Piaget's *Moral Judgment of the Child*

Daniel Lapsley
University of Notre Dame
ORCID: 0000-0001-6104-6852
Contact: danlapsley@nd.edu

Abstract

Jean Piaget's *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (1932) explored children's understanding of various justice concepts in the context of his overall project of genetic epistemology. He identified two broad stages of moral judgment: the morality of constraint, characterized by heteronomy, moral realism, and unilateral respect of the child for adult authority; and the morality of cooperation, characterized by reciprocity, mutual respect, and sense of equality in the peer group. Strict obedience to adult rules in the first stage gives way to strict equality by late childhood to considerations of equity as a correction on justice by adolescence.

Keywords: heteronomy, autonomy, equity, genetic epistemology, moral realism, justice

Piaget in Perspective

Jean Piaget's (1896-1980) epochal research on children's understanding of logico-mathematical and philosophical concepts made possible the modern study of child development. This is not hyperbole. Piaget's cognitive structuralism restored mental life to scientific investigation in the 20th-century after decades of behaviorist exile; and when his work became better known in English in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it set up an epic paradigm clash with behaviorism that resulted in the ascendence of the cognitive developmental tradition and the diminution of behaviorist learning theory.

In those days the Piagetian paradigm was seen to be doing something audacious and exciting. While behaviorists were searching for the general laws of learning in rat mazes and pigeon cages, manipulating reinforcement schedules, Piaget and his team in Geneva were revealing startling developmental facts about the cognitive capacities and limitations of children; and on topics that must have seemed unusual and strange to the learning theorist relying upon animal models. Piaget was investigating, for example, children's understanding of space, time, and number. He studied the connection between thought and language. He wanted to know about children's play and dreams, their understanding of physical causality, geometry, chance and probability, their understanding of movement and speed, the mechanisms of perception, the growth of logic, among other topics, including children's moral judgment.

Genetic Epistemology

Piaget called his project "genetic epistemology." It is a developmental ("genetic") theory of knowledge ("epistemology") designed to show how systems of philosophy, mathematics, or

logic, the traditional concerns of epistemology, come to be preferred over other rival approaches. How do we know when we are making progress in these disciplines?

Piaget's revolutionary insight was that by studying children's changing understanding of epistemological topics this might inform our appraisal of progress in these fields. He assumed that there is a complementary relationship between the psychological formation of knowledge as it might occur in the course of children's cognitive development and the formation of knowledge as it might occur in the disciplines. There is a tendency, he argued, on the basis of his own research with children, for organized forms of knowledge to develop in the direction of increased structural adequacy, the trajectory of which could be demarcated as a series of stages. This suggests a criterion of adequacy: forms of knowledge that come later are better than earlier forms if later forms are a *product of development*.

This developmental criterion makes evaluative judgments possible with respect to epistemological claims insofar as development has its own internal standard of adequacy. Developmental processes, as opposed to mere change, begin in simplicity and end in complexity. It moves from instability to stability, from a state of globality and lack of differentiation to states of increasing differentiation, precision, and integration (to channel the orthogenetic principle). Hence, to say that an organizational structure has developed is to say that it has reached a more desirable state of perfected operations. It is good and better for *structures d'ensemble* to be adaptive rather than nonadaptive; to be ideal rather than partial; to be enduring rather than temporary; to be stable rather than unstable.

In this way it is possible to conflate empirical claims about developmental trajectories with evaluative claims about its desirability. Lawrence Kohlberg (1971) would later pick up on this Piagetian insight to argue that it is possible to reason from the empirical developmental *is* to the normative *ought* in the study of moral development and *get away with it.* **[see Kohlberg's Moral Stage Theory].**

Comparing Epistemological Perspectives

Piaget used insights from developmental research to evaluate competing metaphysical positions. He famously showed that young children's understanding of reality begins in egocentric confusion of subjective and objective but ends with a proper understanding of physical objects and causal events. These developmental facts undermine two venerable epistemological options.

The *empiricist* option suggests that external realities are impressed upon the blank slate of the child's mind from the *outside-in*. That is, the child's mind becomes populated with content by socializing forces in the environment. Yet the empiricist option is undermined by the fact that children assimilate encounters with reality to their own subjective schemas. The mind of young children is hardly blank but is instead constructively active in forcing the realities of objective experience into the mix of their subjective understanding.

The confusion of objective and subjective, between what is psychical and internal and what is physical and external, is a form of egocentrism that Piaget claimed was endemic among young children. The external projection of mental subjectivity into the material processes of the

external world he called *realism.* The child comingles objective and subjective. Dreams, for example, take place physically in the room at night, names are part of the objects named. Realism will later show up in his account of moral judgment.

