# "There Are Children All Around Us"

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*Introduction*

> The memories of childhood have no order, and so I remember that never was there such a dame school as ours, so firm and kind and smelling of galoshes, with the sweet and fumbled music of the piano lessons drifting down from upstairs to the lonely schoolroom, where only the sometimes tearful wicked sat over undone sums, or to repent a little crime (Dylan Thomas, "Reminiscences of Childhood" 1954, p. 13).

As a teacher, I am not restricted to the technical images of childhood produced by various theories of child development, or the images of children implicit in curriculum guidelines. Rather, the practice of teaching has the power to call forth a complex analogical network of images of childhood (Jardine & Morgan, 1987). In this network, I find my own childhood as the object of reverie or reminiscence. I find my own childhood as an object to which certain facts pertain, and about which many differing interpretations of such "facts" exist. I discover the details of a particular experimental study which I find of theoretical interest, or of practical exigency to my teaching, or to my understanding of this particular child, or as a challenge to my own scholarly work in a particular area. At thirty-six years old, I am still the child of my parents, with all the complexity, controversy and comfort that this relationship offers. Piaget offers me the anonymous child addressed in details of a particular stage of cognitive development. The children of "my" classroom are present as experientially and emotionally distinct from children of "other" classrooms, and they are also present as the ones for whom I am professionally accountable, to their parents, to the administration of the school. My own son Eric is someone in relation to whom my love, caring and concern are particular, concrete and irreplaceable vis à vis any other child; he is also someone who provokes in me questions of my own upbringing, questions of what it means to be a parent, to "bring up" a child well. My own "childishness" is something I might deny, or something with which I must deal on certain occasions of its emergence. My own "childlikeness" emerges as something I might ignore, or aspire to, or only reveal in particular situations, to particular

people. Then there is the mythical, non-existent child which my student-teachers refer to in asking "what do you do with a child who does x, y or z?" Also I am confronted with a vast array of social and cultural presuppositions, from nebulous (children need education, and society is responsible for this need) to specific (to be a functioning member of society, children need specific reading skills, and these will be mandated as part of the curriculum for specific grades).

This network, clearly only partially drawn here, is not an array of different interrelated images which stand before me as an objective organization which I might peruse or ignore at my theoretical leisure. I do not have the liberty of theoretical indifference (Heidegger, 1962, p. 183) nor the liberty of either randomly placing myself in, or extracting myself from this network in a free-floating way. Rather, I find myself already engaged in and by this network, defined by it, constrained by it, informed and misinformed by it. Such engagement draws out a basic hermeneutic fact. Prior to the particular engagement of the world requisite of scientific discourse, we find ourselves in a world in which "childhood" is already at issue, already interpreted and understood in various ways. We find ourselves already profoundly connected with phenomena which can subsequently become objects of various social scientific disciplines. Because of this embeddedness or connectedness with a world which is already understood, Gadamer (1975) maintains that "the hermeneutical phenomenon is basically not a problem of method at all" (p. xi). The task of hermeneutics is not one of methodically establishing a relationship to certain phenomena in order to *achieve* understanding. Rather, its task is *reflective*; its task is to address and interpret the understandings in which we *already live*, and it must be emphasized that *we* already live in such understandings. "Childhood" is not a private, introspective domain, but is the concern of parents, teachers, educational administrators and theorists, and, of course, of children themselves. A "lived understanding of children" thus is beyond the domain of "private experience," living in the discourse of everyday life.

The work of Jean Piaget has a special place in this network of images of childhood. As an educational theorist and practitioner, any reflections, decisions or considerations I might pursue regarding the notion of "childhood" operate at the outset in a context in which the work of Jean Piaget is already present. Piaget's work is irreplaceable, both in its relevance to and its effects upon our understanding of children, their development, curriculum development, teacher education and on innumerable other areas of pedagogical theory and practice. In fact, Piaget's work has become pervasive to the extent that its terms of reference and formulation of issues regarding children and their development have come to form a part of everyday discourse (Jardine, 1987). It has become a taken-for-granted feature of the "community of conversation" (Gadamer, 1983, p. 108) that constitutes "education." Thus, in considering the notion of childhood, the Piagetian picture of the world is inevitably that "in, out of or against" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 213) which such consideration emerges. It is one among many ways in which "childhood" is given a voice in educational theory and practice.

