

JEAN

PIAGET

**THE MORAL
JUDGEMENT OF
THE CHILD**

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The Moral Judgement of the Child

Jean Piaget

(c63)

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With the assistance of seven collaborators

Translated by Marjorie Gabain



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Foreword

Readers will find in this book no direct analysis of child morality as it is practised in home and school life or in children's societies. It is the moral judgement that we propose to investigate, no moral behaviour or sentiments. With this aim in view we questioned a large number of children from the Geneva and Neuchâtel schools and held conversations with them, similar to those we had had before on their conception of the world and of causality. The present volume contains the results of these conversations.

First we had to establish what was meant by respect for rules from the child's point of view. This is why we have begun with an analysis of the rules of a social game in the obligatory aspect which these possess for a *bona fide* player. From the rules of games we have passed to the specifically moral rules laid down by adults and we have tried to see what idea the child forms of these particular duties. Children's ideas on lying were selected as being a privileged example. Finally we have examined the notions that arose out of the relations in which the children stood to each other and we were thus led to discuss the idea of justice as our special theme.

Having reached this point, our results seemed to us sufficiently consistent to be compared to some of the hypotheses now in favour among sociologists and writers on the psychology of morals. It is to this final task that we have devoted our fourth chapter.

We are more conscious than anybody of the defects as of the advantages of the method we have used. The great danger, especially in matters of morality, is that of making the child say whatever one wants him to say. There is no infallible remedy for this; neither the good faith of the questioner nor the precautionary methods which we have laid stress upon

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elsewhere¹ are sufficient. The only safeguard lies in the collaboration of other investigators. If other psychologists take up our questions from different viewpoints and put them to children of differing social environment, it will be possible sooner or later to separate the objective from the arbitrary elements in the results which we bring forward in this work. An analogous task has been undertaken in various countries with regard to child logic and children's ideas on causality; and while certain exaggerations of which we had been guilty came to light in this way, the results up to date in no way tend to discourage us in the use of the method we have adopted.

The advantages of this method seem to us to be that it makes evident what observation left to itself can only surmise. During the last few years, for example, I have been engaged in taking down the spontaneous remarks made by my two little girls, to whom I have never set the questions examined in *The Child's Conception of the World* or in *The Child's Conception of Causality*. Now, broadly speaking, the tendencies to Realism, Animism, Artificialism and dynamic Causality, etc., come very clearly to light, but the meaning of these children's most interesting 'whys', as of many of their chance remarks, would have almost completely eluded me if I had not in the past questioned hundreds of children personally on the same subjects. A child's spontaneous remark is, of course, more valuable than all the questioning in the world. But in child psychology such a remark cannot be seen in its right perspective without the work of preparation constituted by those very interrogatories.

The present book on child morality is just such a preliminary piece of work. It is my sincere hope that it may supply a scaffolding which those living with children and observing their spontaneous reactions can use in erecting the actual edifice. In a sense, child morality throws light on adult morality. If we want to form men and women nothing will fit us so well for the task as to study the laws that govern their formation.

1. See *The Child's Conception of the World*, Kegan Paul, which in the sequel will be designated by the letters C.W. My other books, *Language and Thought in the Child*, *Judgement and Reasoning in the Child* and *The Child's Conception of the World*, will be referred to by the initials L.T., J.R. and C.W. respectively.

Chapter I

The Rules of the Game¹

Children's games constitute the most admirable social institutions. The game of marbles, for instance, as played by boys, contains an extremely complex system of rules, that is to say, a code of laws, a jurisprudence of its own. Only the psychologist whose profession obliges him to become familiar with this instance of common law and to get at the implicit morality underlying it, is in a position to estimate the extraordinary wealth of these rules by the difficulty he experiences in mastering their details.

If we wish to gain any understanding of child morality, it is obviously with the analysis of such facts as these that we must begin. All morality consists of a system of rules, and the essence of all morality is to be sought for in the respect which the individual acquires for these rules. The reflective analysis of Kant, the sociology of Durkheim or the individualistic psychology of Bovet all meet on this point. The doctrines begin to diverge only from the moment that it has to be explained how the mind comes to respect these rules. For our part, it will be in the domain of child psychology that we shall undertake the analysis of this 'how'.

