

Piaget's 1918 Article on Biological Evolution
and Moral Norms

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Before psychology



- ◆ In 1918, Jean Piaget was about to hand in his doctoral thesis in biology
- ◆ His first publication in “genetic psychology” was 3 years away
 - ◆ He was a lot more interested in psychoanalysis than in child psychology
- ◆ Yet two publications from 1918 are vital for understanding
 - ◆ His genetic epistemology overall
 - ◆ His conception of morality

A 3 x 2 table
(Introduction to Genetic Epistemology,
2nd ed., Vol. 1, p. 31)

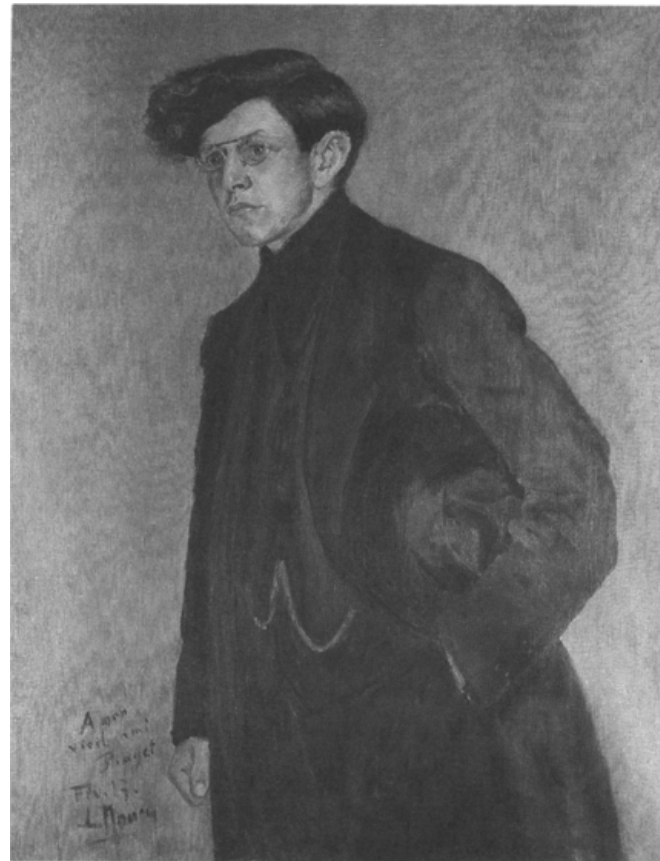


	Nondevelopmental Solution	Developmental Solution
Primacy of the object	Realism	Empiricism
Primacy of the subject	Apriorism	Pragmatism and conventionalism
Indissociation between subject and object	Phenomenology	Relationalism

A 3 x 2 table
(The Moral Judgment of the Child)



1917: A few things on his mind





Recherche



- ◆ An autobiographical “novel”
- ◆ Written in Leysin, 1916-1917
- ◆ Theme: science vs. faith, or science vs. values
- ◆ Alludes to the key thinkers with which Piaget was familiar in
 - ◆ Evolutionary biology
 - ◆ Moral philosophy

Biology and War



- ◆ Or is it Biology and *The War*?
- ◆ Written in January 1918
- ◆ For the Zofingian Society (which promoted cooperation among French and German-speaking students in Switzerland)
- ◆ Just 6 pages long
- ◆ Gives his take on science vs. values in highly condensed form
- ◆ Gives his solution (ideal equilibrium) in even more condensed form

The internal logic of biological evolution



Piaget focuses on

- ◆ “Pure biology”
- ◆ Laying out “normal laws of evolution”

Insufficiency of appealing to data



In the data Darwin saw the struggle for life, a struggle against the environment and against competitors. All that he drew from what he noted was a biological doctrine. But a morality was contained in it, which we have not faulted ourselves for extracting since his time. (p. 375)

Insufficiency of appealing to data



With very different eyes, Kropotkin also examined the data. He saw mutual aid, and believed that this authorized him to condemn war. In biological morality, then, the data justify every position. Everyone from Guyau to Nietzsche, from Bain and Mill to Kropotkin, from Spencer to Cresson and Le Dantec, claims to draw support from the facts—and everyone is right. War exists; charity exists; therefore war, like charity, is good... (pp. 375-376)

The internal logic of Darwinism



War can be given a biological justification in one of two ways: either by showing that evolution is explained by Darwinism alone, or, if this should turn out to be false, by restricting Lamarckianism to Le Dantec's narrow conception of "functional assimilation." (pp. 376-377)

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The internal logic of Darwinism



It seems obvious to me that Darwinism, if it is seen as the only way to explain evolution, will justify war. What I have in mind here is Neodarwinism, the kind that rejects the inheritance of acquired characteristics and, in consequence, the influence of the environment, seeing competition among individuals and among species as the sole mechanism of evolution. **Competition is conflict, indisputably.** (p. 377, bold print added)

Does Weismann help Darwin?



It is true that a doctrine of social harmony can be founded on theories like Weismann's. One could show that among **the “particles” of heredity, whatever they are exactly**, there is some kind of coordination that exerts an influence on relationships among individuals. But of necessity this factor will be sharply restricted by competition, because by definition no new adaptation can undergo hereditary transmission. (p. 377, bold added)

The internal logic of Lamarckianism



Now Lamarckianism attributes all of evolution to the influence of the environment, an influence that creates habits and is conserved through heredity. It consequently supposes that, once new characteristics have been acquired, they will be stable; this, in turn, presupposes assimilation, and Le Dantec, in basing all of his biology on this factor, was just explicating Lamarckianism. (p. 378)

A nighttime photograph of a city skyline, featuring the CN Tower prominently in the center. The lights of the buildings and the tower are visible against a dark sky.

