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Bleuler in Weimar

At the Weimar Psychoanalytic Congress in 1911, with Freud and Jung among his audience, the Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler argued for a distinction between two different modes of thinking: logical or realistic thinking on the one hand, and what he called 'autistic' thinking on the other (Bleuler, 1951). Bleuler is generally remembered for his contribution to our understanding of schizophrenia, but he also made an indirect, and inadvertent, contribution to the study of child development. His ideas influenced both Piaget and Vygotsky, albeit in different ways. They transposed his concept of autistic thinking from the study of adult pathology pursued in Zurich and Vienna in the early years of the twentieth century to the study of cognitive development that began to flourish in Geneva and Moscow during the 1920s. As a result, the proposals that Bleuler made in Weimar turn out to be important for the way that developmental psychologists have conceived of pretence, fantasy and wishful thinking – what I shall call the work of the imagination.

Today, we normally associate the term 'autistic' with the developmental pathology first identified by Kanner (1943). Kanner borrowed Bleuler's terminology because the children that he had observed displayed a withdrawal from other people and from the external world into the self that is similar to the withdrawal that Bleuler associated with autistic thinking. However, Bleuler conceived of autism not as a pathology confined to a special group of children but as a normal mode of thinking, found among children and adults alike.

Autistic thinking, Bleuler claimed, is especially evident in dreams, in the pretend play of young children, in the reveries of normal adults,

and in the fantasies and delusions of the schizophrenic. It is a mode of thought that is dominated by free association and wishful thinking. In logical or realistic thinking, by contrast, affective and emotional considerations are set aside, or tempered by an acknowledgement of what is rational and what is feasible. Bleuler acknowledged that autistic thinking can sometimes override logical thinking among normal adults. For example, faced with a situation that strains our rational comprehension, wishful thinking in the autistic mode gains the upper hand. In the case of pathology, however, there is a sustained rather than a transient disturbance in the balance between the two modes of thinking: the schizophrenic makes some limited contact with reality, but is primarily absorbed in an unrealistic, fantasy world: 'the patient adapts himself in many ways to the institution, puts up with reality . . . but within he remains the Emperor of Europe around whom the whole world revolves, and in contrast to whose imperial dignity the humiliations of institutional life do not even count' (Bleuler, 1951, p. 415).

Bleuler's distinction between autistic and realistic thinking echoes a distinction that Freud had made earlier between primary processes guided by the Pleasure principle and secondary processes guided by the Reality principle (Freud, 1961a; Freud, 1961b). However, it is important to notice that Bleuler explicitly dissents from one central component of Freud's formulation. According to Freud, it is primary or autistic thinking that is present initially in the mental life of the infant; realistic thinking is secondary in the sense that it emerges later in development. Thus, according to Freud, the infant is dominated by primary processes or autistic thinking and 'hallucinates' the fulfilment of his inner needs.

Bleuler crisply rejects this developmental sequence as biologically implausible: 'I do not see any hallucinatory gratification in the infant, but only a gratification by actual food intake. A chick in the egg grows up on physically and chemically tangible food and not on ideas of eating' (Bleuler, 1951, p. 427). Bleuler proposes a very different account of development. He argues that the ability to conceive of alternatives to reality is not a primitive process but something that is relatively sophisticated. Indeed, the conceptual material that is needed to entertain such alternatives is not likely to be available to the infant mind. The child who pretends to bathe a doll needs to know something about water and about baths. The schizophrenic with delusions of grandeur needs to be able to conceive of an Emperor or a Saviour. Accordingly, Bleuler proposes that: 'at a certain level of de-

velopment, the autistic function is added to the reality-function and develops with it from there on' (Bleuler, 1951, p. 427). In short, for Bleuler, reality-directed thinking comes first and autistic thinking comes later.

Immediately after the First World War, Piaget came to Zurich where he attended lectures by Jung, Pfister and Bleuler (Piaget, 1952, p. 244). In the course of Bleuler's lectures, he learned about the distinction between autistic thinking on the one hand, and reality-directed thinking on the other. However, ignoring Bleuler's criticisms of Freud, he went on to adopt the assumption that autistic thinking dominates the infant's psyche from the outset, and is only gradually subordinated to rational thought. His early experimental work in Paris in the laboratory that had been set up by Alfred Binet was intended to document this gradual subordination of autism to rationality (Harris, 1997a). In 1922, he presented his findings at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Congress (Piaget, 1923). His paper is a striking attempt to weld together the concept of early autistic thinking and his own empirical observations of children's developing logical abilities. Piaget sets out a three-step sequence. Early childhood is dominated by autistic thinking in which reality is subordinated to the child's affective life. Next, various transitional forms including egocentric thinking are apparent, interposed between early autistic thinking and logical thinking. Finally, with the development of logic, autistic thinking is suppressed, and the child becomes more rational and objective.