But the Piagetian picture of the world offers us a peculiar relationship to this complex of images of childhood. It begins, of necessity, with an estrangement from everyday life, an estrangement from the way in which "childhood" appears as a feature of everyday discourse and practical understanding. Such estrangement reconstructs childhood into a technical term which refers to a univocal object domain to which only the theorist, practiced in the art of estrangement, can have proper access. Piaget's picture of childhood thus seems to appear from "outside" of practice, as a stranger who does not belong, but who portends to give a voice to that which "underlies" practice. But it does this in spite. It does not speak on behalf of this "community of conversation" in which we belong. It does not speak on behalf of practical understanding, but speaks *in spite of* practical understanding. Freed from the exigencies of moral and practical choice, freed from the need to give a voice to how we, as teachers, find ourselves in the midst of the complexities of everyday life, it seems to render practical understanding mute. Teachers are then confronted with the task of retrieving the connections to practical understanding that were originally forfeited. In education we find ourselves, again, with a hermeneutical task: "There would be no hermeneutical task if there were no mutual understanding that has been disturbed and that those involved in a conversation must search for and find again together" (Gadamer, 1977, p. 25).

It seems, however, that this extreme formulation belies the facts of the case. To a teacher, Piaget's work appears in the midst of a *lived understanding of children*, with all the richness, opaqueness and multiplicity that such an understanding entails. It appears as a familiar course of action, which has a viable and valuable place in this understanding. It belongs, despite philosophical protest to the contrary, to the practice of teaching. But we cannot recover this sense of belonging by simply reiterating its practical exigency, since the Piagetian picture of the world contains an essential *resistance to mutual understanding, to the "community of conversation" that constitutes education.* To understand this resistance, we must root out the underlying and undiscussed image of childhood found in Piaget's work.

## Piaget's Invitation to the field of Study of Genetic Epistemology

> If, when one is engaged in a particular, concrete interpretation, one likes to appeal to what "stands there", then one finds that what "stands there" in the first instance is nothing other than the obvious, undiscussed assumption . . . of the person who does the interpreting (Heidegger, 1962, p. 192).

The phenomenon of appealing to what "stands there" appears in a provocative way in Piaget's attempts, in conversation with Richard Evans, to turn his readers attention from the fundamental interest of genetic epistemology to the field of study that will allow that interest to be addressed:

> Evans: You stated that you were most fundamentally interested in the matter of how primitive man began to think, how knowledge evolves and that you became interested in cognitive

development in children because this was the only way available of looking at the whole historical development of cognitive processes in man in general. Is this still your fundamental interest?

Piaget: Yes. Of course that is quite right. My problem is the development of knowledge in general. Unfortunately, this history is very incomplete — especially at its primitive beginnings. So I am doing what biologists do when they cannot constitute a phylogenetic series, they study ontogenesis (Piaget & Evans, 1973, p. 48).

If one cannot provide a "reconstituting of human history" (Piaget, 1970, p. 13) in order to account for the development of knowledge in general, Piaget asks "what will be our field of study?" (Ibid). In response, Piaget simply states "nothing could be more accessible than the ontogenesis of these notions. There are children all around us" (Piaget, 1970, p. 13-14).

This statement immediately strikes anyone who reads it as a statement of the obvious. When I read it, I can immediately and unproblematically turn my attention to the phenomenon about which he is speaking. And I can do this without first versing myself in what might *follow from* this statement, without first securing myself in the *methods* proper to genetic epistemology. This statement appeals to something that we, as the readers of Piaget's work, already know as a common and evident feature of everyday life. It is invoked by Piaget as something the sense of which the reader already possesses, as something the reader already understands. It is only as such that the reader will gain access to the field of study of genetic epistemology from such a statement of the obvious. If this statement were, on the face of it, provocative or problematic, more would need to be said. In its function as an invitation to the field of study of genetic epistemology, no more needs to be said — just this, "there are children all around us."

