

The Child and The Tao Te Ching

In the following poem, Piaget's (2007, pp. 258-263) analysis of one child's interview, that of Roy, a six year old boy, will be paraphrased closely, and kept in sequence, according to the transcript text from *The Child's Conception of the World*. Excerpts from Lao Tzu's (Tzu, 2012) ancient writing of his recommended way of life will be taken out of order from the *Tao Te Ching*. The selection of the phrases from Lao Tzu will be chosen either because they are similar to Piaget's observations of the child, or because they provide a view related to Piaget's that might stimulate reflection. The author presumes that you know who Lao Tzu is; but who is Jean Piaget? He is one of the founding fathers of educational methods in the U.S. for over half a century. His famous interviews with children are quite extensive. This paper intends to show, however, that Piaget's conclusions about the wisdom of children is out of date. He constantly jumps to the conclusion – as did education in the U.S. up until now – that children who do not use formal reasoning before the age of 7, simply do not know what they are talking about. He consistently misses their wisdom. The final stanza will be subjective commentary of the researcher.

Jean Piaget and Lao Tzu

Piaget: The child in primordial notions
believes that nature
is made by us
and that it is alive.

The child believes that nature
participates in our affairs.

Tzu: All things are produced by the Tao, and nourished by its outflowing operation. They receive their forms according to the nature of each, and are completed according to the circumstances of their condition. Therefore all things without exception honor the Tao, and exalt its outflowing operation.

This honoring of the Tao and exalting of its operation is not the result of any ordination, but always a spontaneous tribute.

Piaget: The child believes three things:
that the sun and moon have been made by humankind,
that the sun and moon are alive and they know what we are doing,
that there are participations between the sun and moon and humankind.

These three tendencies are primitive.

*Tzu: We look at it, and we do not see it, and we name it 'the Equable.'
We listen to it, and we do not hear it, and we name it 'the Inaudible.'
We try to grasp it, and do not get hold of it, and we name it 'the Subtle.'
With these three qualities, it cannot be made the subject of description;
and hence we blend them together and obtain The One.*

Piaget: The belief that humans made the sun and moon
comes from feelings that the sun and moon
participate in our affairs.
It is the myth which is derived from these feelings
and not the inverse.

*Tzu: When the mother is found, we know what her children should be.
When one knows that he is his mother's child, and proceeds to guard
the qualities of the mother that belong to him, to the end of his
life he will be free from all peril.*

Piaget: The myth is an invention.
It defines origins.
The child's beliefs amounted to no more than this,
that man in coming to life
thereby provoked the same sort of activity in the sun and moon.
This does not constitute an idea that the sun was actually made by man,
it simply indicates a participation between them.

*Tzu: From this community of feeling
comes a kingliness of character;
and he who is king-like goes on to be heaven-like.
In that likeness to heaven he possesses the Tao.
Possessed of the Tao, he endures long;
and to the end of his bodily life,
is exempt from all danger of decay.*

Piaget: The notion of participation
leads to that of animism
and by nature precedes it,
though animism may subsequently react on participation
by confirming and consolidating it.

*Tzu: The Tao produced One;
One produced Two;
Two produced Three;
Three produced All things.
All things leave behind them the Obscurity,
and go forward to embrace the Brightness,
while they are harmonized
by the Breath of Vacancy.*

Piaget: The child uses formulae which,
express simple images or comparisons,
without concern as to a causal explanation.

*Tzu: Who knows his manhood's strength,
Yet still his female febleness maintains;
As to one channel flow the many drains,
All come to him, yea, all beneath the sky.
Thus he the constant excellence retains;
The simple child again,
free from all stains.*

Piaget: The child it seems
has in view not merely analogy but genuine causality.
Analogy may enter,
but only inasmuch as analogy and causality
are always confused by children,
where the logical or the moral
is confused with the physical.

*Tzu: If earth were not thus sure,
'would break and bend;
Without these powers,
the spirits soon would fail;
If not so filled, the drought would parch each vale;
Without that life, creatures would pass away;
Princes and kings, without that moral sway,
However grand and high, would all decay.*

Piaget: The child relates the birth of things to that of men.
Thus there is a connection between parents and babies.
This feeling of a connection
precedes the myth
and actually gives rise to it.

*Tzu: So it is that existence and non-existence give birth the one to the other;
that difficulty and ease produce the one the other;
that length and shortness fashion out the one the figure of the other;
that height and lowness arise from the contrast of the one with the other;*

*that the musical notes and tones become harmonious through the relation of one with another;
and that being before and behind give the idea of one following another.*

*Therefore the sage manages affairs without doing anything,
and conveys his instructions without the use of speech.*

Piaget: The foundation of the child's belief
that nature is alive
and nature was made by humankind
is in the feelings of participation.
It is when the child seeks to systematize these feelings
(in answer to adult questioning)
that he has recourse to myth.
When urged to define the contents of his participations
he fell back on animist explanations

*Tzu: He who knows the Tao does not speak about it;
he who is ever ready to speak about it does not know it.*

Piaget: The child believes that the universe is a society of like beings
living according to a well-ordered code of rules.

*Tzu: Man takes his law from the Earth;
the Earth takes its law from Heaven;
Heaven takes its law from the Tao.
The law of the Tao is its being what it is.*

Piaget: Every analogy is at the same time a logical relationship
of common or interacting purposes
and every purpose is a cause.

Tzu: Words that are strictly true seem to be paradoxical.

Piaget: The child feels that the members of this universe
necessarily imitate each other so that when we grow
the moon and the clouds are forced to follow suit.

*Tzu: Man at his birth is supple and weak;
at his death, firm and strong.
So it is with all things.
Trees and plants, in their early growth, are soft and brittle;
at their death, dry and withered.*

*Thus it is that firmness and strength are the concomitants of death;
softness and weakness, the concomitants of life.*

*Hence he who relies on the strength of his forces does not conquer;
and a tree which is strong will fill the out-stretched arms.*

*Therefore the place of what is firm and strong is below,
and that of what is soft and weak is above.*

Piaget: The child believes that in this universe
consisting of a society of living beings,
the first place is given to man
or alternatively to God,
which amounts to the same
since he conceives God as a "gentleman".

*Tzu: Thus we say, 'He ne'er contends
And therein is his might.'
Thus we say, 'Men's wills he bends,
That they with him unite.'
Thus we say, 'Like Heaven's his ends,
No sage of old more bright.'*

Researcher: For the last few centuries,
we thought children did not know.

Formerly, a few millennia ago,
we aspired to be like them.

What will we think in the future?

References

- Piaget, J. (2007). *The child's conception of the world*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
Tzu, L. (2012). *Tao te ching*. Savannah, GA: Green King Press.