

# Developmental Theory and the Progressive Curriculum: Lessons from an Unheralded Success Story

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## Abstract

Jean Piaget's fifth text, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, remains his single most influential text within the world of educational practice. This paper explores general perceptions and expectations of moral versus academic development in order to illuminate possible reasons for both Piaget's and his readers' relative clarity regarding the need to foster students' autonomous reasoning in the moral realm. Subsequent analysis of relevant classroom realities then suggests that, in contrast to Piaget's primary focus on intellectual reciprocity, cultural constraints may also support developmentally oriented educators in nurturing their students' moral reasoning.

Relative to the world of educational practice, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* serves as Piaget's masterwork.<sup>1</sup> Based on novel empirical findings he had established with colleagues at the Jean Jacques Rousseau Institute, and on his pointed critique of influential works in sociology and social psychology of the time, Piaget argued that human morality arises from the species' developmentally sensitive ability to reason morally and that moral education must therefore concern itself with the active nurture of this natural capacity. Children must be challenged to reason themselves, in increasingly nuanced fashion, about moral issues as they encounter them in the world.

Reviewers greeted *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, Piaget's fifth work in the field, with great enthusiasm; several termed it the most significant of the first five (Mayer, 2003). Particularly among educators, this warm reception can in large part be attributed to the work's compelling mix of findings, theory, and educational recommendations, a mix not otherwise seen within Piaget's oeuvre. Although Piaget typically deferred to the expertise of educators when queried about his recommendations for educational practice, he chose to propose pedagogical principles in the moral realm, linking them both to his findings and to a critique of existing theory.

The considerable influence Piaget's claims about moral education have exercised within developmentally oriented contexts, however, raises the question of what other factors may have supported a broad cultural integration of this work.<sup>2</sup> Educational practice has never followed directly on the heels of established psychological findings and theory; certainly, the relationship between developmental theory and progressive educational practice can not be thought a simple one.<sup>3</sup> For what complex set of reasons, then, did the pedagogical implications of developmental theory seem relatively clear, both to Piaget and his readers, in the moral realm?

This paper begins by briefly reviewing Piaget's findings and claims and the critical reviews they received in

the English and American scholarly press. It then presents three possible explanations for this relative clarity: 1) Western democratic societies are founded on the principle that a human propensity for moral reasoning exists and citizens therefore have a vested interest in believing that such a propensity can, in general terms, be nurtured; 2) the notion that all students must learn to wrestle with concrete issues in the academic areas may seem less obvious to many; 3) the essential questions, logics, and conclusions of the moral domain may seem more readily available, or comprehensible, than those of the various academic areas.

Finally, discussion of relevant classroom realities generates the tentative conclusion that three common dynamics of classroom life may also implicitly support educators both in fostering their students' ability to reason independently about moral issues and in seeing such work as essential: 1) the wealth of pressing issues or dilemmas in which the children are themselves invested; 2) the teachers' own practical expertise with the underlying purposes, premises and logics of the domain; and 3) the presence of fundamental performance standards throughout a student's school career. This last point, then, invites the hypothesis that the tension generally active between established performance parameters *and* the reasoned negotiations Piaget advocates may help to fuel the kind of moral growth that educators recognize as acceptable. If so, Piaget under-theorized the role that existing cultural constraints play, via authority figures, in inspiring intellectual accommodation to established moral and ethical principles.

## Piaget's findings and claims

As one would expect and many will remember, the research of Piaget and his seven collaborators identified developmental phases in a child's understanding of moral questions, in this case, two.<sup>4</sup> Younger children tended to judge level of culpability according to amount of damage done, regardless of intention, older children the reverse. Piaget argued that these and other findings indicated the existence of two moralities, an earlier 'heteronomous' one, which defers to established authority, and a later 'autonomous' one, which seeks to cooperate on equal terms with others in judging what is right. An intermediate phase, "during which rules and commands are interiorized and generalized" (p.195), was also theorized. Piaget also discovered a tendency among children to embrace one of two types of punishment -- either 'expiatory,' based on a felt need for retribution, or 'reciprocal,' based upon reasoned negotiation -- and correlated these two opposing inclinations to the two types of morality.