More generally, Piaget argues that early thinking has a ludic or playful character; it does not accommodate to reality but instead distorts reality to fit the self and its desires. In making this assertion, Piaget cites with approval the distinction initially made by Freud: 'Everyone knows the distinction that Freud introduced between the Pleasure principle and the Reality principle: thinking, according to Freud and indeed according to Baldwin and many others, is aimed in the first place at immediate, quasi-hallucinatory satisfaction, at pleasure, and only later at adaptation and reality' (Piaget, 1923, p. 303, my translation).

This incorporation of Bleuler's ideas, or more precisely of the Freudian distinction that led to those ideas, had a wide-ranging impact on Piaget's interpretation of development. For example, in his analysis of language, Piaget emphasized that children's early speech springs from their own inner mental world and is not adjusted to the external world, especially the needs of their listener. When they play alongside one another, young children may appear to be communicating but a large

proportion of what they say is egocentric – it is not primarily intended as a form of communication with a play partner but constitutes a kind of monologue. Piaget went on to argue that this mode of thinking and communicating is a transitional form, intermediate between the early autistic mode on the one hand, and the later-developing, logical intelligence on the other: 'Now between autism and intelligence there are many degrees, varying in their capacity for being communicated. . . . The chief of these intermediate forms, i.e. the type of thought which like that exhibited by our children seeks to adapt itself to reality, but does not communicate itself as such, we propose to call *egocentric* thought' (Piaget, 1959, p. 45). Thus, starting as he did from the conception of the infant as prone to autistic thinking and therefore poorly adapted to the external world, Piaget concluded that what we initially take to be communication with others is no such thing; it is more appropriately seen as speech-for-the self and not as genuine communication.

While Piaget was developing his ideas about egocentricity, and recording the incidence of egocentric speech, his Russian peer, Lev Vygotsky, had also read and been influenced by Bleuler's ideas.[1] However, in contrast to Piaget, Vygotsky paid careful attention to Bleuler's argument that autistic thinking can scarcely be regarded as a primitive mode of thought (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 21). Accepting this argument, he concluded that Piaget's developmental analysis of egocentric speech was untenable. If the autistic mode is not the starting point for development, then egocentric speech cannot be explained by supposing that it is a transitional form that grows out of the autistic mode. As is well known, Vygotsky went on to develop his own creative analysis of egocentric speech, claiming that it reflects the child's tendency, especially when engaged in planning or the circumvention of an obstacle, to think in words. The fate of such speech, according to Vygotsky, is not to be suppressed by the advent of a more socialized intelligence as Piaget implied, but to go underground – to become inner speech – once the child makes a clean separation between speech for communication and speech in the service of thinking.

Piaget published his findings on the development of pretence – or symbolic play as he called it – several years after his early research on language (Piaget, 1962). By that time, he had made detailed studies of the infant's developing sensory-motor intelligence and his description of the emergence of pretend play takes its place alongside his detailed account of other sensory-motor capacities, especially imitation. None-

theless, there remain important continuities between his analyses of language and pretend play. He contends that both functions have their roots in early autism. Thus, in his theoretical account of pretend play, Piaget maintained his earlier contention that such play is a retreat from reality: 'Unlike objective thought, which seeks to adapt itself to the requirements of objective reality, imaginative play is a symbolic transposition which subjects things to the child's activity without rules or limitations' (Piaget, 1962, p. 87). Echoing Freud, he proposed that play offers the child an opportunity to secure via fantasy what is not available in reality. For example, he describes how his daughter Jacqueline, having been told that she could not play with the water that was to be used for the washing, took an empty cup, went to the forbidden tub of water, and made pretend movements saying, 'I'm pouring out water' (Piaget, 1962, observation 84). To underline the continuity in his thinking, Piaget refers back to the proposals he had made at the Berlin Congress more than 20 years earlier (Piaget, 1962, p. 166). In short, Piaget's analysis of pretend play has clear parallels with his analysis of egocentric speech. He implies that pretend play, like egocentricity, is a primitive and temporary phase of maladaptation that will be outgrown in the course of development.

