelings are set up before the child has any clear consciousness of moral intention . . . What is done or not done on purpose'.⁸ He gives illustrations from his own child's conduct which show that she is aware that parental authority and wishes are different from her own immediate inclinations, yet she is sometimes moved by the desire to retain the affection of the parents. (Whilst removing books from a shelf the present writer's three year old son anticipated reprimand with the remark, 'I am not a naughty boy. You like me doing this, don't you?')

This is the stage of adult constraint, when adult disapproval is synonymous with wrong. Constraint helps to perpetuate this first stage yet even Piaget admits, 'However averse one may be in the field of education to any use of constraint, even moral, it is not possible completely to avoid giving children commands which are incomprehensible to them'.⁹ *Stage 2 – Equity* Here, about the ages 5 to 8/9 years, the rules are rigid, external, even eternal and sacred; 'verbal precept can be elevated . . . to almost supernatural status'.¹⁰ Suggested changes are resisted even though the child breaks the rules himself, having as Piaget puts it 'a curious mixture of respect of law and caprice in its application'.¹¹ The sense of the pre-existence of rules would seem to hold even when the child devises a completely new game for himself, as did one six year old who commented afterwards, 'It was lucky that I knew the rules of that game of running round the bushes, the one who says, "let's play" must know the rules'.

This is the stage at which privileges and punishments are required to be strictly, even meticulously, equal. On one occasion the writer's nine year old reported that he had allowed his five year old sister to push him over because he had accidentally knocked her over! Generally, however, if allowances are made at all at this stage they are begrudged; it is the age at which the cry is frequently heard, 'It's not fair'.

Nevertheless, according to Piaget, it is at this point in the social interplay between peers that the child begins its development towards the second morality of co-operation (or autonomy).

Stage 3 – Equity. This is achieved in the final stage beginning at the age of 10 or 11. Here rules may be changed provided this is mutually agreed upon: they are no longer imbued with divine authority and the child will now make allowances for younger children. He will also make relative judgments ('it all depends . . .') and generally he adopts an equitable attitude.

It will be noted that in Piaget's developmental theory of moral judgment he ends at the threshold of adolescence. This, as we shall later see, has given rise to criticism.

Moral Realism

In Piaget's work a child was presented with a series of situations involving clumsiness, stealing etc. and asked to assess the blame-worthiness of the actions taken. Results showed that the younger children judged actions objectively with no consideration of circumstances or motive. Thus accidental breakage of a trayful of cups was deemed more reprehensible than the wilful destruction of one cup.

Lying. The younger child 'distorts reality in accordance with his desire and his romancing'.¹² The parent hears such remarks as 'I didn't hear you say put the toys away' . . . 'The doctor said I had to eat chocolate' and (as I check this script my five year old daughter irritated by my lack of attention to her, announces 'Daddy, a crocodile has bitten me on the arm, Look! just there!').

Also, the younger child deems a lie told to an adult as more reprehensible than that told to one of his peers. Lying is equated with 'naughty words' or swearing. Only at a later stage, is objective truth and finally intention taken into account.

Ideas of Justice. Punishments are *expiatory* or *retributive*. The former are meted out in proportion to the crime - an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth - but are of a kind which is not always clearly relevant. Retributive punishments, on the other hand, seek 'to fit the punishment to the crime'. As might be expected the younger child chooses the expiatory end of the spectrum, the older the retributive.

Some attention was given to how children believe rewards and punishments should be administered to those who violate parental commands. The younger child accepts as fair whatever the adult decides, at the next stage the slightly older child demands equality for all, while at the stage reached sometime after eleven, motive and circumstances are once more of greater importance than objective action.

In these investigations the early stage of moral realism is seen as a time when the letter not the spirit guides the child. *Peer Groups* Thus morality develops through a stage of constraint to one of co-operation and Piaget, as noted above, claims that it is co-operation with the peer group which is the

vital factor in the moral development of the child. If this be so, then there are obvious implications for both the content and organisation of our teaching he adds that, 'it is often at the expense of the adult and not because of him that the notions of just and unjust find their way into the youthful mind'.¹²

From the early adult dominated morality or heteronomy the child moves in this way to autonomy which appears 'when the mind regards as necessary an ideal that is independent of adult pressure'¹³ when, for example, telling the truth is seen as necessary to the proper function of social intercourse.

