The Construction of Meaning: Kegan, Piaget, and Psychoanalysis

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ABSTRACT: Kegan’s theory is discussed in terms of its relationships to Piaget and to psychoanalysis. Basing himself on Piaget’s genetic epistemology, Kegan formulates a theory of human development extending throughout the life cycle. The theory postulates that individuals alternate between periods of concern with intimacy and concern with autonomy. For Kegan, what is conceived by the individual as part of the self (subject) at one stage becomes object at the next. While his work is considered to be an important contribution, Kegan is criticized on the grounds of conceptual vagueness and an overemphasis on developmental universals at the expense of the consideration of idiosyncratic aspects of individual development. Kegan is also criticized for appearing to believe that there is only one correct therapeutic approach.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 20 years the shadow of Piaget has hung over psychoanalysis. Historically, psychoanalysts and other clinically-oriented theorists have felt that Piaget’s contributions must be of importance to their work. Yet, just what the significance of Piaget’s work was had not become clear. Some, such as Wolff (1960) and Anthony (1957), have compared Piaget’s developmental scheme to analytic theory. However, no attempts at synthesis of the rival approaches arose out of these efforts. Others, such as Anne-Marie Sandler (1975) and (to a great extent) Stanley Greenspan (1979), have essentially grafted insights derived from Piaget’s vision of cognitive development onto psychoanalytic theory. The above mentioned comparisons and integrations of psychoanalysis with Piagetian theory have all focused largely on the details of Piaget’s stages of cognitive
development. From this perspective Piaget is the psychologist who named four stages of cognitive development: the sensorimotor, the preoperational, the concrete operational, and the stage of formal operations.

To caricature a bit, the attempts at synthesis suggest that we have to keep in mind the (relatively) independent developmental lines of cognitive and psychosexual stages. Some modifications of psychoanalytic propositions occur in the process, but psychoanalytic theory maintains its integrity. Familiar landmarks such as the theory of drives or of psychosexual stages remain, not to mention the analytic perspective which searches for the roots of present conflict in past events. In the view of these writers, no serious contradiction between classical psychoanalytic theory and Piagetian psychology need exist. Analysts need only pay a little more attention to the young child’s stage of cognitive development in their thinking.

Robert Kegan’s new work, The Evolving Self (Kegan, 1982) is an attempt at construing a dynamic personality theory on Piagetian principles. Kegan’s synthesis of psychodynamic and Piagetian concepts however, draws on a different aspect of Piaget’s theory.

Piaget’s “Genetic Epistemology”

This other side of Piaget’s work has so far resisted integration into analytic theory. I am referring to Piaget’s general theoretical framework, which he called “genetic epistemology,” and which constituted the inspiration for all the detailed studies in psychology and biology that Piaget undertook. From early in life Piaget was fascinated by the problem of understanding how it was possible for human beings to develop objective, scientific knowledge of the world. It is generally believed that a baby is born with a limited repertoire of behaviors; however, there is considerable contemporary controversy over the exact capacity of this repertoire. Yet, over the subsequent 20 years, the person develops an extraordinary amount of knowledge about the nature of the world. Furthermore, the human race, through the process we call science, has developed theories with great power to make sense of the world around us.

Much of modern philosophy has been concerned with the