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**R. S. PETERS**

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MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND MORAL EDUCATION



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# Moral Development and Moral Education

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## Preface

As a writer I am best known for my *Ethics and Education* (Allen & Unwin, 1966) but I have also written extensively on moral education. My essays on the subject, however, are little known because they are to be found in a large collection called *Psychology and Ethical Development* (Allen & Unwin, 1974) which is beyond the pocket of most students. It seemed appropriate, therefore, to extract these essays and to publish them in paperback form.

My approach to moral education is, I think, distinctive. In the first place my background in the two disciplines enables me to combine both psychological and philosophical material. This is evident in my first two essays, 'Freud's Theory of Moral Development in Relation to that of Piaget' and 'Moral Education and the Psychology of Character'. It is also evident in my two critiques of Lawrence Kohlberg: 'Moral Development: a Plea for Pluralism' and 'The Place of Kohlberg's Theory in Moral Education' (published later in 1978). Psychological material is also used to support the philosophical analysis in 'Freedom and the Development of the Free Man'.

In the second place, while believing in a 'principled morality' as the ultimate goal, I am much more mindful than most of the importance of a 'conventional morality' as a necessary stage on the way to it and of the importance of techniques such as modelling, identification and approval as ways of imparting it early on. This dual emphasis is to be found in my criticisms of Kohlberg's dismissal of the 'bag of virtues' approach, in my attempt to tackle 'Reason and Habit: the Paradox of Moral Education', and in the definitive statement of my views on this issue in 'Moral Development and Moral Learning'.

Finally, though guardedly supporting the use of reason in a 'principled' morality, I am most anxious to show that this is not inconsistent with the crucial role played by feeling. One aspect of this is dealt with in my 'Concrete Principles and the Rational Passions', in which it is claimed that the use of reason is not a dispassionate business. The other aspect is dealt with in the last essay, 'The Place of Kohlberg's Theory in Moral Education', in which a sketch is given of the development of concern for others to supplement Piaget's cognitive stages.

These articles have been written over a number of years but are reasonably consistent with each other. This is because they stem from a definite ethical theory, as must any view of moral education.

Many will disagree with the underlying theory. Nevertheless the articles as a whole raise most of the issues in moral education. It is hoped that they will do something to stimulate further reflection and research.

*University of London Institute of Education*  
*November 1980*

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## Chapter 1

# Freud's Theory of Moral Development in Relation to that of Piaget

### INTRODUCTION

In dealing with the vast field of the psychology of morals, Kant's aphorism is particularly apposite: that percepts without concepts are blind and that concepts without percepts are empty. On the one hand there has been a great deal of investigation by psychologists, such as the Hartshorne and May *Character Investigation Inquiry*<sup>1</sup> without adequate conceptual distinctions being made; on the other hand moral philosophers have developed many conceptual schemes which seldom get much concrete filling from empirical facts. The aim of this paper is to explore how psychological theories of moral development might be unified and seen in relation to each other by making certain conceptual distinctions. Such distinctions are necessary for getting clearer about what the theories in fact explain, and for rendering the percepts less blind. I propose to attempt this by setting out Piaget's theory very briefly and by dealing with Freud's theory in relation to it.

### I PIAGET'S CONTRIBUTION

#### (a) *Exposition*

Perhaps Piaget's most important contribution was to make explicitly a distinction which people who speak of the psychology of morals are too prone to forget. This is the distinction between what might be called conventional morality and the following of a rational moral code. By 'conventional morality' I mean just doing the done thing, or doing what one is told. If a justification for following a particular rule is asked for, the individual appeals to an authority or to what

others do or say is right. Usually, however, the question of the validity of such a code does not arise, as in a closed, tight-knit, society, where norms tend to be undifferentiated. By a 'rational moral code' I mean one for which the individual sees that there are reasons, which he sees could be otherwise than it is, which he follows more reflectively.

Now Kant, of course, made this sort of distinction when he contrasted the autonomy with the heteronomy of the will; and Piaget, both in his moral theory and in his theory of knowledge, has a Kantian point of view. What he did was to pour into the mould of this conceptual distinction a rich filling taken from observation of children at different ages. He showed that the distinction actually has application.