Not surprisingly, Piaget's work has both stimulated research and provoked criticism. His main sequential stages are generally accepted, but as to the details much remains to be filled in. Before continuing we shall now illustrate what has been said by examples culled from children talking.

Situation A. Lies. The children were asked, 'What is a lie?'
Aged 5 answered: 'If I said I am in bed and I'm not, is that a lie? *Aged 9*, 'When you don't tell the truth' *Aged 13*, 'A lie is when you don't tell the actual true fact. . . when you don't tell the truth on purpose. If you tell so as to get out of something!'

Thus the older child brings in the idea of intention as a modification of his initial statement of fact. This distinction was also put rather more clearly by another child aged 11 who distinguished between 'white' and 'black' lies. The youngest child gave an example rather than a definition being at a concrete rather than an abstract stage of reasoning, while the nine year old answered 'When you didn't tell the truth!' Confusion concerning the matter of a lie and the difficulty in distinguishing intention even for the intelligent child was well expressed by a six year old who although able to refer to 'the mistake' of taking the wrong train stated that to report this would in fact be a 'double decker lie'!

Piaget warns that until fairly late (between 6 and 10 on average) the definition of a lie consists simply in saying 'a lie is something that isn't true', but the mere words must not deceive us and we must get at the implicit notions which they conceal'. It is not until later on at about 11 or 12 that

we find an explicit statement which shows the lie as something involving deceit.

This difficulty is seen again when two Piagetian situations were presented to the children as follows:-

Situation. B. Lies, continued,

(a) "A little boy (or a little girl) goes for a walk in the street and meets a big dog which frightens him very much. So then he goes home and tells his mother he has seen a dog that was as big as a cow."

(b) "A child comes home from school and tells his mother that the teacher has given him good marks, but it was not true; the teacher has given him no marks at all, either good or bad. Then his mother was very pleased and gave him a present."

The children were asked to say which child was the naughtier. *Aged 5* laughed at the idea of a dog as big as a cow but could only answer, 'I don't know'. *Aged 9*, 'I think the one who said he had been given good marks was naughty. The other might have felt it was an as big as a cow and it wouldn't have caused any trouble but the other boy got a present.' *Aged 13*, 'The first wasn't really naughty, he was just showing his fear.'

Here the youngest sees no moral problems at all, still less distinguishes between them. The nine-year old expresses his answer in the tangible terms of trouble and the undeserved reward. At thirteen Andrew pinpoints the emotional motivation for the exaggeration in the first story, an equitable judgment indeed.

Clumsiness, In two examples involving clumsiness similar differences in reasoning can be discerned:

Situation C. Clumsiness.

(a) A little boy who is called John is in his room. He is called to dinner. He goes into the dining room. But behind the door there was a chair, and on the chair there was a tray with fifteen cups on it. John couldn't have known that there was all this behind the door. He goes in, the door knocks against the tray, bang go fifteen cups and they all get broken!

(b) Once there was a little boy who's name was Henry. One day when his mother was out he tried to get some jam out of the cupboard. He climbed up on to a chair and

stretched out his arm. But the jam was too high up and he couldn't reach it and have any. But while he was trying to get it he knocked over a cup. The cup fell down and broke.

Which boy is the naughtier John or Henry?

Replies were:-

Aged 5, 'John - because he knocked too many over'.

Aged 9, 'I think the one who was trying to get the jam because he was being naughty; the other one wasn't.

Aged 13, 'Henry who was trying to get the jam was the naughtiest because in the first place he shouldn't have been trying to get the jam . . . but on the other hand John might have come through the door less quickly'.

