PLAY, DREAMS AND IMITATION IN CHILDHOOD

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JEAN PIAGET

AUTHOR'S PREFACE
TO THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION

THE publication of the English translation of *La Formation du Symbole* is for me an opportunity to express my indebtedness to English-speaking psychologists, in particular to C. Spearman, S. and N. Issacs, C. Burt and C. W. Valentine, who have contributed so much to the study of the child and of symbolism. It is also a matter of great satisfaction to me that this book is now available to the English reading public.

This volume is the third of a series devoted to the first years of the child's development, the two others being concerned with the beginnings of intelligence and the child's construction of reality (*La naissance de l'intelligence chez l'enfant* and *La construction du réel chez l'enfant*). Although this book contains frequent references to the two other volumes, which deal with the same three children and study the relationships between their mental activities, it nevertheless constitutes in itself an independent and complete study.

I should like to add a word with regard to the translation. A certain author is said to have declared that he understood himself better as a result of reading a French translation of his work. This is probably true of all good translations ; but unfortunately they are very rare ! In the present case I feel that my original somewhat difficult text has become in English more understandable, thanks to the efforts of my translators, to whom I take this opportunity of expressing my appreciation.

JEAN PIAGET.

May, 1951.

TRANSLATORS' NOTE

MOST of the terms used in the text are self-explanatory, or explained as they occur. It is thought advisable, however, to define the following important, recurrent terms at the outset.

Equilibrium. Used here to convey the idea that two changes in opposite directions balance each other without the balance necessarily being permanent. Since it is concerned with changes, it is dynamic.

Group. This is a notion taken from mathematics, and can be illustrated by the following example :—The operation of addition applied to whole numbers is such that (*a*) any two successive additions can be replaced by a third which combines them, and (*b*) each addition can be neutralised by a suitable subtraction called its inverse operation. A *group* is a set of operations such that (*a*) they can be composed so that any two will produce a third belonging to the same set, and (*b*) the set contains the inverse of each of the operations composing it.

Ludic. Used here to qualify behaviours related to play.

Oneiric. Used here to qualify dreams.

Operation. Although this word is taken from arithmetic, it contains a psychological component which is essential to the understanding of it. An operation is an action that has become abstract and has acquired the property of being combined with other operations, in particular in the form of groups.

Reversibility. This notion is taken from thermodynamics. In this branch of physics the processes form pairs, which represent two opposite directions in which a system can evolve. The equilibrium of these pairs is said to be reversible when the system can evolve indifferently in either direction. Reversibility here indicates a psychological situation analogous to that of physics, *i.e.*, the psychological processes involved are at any given moment in reversible equilibrium.

Schema. This word is used to indicate an elementary structure, particularly in the beginnings of psychological life.

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INTRODUCTION

La Genèse du nombre and *Le Développement des Quantités chez l'Enfant* were the last volumes we devoted to the development of rational thought in the child. These dealt with the construction of the various systems of operations involved in logical and mathematical functions when the mind is confronted with the real world. They were thus concerned with intuitive or representational thought only in a somewhat negative way, our main object being to indicate its shortcomings and show the necessity for completing and correcting it by means of operations properly so called. But imaged or intuitive representation as such raises a series of problems which need to be discussed in their own right. We need to consider the function of the development of representation and not only its ultimate inclusion within the framework of operations (or rather, that is to say, we need to consider the progressive articulations which gradually transform representation into operational, reversible thought). It is therefore important to give an account of the beginnings of representation and to attempt to understand its specific method of functioning. Only when this has been done is it possible to clarify the connection between intuition and operations, both in those cases where the first is produced into the second, and in those, which may be equally numerous, where imaged representation retains an existence of its own apart from operations, as in play, imitation, and symbolic thought.

In two previous volumes, *La Naissance de l'Intelligence* and *La Construction du Réel chez l'Enfant*, we studied sensory motor intelligence in the pre-verbal stage, *i.e.*, that aspect of intelligence which is a preparation in the field of elementary activity for what will much later become the operations of reflective thought. What now therefore requires to be done is to bridge the gap between sensory-motor activity prior to representation, and the operational forms of thought. The problem again becomes that of describing the beginnings of representational thought and of placing its evolution with respect to the sensory-motor stage at one end and the operational stage at the other.

Obviously these problems involve the question of the role of language, which has already been much studied. In our first two volumes, *Le Langage et la Pensée chez l'Enfant* and *Le Jugement et le Raisonnement chez l'Enfant*, we considered this question from the point of view of the socialisation of thought. We shall come back to it here only in connection with the first verbal schemas and with "pre-concepts," so characteristic of the two to four-year-old stage. We shall rather try to show that the acquisition of language is itself subordinated to the working of a symbolic function which can be seen

in the development of imitation and play as well as in that of verbal mechanisms. Our study of the beginnings of representation in the child will mainly be in those fields where the individual processes of mental life dominate the collective factors, and we shall emphasise these individual processes particularly in the case of imitation, which though it leads to inter-individual relationships does not necessarily result from them. We shall confine ourselves to the development of representation in general, only dealing with the description of particular representations in so far as they are related to those already studied in our previous works, *La Représentation du Monde* and *La Causalité Physique chez l'Enfant*.

Even within these limitations, the problems to be discussed are very wide. We shall first study the development of imitation. In *La Naissance de l'Intelligence* we have already made the assumption that representation derives to some extent from imitation. In his important book, *De l'Acte à la Pensée*, concerned with the same problems, Professor Wallon takes the same view, and gives us a further reason for reconsidering the question in the light of facts accumulated in the past from a study of our own children. We must say that, far from accepting all Professor Wallon's theses, we shall often be led to reply to him.