Having presented these findings, Piaget offered a critique of the work of Emile Durkheim, Pierre Bovet, and James Mark Baldwin in relation to them. Piaget argued that,

though these theorists had in various ways begun the work of distinguishing between the role of authoritarian constraint and that of democratic cooperation in the construction of moral sensibility, their preexisting distinctions were underspecified. He further claimed that this was especially clear when one considered the educational implications of these earlier theories, none of which stressed the nurture of children's autonomous moral reasoning sufficiently; indeed, he maintained that Durkheim's theory implied an unequivocally authoritarian model.<sup>5</sup>

Piaget believed that his research, in demonstrating a developmental progression from 'heteronomous' to 'autonomous' morality, indicated the need for a radically new approach to moral education -- one that would build upon maturing children's natural inclinations to reason through the moral questions that life presented. Children must be given opportunities to claim the underlying means and purposes of the moral realm on their own terms and in relation to the practical issues they faced in their lives.

### **The critical reception**

When *The Moral Judgment of the Child* was first published, *New Statesman and Nation* called it "the most brilliant and persuasive of Professor Piaget's studies of the child's mind." That statement well represents the contemporary academic response in Great Britain and America.<sup>6</sup> William White, co-founder of *Psychoanalytic Review*, who had reviewed all four of Piaget's previous texts in tones ranging from disparaging to neutral, seems to have reconsidered his stance entirely. He wrote, "This volume of Piaget's, like all of the preceding ones, is illuminating, exceedingly helpful, interesting, provocative, and informative," and added "It can not be too strongly emphasized that if we are going to develop any program for the child that we should inform ourselves about him beforehand, that we should know something of his development, that we should realize that there are these various stages in the unfolding of the psyche. . ." (White, 1933, p.215). White had apparently come to see all of Piaget's research in a more sympathetic light.

In his review in *Progressive Education*, Randolph Smith of the Teacher's College Child Development Institute stated, "[T]he book contains ample evidence, out of the mouths of children themselves, indicating the desirability of early and continuous social experience with contemporaries if the more mature forms of social judgment are to be developed" (Smith, 1933, pp.237-8). A review in *Journal of Educational Psychology* refers to *The Moral Judgment of the Child* as "the most valuable of this significant series" and says it "should be pondered long and seriously by our moral guardians, whether parents, teachers, or ministers" (Schoen, 1933, p.157). Another in *The Personalist* calls the work "an outstanding contribution not only to experimental ethics but also to educational theory."

Susan Isaacs, the closest and most prolific critic of Piaget's five early works, termed Piaget's critique of Emile Durkheim "most satisfying in its penetration and vigorous hold upon a living empiricism," and said of the work overall:

In none of his other books have his conclusions grown so inevitably from the vital nexus of actual fact. One of the great qualities of this book is the masterly way in which point after point of the material is taken up and used to qualify, elaborate or sustain his tentative hypotheses. One sees conclusions actually growing before one's eyes, out of the living movement of the children's minds (Isaacs, 1934, p.94).

Overwhelmingly, then, reviewers of *The Moral Judgment of the Child* agreed that the work successfully blended empirical research with theoretical critique and found its practical implications for education compelling. For these reasons, many found it Piaget's most significant and convincing work to date. Piaget's fundamental and original claim regarding the existence of two moralities was seen to have grown in compelling fashion from recognizable empirical realities and to reveal the need for the dramatically new approach to moral education that he proposed.

### **Potential reasons for this relative clarity**

Even today, uncertainty regarding the implications of developmental theory for the academic subjects lingers, particularly at the secondary level, where a perceived need for verbal mastery of key cultural understandings still generally trumps concerns for students' depth of understanding. For what reasons, then, might educators more broadly agree that all children do need to internalize the fundamental logics and rationales of moral reasoning through an active engagement with the concrete moral challenges they face in their lives? What might distinguish the nature of moral understandings from that of academic understandings in people's minds? This paper presents three possibilities.

