

# Jean Piaget Foundation for research in psychology and epistemology

## Newsletter #5

May 2011

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### **After four years...**

The Jean Piaget Foundation launched its website in April 2007: [www.fondationjeanpiaget.ch](http://www.fondationjeanpiaget.ch). Our primary purpose in creating it was to facilitate the dissemination of Piaget's work, since many of his writings on psychology and genetic epistemology<sup>1</sup> had become difficult to find. Now, after four years, it's clear that we have achieved our goal.

Just nine months after its launch, the site had received over 24,000 visits (an average of 2,700 visitors each month). In 2008, this increased to an average of 3,600 visitors per month (for a total of around 44,000 visitors). In 2009, the number increased again to 52,500; and in 2010, to 71,900 (or nearly 6,000 visitors every month). Although the visits are often short—usually just time enough to download an article or book chapter—several hundred visitors each year stay on the site for more than half-an-hour, either to explore or to listen to one of Piaget's lectures.

These numbers suggest to us that interest in Piaget's work is still strong, not only in Francophone countries (from whence the majority of our visitors come), but also in significant numbers from countries such as Brazil, Russia, Germany, the United States, Spain, Luxembourg,

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: This is the standard rendering of *épistémologie génétique*, but it is misleading. The theory is not about genes, but construction. (The root is "genesis.") A more precise translation would therefore be "generative epistemology" or, as Les Smith renders it in the new *Cambridge Companion to Piaget*, "developmental epistemology."

Italy, Argentina, Morocco, etc., and, in small numbers, from approximately 80 other countries (on all continents!). Only the forum has not exceeded our expectations, which has led us to consider taking it down.

Turning to the figures for downloads,<sup>2</sup> it is not surprising to find among the most popular files two of the three key books that Piaget wrote about the cognitive development of infants: *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (1936/1952) and *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (1937/1954).<sup>3</sup> Nor is it surprising to discover the continuing popularity of the book summarizing Piaget's essential theses regarding the mechanisms by which cognitive structures are constructed, both in the child and in scientific thought: *The Equilibration of Cognitive Structures* (1975/1985).<sup>4</sup> More

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<sup>2</sup> Trans: The original included a caveat here about interpreting these statistics, which has been cut for length and clarity. The gist, though, is that the relative rankings of downloaded documents do not take into account the respective dates on which each file was made available.

<sup>3</sup> Trans: Although dates and titles of translations have been provided here for the convenience of readers, it must be noted that the works discussed are the original French editions: the Foundation has not made English editions available for download, although some can indeed be found at [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org). (Also, when works have not been translated, the original titles have been preserved.)

<sup>4</sup> Trans: It is important to note that there are two translations of this book. The first, *The Development of Thought* (1975/1978), was deemed defective. Readers should therefore refer to the second: *The Equilibration of Cognitive Structures* (1975/1985). As Les Smith notes in the *Cambridge Companion*, this is the only translation to have been completely reworked, although many others need a similar treatment. (For example: Eleanor Duckworth, Piaget's favourite translator, told me that she would like to see a new edition of *The*

surprising, however, is the reception received by Piaget's lectures on "The relationship between intelligence and affectivity in the child's development," delivered at the Sorbonne in 1953-1954.<sup>5</sup> (This has had more than 2700 downloads!) And Piaget's first book, *Recherche* (written in 1917-1918), has been downloaded nearly 800 times.

Piaget's works on logic—which have always been difficult to find—have themselves met with a certain amount of success here, with nearly 200 downloads for some of the chapters from *Classes, relations et nombres* (1942), which were made progressively available starting in February 2007, as well as for the few dozen chapters from the 2nd edition (1972) of the *Essai de logique opératoire* (originally titled *Traité de logique* [1949]), available on the website since September 2010.

In recent months, we have also begun to upload excerpts from one of the four or five most important books in the Piagetian canon: *Introduction à l'épistémologie génétique*, which was published in three volumes in 1950.<sup>6</sup> It is too soon to say how this book will be received by visitors to our site. Note however that its long introductory chapter, made available in March 2009, has since been downloaded a couple of hundred times. This is far fewer than it deserves, of course, given the importance of epistemology in Piaget's work. But there's no reason why, in the future, epistemologists and philosophers of science—as well as historians of epistemology and of the philosophy of science—will not discover the exceptional contributions of Piaget's work, both empirical and theoretical, addressing the development of the kinds of logico-mathematical structures<sup>7</sup> which underlie not only the intelligent

behaviour of children but also the various stages in the development of any science.<sup>8</sup>

It is important that we stress here, rather forcefully, that the work and theories of Piagetian psychology and genetic epistemology cannot be considered in depth if we lose sight of the complementarity between developmental and historical analysis. This view relies upon the recognition of Piaget's early research and studies in child psychology *and* the history of science, as well as his subsequent work on modeling the structures of thinking and his deep study of the various theories of knowledge invented in the first decades of the 20th century.