But imitation is but one of the sources of representation, for which it provides the necessary imaged " signifiers." Play also, especially from the point of view of " meanings " can be considered as leading from activity to representation, in so far as it evolves from its initial stage of sensory-motor activity to its second stage of symbolic or imaginative play. We would even say that it is in the evolution of play that the assimilating processes characteristic of the beginnings of individual representation are most clearly evident. The second and longest part of this volume will therefore be devoted to a study of play and related phenomena. We shall start by examining the beginnings of play during the first year, as an introduction to the study of the symbol. The question of games with rules will only be touched on, since one example, marbles, has already been studied at length in *Le Jugement Moral chez l'Enfant*. Hence it is symbolic play that will be our main concern, and discussion of it will inevitably lead us to a consideration of the question of " unconscious " symbolism and symbolic thought in general, in the sense of the psycho-analysts from Freud to Silberer, Adler and Jung.

Only after discussing the problems of imitation, play and unconscious symbolic thought can we then, in the third and last part, place within the whole structure the beginnings of cognitive representation and draw the resulting conclusions as to the mechanism of representational activity or the symbolic function.

We shall develop two main theses. The first is that in the field of play and imitation it is possible to trace the transition from sensory-motor assimilation and accommodation to the mental assimilation

and accommodation which characterise the beginnings of repre-
sentation. Representation begins when there is simultaneous
differentiation and co-ordination between "signifiers" and "signified."
The first differentiations are provided by imitation and the mental
image derived from it, both of which extend accommodation to
external objects. The meanings of the symbols, on the other hand,
come by way of assimilation, which is the dominating factor in play
and plays an equal part with accommodation in adapted representa-
tion. Having progressively separated at the sensory-motor level and
so developed as to be capable of going beyond the immediate present,
assimilation and accommodation finally come together in a combina-
tion made necessary by this advance beyond the immediate present.
The constitution of the symbolic function is only possible as a result
of this union between actual or mental imitation of an absent model
and the " meanings " provided by the various forms of assimilation.
Then it is that language, a system of collective signs, becomes possible,
and through the set of individual symbols and of these signs the
sensory-motor schemas can be transformed into concepts or integrate
new concepts. Our first thesis, a continuation of that in *La Naissance
de l'Intelligence*, will therefore be that there is functional continuity
between the sensory-motor and the representational, a continuity
which determines the construction of the successive structures. This
hypothesis does not appear to be obvious. Professor Wallon objects
that " Piaget, in spite of his insistence on the continuity of this progres-
sion, has been obliged to introduce two terms not included in the motor
schemas: the ego and the symbol." (*De l'Acte à la Pensée*, p. 45.) On
the contrary, we shall try to show how the symbol results from the pre-
representational schematism. The ego will doubtless follow of itself.

Our second thesis is that the various forms of representation interact.
There is representation when an absent model is imitated. There is
representation in symbolic play, in imagination and even in dreams.
The system of concepts and logical relations, both in their intuitive
and operational forms, implies representation. What then are the
elements common to these various representations, and is it even
possible to maintain that they contain comparable mechanisms?

Classical associationist psychology found an easy solution to the
problem by making all representations derive from a single, simple
reality: the image, a direct continuation of sensation. But the image
itself raises a problem, for far from being an immediate continuation
of perception as such, it does not seem to intervene in mental life
before the second year. Moreover, it is only a " signifier," or symbol,
and to understand the part it plays it is necessary to study the relation-
ship between the various " signifiers " and the various " signified,"
in short the whole representational activity.

A second means of attempting a solution of these problems is by

bringing in social life.   Professor Wallon, after attempting to explain the elementary forms of mental life, emotion at the " projective " level and that of " understanding of situations," by the intervention at various stages of physiological systems each integrating those which precede it but without preparing through functional continuity for those which will follow, has recourse to social factors such as ritual, myth, language and the higher forms of imitation in order to account for representation.   But the question that then arises is why and how the child is influenced at certain definite moments by this or that social action.   Language, for example, is acquired at this age and not at that, in this order and not in that, and therefore only modifies thought in so far as thought is susceptible of being modified.   It is therefore not " social life " as a whole that psychology must invoke, but a series of relationships established in all possible combinations between individuals of distinct levels of mental development, and as a consequence of various types of interaction (coercion, co-operation, imitation, discussion, etc.).   Though obviously social life plays an essential role in the elaboration of concepts and of the representational schemas related to verbal expression, it does not in itself explain the beginnings of the image or the symbol as they are to be seen in deferred imitation or in the first imaginative games of the one year-old child. Moreover, no sociologist has yet undertaken to prove the social origin of the unconscious " anatomical " symbols to be found in dreams or of the images of the half-sleeping state.

The problem we shall discuss in this volume is therefore that of the symbolic function itself considered as a mechanism common to the various systems of representations and as an individual mechanism whose existence is a prerequisite for interaction of thought between individuals and consequently for the constitution or acquisition of collective meanings.   This in no way implies that we dispute the social nature of collective meanings, far from it, since we have constantly tried to show that reason implies co-operation and reciprocity. But the social fact is for us a fact to be explained, not to be invoked as an extra-psychological factor.   Hence it seems to us that the study of the symbolic function must cover all the initial forms of representation, from imitation and ludic or oneiric symbols to verbal schemas and elementary pre-conceptual structures.   Only then will the functional unity of the development which leads from sensory-motor to operational intelligence be seen through successive individual or social structures.   Progressive equilibrium between assimilation of objects to individual activity and accommodation of activity to objects results in the reversibility which characterises the operations of reason, while the primacy of accommodation characterises imitation and the image, and the primacy of assimilation explains play and the " unconscious " symbol.