First, because Western societies are democratic, their citizens have a vested interest in believing that a human propensity for moral reasoning exists and that such a propensity can be nurtured through appropriate schooling. In general terms, the governing structures of such societies require that citizens grasp basic moral premises and tackle novel moral issues through the application of reason. In contrast, people may be less likely to assume that everyone shares a propensity for mathematical or historical reflection or for artistic expression. Indeed, some educators may believe that only a select number are able to think originally in these domains.

Second, the idea that all students must develop an ability to wrestle with practical issues in the academic areas may seem less obvious to many. The central relevance of morality to all democratic social relations leads to a prioritizing of certain central understandings and to their permeation, in fact, of democratically oriented classroom cultures. Interpersonal issues rife with moral implications continually arise and, if a teacher is not to be preoccupied with them continually, children must learn to reason about what is right and fair together. This, in turn, may nurture a deeper sense of moral understandings as socially constructed (and reconstructed), causing educators and guardians to see

children's accommodation of the underlying logics of moral behavior as essential to their ability to apply moral understandings effectively. If so, this may lead people to view some working set of premises and practical capabilities as constituting the worthy knowledge in this domain.

Third, the fundamental questions and rationales of the moral domain may seem more readily available, or comprehensible, than those of the various academic areas. The basic moral premises of one's society inform and enable all social relationships and may therefore strike many as intuitively obvious. Perhaps such premises, their constituent logics, and their practical implications have been so thoroughly inculcated among adult educators that they come to seem readily discoverable through a child's autonomous exploration of the world.

In reviewing these possibilities, it is worth considering the extent to which the power of Piaget's practical analysis in *The Moral Judgment of the Child* reflected a prior clarity about the significance of his findings for education in this domain. Relevant insights and analyses may well have been fostered by the active contemporary debate among sociologists and psychologists regarding the need for a new basis for moral authority in a post-Darwinian world. A paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962) among those social scientists and educators concerned with theorizing the basis of morality and its implications for moral education, then, may have been due.

Although this paper is not intended to confirm this hypothesis, it is useful to bear it in mind when contrasting pedagogical assumptions in the moral domain with those current in others. What contemporary questions and concerns may have prepared Piaget's readers for his bold pedagogical prescriptions? Might some set of shared commitments continue today to inform current understandings of the pedagogical implications of developmental theory within the moral domain?

Fernando Vidal's intellectual biography of Piaget's early adulthood establishes the cultural and personal circumstances within which Piaget came to feel a pressing need to reconcile his belief in a Protestant God with the dictates of evolutionary science (Vidal, 1994).<sup>7</sup> As Piaget himself characterized it at the time, these theological struggles only subsided in response to his ecstatic embrace of an immanent God.<sup>8</sup> Human reason, in its demonstrable power to master material reality to compelling end, came to represent this Immanence for the adolescent Piaget. Within two years, Piaget had cast off the religious framing, yet still sought to establish a biological basis of morality, a goal he linked with establishing the biological roots of reason (Vidal, 1987, 1994; Chapman, 1986, 1988).

In *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, written fifteen years later, Piaget speaks of experiencing "the higher and purely immanent feeling of obligation, which is the product of rational necessity" (1965/32, p. 370), and states that only those who are deaf to this internal call could ever imagine abject deference to external authority to be a reflection of moral feeling. In this language, one hears the theological roots of Piaget's commitment to locating moral authority within and to characterizing it as a function of independent

reason. Certainly, his oft-quoted observation from *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, "Logic is the morality of thought just as morality is the logic of action" (*ibid*, p.398), powerfully conveys his enduring attachment to the equation he had posited as a young man between lucid reason and moral right.

Although Piaget concurred with those who claimed that morality is an inherently social phenomenon, he objected to the notion that moral law exists outside of or prior to the specific human relations that construct it. That morality depends upon people reasoning together in relation to evident realities, he felt, could be seen in the ways in which the older boys he studied came to view the origins and status of the rules of the game of marbles as contingent rather than absolute. As Piaget put it, "Social laws are unfinished and their progressive formation presupposes the unfettered cooperation of personal reason" (*ibid*, p. 370).

