



Jonja Gojman:

FOUR KINDS OF MORAL VALUES AMONG CHILDREN

Introduction

Taking as a starting point the exposition of Jean Piaget in his *Evolutionary Psychology* (1) and Erich Fromm's *Humanist Psychoanalysis* (2), the "moral reasoning" of 120 Mexican children, between the ages of 6 and 14, was explored. Sixty of them belong to proletarian families, and the other sixty, to families of employers and high-government officials. They were told tales and anecdotes related to moral questions within a series of sociopsychanalytical interviews during which special attention was given to their most characteristic relationships with their school-family-recreations environment. The children were requested to express, freely and openly, their opinions and judgements in respect to the stories' endings, as well as to the main characters and their deeds. When the children responded, we noticed their feelings of helplessness, fears and sensations of impotence in the face of injustice; as well as their wishes, what they think it "ought to be", equalitarian ideals they wish to uphold, even though the children are aware of the fact that these do not correspond to the daily happenings in reality.

Some children appeared submissive before social norms, others, ready to negotiate these norms in an adaptive-pragmatic way, others still, conceived them in an idealistic form. Though not many, there were children among the group which referred to



a different possibility from the already mentioned: one that would manipulate social obligations and moral norms with originality, ingenuity and innocence in order to embody them and make them respond to profound humanitarian principles (3), principles of solidarity towards others which should be sensible to their circumstances and specific needs, since, when considering their requirements very seriously, what is being tried is the attainment of their welfare.

These children, including some quite young, outlined keen and vital apprehensions. They would focus their attention trying to find convenient solutions to the given situations in the presented stories. They imagined kind and feasible solutions for the main characters, not limiting themselves, as did the others, to judgements a posteriori to the facts (which in reality – to a greater or lesser degree – are, nonetheless, sententious). These last answers, much to the contrary, looked after devising what "could be done better" in each particular case, and they established, due to a disposition of empathy and solidarity which denotes a discovery, a humanist option in the moral development of children.

Four Different Motives in Moral Evaluation

The answers we received as a whole, assembled according to their similarities, makes one think of four ways to approach the moral evaluation of the facts; four ways, each bringing forward different motives, and that we may conceive in general terms as



a) submissive or non-autonomous, b) utilitarian or adaptive-pragmatic, c) institutionary or equalitarian-individualistic and d) humanitarian or solidary-dynamic. (4)

A) "THE AUTHORITIES STIPULATE, KNOW, AND DICTATE WHAT IS GOOD AND WHAT IS BAD. WHAT I CAN DO IS OBEY, LEARN, AND CARRY THINGS OUT JUST THE WAY THEY ORDERED THEM.

Each time the argument upheld by the boy or girl makes reference to postulates originating with the authorities who have ordered it that way. When children accept as a sufficient and indiscriminative explanation the fact that that is the way things should be, simply because they have been told so, showing that they are subject to norms established on the outside, by the adults, and just because those are "the norms", without questioning, understanding, or explaining them, but only by repeating instructions of the authorities, quoting formulas which they can word, but cannot justify, and in many cases, cannot really explain. We considered this way of answering, SUBMISSIVE OR NON-AUTONOMOUS. Later, we shall see that this is characteristic of the younger children, or less developed children in reference to their moral criterion.

B) "'AUTHORITIES' WATCH AND MAKE SURE ONE COMPLIES WITH THE STIPULATIONS OF GOOD AND BAD. IT IS BEST FOR ME TO ADJUST. I MUST MAKE A GOOD IMPRESSION, SINCE THEY ARE WATCHING ME. IF I FAIL IN WHAT THEY REQUEST, THEY MIGHT DISCOVER ME, AND THE ONLY WAY TO AVOID PUNISHMENT IS



BY DOING WHAT THEY ASKED FOR."