A second option, which Piaget called *apriorism*, has a Kantian ring to it. It suggests that individuals make sense of the world because of preexisting schemas. The mind has original cognitive powers, it has *apriori* categories that structure our experience of the world to give it meaning. In this case sensibility is imposed upon the world from the *inside-out.* Piaget could agree with this much. We do understand the world in ways that accord with our current way of thinking, a process he called assimilation.

But *apriorism* is also inadequate because it fails to account for the fact that children's schematic conception of the world *develops*. Children's thinking makes progressive accommodations to the demands of reality, and the trajectory of these accommodations can be marked off as a series of stages. Of course, children assimilate objective reality to subjective schemas (undermining empiricism), but schemas also change as a result of experience, and in the direction of more accurate conceptions of reality (undermining apriorism). Hence, evidence of assimilation and accommodation in children's cognitive development has implications for how we understand broader theories of knowledge represented by empiricism and apriorism.

The Moral Judgment of the Child

Piaget's (1932) *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, his most cited and most accessible book, should be read in the context of his larger project of genetic epistemology. Are some moral judgments better than others, and can this be determined on developmental grounds? Piaget takes up these questions by investigating how children come to understand rules and the application of rules to different domains of justice.

Against Durkheim

Piaget's book can be read as an extended response to Emile Durkheim's (1927/1973) claim that children come to learn moral rules when they encounter the injunctions and prescriptions of adult authority. On this view children are socialized into moral realities by the coaxing and admonitions of parents and other adults who are presumably wiser in the ways of the world and whose greater social power can compel children's compliance with their strictures. Moral socialization is complete when children submit to the authority of these agents and abide by the discipline of the group. Moral socialization, on this view, is one generation imposing its will on the younger generation, from the *outside-in.*

Yet Piaget's book is a sustained polemic against this view. He did not question that moral socialization begins with parents inculcating in children respect for the rule-making authority of adults. But he thought this yielded only a mediocre moral stance insofar as it is premised on the unilateral respect of children for the overweening power of their parents. A relationship like this necessarily lacks reciprocity and mutual coordination within the family system. However, moral socialization only begins in this social environment but does not end there. As they get older children will move into peer relationships that are marked by greater reciprocity and balance

than is possible in parent-child relationships; and within this society of equals children will come to a more advanced understanding of fairness, justice, and moral responsibility.

Development of the Idea of Justice

Children's moral growth, then, has two sources, each derived from a particular form of social relationship, and one is better than the other. The heteronomous orientation is located within adult-child relationships, which confirms and sustains moral egocentrism. He called this the *morality of constraint*, and it predominates before age 7. The autonomous orientation emerges between age 8 and 11, when peer relationships makes possible an equalitarian understanding of justice. Piaget called this the *morality of cooperation* to acknowledge its source in the society of equals. Finally, by age 12, equalitarian justice gives way to notions of equity, which is a correction on justice that considers extenuating circumstances. At this third stage "the child no longer thinks of equal rights for individuals except in relation to the particular situations of each" (p. 317). Several features of moral constraint and cooperation are described below.

Constraint and Moral Realism. Adult constraint and the child's unilateral respect allow moral realism to flourish. The commands of adults are as inscrutable to the child as are the regularities of the physical universe and are on the same plane: "One must eat after going for a walk, go to bed at night, have a bath before going to bed, etc., exactly as the sun shines by day and the moon by night, or as pebbles sink while boats remain afloat" (Piaget, 1932, p. 191).

The inherent inequality of this relationship requires children to subordinate their own subjective interests to the opaque perspective of adults. This yields a morality of obedience, yet childish notions persist. Children submit to adult rules but do not understand them. Rules are binding but do not constrain. As Piaget put it, "The child is, on the one hand, too apt to have the illusion of agreement when actually he is only following his own fantasy; the adult, on the other hand, takes advantage of this situation instead of seeking 'equality'" (pp. 61-62).

Rules of the Game. This illusion of agreement is evident in Piaget's analysis of how children understand and practice the rules to the game of marbles. Young children understand that games like marbles have rules, and that rules are sourced to external authorities only dimly conceived (the "elders"). As such, rules have great authority and are inviolable. Yet in practice children assimilate these rules to their own subjective schemas. The result is idiosyncratic play that is uncoordinated with playmates. Hence, there is only the illusion of agreement with rules. Children feel the constraint of rules, but rules do not govern conduct. Rules are inviolable and unchanging, but play is idiosyncratic and variable, assimilated to subjective schemes.