Le Dantec



Assimilation is the property that every living thing possesses of reproducing its own substance. It is thus a factor of conservation, nothing more. It is the environment that is the factor of variation, not the living thing or anything that is inside it. (p. 378)

Assimilation and imitation



Now, by the very fact that an individual organism assimilates, it is in conflict with its environment. Everything around it tends to act upon it, to deform it; it is the organism alone, bearing up under the opposition of the entire universe, that tends to conserve its individuality. This is the toughest conceivable struggle. It is not limited to the struggle against the environment. Everything that is not me is hostile to me; in this non-me are included all the other individuals of my own species, all other species, all of life. (pp. 378-379)

Assimilation and imitation



Bit by bit, Le Dantec has worked out all of the consequences of the struggle against the environment, tracing each step that leads to selfishness. Even those whom we love deposit their imprint in us, they “conquer” us “through their image,” and, to that extent, they diminish us. Instead of **assimilating** according our own formula, we “**imitate**” them, just as the eye is obliged to “imitate” the light ray that strikes it, just as a species of animal “imitates” the new condition to which it must adapt, just as a bit of protoplasm “imitates” the toxin that has been injected into it. (p. 379)

What hath evolution wrought?



Conclusion: selfishness is the basis for every society. Conflict is part of the internal logic of life; war is necessary. Darwinism crassly legitimates war. Lamarckianism follows a subtler path to the same result. (p. 379)

Straightening Le Dantec out



But let us analyze this “functional assimilation” at the base of Le Dantec’s system, and we will uncover a flaw that explains these deductions. The flaw consists of **making assimilation and “imitation” into opposites of each other** in order to make a synthesis of them. Whereas there is a profound truth behind this way of thinking when it is applied to phenomena of digestion (where assimilation is at its maximum and imitation at its minimum), not much reflection is needed to see that for psychological phenomena the inverse is true. **One is all the more oneself when one understands one’s environment**, while for Le Dantec, one is, to put it in extreme terms, **either truly original and unintelligent, or truly intelligent and bereft of personality**. (pp. 379-380)



Conclusion



Henceforward our view on war changes completely. Where intellectual functioning is concerned, understanding things will allow true assimilation (as common sense already has it). As far as morality goes, only love, *caritas*, will expand the ego. Socially, only cooperation and peace will work to the benefit of social groups. (p. 380)

Translation issues



- ◆ You can get “Biology and war” in English, from Gruber and Vonèche, *The Essential Piaget*
- ◆ Word for word, their translation is very good
- ◆ But there are **no annotations**

What's this about?



You have asked me for a few lines on biology and war.

If what you want is an article, no. I lack the necessary documentation, and I do not believe that a naturalist will be able to say anything on this subject for a long time to come. He would need objectivity and distance that he cannot get. **He could try his hand at literature**, because it is a living medium and it aims at human truth, not scientific truth—but **he would not be able to integrate his attitude as a human being with his science**. He is too human to adopt such an *a priori* that would run counter to his loyalty as a scholar. (1918, pp. 374-375)

A nighttime photograph of a city skyline, featuring the CN Tower in the center. The text "Or this?" is overlaid in a bright green color.

Or this?



The Nicolai whom Romain Rolland has shown us in the pages of *Demain* certainly has the right to put his biology in the service of his ideals. He writes from the depths of imprisonment. We, however, are not suffering; as we search for an answer under calm conditions, we have to keep our cool. So if you want something all worked out, I will have to decline; if you want my little idea, though, I will accept, because everything is pressing us to look for an answer... (p. 375)

A nighttime photograph of a city skyline, likely Toronto, featuring the CN Tower. The word "Nicolai" is overlaid in a bright green, sans-serif font.

Nicolai



3. Georg Friedrich Nicolai (1874-1964), a prominent German physiologist, spoke out against his country's entry into World War I. In 1914, he was fired from his position at the University of Berlin for publishing a rejoinder to a pro-war manifesto, and imprisoned in the fortress of Graudenz. When he arranged for his antiwar treatise, *Die Biologie des Krieges* [The Biology of War], to be published in Switzerland, it was banned in Germany and he was imprisoned for a second time. Nicolai subsequently escaped to Denmark by plane and started his own antiwar magazine there.

A nighttime photograph of a city skyline, featuring a prominent tower with a red light. The name "Rolland" is overlaid in a bright green, sans-serif font.

Rolland



4. Rolland, a French novelist, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915. Known for his advocacy of socialism and pacifism, he was living in semi-exile in Switzerland during World War I, and corresponding with a number of German intellectuals who opposed the war. He gave *The Biology of War* an enthusiastic review: Un grand Européen: G. F. Nicolai, *Demain* #2, October 1917, 337-357, and November 1917, 13-30.

A nighttime photograph of a city skyline, featuring a prominent tower with a red light beam. The word "Demain" is overlaid in a bright green, italicized font.

Demain



5. *Demain* (“Tomorrow”) was an anti-war literary magazine published between 1916 and 1918 by Henri Guilbeaux, a French anarcho-syndicalist who fled to Switzerland to avoid wartime censorship. Rolland often contributed to it, but it “quickly tilted to the Bolshevik side” (Landy Charrier, *Romain Rolland, les relations franco-allemandes et la Suisse* (1914-1919))

Translation plans



- ◆ “Biology and war” would make the right afterword to *Recherche*