Now, most of the moral rules which the child learns to respect he receives from adults, which means that he receives them after they have been fully elaborated, and often elaborated, not in relation to him and as they are needed, but once and for all and through an uninterrupted succession of earlier adult generations.

In the case of the very simplest social games, on the contrary, we are in the presence of rules which have been elaborated by the children alone. It is of no moment whether these games

1. With the collaboration of Mme V. J. Piaget, M. Lambercier and L. Martinez.

strike us as 'moral' or not in their contents. As psychologists we must ourselves adopt the point of view, not of the adult conscience, but of child morality. Now, the rules of the game of marbles are handed down, just like so-called moral realities, from one generation to another, and are preserved solely by the respect that is felt for them by individuals. The sole difference is that the relations in this case are only those that exist between children. The little boys who are beginning to play are gradually trained by the older ones in respect for the law; and in any case they aspire from their hearts to the virtue, supremely characteristic of human dignity, which consists in making a correct use of the customary practices of a game. As to the older ones, it is in their power to alter the rules. If this is not 'morality', then where does morality begin? At least, it is respect for rules, and it appertains to an inquiry like ours to begin with the study of facts of this order. Of course the phenomena relating to the game of marbles are not among the most primitive. Before playing with his equals, the child is influenced by his parents. He is subjected from his cradle to a multiplicity of regulations, and even before language he becomes conscious of certain obligations. These circumstances even exercise, as we shall see, an undeniable influence upon the way in which the rules of games are elaborated. But in the case of play institutions, adult intervention is at any rate reduced to the minimum. We are therefore in the presence here of realities which, if not amongst the most elementary, should be classed nevertheless amongst the most spontaneous and the most instructive.

With regard to game rules there are two phenomena which it is particularly easy to study: first the *practice* of rules, i.e. the way in which children of different ages effectively apply rules; second the *consciousness* of rules, i.e. the idea which children of different ages form of the character of these game rules, whether of something obligatory and sacred or of something subject to their own choice, whether of heteronomy or autonomy.

It is the comparison of these two groups of data which constitutes the real aim of this chapter. For the relations which

exist between the practice and the consciousness of rules are those which will best enable us to define the psychological nature of moral realities.

One word more. Before embarking upon an analysis of the practice or of the consciousness of rules, we must first give some account of the actual content of these rules. We must therefore establish the social data of the problem. But we shall confine ourselves only to what is indispensable. We have not attempted to establish the sociology of the game of marbles; this would have meant finding out how this game was played in the past and how it is now played in different parts of the world (it is actually played by Negro children). Even confining ourselves to French Switzerland, we believe it would need several years of research to discover all the local variants of the game and, above all, to outline the history of these variants throughout the last few generations. Such an inquiry, which might be useful to the sociologist, is superfluous for the psychologist. All the latter needs in order to study how rules are learned is a thorough knowledge of a given custom in actual use, just as in order to study child language, all he needs is to know a given dialect, however localized, without troubling to reconstruct all its semantic and phonetic changes in time and space. We shall therefore confine ourselves to a short analysis of the content of the game as it is played in Geneva and Neuchâtel, in the districts where we conducted our work.

1. *The Rules of the Game of Marbles*

Three essential facts must be noted if we wish to analyse simultaneously the practice and the consciousness of rules.

The first is that among children of a given generation and in a given locality, however small, there is never one single way of playing marbles, there are quantities of ways. There is the 'square game' with which we shall occupy ourselves more especially. A square is drawn on the ground and a number of marbles placed within it; the game consists in aiming at these from a distance and driving them out of the enclosure. There is the game of '*courate*' where two players aim at each other's

marble in indefinite pursuit. There is the game of '*troyat*' from '*trou*' (=hole) or '*creux*' (=hollow), where the marbles are piled into a hole and have to be dislodged by means of a heavier marble, and so on. Every child is familiar with several games, a fact that may help according to his age to reinforce or to weaken his belief in the sacred character of rules.