Immanent Justice. The moral realism of young children also yields a world permeated with moral rules. It is forbidden to lie, to steal, and these laws have an independent existence, and are applicable regardless of motive, intention, or special circumstance (which are prioritized in the morality of cooperation). Rules, like names, are part of the physical stuff of the universe. If we are unwittingly careless with the truth, it is a lie, and punishment must follow with just as much inevitability as does falling when one unwittingly and carelessly trips. It is as if nature obeys moral as well as physical laws.

This belief Piaget called *immanent justice*, and it is another outgrowth of moral realism. Immanent justice is the belief that moral laws are immanent in the forces of nature, and that the physical universe will automatically exact retribution even when adults fail to detect a transgression. "A great many children," he writes, "think that a fall or cut constitutes a punishment because their parents have said to them, 'It serves you right', or "That will be a punishment for you', or 'God made it happen'" (p. 260). Hence immanent justice, and moral realism more generally, is nurtured by adult constraint and the habit of punishment. In the morality of cooperation children come to see that justice is a social construction and variable in application.

Retributive Justice. What do children think is a fair punishment? For children gripped by the morality of constraint, punishment must be severe to emphasize the necessity of punishment itself. Punishments are expiative and not necessarily tied to the misdeed. It is adults who should punish because rules belong to them and vengeance is their responsibility. It is necessary to "tell" on classmates if they misbehave out of submission to authority. If there is a misdeed, unknown to the group, collective punishment of the group is endorsed because there must be punishment at all costs, even if the innocent is subjected to it.

Objective Responsibility. Another feature of moral realism is that acts are judged not according to motives or intentions, but in terms of objective consequences, or in terms of exact conformity to the rules. A boy who accidently breaks 10 cups trying to be helpful is more blameworthy than another boy who breaks 2 cups out of mischief -- after all breaking 10 cups is objectively more damaging than breaking just 2 cups. Hence, the young moral realist believes in the primacy of objective responsibility. Objective consequences are the measure of moral responsibility, not subjective intentions (which is the priority of the morality of cooperation).

In sum, then, the *morality of constraint* is driven by notions of heteronomy and unilateral respect and is associated with a variety of immature moral notions: It encourages moral realism, objective responsibility and immanent justice. It reduces moral duty to obedience. It identifies justice with the prerogatives of authority. Indeed, whatever conforms to authority is just; whatever is unpunished is "good". Punishment itself is arbitrary expiative, severe, and necessary.

Morality of Cooperation. Yet these childish moral notions born of realism and constraint will be supplanted when young children become active in the peer group. It is through cooperative exchanges with agemates that children come to learn that rules are not blind requests for obedience but are instead socially constructed flexible arrangements that serve pragmatic ends, and are binding so long as consensus prevails, mutual interests are served, and the bonds of solidarity are protected. Because social power is more evenly distributed within a peer group, peers must be won over with reasons. Rules must be established that draw wide support. When rules fail the test of consensus, they can be flexibly renegotiated to maintain cohesion and solidarity.

Hence, the morality of cooperation is driven by notions of equality and mutual respect. It is attuned to subjective (vs. objective) responsibility and the social (vs. immanent) nature of justice. It is responsive to peer solidarity, to cooperation, to equalitarianism in all aspects of social life. By the latter years of childhood children will insist on strict equality as a matter of distributive justice; and by the onset of adolescence, the thorough-going equalitarianism of the morality of

cooperation will be refined so that notions of equity will be more common. That is, strict equality will be augmented by considerations of situational complexities and extenuating circumstances.

Peer Relations and Mature Moral Judgment

What seems startling about this account is Piaget's claim that the better and more adequate moral orientation is found in the peer group and not the family. The notion that adult-child relations promote only an unstable and mediocre kind of moral orientation must come as a shock to those who assume that the moral formation of the child is a family affair, and that only the worst is to be expected of peer influence. Yet Piaget is quite harsh in his estimation of what passes for moral education in the home. "The majority of parents", he writes, "are poor psychologists, and give their children the most questionable of moral teachings" (p. 191). Oftentimes adults are overbearing, opaque, and harsh in their dealings with a child, to such an extent that moral and intellectual egocentrism is strengthened, rather than overcome.

In contrast, the give-and-take of peer negotiations, learning how to cooperate, the way plans are made and disputes settled -- these common features of children's friendships provide ample opportunity for the construction of mature moral judgments. What children learn through these exchanges is a keener appreciation of the purposes and functions of social rules. What they learn is how the benefits and burdens of cooperation can be fairly shared in ways that are responsive to the demands of peer solidarity.