Piaget's negative analysis of pretend play continues to be influential. Children who are engaged in pretence are thought to assimilate reality to their own distorting, cognitive schemas. Second, they are alleged to get carried away by their imagination and to blur the distinction between fantasy and reality. Indeed, a pretend episode may arouse many of the emotions associated with a real episode. As a result, children's pretend play is often seen as an important window into their unconscious emotional life, much as dreams are thought to provide a window into the adult unconscious. Finally, children's imagination is thought to be undisciplined – to be dominated by primary process thinking, in which free association and loose analogy link one idea to another. Older children are thought to gradually replace such primary process thinking with a more objective approach.

In this book, I take Piaget's pioneering description of pretend play as an important starting point. However, I take a different stance from Piaget toward its role in the child's mental life. Echoing Bleuler, I argue that it is a mistake to think of pretence as a primitive or primary mode of thinking. Echoing Vygotsky's analysis of the fate of egocentric speech, I argue that pretence is not a psychological function that is gradually suppressed in the course of development. There are three

reasons for considering this more positive stance. In the first place, pretend play is not something that we observe in very young infants. It is more or less entirely absent in the first year of life, it starts to emerge in the second year, and it becomes increasingly elaborate thereafter. Thus, the developmental timetable is what Bleuler might expect.

Second, the great apes engage in only limited and sporadic pretending, and even this limited disposition may be confined to those that are reared alongside human beings. By contrast, pretending appears to be a widespread feature of early human childhood. From a biological point of view, it is reasonable to ask what function this early human capacity might serve rather than to assume that it is a maladaptive tendency that will disappear with the advent of maturity.

Finally, the study of early pathology shows that it is the absence of early imagination, and not its presence, that is pathological. One of the major characteristics of the syndrome of early childhood autism is an absence or impoverishment of pretend play. Although children with autism can be prompted to engage in pretence, they rarely do so spontaneously (Harris, 1993; Harris and Leevers, 2000b). This deficit (along with deficits in joint attention and pointing) is one of the earliest markers of the syndrome. The long-term social and cognitive restrictions of people with autism suggest that the capacity for pretence is an important foundation for lifelong normality. It is reasonable to ask, therefore, just what that capacity might contribute to normal cognitive and emotional functioning.[2]

I shall argue that when pretend play does emerge, children draw to a remarkable extent on the causal understanding of the physical and mental world that they have already built up during infancy. Thus, in pretence, young children may step back from current reality, or go beyond it, but that does not necessarily entail any cognitive distortion of the general principles by which reality operates.

Second, if we regard children's disposition to become emotionally involved in an imaginary world as an index of cognitive immaturity, we ought to draw similar conclusions regarding that disposition among adults. Yet most adults become absorbed in novels, films or the theatre. To the extent that absorption in fiction is not a short-lived phenomenon of childhood but a capacity that endures a lifetime, it is appropriate to ask what it is about the cognitive and emotional make-up of human beings that disposes them toward such sustained involvement in other people's lives – including the lives of fictional characters.

Finally, I argue that the consideration of alternatives to reality may

be linked with a move toward objectivity rather than away from it. As they think about alternative possibilities, children can consider them in a consequential and orderly fashion. Eventually, the conceptually infused alternatives to reality that children conjure up feed back on their assessments of reality. For example, children's ability to entertain counterfactual alternatives to an actual outcome is critical for making causal and moral judgements about that outcome. Thus, what Bleuler called autistic thinking remains a constant companion to reality-directed thinking in the course of development, and enlarges the scope of children's objectivity.

In the chapters that follow, I lay out this more positive assessment of the work of the imagination.

Notes

1 It is not clear exactly when Vygotsky first encountered Bleuler's ideas. In *Thought and Language*, first published in 1934, he uses them extensively in his critique of Piaget. It is possible, however, that he had encountered them considerably earlier, either by reading Bleuler's original paper published in German, or its translation into Russian published in 1927. It is also interesting to note that Sabina Spielrein, Bleuler's former doctoral student and Piaget's psychoanalyst, returned to Moscow from Geneva in 1923 (Kerr, 1994). Given their joint acquaintance with Luria, their common interest in language (cf. Spielrein, 1923), and their respective contacts with the Institute for Psychoanalysis in Moscow (Miller, 1998), it would be surprising if Vygotsky and Spielrein had not exchanged views – and the topic of autistic thinking might well have been included in that exchange.

2 Bleuler assumed that pathology was mainly characterized by the failure of reality-directed thinking to temper the autistic mode. The developmental pathology of autism (Kanner, 1943) provides an interesting counter-example. One can reasonably argue that in the case of children with autism it is the imagination that fails to inform judgements about reality. In more prosaic ways, for example in conceptualizing physical mechanisms and the organization of space, children with autism are well equipped to think about reality.