

## 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

epistemological problem of trying to understand how, and if, objective knowledge is possible. Piaget reconceptualized the problem of the possibilities of scientific knowledge as one manifestation of the general problem of development which has so fascinated thinkers of the last two centuries. Like Darwin, who explained the present forms of living organisms by studying the processes of their evolution, or like Marx who elucidated the structure of contemporary capitalist social relations by considering their historical character, Piaget attempted to throw light on the possibilities and nature of scientific and logico-mathematical knowledge by studying the development of the capacities for such knowledge in the child. That is, the nature of knowledge was to be understood by considering the process of its genesis through human development. For Piaget epistemology was to become an experimental science; hence, "genetic epistemology."

In the process of studying the development of thought, Piaget became dissatisfied with some traditional explanations, which are still well represented in modern psychology. In *Origins of Intelligence*, Piaget (1936, 1952) critiques three alternative epistemological positions: Empiricism, rationalism, and vitalism. *Empiricism*, the doctrine that people are born a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, and that knowledge comes from the outside, is found in contemporary psychological behaviorism. Skinner's view that humans become what environmental reinforcers force them to become is a contemporary version of this classic doctrine. The concept of "reality testing" is essentially an empiricist one in that it assumes that reality is simply 'out there' to be found by the child.

The opposite of empiricism is usually considered to be *rationalism* or *innatism*, the position that knowledge is essentially inborn and that development is simply the unfolding of this hereditary potential. Noam Chomsky's view that grammatical structures are essentially innate and only need a minimal amount of environmental stimulation to unfold is a representative of this position. The third position, which consistently gets less scientific attention, but which emerges periodically, is the *vitalist* position. While hard to define precisely, vitalism is the doctrine that says there is some mysterious quality in human beings, or perhaps, in all living things, which represents the life force itself. This force, which used to be called spirit, is the cause of all that distinguishes

the living from the nonliving, including knowledge. Much of contemporary humanistic psychology appears to represent a return of the vitalist spirit, even unto attacks on the spiritless nature of scientific inquiry into human functioning. In some of its forms, the psychoanalytic theory of drives also seems to represent a vitalist current in psychoanalysis.

In rejecting the empiricist, innatist, and vitalist positions on the nature of knowledge, Piaget was led to propose a new model of development. For Piaget, knowledge was neither innate nor was it imposed by the force of the external world. Instead, knowledge is constructed by the child through *acting on*, and in the process, being influenced by the external world. That is, the child's (or the scientist's) knowledge of the world is constructed by the child in the process of development. But the child (or the scientist) is not free to construct any model. After all, the external world does really exist, even if human beings have difficulty learning what its true nature is.

*Assimilation and Accommodation.* Piaget explores two aspects of this process. These aspects are only separable by the observer and seldom, if ever, in actual development. In *assimilation*, the organism perceives a phenomena within the existing structures of thought and action (which Piaget calls "schemas"). Assimilation is the conservative tendency of the organism to maintain its identity in a changing world. The other aspect of development is *accommodation*, in which the organism's schemas of thought and action are modified in response to environmental phenomena. In accommodation the organism (child or scientist) modifies itself to better fit in with the external world. For Piaget, development consists of a continuous process of equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation, as the organism acts on, and is acted upon by, the external world. (Wachtel (1981) discusses an interesting application of accommodation and assimilation to the psychoanalytic concept of transference.)

To summarize, Piaget views the development of knowledge as a process in which the person constructs more and more adequate views of the world through interaction with it. That is, for Piaget human beings are meaning-making organisms, who constantly try and make sense of the world around them and form better and better theories in order to do this. The cognitive

stages that Piaget describes can be viewed as metatheoretical frameworks constructed by children in order to aid them in the process of meaning-making. Each successive stage is built to improve upon the limitations of the previous one.