Empirical Status of the Theory

There is significant empirical support for Piaget's account of children's moral judgment development (see Lapsley, 1996, 2006 for reviews). For example, there is broad evidence that children shed moral egocentrism as they become adept at taking multiple perspectives as they get older. Young children do seem to believe in immanent justice, and this attenuates with age in favor of social (or what Piaget called "natural") justice. Similarly, children come to consider intentions in their moral judgments and forsake objective responsibility in their moral evaluations. In the area of retributive justice, young children do seem to favor expiative punishments, whereas older children favor restitutive punishment, and punishments reciprocally tied to the misdeed itself. When it comes to distributive justice, younger children make egocentric decisions that favor the self. This gives way to endorsement of equalitarian and then equitable sharing with development. **[see Distributive Justice Reasoning]**

There are three significant challenges to the theory: *information-processing research, social learning theory*, and the *social domain* approach to social judgments.

The *information-processing approach* models cognition using computer metaphors. How children encode, manipulate, store, process, and retrieve information is central to this research tradition. This approach requires examination of the nature of the information to be processed, since various kinds of stimuli (e.g., task complexity, story format, kinds of information, modes of presentation) interact with cognitive processing ability.

Several aspects of Piaget's theory of moral judgment have been subject to this sort of task analysis, with the general finding that age differences observed on the various Piagetian tasks are better

explained by how information is encoded, weighed, integrated, stored, and retrieved from memory. On this view the real abilities of children are obscured by the complexities of the moral judgment interviews, which strain the information-processing abilities of children.

The *social learning approach* invokes such processes as imitation, modelling, and reinforcement to explain age differences on Piaget's moral judgment constructs, as opposed to realism, structures, and stages. For example, can we induce younger children in the morality of constraint to give responses more typical of older children; and more dramatically train older children to give putatively more immature responses? In this latter case the social learning theory objective is to take a child whose reasoning was advanced on the moral stage trajectory but to reinforce the child to give responses more typical of the lower stage that the child had already rejected as inadequate. This was the general strategy of the behaviorist counter-offensive against the Piagetian cognitive developmental paradigm. And, indeed, some experiments purported to demonstrate the fragility of Piagetian stages. In these studies children were shown to change their responses to Piagetian moral tasks in the direction of adult models.

It is disputed how much this should count against Piaget's theory. The rejoinder is that modelling and reinforcement influence only discrete, isolated verbal responses and not the underlying structural organization of reasoning. During the 1960s and 1970s this dispute was central in the clash between Piagetian and behaviorist paradigms, and was played out in many Piagetian domains, most famously in the children's understanding of conservation in the stage of concrete operations.

Social domain theory argues that children's social judgments fall within three domains: moral, conventional, and personal. The moral domain includes rules regarding harm that are universally obligatory and not subject to evasion by consensus. Conventional rules are also binding but serve the interest of efficient social organization and hence can be changed by consensus. The personal domain includes preferences of interest only to the self **[see Social Domain Theory].**

Domain theory research shows that even young children are sensitive to these domain distinctions. Indeed, heteronomous morality and the several features of moral realism are contrary to evidence. It is not the case that young children define moral duty as obedience to authority, that rules are somehow sacred, immutable, unchanging, driven by unilateral respect and invested with the authority of adults. In fact, children draw boundaries around adult authority. It is not permissible for adults to practice or encourage behavior contrary to morality. Morality is not simply anything that adults command, nor are young children heteronomous across the board.

Hence, some practices are evaluated by children with moral criteria, others with conventional criteria, and young children know the difference. Even the game of marbles sheds no light on moral judgment insofar as games are conventional practices and hence falls outside the moral domain.

Conclusion

The term "moral psychology" now describes an interdisciplinary terrain occupied by philosophical ethics and empirical psychology. Professional societies have formed devoted to collaborative work at the mending wall boundary of the two disciplines, with the goal of contributing to empirically responsible moral philosophy and philosophically responsible moral psychology (Lapsley, 2016).

But Piaget should be credited for getting there first. Piaget's work will not have the last word in the study of moral development, indeed, there is not much interest these days in the stage properties of moral judgment, but he did something harder, he had the first word. An important legacy of *The Moral Judgment of the Child* was that it gave permission for researchers to think of children as moral agents who have ideas about justice, and to show how investigations of their moral development can open dialogue with epistemology and philosophical ethics. The current terrain of moral psychology is built on the foundation of Piaget's landmark investigation of children's changing conceptions of justice.

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