Piaget studied the attitude of children to the rules of both marbles and morality and found a correlation between them.<sup>2</sup> At the 'transcendental stage' the rule appears as something external and unalterable, often sacred. At the autonomous stage it is seen to be alterable, a convention maintained out of mutual respect which can be altered if the co-operation of others is obtained. Constraint is replaced by reciprocity and co-operation. A lie is no longer just something 'naughty' which adults disapprove of, a prohibition which goes very much against the egocentric wishes of the child, a command stuck on to a mental structure of a very different order from that of the adult, whose letter has to be adhered to, but whose intention is incomprehensible. It now becomes an action which destroys mutual trust and affection; truth-telling becomes a rule which the child accepts as his own because of the reasons which can be given for it. To summarise the main features of Piaget's contributions:

- (i) Piaget insists that there *is* something of the sort which Kant described as morality proper, distinct from custom and authoritative regulation.
- (ii) Piaget assumes, so it seems, some process of maturation. There is a gradual transition from one mental structure to another.
- (iii) He assumes that this development in the child's attitude to rules is paralleled by his cognitive development in other spheres – e.g. the grasp of logical relations, and of causal connections.

(b) *Comments*

Piaget can be criticised both for what he did do and for what he did not do. Amongst the former type of criticism should be included those of J. F. Morris<sup>3</sup> and D. MacRae<sup>4</sup> who have maintained that many different sorts of things are included under the concept of

'autonomy' which are not only distinct but which also have not all a high mutual correlation. And, of course, much in general could and has been said about Piaget's methods of investigation.

More interesting, however, are criticisms of what Piaget did not do. For instance, he could have investigated whether the transition through the different stages of morality *is* just a matter of maturation, or whether it depends on specific social or family or educational traditions. In a lecture which he delivered to UNESCO in 1947<sup>5</sup> he assumes both that value judgements become more equitable with age and that the development depends on general features of the culture. But he makes no attempt to establish this in any detail. E. Lerner<sup>6</sup> has investigated this question and finds a correlation between the sort of development which Piaget outlined and the social status of the parents and the extent to which coercive techniques of child-rearing were employed.

Havighurst and Taba<sup>7</sup> also studied the moral attitudes of adolescents in a mid-West town and of children in six American Indian tribes and tried to relate them to methods of training, cultural factors, etc.

Such studies are suggestive but very inconclusive. From them three very general observations could be made about Piaget's work.

(a) Piaget's distinctions provide a useful framework for research. The details, however, of this descriptive apparatus need clarifying and tightening up – e.g. his concept of the autonomous stage.

(b) Given that some such transition sometimes occurs, much more needs to be established about the conditions which favour or retard it. These would include a variety of social factors, but of particular importance would be the techniques for passing on the rules of a society. As far as I know, Piaget says nothing about the ways in which parents and teachers help or hinder children in the transition to the autonomous stage.

(c) Piaget says nothing of the extent to which the relics of the 'transcendental stage' persist in the adult mind, and the conditions which occasion a complete or partial failure of the transition to autonomy in a society where such a development is common, and encouraged.

As Freud, so it seems to me, said a great deal in an indirect way about such matters, it is appropriate to pass to his contribution.

## 2 FREUD'S CONTRIBUTION

Piaget, I have stressed, explicitly made the distinction between con-

ventional morality and following a rational code. In Freud this distinction is only implicit and the features of a rational code are not explicitly sketched.

Philip Rieff, in his timely book,<sup>8</sup> makes much of what he calls Freud's ethic of honesty and of his uncompromising egoism. He suggests that Freud believed in the generalisation of the frankness that is a necessary procedural requirement for psycho-analysis. A man must admit his nature, be quick to detect dishonesty and sham in himself and in others. He must accept his natural needs and have a deep suspicion of 'moral aspirations' such as Freud so often encountered in dealing with middle-class women at the turn of the century. Freud's 'education to reality' and 'the primacy of the intelligence', which he explicitly advocated, go no further than what should be called prudence, rather than morality proper as Piaget understood it. For Freud, on Rieff's view, heralded the advent of psychological man, the trained egoist.

Rieff's account of Freud the moralist, is interesting not only in stressing the cool rationality of Freud's own moral outlook but also in giving a certain interpretation of it. This interpretation is highly disputable. For, although Freud described the principle of impartiality or justice as a cloak for envy,<sup>9</sup> he actually said of himself: 'I believe that in a sense of justice and consideration for others, in disliking making others suffer or taking advantage of them I can measure myself with the best people I know.'<sup>10</sup> This looks very much like the confession of a rational Utilitarian code such as one could find in Sidgwick – or, indeed, in Piaget. It does not sound like the confession of a man who believed only in prudence or rational egoism.

