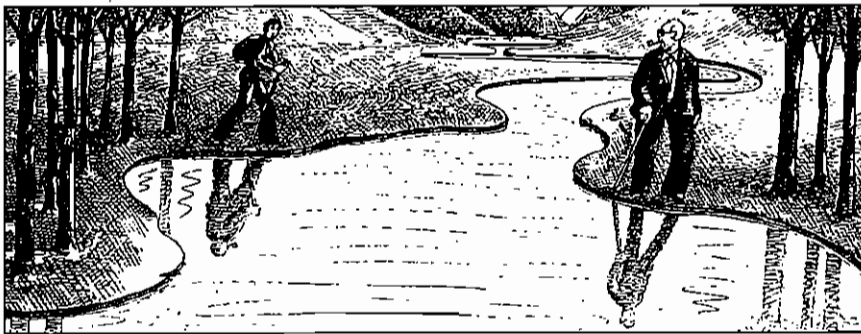


PIAGET'S FORGOTTEN NOVEL

“You don’t have to be an expert on Piaget to recognize he stole all his ideas from Sébastien, a character in a 1918 novel.”

BY KENNETH KAYE



Suppose for a little light bedtime reading you pick up a French novel published in 1918. The book’s title, *Recherche (Quest)*, reminds you of Proust’s monumental work of the same period. *Quest*, however, not only has no plot but also no setting, no characters, no action whatsoever—only a discursive summary of the mind of a troubled adolescent called Sébastien, who wanders, lonely as a cloud, over an Alpine landscape that was described more poetically by Wordsworth.

What is troubling Sébastien? Sex? Perhaps, for he does give it a thought or two. His parents? Not a hint that they exist. The Great War raging in Europe? It depresses him, but he seems to have no personal stake in it. What troubles Sébastien is a good old-fashioned identity crisis. Who am I? Is there a God? Is there a true religion? What is the meaning of life? And most important, can he be sure of success in “his divine mission to conciliate, by his life, science and religion”?

Sébastien’s quest is an informal dissertation on some obscure philosophers and thinkers, as well as on some more famous names. He has great admiration for Bergson, sympathizes with Nietzsche, and holds William James in contempt. He does not seem to know William’s brother, Henry, at all. In fact, neither Sébastien nor

the author knows much about the art of the novel: the prose is more grandiose than elegant, as this excerpt shows:

“Victory! I found again my God, my true God. Am I good, am I bad? I no longer know anything. I live, I suffer, I weep for joy, that is all I know. I know that I shall do something great and I no longer care whether it is God or I who will produce the result.”

Two hundred pages of that could make boring reading, except that Sébastien’s conclusions seem to ring a bell. Indeed, you don’t have to be an expert on the work of Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist and epistemologist who died this past fall, to recognize that he stole all his ideas from Sébastien. He had the right to do so, since he wrote *Quest* himself at the age of 20. The book is now being translated, with his permission, by his friend E. James Anthony, a child psychiatrist at Washington University. At the time that he wrote *Quest*, Piaget had done no research in psychology at all, much less studied the development of children’s thinking. Yet those familiar with his work are likely to recognize all of the following ideas, stated explicitly by Sébastien:

□ All human phenomena—reason, passion, science, morality, faith, politics—are reducible to certain universal biological laws that govern life.

□ What distinguishes all forms of life from inorganic matter is the process of *assimilation*, by which an organism, group, or institution maintains its own structural form while incorporating material from its environment.

□ Assimilation occurs on the psychological plane—the assimilation of experience to the existing cognitive structures—just as it does on the physiological plane with the assimilation of food.

□ The mind develops from an intuitive state to successive levels of logical thought.

□ All development is a matter of equilibration. The ultimate goal, equilibrium, is an ideal never actually attained. The parts of any system will come into a relative state of balance, be thrown into disequilibrium again by conflicts with the outside world, and then achieve a higher state of equilibrium.

If a scientist comes away from “empirical” research with the same conclusions he had before he began, can those conclusions be trusted? How can he claim, as Piaget did in a 1976 interview, “I’ve never had a system. I put successive things together after the fact. I always face the unknown with a new problem and attach the results to those we’ve already found.”

The answer was revealed to Sébastien 60 years earlier by Christ (if we correctly recognize the voice), who whispers to him: “You would not search for me, had you not found me.” Pure empiricism does not exist. The seeker may find greater clarity and better evidence with which to convince others, but basically the vision he achieves is always his own personal one.

Are such systems a necessary component of great work in psychology? The answer, in Piaget’s case, is found in *Quest*. His personal need for an all-encompassing system motivated all of his subsequent output. It was that sense of “divine mission,” that faith so passionately doubted and then affirmed, that drove Piaget to produce his staggering work of the next 65 years. □

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