Here the five year old quite firmly gives an objective type answer that shows her to be in this respect at the stage of moral realism; The nine year old is equally clear that Henry in attempting to steal is the only naughty one; the oldest while agreeing that Henry is at fault also considers that some blame is due to John and thus brings in the notion of culpable negligence!

This last response also displays some of the characteristics of the *equitable stage* of development which distinguish it from the earlier *equitable stage* namely a concern with relative opinions and with finer points of judgment.

Intention. A clear distinction between objective and subjective responses¹⁴ is seen in the following:

Situation D. Intention.

(a) There was once a little girl called Mary, she wanted to give her mother a nice surprise and cut out a piece of sewing for her. But she didn't know how to use the scissors properly and cut a big hole in her dress.

(b) A little girl called Margaret want and took her mother's scissors one day that her mother was out. She played with them for a bit, Then as she didn't know how to use them properly she made a little hole in her dress.

Who is the naughtier Mary or Margaret?

Replies were:-

Aged 5 'Mary because she made the biggest hole'.

Aged 9, 'Margaret, because although she made a little hole she just played with the scissors and didn't use them for a proper purpose.'

Here the nine year old responds subjectively, in contrast to the moral realism of the five year old. He also approaches the equitable stage by introducing the notion of purpose.

Let us now return to the same three children answering questions on the following story.

Situation E. Carelessness. One afternoon on a holiday, a mother had taken her children for a walk by the side of a river. At four o'clock she gave each of them a roll. They all began to eat their rolls except for the youngest, who was careless and let his fall into the water. What will the mother do Will she give him another one? What will the older ones say?

Answers were: *Aged 5*, 'Don't know'. ('what do you think the mummy should do?') 'Give her another one.' (What will the older ones say if she does?) 'Don't give him one because he let his go into the water.' *Aged 9*, 'I think she shouldn't have given him one because she had seen that he had been careless. So I think the same as Ruth (aged 5) that the others would have said "don't give him one" - but I don't think she would anyway.' *Aged 13*, 'She would let him have another one I would have thought, but the other children if they had been smaller and not understood would have objected, but say they were older would have seen and understood that it was an accident.'

In the above responses Ruth (5), maintains her moral realism and here unlike the previous situation is joined by the nine year old. This illustrates the variation in judgment shown by a child at a transition between the equality and equity stages of development. It also introduces a further suggestion of punishment which the younger child often demands 'because he had been careless'. At the equality stage no consideration is given to extenuating circumstances. The need for some such allowance is clearly voiced by the eldest child who not only considers the age of the child in the story but even begins to develop his own theories of moral judgment or conduct according to age!

Several points emerge from the above conversations.

(1) Whether or not we accept Piaget's theoretical model of two moralities there is certainly a developmental structure in the child's conceptualisation of morality. (2) Such development does not advance evenly over the whole front of our

judgments; as earlier suggested it continues into adolescence and perhaps beyond. In this connection Bull¹⁵ complains forcefully of the incompleteness if not distortion of the developmental picture produced by a failure to continue testing throughout adolescence. (3) The posing of questions involving moral situations may prove an aid to their moral education. This method is advocated by Kohlberg⁴ in particular.

Criticisms and Developments

We turn now to later work inspired by Piaget. Morris¹⁶, Edwards¹⁷ and the Williams's⁵ have concentrated on the adolescent age group which Piaget neglected. They find that judgments made at this time are far more fluid and various than Piaget's notion of the achievement of the stage of equity might suggest. In general, recent researchers express dissatisfaction with the unrealistic 'happy ever after' implication of the stage of equity.

In the writer's own studies of several hundred adolescent boys in Liverpool¹⁸ there was considerable variation in the judgments made within the age group of 10–15 years. With increasing age there was found to be a significant shift away from authoritarian judgments towards peer group loyalties. There were further significant differences in the judgments made between a sub-cultural group in a deprived area of the city and a cross sectional sample; furthermore, there seemed to be important situational influences operating which showed up in the analysis of responses to a series of individual, factually based incidents. Similar conclusions had been reached by others. For example, Harrower¹⁹ in a survey carried out in two areas in London soon after the publication of Piaget's book, found that environmental influences clearly affected the development of moral judgments.