In the second place, one and the same game, such as the Square game, admits of fairly important variations according to when and where it is played. As we had occasion to verify, the rules of the Square game are not the same in four of the communes of Neuchâtel² situated at two to three kilometres from each other. They are not the same in Geneva and in Neuchâtel. They differ, on certain points, from one district to another, from one school to another in the same town. In addition to this, as through our collaborators' kindness we were able to establish, variations occur from one generation to another. A student of twenty assured us that in his village the game is no longer played as it was 'in his days'. These variations according to time and place are important, because children are often aware of their existence. A child who has moved from one town, or merely from one school building, to another will often explain to us that such and such a rule is in force in one place but not in the other. Very often, too, a child will tell us that his father played differently from him. Last of all, there is the boy of 14 who has given up playing because he is beginning to feel superior to the little ones, and who, according to his temperament, laughs or mourns over the fact that the customs of his generation are going by the board instead of being piously preserved by the rising generation.

Finally, and clearly as a result of the convergence of these local or historical currents, it will happen that one and the same game (like the Square game) played in the playground of one and the same school admits on certain points of several different rules. Children of 11 to 13 are familiar with these variants, and they generally agree before or during the game to choose a given usage to the exclusion of others. These facts must therefore be borne in mind, for they undoubtedly condition

2. Neuchâtel, La Coudre, Hauterive and Saint-Blaise.

the judgement which the child will make on the value of rules.

Having mentioned these points, we shall give a brief exposition of the rules of the Square game, which will serve as a prototype, and we shall begin by fixing the child's language so as to be able to understand the reports of the conversations which will be quoted later on. Besides, as is so often the case in child psychology, some aspects of this language are in themselves highly instructive.

A marble is called '*un marbre*' in Neuchâtel and '*un cœillu*' or '*un mapis*' in Geneva. There are marbles of different value. The cement marble has the place of honour. The '*carron*' which is smaller and made of the more brittle clay is of less value because it costs less. The marbles that are used for throwing³ and are not placed inside the square are called according to their consistency '*corne*' (if in carnelian), '*ago*' or '*agate*', '*cassine*' (glass ball with coloured veins), '*plomb*' (large marble containing lead), etc. Each is worth so many marbles or so many '*carrons*'. To throw a marble is to '*tirer*' (shoot) and to touch another marble with one's own is to '*tanner*' (hit).

Then comes a set of terms of ritual *consecration*, that is, of expressions which the player uses in order to announce that he is going to perform such-and-such an operation and which thus consecrate it ritually as an accomplished fact. For, once these words have been uttered, the opponent is powerless against his partner's decision; whereas if he takes the initiative by means of the terms of ritual *interdiction*, which we shall examine in a moment, he will in this way prevent the operation which he fears. For example, in order to play first in circumstances when it is possible to do so, the child will say (at Neuchâtel) '*prems*' – obviously a corruption of the word '*premier*' (first). If he wants to go back to the line that all the players start from at their first turn and which is called the

3. The English technical equivalent is the generic term 'shooter' which we shall use in the interrogatories given below. For the rest we have generally retained the French words as one cannot be sure that the English terms mean exactly the same. [Trans.]

'*coche*',⁴ he simply says '*coche*'. If he wishes to advance or retreat to a distance twice as great, he says '*deux coches*', or if to a distance of one, two or three hand-breadths he says 'one (or two, or three) *empans*' (spans). If he wishes to place himself in relation to the square at a distance equal to that at which he finds himself at a given moment, but in another direction (so as to avoid the probable attacks of his opponent) he says '*du mien*' (mine), and if he wishes to prevent his opponent from doing the same thing he says '*du tien*' (yours). This applies to Neuchâtel. In Geneva these displacements are expressed by the terms '*faire une entasse*' or '*entorse*' (to make a twist). If you wish to give up your turn and be 'dead' until your opponent has moved, you say '*coup passé*' (my turn passed).

As soon as these terms have been uttered in circumstances which of course are carefully regulated by a whole juridical system, the opponent has to submit. But if the opponent wishes to anticipate these operations, it is sufficient for him to pronounce the terms of ritual *interdiction*, which at Neuchâtel are simply the same terms but preceded by the prefix '*fan*' from '*défendu*' (forbidden). For example, '*fan-du-mien*', '*fan-du-tien*', '*fan-coche*', '*fan-coup-passé*', etc. Some children, not having understood this prefix, which does not, after all, correspond with anything in the speech they hear around them, say '*femme-du-tien*', '*femme-coche*', etc.