But we must recall that the question to which this statement gives an answer is a rhetorical one. It is a question the answer to which is already understood, already prefigured in the asking of the question in the first place. And there lies in this prefigured understanding an undiscussed assumption regarding what this statement *signifies*, what it points to *in* the project of genetic epistemology. To bring out the significance of this statement in Piaget's work, we must go beyond its function as a common-sense invitation to the uninitiated, and look to what is undiscussed. We begin, as readers, with a foothold in the commonplace, multivocal understanding of this statement as it forms a feature of everyday discourse. And, over the course of considering its signification, we begin down the road of a slow estrangement from this understanding. Our everyday understanding of what it means for children to be there, all around us, is slowly replaced with a technical understanding of this phenomenon. Our supposed familiarity is slowly replaced by the unfamiliarity of technical discourse and its particular demands. Children, the ones who are there, all around us in a multiplicity of ways, slowly become transformed by the methodological requirements of genetic epistemology, into an *univocal object domain* to which only the theorist has proper access.

## *"Children"* as an Univocal Object Domain

For not to have one meaning is to have no meaning and if words have no meaning, our reasoning with one another and indeed with ourselves, has been annihilated; for it is impossible to think of nothing if we do not think of one thing; but if this is possible, one name might be assigned to the thing (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bk IV). [Cited in Elkind, 1968]

The undiscussed significance of Piaget's statement appears most pointedly if we begin by considering texts that form part of a transitional period in Piaget's work. In *The Child's Conception of the World* (1926/1974), Piaget notes that his two earlier works, *Language and Thought of the Child* (1926a/1974a), and *Judgement and Reasoning in the Child* (1928/1972), were concerned with the "forms and functionings of thought" (Piaget, 1926/1974, p. 14) only insofar as they "constitute a form of social behaviour, observable from without" (p. 14). Since Piaget feels that the "need to share the thought of others" (Piaget, 1928/1972, p. 204) is a *social need*, he is left, in the two earlier works, with the immense problem of having "no proof that childish beliefs held in solitude are the same as those which appear in his interactions with adults" (Piaget, 1928/1972, p. 205). In reflecting on these two earlier works in the "Foreward to the Second Edition" (1930/1974a) of *Language and Thought of the Child*, Piaget put this problem into full relief: "The studies contained in this volume, as also in *Judgement and Reasoning in the Child*, are only of a preparatory nature, and are *relative to the social conditions of thought*. The task still remains . . . of studying the formation of reason in the child *in and for itself*' (p. 24). It seems, then, that the children all around us, about whom we were told that "nothing could be more accessible" are becoming objects of a methodological problem of how we might have access to an entity "in and for itself." This might lead us to suspect that Piaget's difficulty is simply a rather technical version of a difficulty we all face: How are we to understand this child, what he or she "really" believes? It might lead us to have recourse to the multiplicity of ways of addressing this difficulty as a feature of everyday life. But we find that Piaget's question makes problematic such recourse, since such recourse operates within the very realm ("reason relative to social conditions") which is precisely *the problem* for genetic epistemology. The children all around us are distinguishable from "everything the child receives from without and learns generally by family, school, educative transmission" (Piaget, 1976, p. 2). But more than this, the appearance of the child "in home and school life or in children's societies" (Piaget, 1977, p. 7) is not of interest, since all of these reference the *appearance* of thought "relative to social conditions" and do not address the question of the nature of thought "in and for itself." We are to treat such appearances as "symptoms rather than realities" (Piaget, 1926/1974, p. 37), symptoms which "announce the presence of an object" (Piaget, 1926/1974, p. 192) which exists "more or less independently of external pressure" (Piaget, 1926/1974, p. 39). It seems, then, that children being "all around us," which we originally took to be a common and evident feature of everyday life, does not signify this *in* the project of genetic epistemology. What then does it signify? In