It is therefore difficult to say whether Freud himself subscribed to a rational moral code such as that sketched by Piaget, or only to the cautious prudence attributed to him by Rieff. But, from the point of view of this article, it does not matter. For what I want to begin by stressing is that Freud assumed *some* form of *rational* code, both in his dealings with others generally and in his therapeutic practice. For the aim of psycho-analysis is to strengthen the ego by making unconscious conflicts conscious and by helping people to make decisions of principle with full cognisance of the irrational sources of their promptings and precepts. It is only his basic assumptions both about the distinction between rational behaviour and being at the mercy of the super-ego, and about the *desirability* of rational behaviour, that make his talk of 'education to reality' intelligible and his therapeutic practice square with his theory about morals.

As a matter of fact, the distinctions which he made between the ego, super-ego and id, were ways of making the distinction between behaving rationally and behaving in other ways. He equated the ego with reason and sanity; he says it 'tests correspondence with reality', 'secures postponement of motor discharge', and 'defends itself against the super-ego.' When we ignore the pictorial model which Freud's concepts suggest, we see that their main function is to distinguish between acting rationally when we take account of facts, plan means to ends, and impose rules of prudence on our conduct, in contrast to being at the mercy of the id, when we act impulsively or are driven to act, or being at the mercy of the super-ego when we are obsessed or goaded by the irrational promptings of past authorities.<sup>11</sup>

If we bear in mind this basic conceptual framework we can see, roughly speaking, that Freud's contribution to moral psychology falls under three main headings.

(i) In the theory of the id and the unconscious we find a description of typical occasions when we are deflected from conscious aims, when we cook up rationalisations as a cloak for following our inclinations, when we act unaccountably 'out of character', and when we seem to suffer from a general inability to decide between different possible courses of action, to control our impulses, or to carry out intentions however well-meaning. Such investigations throw great light on what might be called the *executive* side of moral action. I do not intend to say anything more about this side of Freud's work, in spite of its intrinsic interest. I propose to concentrate on the extent to which Freud deals with defects on what might be called the legislative or judicial aspects of morals. This implies something amiss with the sorts of rules which we apply to given cases or with the inability to see when rules fit particular cases. Such defects are to be found.

(ii) In Freud's theory of the super-ego.

(iii) In Freud's theory of character-traits.

These I now propose to discuss.

*The Super-ego* The first and obvious point to make about Freud's theory of the super-ego is the extent to which his account of the formation of conscience corroborates Piaget's findings about the child's attitude to rules at the transcendental stage. Freud, it might be argued, went further and showed the mechanisms such as introjection, identification and reaction-formation, by means of which these externally imposed sacrosanct commands come to be interiorised by the child and the standards adopted of that parent with whom identification takes place. This would explain the perfectly



familiar procedure of standards being passed on from generation to generation by contact with the earliest admired figures who exert some kind of discipline and provide a model for the child to emulate. Freud, it might be commented, stressed the 'inner voice' aspect of conscience because he took for granted a way of passing on rules which, as has often been pointed out, was prevalent in a patriarchal society where the father exerted discipline in an authoritarian manner, with a lot of *voice*, and where he was taken as the exemplar of conduct. Freud's theory looked after both the negative notion of taking the voice of prohibition into ourselves and the more positive modelling of our conduct on that of some loved and admired figure.

But a closer look at Freud's theory of the super-ego does not altogether confirm this rather obvious interpretation. Even in the matter of the authoritative voice, Freud showed very little interest in the empirical question of how rules were, in fact, passed on, in whether they were in fact taught with a lot of voice. Indeed, he seemed to take the social environment and educational techniques as more or less constant. He was mainly interested in the mind of the child, in the mechanisms of defence – introjection and reaction-formation – by means of which the child either took the parent into himself, in the form of the ego-ideal, as a safeguard against losing a loved object, or took over the parent's reactions to his sexual wishes as a way of dealing with the danger which they represented. He did not simply use his theory to explain how the traditions of a society are handed on by being taken into the child. For most of his theory was used to explain phenomena which were both different from this and different from each other.<sup>12</sup>

On the one hand, he was interested in the fact that some children develop *more rigorous* standards than those demanded by their parents; on the other hand, he tried to explain the familiar feature of types like the arrogant or humble man who have a picture of themselves, an ego-ideal – what Adler called a 'guiding fiction' – which is quite out of keeping with the traits which they, in fact, exhibit. These phenomena, too, he explained in terms of mechanisms which the child employs to deal with wishes in a social environment which is viewed as being more or less constant. The over-conscientious child is one who has turned his aggression inwards; the ego-ideal is the product of narcissism or outgoing love turned inwards. The obsessional and the melancholic exhibit extreme forms of this type of character. In other words, Freud was here concerned with people who had an exaggerated or distorted style of rule-following. This style of rule-following prevents the development towards a more