Two more particularly suggestive terms of consecration should be noted, which are current among the little Genevans: '*glaine*' and '*toumiké*'. When a player places a marble of superior value in the square, thinking that he has put down an ordinary marble (say an *ago* instead of a *cœillu*) he is naturally allowed, if he has noticed his mistake, to pick up his *ago* and put an ordinary marble in its place. Only a dishonest opponent would take advantage of his partner's absent-mindedness and pocket this *ago* after having hit it. The children we questioned on this point were unanimous in pronouncing such procedure equivalent to stealing. But if, on the other hand, the opponent spots his partner's mistake in time and utters the word '*toumiké*' or (by doubling the last syllable) '*toumikémik*', then

4. English, pitch-line (sometimes). [Trans.]

the absent-minded player no longer has the right to pick up his *ago*; he must leave it on the ground like a common-or-garden *cœillu*, and if one of the players succeeds in hitting it, this player will be allowed in all fairness to take possession of it. This shows us a very interesting example of a word consecrating a mistake and by doing so changing a dishonest action into one that is legitimate and recognized as such by all. We have here for the first time an example of that formalism, which belongs to certain aspects of childish morality, and into whose nature we shall go more deeply in the sequel in connection with objective responsibility.

In the same way, the word '*glaine*' legitimatizes piracy in certain well-defined conditions. When one of the players has succeeded, either by luck or by skill, in winning all his partners' marbles, it is a point of honour similar to that which sociologists designate with the term '*potlatch*' that he should offer to play a fresh set and should himself place in the square the necessary marbles, so as to give his less fortunate playmates the chance of recovering a portion of their possessions. If he refuses, of course no law can force him to do this; he has won and there is the end of it. If, however, one of the players pronounces the word '*glaine*' then the whole gang falls upon the miser, throws him down, empties his pockets and shares the booty. This act of piracy which in normal times is profoundly contrary to morality (since the marbles collected by the winner constitute his lawfully acquired possession) is thus changed into a legitimate act and even into an act of retributive justice approved by the general conscience when the word '*glaine*' has been pronounced.⁵

At Neuchâtel we noticed neither '*glaine*' nor '*toumike*', but, on the other hand, we found '*cougac*'. When one of the players has won too much (therefore in the situation just described)

5. This word '*glaine*' really has a wider sense. According to several children it entitles whoever pronounces it simply to pick up all the marbles that are on the ground when a discussion arises about them, or if a player forgets to take possession of what is his due. It is in this sense that the word is taken, for instance, in Philippe Monnier's *Le Livre de Blaise* (3rd edn, p. 135).

his defeated partner can force him to offer to play another set by uttering the word '*cougac*' (probably derived from *coup-gagné* just as '*prems*' was from *premier*). If the winner wishes to evade the obligation laid upon him by the fateful word, he has only to anticipate the blow by saying '*fan-cougac*'.

Our reason for emphasizing these linguistic peculiarities is only to show from the first the juridical complexity of game rules. It is obvious that these facts could be analysed more fundamentally from other points of view. One could, for example, work out the whole psychology of consecration and interdiction in connection with the child and, above all, the psychology of social games. But these questions are really outside our scope.⁶ Let us therefore return to what is the essential point so far as we are concerned, namely, the rules themselves.

The Square game thus consists, in a word, in putting a few marbles in a square, and in taking possession of them by dislodging them with a special marble, bigger than the rest. But when it comes to details this simple schema contains an indefinite series of complications. Let us take them in order, so as to get some idea of their richness.

First of all, there is the '*pose*' or outlay. One of the players draws a square and then each places his *pose*. If there are two players, each one puts down two, three or four marbles. If there are three players; each puts down two marbles. If there are four or more players, it is customary to put down only one marble each. The main thing is equality: each one puts down what the others do. But in order to reach equality the relative value of the marbles must be taken into account. For an ordinary marble, you must put down eight *carrons*. A little *cornia* is worth eight *marbres*, sixteen *carrons*, and so on. The values are carefully regulated and correspond roughly to the price paid at the shop round the corner. But alongside of financial operations proper, there are between children various exchanges in kind which appreciably alter current values.

6. With regard to social games we are awaiting the publication of R. Cousinet's book which will incorporate all the valuable material which this author has been accumulating for so many years.