To the extent Piaget intended to distinguish between social and physical laws in this last quotation, he would likely have viewed such a distinction as a matter of degree rather than of kind. For Piaget, all knowledge resulted from the collaborative investigation and theorizing of material, social, and psychological structures, and all forms of knowledge were interdependent and progressive.<sup>9</sup> The relative ease with which Piaget's prescriptions for moral education were understood and appreciated, however, suggests that Piaget may have underestimated the degree to which an opposition between social and physical laws functioned within the popular imagination.

If educators perceive certain types of culturally established understandings, say in math or science, as more absolute than those in the moral realm, they may be less likely to invest themselves in nurturing the quality of reasoning required for genuine participation in those domains. As noted above, if the premises and logics of other fields also seem more complicated, or less readily apparent through one's interactions with the world, such participation may come to seem the legitimate province of only a few. Educators may therefore tend to consider students' active intellectual engagement in the reasoning of these fields nearly impossible and therefore irrelevant -- both for them and for society at large.

### **A generative convergence of three common classroom dynamics**

Consider the depth of understanding developmentally oriented educators and guardians seek to foster in even very young children in the moral domain. By pre-school, students are expected to appreciate fundamental moral purposes, such as getting along peaceably with their classmates, and are taught to bring organizing premises and logics to bear in the dispensation of moral issues that arise in a classroom. (If Sharon expects Tyler to account for her feelings, than she must account for Tyler's.) By first grade, students are expected to be able to reason through minor moral dilemmas themselves, by taking each other's perspectives and the larger social context into consideration.

Inevitably, relevant issues continually present themselves in any democratically oriented group setting:

space and material must be shared, others' feelings must be appreciated, and harmful behavior must be contained. The intellectual struggles demanded in these situations are as necessary to relationship as are the struggles required to learn one's first language. As Piaget himself pointed out, it is a child's feelings of warmth toward, interest in, and respect for elders and peers that inspire the first moral leanings. To a large extent, then, the development of these leanings is undertaken not just willingly, but without question. It is work that must be done if one does not want to be socially isolated.

A sense of practical necessity has naturally informed the authority figure's relationship with the moral realm as well. As adults, and as children before that, they have also been called upon to make sense of their culture's moral understandings relative to the experiences of their own lives. Perhaps in general terms, then, teachers can be thought to possess greater practical expertise in bringing the constituent logics and premises of moral reasoning to bear in resolving concrete issues than in the academic subject areas. In contemporary pluralistic democracies, basic moral precepts are no longer recited from a book, and it is not to a book that most educators will turn in order to resolve the moral issues classroom life presents.

Finally, in reflecting on the nature of the social realities that the child must accommodate in the moral realm in order to sustain peer and authority relationships, one sees that these are not only socially constructed, but that certain basic agreements are socially necessary. Even those most committed to reasoning out all matters with children will recognize the need to uphold behavioral standards that keep people safe and make relationship and communication possible; moral reasoning therefore tends to occur in contexts where such standards are in place. A child may be encouraged to come to terms with these standards in a manner he or she finds meaningful, but he or she is required to respect them regardless.

If authority figures do appreciate their necessary role in negotiating various moral dilemmas, they are more likely to play this role effectively. A tension is thereby activated between the child's emergent understandings and culturally established ones. The shifts of perspective this requires of the child may serve to challenge and to foster the child's thinking.<sup>10</sup> If so, such activity likely bolsters educators' and guardians' sense of themselves as capable of educating effectively based upon this belief.

This logic would suggest the need to extend and elaborate the role Piaget theorized for authority figures in moral education. Although Piaget acknowledged that adult authority may constitute "a necessary moment in the moral education of the child" (p.319), this argument would indicate that adult authority actually plays a central and continuing role in constructing the circumstances within which even older children are able to appreciate the culture's moral reasoning and to incorporate it into their own lives.