### *Kegan's The Evolving Self*

Robert Kegan (1982) has chosen this general framework of Piaget's contribution, which he elaborates in his work, *The Evolving Self*. He derives inspiration from Piaget's view of people as active, meaning-making organisms, but he is dissatisfied with Piaget's restrictive focus on formation of cognitive structures alone. Kegan maintains that this concept provides a unique perspective which can elucidate the realms of personality development and psychodynamics, with which psychoanalysis has traditionally dealt. The result is a new paradigm for thinking about psychodynamic issues Kegan variously calls the "constructive-developmental," or "neo-Piagetian" framework. This approach also highlights a new series of developmental stages to replace the traditional concept of psychosexual stages or the psychosocial stages of Erik Erikson (toward whom Kegan seems to experience both admiration and rivalry).

### *New Theory of Object Relations*

The core of Kegan's work is a new theory of the development of object relations. Unlike many recent psychoanalytic views, with which Kegan's theory bears some similarity, this new perspective does not consider the first few years of life as all important in the formation of object relations. He thus states,

While early infancy has great importance from a neo-Piagetian view, it is not in its most fundamental respect qualitatively different from any other moment of the lifespan. What is taken as fundamental is the activity of meaning-constitutive evolution. It is true that infancy marks the beginning in the history of this activity. . . . (T)he distinctive features of infancy it is suggested, are to be understood in the context of that activity which is the person's fate throughout his or her life. The recurrence of these distinctive features in new forms later on in development are not understood as later manifestations of infancy issues but contemporary manifestations of meaning-making, just as the issues of infancy are, in their own time, contemporary manifestations of meaning-making. (Kegan, 1982, pp. 77-78)

*Early Stages.* For Kegan, the essence of the development of object relations is the gradual process of parts of the subject becoming object. That is, what at one stage a person simply is, can be observed and reflected upon at the next stage. Thus, after early infancy (Kegan calls this Stage 0: "the incorporative"), in which the baby simply is his or her reflexes, the child moves into the Impulsive Balance Stage (Stage 1), in which the subject consists of impulses, as the reflexes become the focus (object). The child at this stage is able to *have* reflexes rather than *be* them. The impulses and perceptions which form the self at this stage are ways in which children coordinate their reflexes. This allows the construction of the external object, both inanimate and human. (If this seems somewhat nebulous, I believe this reflects a vagueness in Kegan's conceptualization—but more on this later.)

During the "Impulsive Stage," subjects *are* their impulses and perceptions. Thus while at this stage the child "is able to recognize objects separate from herself . . . those objects are *subject* to the child's perception of them" (p. 88). Additionally, children at this stage lack impulse control because they are their impulses and are unable to reflect on or gain distance from these impulses. During this stage children are unable to be aware of two feelings at the same time and experience ambivalence. It is only during the next stage, the "Imperial Stage" (Stage 2) covering roughly what analysts call latency, that the impulses and perceptions can become objects and be reflected on. In the cognitive realm, it is at this stage, the stage of concrete operations, that the child is first able to realize that an object doesn't change as one's perceptions of it change. A mountain seen from different perspectives is still the same mountain. Similarly, at this stage the child can, for the first time, *have* impulses rather than *be* them. This is Kegan's explanation for the ability to control impulses that classical analysts have traditionally associated with the repression attendant upon the resolution of the Oedipus complex. At this stage the self consists of needs, interests, and wishes which coordinate the impulses and perceptions of the previous stage.

*Later Stages.* This process of subject becoming object continues through three more stages which Kegan calls the "Interpersonal" (Stage 3, roughly adolescence), the "Institutional" and the "Inter-

individual" (Stages 4 and 5, respectively). Each stage arises out of the limitations and contradictions of the previous one and constitutes a new way of making sense of the world. Emotions, being intimately related to the meanings people give to their experience, are experienced differently at each stage. In fact, "affect is essentially phenomenological, the felt experience of a motion (hence 'emotion')" (p. 81). Thus, Kegan wants to *abolish the traditional split between feeling and thought*. For him these are both aspects of the evolution of a person's system of meaning-making.