*Structuralism* (1970a) Piaget maintains that "the discovery of structure may . . . give rise to formalization. Such formalization is, however, always the creature of the theorist, whereas the structure itself exists apart from him." (p. 5). And, in *Insights and Illusions of Philosophy* (1965), he says that "the notion of 'structure' is not at all reducible to a simple formalization due to the observers mind; it expresses, on the contrary, through its formalization . . . properties constitutive of structured 'being'" (p. 109). Piaget consistently maintains that his theory is not a version of "epistemological realism" (Piaget, 1952, p. 375). He maintains that we *know* the world only in terms of the available mental schemata we possess. All *knowledge* of something which 'exists apart' from us is a matter of the assimilation (and thereby transformation) of 'what exists apart' to the schemata of the organism, and the accommodation (and thereby transformation) of the schemata of the organism to 'what exists apart' (Jardine, 1984). Nevertheless, it is precisely what "exists apart" ("structured 'being'", the "structure *itself*") which is the field of study for genetic epistemology. It is against the background of this *ontological assumption of the "being" of children*, that the phrase "there are children all around us" is set out as an answer to questions regarding the field of study for genetic epistemology.

Such an ontological assumption is an essential consequence of the nature of the project of genetic epistemology and its reliance on scientific discourse as a way of giving voice to the children all around us. The term "child" in the phrase "there are children all around us" is taken to signify an independently existing "object" to which one must gain proper access. "Childhood" becomes reconstructed as an univocal object domain with particular characteristics or properties and, correlatively, "proper access" to this entity is defined as that method which will express this univocal, objective character, this character of children as they exist apart from the life we live with them, this character of children as they exist apart from the life we see them lead as a feature of everyday life (at home, in school, in children's societies etc.). Clearly, then, if we intend to signify such an entity which "exists apart," which exists as it is, apart from our signification of it, the principle of non-contradiction, and its correlative principle of identity (cf. Elkind, 1968) demands that that entity either is or is not something which "corresponds" to what is said. And since "a single truth alone is acceptable when we are dealing with a problem of knowledge in the strict sense" (Piaget, 1965, p. 216-7), signification in scientific discourse must necessarily orient to *univocity*, to "one voice." Understanding the children all around us requires, therefore, that we secure ourselves in those techniques or methods which will promote such a singularity of voice — this being what Habermas (1972) means by the "monological" character of scientific discourse. It necessitates, therefore, that we suspend or sever the whole complex network of "bonds which tie the theorist/researcher to the very understandings which they have in common with all those not themselves participating in the research" (Misgeld, Jardine & Grahame, 1985, p. 204). It is precisely such severance which constitutes the objectivity of such research. In securing children as an object domain for scientific

study, we must secure ourselves outside of the complex network of understanding which constitutes everyday life and remain within the parameters of "processes [which are] common to all subjects" (Piaget, 1965, p. 108). We must address the children all around us such that what we claim about such children "is sufficiently delimited and admits of a solution verifiable by everyone" (p. 109), a method "open to everyone" (p. 80).

## Concluding Remarks

It is a mistake to consider the knowledge that is behind our practical decisions as nothing other than the application of science — no matter how much the application of science enters into our practical knowledge.

. . .

If the application of science were simply the problem of how, with the help of science, we might do everything we can do, then it is certainly not the application we need as human beings who are responsible for the future. For science as such will never prevent us from doing anything we are able to do (Gadamer, 1977, p. 196).

