



1st Jean Piaget Conferences

Theories of Development

June 26 – 27, 2014
Uni Mail – Geneva

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9h30

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Theory of Mind—Décalage vertical

Abstract:

Vertical Décalage was Piaget's term for describing the phenomenon that knowledge available at the sensori-motor stage had to be re-acquired at the symbolic level a few years later. A similar phenomenon seems to be the hot topic in theory of mind research these days. Infants as young as 14 months (or even 6 months) anticipate a mistaken agent's erroneous action in their looking and in their cooperative behaviour but cannot answer a question about this action correctly until they are about 4 years old, as shown in the traditional false belief test. I will outline the main attempts at accounting for this discrepancy. Nativist inspired theorists see an innate ability being hampered by performance demands which centre on the requirement to follow the agent's circumstances and at the same time engage in a conversation with the experimenter. Content oriented theorists see a change in what children know (this change need not be through learning, it could be maturation of genetically preformed knowledge). This change can be viewed as a deepening of the causal analysis of how what one knows about the agent (as inferred from behaviour in present circumstances) causes future behaviour. A very shallow understanding uses observed behaviour to predict future behaviour ("behaviour rules"). A deeper understanding requires representation of the agent's mental states. However, there are also shallower and deeper analyses possible. Infants might only represent the content of the agent's belief and think of corresponding behaviour without understanding that this content is held as a belief. Illustrative empirical findings for the various positions will be given.