THE CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY IN THE CHILD

BOOKS BY JEAN PIAGET
AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

The Language and Thought of the Child (1926)
Judgment and Reasoning in the Child (1928)
The Child's Conception of the World (1929)
The Child's Conception of Physical Causality (1930)
The Moral Judgment of the Child (1932)
The Psychology of Intelligence (1950)
Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood (1951)
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Introduction

The study of sensorimotor or practical intelligence in the first two years of development[1] has taught us how the child, at first directly assimilating the external environment to his own activity, later, in order to extend this assimilation, forms an increasing number of schemata which are both more mobile and better able to intercoordinate.

Side by side with this progressive involvement of the assimilatory schemata runs the continuous elaboration of the external universe, in other words, the convergent development of the explicatory function. The more numerous the links that are established among the schemata of assimilation, the less it remains centered on the subjectivity of the assimilating subject, in order to become actual comprehension and deduction. Thus, at the beginnings of assimilatory activity, any object whatever presented by the external environment to the subject's activity is simply something to suck, to look at, or to grasp: such assimilation is at this stage centered solely on the assimilating subject. Later, however, the same object is transformed into something to displace, to set in motion, and to utilize for increasingly complex ends. The essential thus becomes the totality of the relationships elaborated through personal activity between this object and other objects; to assimilate means, thereafter, to understand or deduce, and assimilation is intermingled thereby with the formation of relationships. By virtue of the fact that the assimilating subject enters into reciprocity with the things assimilated, the hand that grasps, the mouth that sucks, or the eyes that look are no longer limited to an activity unaware of itself even though self-centered: they are conceived by the sub-

[1] J. Piaget, *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (New York: International Universities Press, 1952).

ject as things among things and as sustaining relations of interdependence with the universe.

It is therefore apparent that a development of explicatory accommodation corresponds to the progress of implicatory assimilation. The increasing coherence of the schemata thus parallels the formation of a world of objects and spatial relationships, in short, the elaboration of a solid and permanent universe.

We must now study the second aspect of the evolution of sensorimotor intelligence. This new phase of mental development is of course inseparable from the first; object and causality are nothing other than accommodation to the reality of the schematism of assimilation. But it is justifiable to study them separately, for the description of behavior no longer suffices to account for these new products of intellectual activity; it is the subject's own interpretation of things which we must now try to analyze.

But, if the study of object concept and the spatial field and of causality and the temporal field requires that one take the point of view of awareness and no longer only that of observer, the description we shall give of the child's image of the world characteristic of his preverbal stage will be less venturesome than one might fear; in order to reconstruct the subject's point of view it is enough to reverse in some way the picture obtained by observation of his behavior. Through an apparently paradoxical mechanism whose parallel we have described apropos of the egocentrism of thought of the older child, it is precisely when the subject is most self-centered that he knows himself the least, and it is to the extent that he discovers himself that he places himself in the universe and constructs it by virtue of that fact. In other words, egocentrism signifies the absence of both self-perception and objectivity, whereas acquiring possession of the object as such is on a par with the acquisition of self-perception.

The symmetry between the representation of things and the functional development of intelligence enables us from now on to glimpse the directional line of the evolution of the concepts of object, space, causality, and time. In general it may be said that during the first months of life, as long as assimilation remains centered on the organic activity of the subject, the universe presents neither permanent objects, nor objective space, nor time interconnecting events as such, nor causality external to

the personal actions. If the child really knew himself, we should have to maintain that solipsism exists. At the very least we may designate as radical egocentrism this phenomenalism without self-perception, for the moving pictures perceived by the subject are known to him only in relation to his elementary activity. At the other extreme, at the moment when sensorimotor intelligence has sufficiently elaborated understanding to make language and reflective thought possible, the universe is, on the contrary, formed into a structure at once substantial and spatial, causal and temporal. This organization of reality occurs, as we shall see, to the extent that the self is freed from itself by finding itself and so assigns itself a place as a thing among things, an event among events. The transition from chaos to cosmos, which we shall study in the perception and representation of the world in the first two years of life, is brought about through an elimination of egocentrism comparable to that which we have described on the plane of the child's reflective thought and logic. But it is in its elementary and primordial form that we shall now try to grasp this component process of understanding; we shall thus comprehend how it depends on the mechanism of intellectual assimilation.

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