At each stage, what was previously self becomes object: the child becomes capable of and needs new relations with others. Kegan extends Winnicott's concept of the "holding environment" to cover the entire life-cycle. At each stage the person needs a different type of holding environment, which Kegan calls a "culture of embeddedness," in order to consolidate the progress made so far and to facilitate further development. A culture of embeddedness at a given stage has three functions: 1. confirmation of the progress made so far; 2. contradiction or letting go which stimulates the person to further development; and 3. providing continuity as persons continue their growth.

As an example, during the impulsive stage the culture of embeddedness usually consists of the family, especially the family triangle consisting of the two parents and the child. Children at this stage are embedded in their impulses and perceptions and thus experience fantasy as a significant mode of experience and way of making sense of the world. Because of the inability of children to reflect on or maintain a distance from their impulses and perceptions, relations with other people, especially the parents, tend to be intense and involve strong rivalries. (Hence the Oedipal conflict is typical at this stage).

The first function of the culture of embeddedness is to acknowledge and help channel these fantasies and attachments. The second function, however, is to help the child advance beyond this point in its development. Parents thus encourage their children's gradual separating from their embeddedness in fantasies and impulses. Despite the child's wishes, he/she is not allowed to have an exclusive relationship with one of the parents and is excluded from the parent's marital relationship. The child is also held responsible for doing what it is supposed to, such as going to school. Also, the child's independence, self-sufficiency,

and attempts at self-regulation are acknowledged and encouraged. The third function of continuity is provided when the parents allow themselves to become part of the larger culture, which includes school and the child's peer relationships. The great danger to the child at this point, according to Kegan, is that the parental marriage might break up just as the child is emerging from his/her embeddedness in it, thus reinforcing feelings that such separation is inherently dangerous.

Associated with each of the developmental stages proposed by Kegan is a characteristic risk which can harm the child's attempts at further development. At each stage the child's process of meaning-making involves the becoming object of that which previously was subject and the concomitant formation of new forms of relationships with other people. Reciprocity from the environment is needed and when this is not provided the child may be harmed. New perspectives on the development of psychopathology (a term not valued by Kegan) are provided by this theory. Personal problems are often (It is unclear if Kegan believes that this is always true) the result of a person's being stuck in development, or of being in the painful process of leaving behind one stage without having yet formed a new way of making life meaningful. The person has lost an old self without yet gaining a new one.

*Stage-Specific Depression.* It would seem that this perspective might most usefully be applied to depression where the issues so centrally involve loss and, indeed, Kegan uses his theory to propose a taxonomy of depressions. Each stage has its characteristic depression which can take two forms. One manifestation of depression at each stage involves the person's reactions to the stability of their way of meaning-making. The other manifestation of each stage-depression occurs when the person has started to question the old balance without yet having developed a new balance. Each kind of depression has characteristic feelings associated with it. For example, a person feeling a threat to his/her impulsive balance may feel "closed, cut off, not included, sent away, feeling others have 'gone into business for themselves'" (p. 118). The person who is beginning to question this balance but has not yet moved to the next stage may experience, as Kegan explains,

*ension* between: feeling unable to curb or control {his/her} impulses, to be self-reliant, to 'go into business for {her/his} self' and feeling the loss of the power of my own wishes to determine reality, the loss of perfect care and attunement from another." (p. 118)

Kegan's constructive-developmental perspective leads him to question some of the common analytic tenets regarding the formation of pathology. In particular, he disputed the genetic proposition that the roots of pathology are to be found primarily in early childhood. In describing a patient who has received the diagnosis of "borderline," he wonders "to what extent is this a matter of her earliest object relations, and to what extent a matter of her present ones, a matter of walking the fearful border between two ways of making the world cohere, one left behind, the other not yet clearly resolved?" (p. 197). A few pages later, in regard to another patient Kegan writes:

{w}hile it is tempting to view all this in light of a model of regression in the service of the ego, and a replaying of a childhood issue, we risk losing the sense in which Alice is *not* four years old, the possibility in which her orneriness is actually a *forward* edge (rather than a regressive one) in her evolution. While we are undeniably witnessing a replaying of the theme of overinclusion, this is an evolutionary theme, not a childhood one, and we risk losing the difference between overinclusion in the impulses and the parents who are confused with them, on the one hand, and overinclusion in the interpersonal and all the important partners (including the parents) with whom one is confused on the other. (pp. 203–204)

### *Dependence and Independence*

Kegan, like many contemporary analysts, sees much of development, and the source of many personal difficulties, in a dialectic between dependence and independence. Not surprisingly, however, he gives these themes a new twist. He views development as a spiral between stages in which independence is the dominant issue and those in which close involvement in personal relationships predominates. It is as if people normally swing from one extreme to the other, never finding a permanent balance. In fact, it may be postulated that it is this *imbalance* that fuels further development and keeps people from being satisfied with their current level of development. To illustrate, the impulsive stage is one in which the child is preoccupied with fantasies

years. At the succeeding stage, the imperial, the predominant issues are self-control and the formation of enduring patterns of needs, wishes, and interests. The balance thus shifts to the independent side.

### *Gender Differences*

This perspective is used to illuminate (though not to provide causal explanations of) the gender differences common in our society. Kegan believes that, for whatever reasons, women tend to find greater stability in the stages in which inclusion in relationships predominates, in particular, the interpersonal and interindividual. In contrast, men tend to find themselves more frequently in the institutional stage during which issues of personal autonomy, self-esteem, and identity predominate. Kegan speculates about the role traditional workplace structures—a main culture of embeddedness at this stage—play in obstructing male development at this stage. He also argues that his theory, in providing a model of development in which successive stages allow greater comprehension of reality, provides a conception of development that is non-ideological. He uses this point to argue that constructive-developmental theory should be a natural ally of oppressed groups such as women or blacks, and should help identify the factors which block the full development of people's potential.

I hope the foregoing has indicated some of the breadth Kegan reformulates. His attempt to reformulate clinically relevant personality theory in a constructive-developmental direction, represents a significant effort. It is extremely suggestive and should inspire new ways of thinking about old issues. This is extremely important and may make his recent contribution a classic. However, Kegan's theory is not without its difficulties, a few of which I would like to briefly discuss.

### *Critique of Kegan's Theory*

The most general problem is that many of the ideas proposed are rather vague. For example, while the concept of subject becoming object is appealing, at points it seems rather unclear. It is hard to identify the manifestation of this phenomena. Some of

points it seems Kegan is using verbal hand-waving to cover over imprecision. This, of course, is not necessarily a vice in a book proposing so many new concepts as this one. However if the theory is to be further developed, this is an area that requires attention.

Another instance of vagueness regards the relation of Kegan's stages of personality development to Piaget's stages of cognitive development. At points it appears that these are supposed to run concurrently and be aspects of the same phenomena. For example, Kegan's impulsive stage occurs at approximately the same age as Piaget's preoperational period. Furthermore, analogies are made between the lack of perspective of the preoperational children regarding their perceptions, and the impulsive's inability to reflect on impulses. Yet, especially at later stages of development, a strict congruence cannot be assumed. For example, even though some persons are capable of formal operational thinking in certain circumscribed areas, they may not have achieved the institutional level of personality functioning (autonomy, self-esteem, and identity) essential to functioning in other areas. It is unclear if this causes a problem for the theory because it is not clear specifically what the theory intends to predict. Should there be strict congruence between cognitive and personality stages? Or should there be some relationship weaker than strict correspondence, and if so, what should it be? Or is the relationship strictly analogical? This is another area that needs clarification.