More recently others have attacked the apparent rigidity of Piaget's basic notion of ages and stages in moral development. The Williams's⁵ report findings of sophisticated and 'final stage' responses among even the youngest group (4 years old)²⁰ It is urged that moral behaviour may involve a number of components.

Wilson of the Farmington Trust has suggested a model which can be used to distinguish between them.²¹ (see also refs. 3, 4, 15.)

Immanent Justice

Immanent Justice is defined by Piaget as the 'existence of automatic punishments which emanate from things themselves'²². It has been discussed *inter alia* by Isaacs,²³ Lerner²⁴ and Jahoda.²⁵

Isaacs speaks of Immanent Justice as a central issue in moral education, a view with which the present writer is in agreement.

Lerner points out that because a young child's life is full of 'unintelligible prohibitions and a very considerable portion of a child's social life consists in nothing but rule violations which mean punishments, one after another, it is not surprising that his belief in universal immanent punishment is reinforced when he accidentally hurts himself'. As adults we unwittingly reinforce this when we make statements such as 'Don't run on that ice or you will slip' and then our words are proved to be only too true!

Two examples from the writer's experience illustrate aspects of this belief (a) a three year old shook his finger at a thundery sky and said, 'You'll get shot for making such a noise' and, (b), (more typically), an eight year old on finding a coin on a footpath announced, 'That is because the woman in the sweet shop gave me the wrong change; it serves her right'.

In his investigations on Immanent Justice Piaget presented the story of the Broken Bridge:

Situation F. Broken Bridge. Once there were two children who were stealing apples in an orchard. Suddenly a policeman comes along and the two children run away. One of them is caught. The other one, going home by a roundabout way, crosses a river on a rotten bridge and falls into the water. Now what do you think? If he had not stolen the apples and had crossed the river on that rotten bridge all the same, would he also have fallen into the water?

The childrens' answers were:

Aged 5, 'Yes. 'Cos it was a rotten bridge.' *Aged 6*, 'No because it was a magic bridge and it would break for the naughty people, but it wouldn't let (other) people fall in, it would hold them up. *Aged 9*, 'The weight of the apples might have caused it to break.'

Jane (11) 'He could have fallen in because it was rotten, but you see he had stolen apples — that's why — so he might have fallen in because of that but also because the bridge might have been rotten.

Question: *Could you tell me what might cause this to happen?*

'Well you can't depend on it (breaking); but mummy says if you do something wrong your sins will find you out.'

In this case the five year old is answering at a level more advanced than that which we have noted earlier. The 9 year old, while clearly rejecting Immanent Justice, still expresses his answer in concrete terms, not in the abstract concepts underlying the question. The response of David a (6 year old) is characteristic of the age (but more imaginative in expression) while the 11-year old introduces another point of view.

Immanent Justice aptly illustrates the uneven rates of development of different aspects of moral judgment. Not uncommonly grown-ups reveal by their comments on controversial topics that they accept Immanent Justice much as if they were still children. Thus someone may say that Social Security allowances are demanded only by those who 'deserve no more', or are suffering because they deserve to. I am acquainted with one elderly lady who firmly believes (like Job's comforters) that all who suffer deserve their fate.

Two further but very different examples which illustrate this belief are taken from B.B.C. television interviews.

Major Mike Hoare,²⁶ the Congo mercenary reported the case of a man court martialled for rape and murder. Hoare's officers urged him to execute the man, but he chose a lesser sentence. Some days later the man was killed in an aircraft accident... 'Fate had confirmed the sentence', remarked Hoare.

A group of people decided to attend a Billy Graham Rally. At the last minute they changed their plans in

favour of a social function but were involved in a car accident. At the Billy Graham Rally the attention of the crowd was drawn to this instance of Immanent Justice – according to a Professor of Theology from Manchester, speaking on the BBC.