The necessity of this complementarity seems obvious to us: a psychology of intelligence cannot ignore the role of knowledge in solving problems intelligently, whether practical or theoretical. Moreover, since the "science of knowledge" is primarily a matter of epistemology, any psychology of intelligence that does not refer back to how knowledge affects action cannot but miss its goal. Yet this bridge goes both ways: philosophical epistemology also benefits, having for too long been thought to be able to address psychological questions simply by using the methods of introspection and reflexivity. Indeed, the psychological theories on which such a perspective is based rely too often on an "adultcentric" view of knowledge,<sup>9</sup> misunderstanding the origin of this "adult thinking" as having derived solely from a philosophical approach using methods borrowed from logic and history. It is clear, however, that epistemology cannot continue to ignore the studies of those developmental psychologists who are interested in the genesis of knowledge: from the perspective afforded by the recognition of logico-mathematical structures, such investigations are complementary to historical studies of the development of science.

This conviction, that we must never lose sight of the complementarity of Piaget's three main areas of study (psychology, logic, and epistemology), translates into our desire to provide a balanced view of Piagetian writings related to these areas, without at the same time forgetting also to provide some of the more peripheral writings to those central thoughts that guided Piaget in most of his research.

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*Origins of Intelligence in Children* [personal communication, 11 October 2010].)

<sup>5</sup> Trans: An expanded, edited version of this course was made available to English readers by Terry Brown in 1981 under the title *Intelligence and Affectivity: Their Relationship during Child Development*.

<sup>6</sup> Trans: Among the dozen or so books by Piaget that have never been translated, *Introduction à l'épistémologie génétique* (1950) is probably the most important: it set the agenda for the decades of work that followed, laid out a complete overview of Piaget's thought at the time, and provided the basis for the grant from the Rockefeller Foundation that led to the creation of Piaget's institute in Geneva: the *Centre Internationale de l'Épistémologie Génétique*. At the same time, however, this book is unlikely to become available any time soon. When I spoke to the publisher in 2006 about securing the rights as a possible project for the Jean Piaget Society translation committee, they told me that the cost per page would be several Euros. That means the rights for all three volumes would cost many thousands of dollars. Since scholarly grants rarely cover the costs associated with translation, it is clear from this that making these texts available would require the generous assistance of a philanthropic patron.

<sup>7</sup> Trans: Logico-mathematical structures are to be distinguished from thoughts that occur in the domain of logic and mathematics. Such thoughts are "content," while structures are the "content containers." Thus, contents derive their meaning from the set of implications afforded by their supervening structures. This is a theme of Piaget's later works, although it is discussed most directly in *Toward a Logic of Meanings* (Piaget & Garcia, 1987/1991).

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<sup>8</sup> Trans: Although the original text connects this to *Introduction à l'épistémologie génétique*, interested readers are also directed to *Psychogenesis and the History of Science* (Piaget & Garcia, 1983/1989).

<sup>9</sup> Trans: We might also call this view "presentist," or even "Whiggish," since it assumes that adult thought is the ideal toward which the development of knowledge proceeds.

## About the texts...

When we decided four years ago to start uploading Piaget's most prominent out-of-print works, we also decided that the texts ought to be released as PDFs (making use of Unicode characters) and not as photocopies. Despite greatly increasing the amount of work we had to undertake, this decision seemed doubly justified: in addition to facilitating the production of a still-distant compilation of Piaget's collected works, it would also allow users to search for specific keywords. (That said, however, an exception was made for the essay on the 256 operational *groupements* of ternary logic [1952], since this includes characters that made it impossible to render in Unicode within a reasonable amount of time.)

The constraints we set ourselves were such that each electronic version was carefully examined prior to being uploaded. We first removed the typos introduced by our OCR software. We then corrected any inaccuracies located in the original printed text, some of which were quite significant. And then, of course, we properly documented each correction.

It was important that the electronic versions of these documents be made available because of the complexity and interdisciplinary of Piaget's

project, to say nothing of its volume (in excess of 25,000 pages!). Making it easier to find passages in which Piaget uses or defines a particular concept will allow readers to get a clearer sense of what he meant in any one particular context. Indeed, this is our attempt to make it easier to build on his work, while at the same time minimizing the risk of misinterpretation that results from its complexity.

That said, however, it is certainly true that Piaget has written—alone or in collaboration with Bärbel Inhelder—several short and relatively easily-accessible texts, in which he summarizes a particular aspect of his work. But, as good as these short works are, relying on them risks biasing the reader away from the deeper meanings upon which his summaries rely: *why* things are the way they are, rather than *that* they are. Thus, here, readers can quickly discover and access additional passages on any particular concept of their interest. (It's important to note that we've done this while remaining purposefully agnostic of the experimental or theoretical validity that one might reasonably attribute to those works.) This then minimizes the risk of misinterpretation, which we believe is a service both to readers interested in Piaget's work (but anxious to avoid mistakes) and to the work itself.