Of great interest to psychoanalysts are two other questions related to the previous one. Kegan assumes that persons, at each point in their life, function at one (and only one) developmental stage. As we have seen, there is no provision for regression in his theory. He argues against the ordinary universal explanatory power of regression invoked in analytic theories of psychopathology. Yet, his lack of any consideration of regressive functioning is strongly at odds with psychoanalysis. Analytic data (among other kinds) strongly suggests that people function at different developmental stages at different times. This is one element of the transference. Now, Kegan could try to argue (I think unsuccessfully) that analysis does not in fact involve regression in developmental stages, but such an argument would need to be made. Such a position runs against experience in the realm

of cognitive functioning. People who are capable of formal operational thought frequently function at other levels concurrently. For example, the thoughts of bad luck that occur when the bus pulls away from the bus stop just as we arrive is an instance of preoperational thought. Furthermore, in driving a car, swatting a fly, or in lovemaking, we operate largely at a sensorimotor level. Thus, people are capable of functioning at disparate cognitive stages. It is only Piaget's single-minded concentration on understanding the genesis of logico-mathematical and scientific thought that leads him to pay too little attention to this phenomenon.

Kegan may believe that it is only the highest level of development attained that is important. He certainly argues convincingly that most forms of pathology involve being stuck in a certain developmental stage that is no longer helping the person make adequate sense of the world. Yet, the question of people's functioning at different levels would suggest that he overestimates this element. Pathology may result from a current developmental impasse that reactivates earlier patterns of functioning or modes of meaning-making. This, of course, is a reformulation of the classical psychoanalytic position. My guess is that there is probably a developmental continuum of pathology that ranges from regression to conditions in which a current developmental impasse is the decisive factor.

In general, Kegan concentrates on developmental universals. The book contains a number of excellent clinical examples, with amusing and enlightening stories which illustrate the application of these universals to particular people. Yet, in no case does he go beyond assigning the individual to a developmental stage (or between stages) to show how the particulars of one case can be understood in the terms of his theory. Kegan's theory helps illuminate the individual's macrodevelopment. The theory, so far, has not thrown comparable light on the microdevelopmental issues of meaning-making that play such a large role in day-to-day clinical work. The constructive-developmental approach needs further elaboration in order to be able to explain the small changes in meaning-making that occur in a given therapy session. I think that Kegan's macrodevelopmental stage theory could be combined with elements of George Kelly's personal construct psychology. Kelly's work concentrated on a theoretical

understanding of the ways that people's construing, or making sense of, the world changed through experience. Kelly's theory is weak in that it lacks a developmental framework. A combination of Kegan's and Kelly's approaches could lead to a theory which could help us understand the broad developmental issues facing a patient while also making sense of the detailed meanings of the person's experience.

#### *Clinical Utility of Kegan's Theory*

Before concluding, a few words need to be said about Kegan's ideas regarding the clinical utility of his theory. Kegan proposes, using his concept of 'embeddedness culture' to illuminate the ways people facilitate the maturation of others. Formal therapy would simply be a subset of this. The idea is intriguing: it generalizes on Winnicott's analogy between the mother's holding of her infant and the therapeutic "holding environment." Yet, while there are many different ways that people help each other grow, for Kegan there is only one way therapy can be conducted correctly—a version of Rogers' client-centered approach. The implication is that any intervention other than a client-centered one will interfere with the autonomy and retard the patient's growth.

At a time when therapies are becoming sophisticated and diversified it is unfortunate that Kegan adopts such a parochial view of psychotherapy. A wide variety of techniques is preferable to only one approach, since no one technique can be applied to every patient. Theoretical insight into how this help occurs is desperately needed. Perhaps it is time that a moratorium is called on personality theorists claiming that their theory reveals the ultimate correct method for their pet therapy. Divergent forms of therapies are here to stay, and we need to know much more about what elements in each of them help which patients, and in what situations they lead more satisfying lives. This should be the goal of clinical theories of personality.

Kegan's constructive-developmental approach can be of help in the task of understanding how our therapies function. This will require leaving behind his parochial approach to therapy. It will also require much further elaboration and development of the theory. It is to be hoped that Kegan and others will under-

take this task. Only then will a definitive appraisal of the value of the theory be possible.

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