Piagetian theory begins with a pretense. We must pretend that we do not already understand children in a multitude of interweaving, often contradictory ways, that we do not already understand ourselves to be adults, until the method of genetic epistemology is instigated. We must forget that we already live our lives with children, that we already belong to a culture, a language, a history in which children are already "there all around us." In such a pretense of forgetting, we find that anything that does not fall within the purview of scientific discourse must be shunted into the realm of the "personal," the "private," the "biographical" or "autobiographical." Once we have torn a technical image of childhood out of the living network of everyday life, the residue becomes designated as "the subjective realm." Resistance to scientific discourse becomes read as a resistance to understanding, since such discourse constructs alternatives to it as idiosyncratic opinion. We find, in all of this, that issues of adulthood and childhood are handed back to us as the objects of expert advice, child-care manuals, curriculum guidelines, to the extent that it becomes more and more difficult to see how it is possible to be a "good" parent or teacher without recourse to such objectification. It becomes difficult to see how we can viably be concerned about such issues at all. It becomes difficult to see how it is that we could have claimed that we actually understood Piaget's original invitation, "there are children all around us."

The "retrieval of practical understanding" is not a question of how well or poorly Piaget's theoretical and empirical work follows from the step of methodological estrangement from which it begins. This is a quarrel for Piagetians to work out between themselves and their friends and enemies. The question, rather, is this: how can we, how do we, live with such estrangement? On what basis can we go about deciding upon the appropriateness and place of such an estrangement as a feature of living our lives with children? Parents' understandings and concerns, children's attitudes and beliefs, theories of child development, curriculum development, teaching methods, administrative and bureaucratic

restraints, colleagues opinions and alternatives, the constraints of this particular classroom and these particular children, and the whole network of images of childhood which form a feature of everyday life — all of this constitutes the "place" in which deliberation and decision occur. It is a sphere in which we are faced with the moral/practical question, not of what can be done, but of what should be done, not of what understandings, images, interpretations and explanations of the children all around us are possible in theory, but what is best in practice. The children all around us, then, are not given objects with certain properties, but persons about whom and with whom we must decide how to live our lives (one feature of which might include the ascription of properties to an object, a possibility which remains open, yet-to-be-decided). *This* is the common sense in which children are "there."

This is the sphere of practical understanding, the sphere of living our lives together with children and thoughtfully asking after what is best for them and for us, deciding, in the midst of an almost overwhelming plethora of possible technical courses of action which are open to us, what should we do? This, in essence, constitutes a hermeneutic understanding of the commonplace, "there are children all around us." The obviousness of this commonplace poses the question of what it means for us to live in a world in which children are a potent presence in our lives. And, in the sphere of education, we find that we must live with the question of what it is we wish to being forth in children, and how we should proceed in doing this. And we find, inevitably, that "no learned or mastered technique can spare us the task of deliberation and decision" (Gadamer, 1983, p. 92).

This morning, two weeks after completing this paper, I took Eric, my only child, to his first day of school. Certainly this is a common experience for a parent. I could tell that from the nods of recognition I received in my search to put into words the commonness of this experience, how it affects my understanding of Eric, of myself, and of our relationship. It is difficult to say what goes without saying. Images of my own schooling erupted, of the teachers who seemed to understand and those who never would, of the seeming hours spent in senseless activity and the uselessness of protest to the contrary. I also recalled how the summers seemed endless and how the time spent in an ecstatic openness to the world were bluntly closed off each September with the advent of school. The vague sadness I felt in taking Eric to his first day of school seems tied to the realization that now, in this parting, I was compelled to face again how much I hope for him and what he will become. It seemed tied to the fact that I had to realize anew that he was the child, not I; that I could not, even vicariously, live again the life of a child. It is his life, not mine. Also, I was compelled again to realize that our relationship is not final and fixed and decided. What he will become, and what I may become in relation to him, is always yet-to-be-decided. As an avowed "phenomenologist," all of this echoes a theoretical "position" I have conceded for years. But this theoretical concession is incommensurate with the moment at which what it has to says speaks irrevocably to me, to how my life

is lived with my child. Each line I now write as an academic seems irretrievably different in ways I have yet to fully understand. The threads unwind and interweave again.

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