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## Overview of new documents uploaded since 2009

A great deal has been accomplished since we published our previous letter in May 2009: in addition to having uploaded new books and articles by Piaget and his close collaborators, and having expanded the section on secondary literature written by authors with an especially good knowledge of Piaget's work, we are also especially pleased to highlight some of our new historical resources.

The first can be found in the biography section: recordings of twelve talks given in 1951 at Radio Suisse Romande, in which Piaget reviewed his research group's major findings regarding the intellectual development of children and adolescents.<sup>10</sup> The second—in the *Présentation de l'œuvre* section—is an interview conducted by Ioanna Berthoud (a former collaborator of Piaget's at the International Center for Genetic Epistemology [see note 1]) with Jean-Claude Bringuier (the producer-director of *Piaget va son chemin*, one of the best films ever made featuring Piaget and his work).<sup>11</sup> Visitors are invited to

review the transcript, in which Bringuier shares how he managed to navigate Piaget's closely-guarded schedule.

In addition to these new features, visitors will also find—at the *Entretiens* page of the biography section—links to two television interviews with Piaget: one conducted for *Continent sans visa* produced by Télévision Suisse Romande (1966), and the other by Thérèse Gouin-Décarie (1969) for *La sel de la semaine* on Radio Canada. This second interview is especially noteworthy because Gouin-Décarie was one of the first to extend Piaget's work on the genesis of object permanence to incorporate the role played by objects in social relationships, examining the connection between cognitive development and emotional development in young children.<sup>12</sup>

Visitors can now also consult, in the *Présentation de l'œuvre* section, several chapters

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this new interview with Berthoud, Bringuier reflects on how those conversations were arranged and made possible. If a second edition of *Conversations* is produced, I would hope to see this piece included as an appendix.

<sup>12</sup> Trans: This work is detailed in her book, *Intelligence et affectivité chez le jeune enfant* (cf. Note 5).

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<sup>10</sup> Trans: See the *Causeries RSR* page.

<sup>11</sup> Trans: Transcripts of Bringuier's interviews were published in English as *Conversations with Jean Piaget* (Bringuier, 1977/1980). In

on Piagetian epistemology by Marie-Françoise Legendre (Professor, University of Laval, Quebec, Canada). Legendre summarizes the main parts of his research program using carefully selected quotations.

Finally, those who visit our site regularly will have noticed that each page has been further enhanced by including short quotations of Piaget or

from other authors commenting on his work. (These can be found on the right side of the page.) What's especially exciting is that these quotations are changed randomly every day. And they are, in our opinion, an ideal way to invite our visitors to explore some of the less well-known aspects of the Piagetian program.

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### Coming soon...

In addition to continuing to upload new texts (relating most notably to genetic [developmental] psychology and biology), we plan to increase the number of hyperlinks between the texts found in *Présentation de l'œuvre* and excerpts of recordings in which Piaget himself comments on or explains the related concept or theory. We also plan to link to excerpts from films in which a child's conduct exemplifies a particular stage of development. Indeed, in showing how children respond when confronted with these "Piagetian tests," we hope to encourage an appreciation of the critical-clinical method developed by Piaget and his close

collaborators; a method which we feel is neglected in contemporary experimental psychology.

Finally, for those who wish to delve more deeply into the Piagetian corpus, a new "tag cloud" will facilitate navigation between different sections of the site. This cloud will enable visitors to discover related material from across the site that makes reference to the chosen concept (in a display akin to that of the results of a search), and then travel there at the simple click of the mouse. It goes without saying that suggestions or comments regarding this new tool, or about the site as a whole, would be welcome.

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### Tips for opening and accessing documents, audio, and video

(1) Free software is needed to open and read PDF documents available on the site, as well as to launch movies or listen to audio. This software is usually installed by default on PC and Mac. But, if your computer doesn't have what you need, you can find the relevant software here:

<http://www.fondationjeanpiaget.ch/fjp/site/liens/index.php>

(2) With the exception of *Recherche* (1918), which is directly downloadable in its entirety, complete full-text works by Jean Piaget have been made available individually as chapters. These can be found on the «[Extraits](#)» page, listed according to the year of their publication. (We have followed this method to reduce the download times for documents for those visitors without access to high-speed broadband.)

As we have noted above, questions and comments are welcome. Links are provided from the home page ([Accueil](#)) and at the Links page ([Liens](#)).

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Genève, mai 2011

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[www.fondationjeanpiaget.ch](http://www.fondationjeanpiaget.ch)