### Conclusion

"In the moral as in the intellectual domain we really possess only what we have conquered ourselves" (p. 366),

Piaget said. From this statement, as well as from all that he said about education throughout his career, we know *he* thought his recommendations for moral education -- which emphasized children's independent intellectual efforts to make sense on their own terms -- applicable to all areas of knowledge. Nonetheless, the recounting of established academic understandings, what Piaget termed "verbalism" and reviled as a pedagogical aim, remains an acceptable and even principal educational outcome in many academic disciplines, particularly at the secondary level.

I have proposed that three factors -- our vested interest in believing everyone can reason morally, our cultural prioritizing of foundational moral understandings, and our sense that moral understandings can be uncovered through interactions with each other and the world -- together support a willingness among developmentally oriented educators and guardians to engage children in moral reasoning. In contrast, a relative discomfort with the fundamental purposes, premises, logics, and their material and theoretical bases in the various academic realms, as well as a sense that reasoning in these areas is less necessary and that not all are truly capable may tend to perpetuate traditional teaching methods in these areas.

In addition, reflection on the classroom context has suggested that several classroom dynamics may implicitly support teachers' effectiveness in this domain. I have argued that the ready availability of pressing and situated moral issues leads to a practical expertise on the part of teachers and eventually students. This expertise may, in turn, foster a teacher's willingness to engage central and reoccurring questions over time and in a variety of circumstances, leading to a depth of understanding regarding the relevance of certain concepts for daily life.

Finally, I have proposed that an implicit tension is generally in place in the domain of moral education *between* the personal investigations and peer negotiations that Piaget advocates *and* the culturally rooted performance parameters authority figures generally insist upon. This tension may help to support the kind of growth that educators and guardians recognize as acceptable. If true, such a conclusion suggests that Piaget under-theorized the role that established performance standards play in inspiring intellectual growth in the moral realm.

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### Bibliography B

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based upon another entitled “An Elaboration of the Pedagogical Vision Implied by Piaget’s Call for Moral Reasoning,” which I presented at the Jean Piaget Society Annual Meeting in 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Historian Fernando Vidal’s biographical entry on Piaget (Vidal, 2000) cites Piaget’s pedagogical influences in both moral and science education. I would argue, though, that Piaget’s influence in the scientific realm has been somewhat anomalous, relying as it largely has on the elaboration of Piaget’s experimental protocols themselves.

<sup>3</sup> “Progressive” pedagogical approaches, defined here as those that have attended to children’s own forms of reasoning and that have encouraged children to make sense of various realities on their own terms, clearly informed classroom practice (in progressive schools) prior to the advent of Piaget’s research. Educator Lucy Sprague Mitchell, who favorably reviewed Piaget’s first work, *Language and Thought of the Child*, for *Progressive Education* in 1927, termed it “a relief to the layman” and closed with the following “. . . I believe no one of his major conclusions is new to teachers who have been observing children’s behavior objectively in their successive growth stages and who regard their work as the establishment of an environment suited to meet these needs of growth.”

<sup>4</sup> In Piaget’s investigations into the development of scientific and mathematical concepts, he generally identified at least three stages.

<sup>5</sup> See particularly pp. 353-371, where Piaget discusses the implications of Durkheim’s theory for the authoritative relation.

<sup>6</sup> (Mayer, *ibid*) I located eight reviews of *The Moral Judgment of the Child* and thirty-three, all together, of the first five works in the field (see bibliography B).

<sup>7</sup> See particularly chaps. 5-10.

<sup>8</sup> See Gruber and Vonèche, (1977), pp.26-37. These excerpts from Piaget’s prose poem of the time, ‘The Mission of the Idea’ powerfully demonstrate the quality of Piaget’s attachment to this vision.

<sup>9</sup> See Piaget’s brief work, *Structuralism* (1970), particularly the final chapter on “Structuralism and Philosophy.” See also Gruber and Vonèche for a concise treatment of Piaget’s epistemological commitments (1977, pp. 735-743).

<sup>10</sup> Those familiar with psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s *zone of proximal development* (1978) will note some resonance between this claim and the arguments with which Vygotsky supports that theory.