Implications for Religious and Moral Education

It will be recalled that in her answer to the Broken Bridge story (*Situation F*) the eleven year old girl referred to ‘your sins finding you out’. The influence of religious teaching is obvious enough here. A background of similar teaching is equally obvious in a child’s response given to one of the writer’s students, ‘When you are out of God’s sight, Satan will get you if you tell a lie’.

It is evident from what has been said that mere moral precept is insufficient: indeed some precepts may actually cause confusion in a child’s mind. This poses the question: Does religious instruction of the traditional kind help or hinder the moral development of the child?

Not surprisingly humanists question the value of such teaching though Hemming²⁷ does admit that in marginal cases where the school practices its ethical beliefs, the influence of religious education can be beneficial.

The Williams’s deemed religious responses irrelevant to their investigation because they wished to investigate the type of thinking rather than the source of judgment.²⁸ Yet they point out that religious answers could themselves be classified in developmental stages. One can draw parallels when comparing, say, the Decalogue with the Golden Rule or the judgments of the Pentateuch with those of the Prophets. It is of interest that, Kay²⁹ mentions a theory of recapitulation of the development of the human race within each individual.

Goldman³⁰ in his work on the development of religious concepts found close parallels to the Piagetian stages outlined earlier. For example he asked children of varying ages who had listened to the New Testament account of the ‘Temptation of Christ’ to say what they understood by the statement ‘man shall not live by bread alone’. The

age of thirteen proved a 'watershed': only those above this age had a clear conceptual understanding beyond the mere concrete stage. The writer has encountered even greater misunderstandings in the case of Old Testament stories (e.g. Esau and Jacob). The implication of all this for religious teaching is not a little disturbing.

But not for the religious teacher alone; other curriculum subjects also involve human judgment e.g. English and in particular History. Some interesting research has been done in this area.^{31,32} The title of one such article paraphrased from a child's answer is itself significant, 'God supports the side that wins'.³³

As other research has shown (compare Williams³⁴) children tend to act in accordance with what they see as the source of power, affection or social acceptance rather than precept. It is obvious that unless we 'practise what we preach' religious, philosophical or other similar teaching will be of little avail.

Kohlberg follows Piaget in ascribing primary importance to the peer group as the formative influence in moral development. The classroom 'climate' will obviously have a great bearing upon this. He further suggests that teaching should take account of the stage at which the child has arrived and that the concepts involved should be geared to be at or preferably one stage above. (His proposals involve some six stages in all). In place of the classroom examples of right and wrong, many of which he points out are morally irrelevant (e.g. silence, dress, tidiness) he suggests the presentation of problem situations (like some of those above considered) which involve universal judgments. No doubt he would approve the programmes used by the Schools Council Humanities Project or by Goldman.³⁰ Perhaps consideration of the moral and religious dilemmas of Henry VIII as presented in the recent television series would be appropriate.

The explicit sentiments of Kipling's 'If' would be of less value in this respect than would D.H. Lawrence's 'The Snake' where the question is put more controversially.

If

You were a man, you would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.
But I must confess how I liked him. . . .

Implicit in much of the foregoing is the belief that knowledge of the various stages of moral development would lead to a healthier understanding of children by adults. Lack of such understanding is seen in its extreme form in the reports of children who have been physically assaulted by their parents.^{35,36} In most instances the parents did not view their children as babies but ascribed to them intentions and motives which would be appropriate only to adults.

Wilson aptly compares rocket launching with moral education: 'To get a rocket launched on course each of the rocket's stages must be ignited at the right time, to get a person on the way to being morally educated it seems that he or she must have certain kinds of experience at certain stages of life'.³⁷)

In a wider context there is the need for a frame of reference in a changing society, it is essential, therefore, that we take a cold, close look at the formative influences on moral development and the means by which the optimum conditions can be provided for its nurture. As Niblett puts it, 'The educated man needs to discuss his direction of progress and the 'whys' of his conduct as well as build up knowledge and skills'.³⁸ In classroom terms, as Kohlberg says, 'this implies that the teacher must be concerned about the child's moral judgments rather than about the conformity of the child's behaviour or judgments to the teacher's own.'⁴

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