When the arguments offered by children point to the fact that they are aware of the probable consequences which might happen if they break an established norm. By this, they show that they bring into play their ability to penetrate into circumstances and their capability to foresee and defend themselves from the harmful or pursuing effects of the authorities and the latter's undeniable possibilities to impose or to demand observance. When fear is the motive that makes them foresee what could happen immediately after, the answers are understood, as a whole, as UTILITARIAN OR ADAPTIVE-PRAGMATIC.

C) "THE ESTABLISHED 'SOCIAL NORMS' FULFILL A NECESSARY FUNCTION: THEY ALLOW THE SOCIAL INTERCHANGE OR COEXISTENCE AND THIS MEANS, BASICALLY, THAT IF I WANT PEOPLE TO RESPECT ME, I SHOULD RESPECT THEM. IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS, WHETHER ADULTS OR CHILDREN, IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR EACH ONE OF US TO FULFILL HIS PART, THAT WAY IT WILL PRODUCE RESULTS."

If the children's answers make reference to a form of "mutual respect," as what sustains the norms themselves; if the desire of being treated in the same manner as one treats others is implied; if the children's arguments denote an understanding of an "equitable moral" as the reference point which permits the interchange, alluding to a sort of "social contract" in which the assumption that without



a common or institutional agreement the benefits of the group's functioning cannot be achieved, makes it self evident, then the answers of the children are included, as a whole, as INSTITUTIONARY OR EQUALITARIAN-INDIVIDUALISTIC answers.

D) "MORAL PRINCIPLES JUSTIFY AND LAY BENEATH THE NORMS. WHAT ARE IMPORTANT ARE THE BASIC PRINCIPLES, WITH WHICH WE CAN DO OUR BEST TO BRING WELFARE TO PEOPLE. BAD IS WHAT BRINGS THEM HARM OR MAKES THEM SUFFER; GOOD, WHAT FAVORS THEIR DEVELOPMENT. BY EXAMINING MY OWN FEELINGS AND REACTIONS I GENERALLY CAN UNDERSTAND WHAT'S HAPPENING TO OTHERS. IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THEM, TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THEIR FEELINGS SO WE MAY HELP THEM."

When children's commentaries try to offer alternatives of solidarity with others, putting before everything – even to the fact of having to make a moral judgement per se – empathy, identification, understanding or interest for the welfare of the characters involved in the stories. When these are the basis through which they try to find a way out or a pertinent solution for the participants, then we are dealing with a set of HUMANITARIAN OR SOLIDARY-DYNAMIC answers which show an effective and quite active disposition to carry out deeds which show interest, preoccupation and tolerance towards others. These children's answers speak of the highest degree of moral development (5), since they involve, besides the intellectual clarity and devel-



opment, the most intimate affective opening and understanding, and a tenderly altruistic disposition towards others.

Moral Evaluation and Children's Age

We basically found, as expected in accordance to Piaget's theory, that the moral values of children tend, as they grow older, to favour social processes, interchange and communication with others. The youngest expressed, through most of their answers, a verbal repetition, almost mechanical, but fundamentally thoughtless, of the social order. For them, norms seem to have a "compulsory" nature because there is an authority which dictates and demands them above all and in spite of everything. We noticed, at the moment they answered our questions, that they would pay no attention to the circumstances surrounding the situations expounded, focusing their attention in the orders and altogether ignoring everything else.

The children said, for example, that a lie "is something that shouldn't be said, because it just shouldn't"; that it is correct for the attendant in a store to serve adults first, even if the child arrived earlier to the store "because one should attend adults first, because they are adults"; and that when a mother would give a larger portion of cake to one of her daughters because she was obedient "she (the mother) was right, because the daughter was doing what the mother was asking for." The young ones expressed themselves like this due to an unreflec-



tive and absolute acceptance of everything adults seemed to indicate to them, providing Type A arguments, which we call Submissive or Non-Autonomous.

On the other hand, we notice in older children that in general, they were leaving that attitude and were beginning to take into consideration, by themselves and in a dynamic form, the importance of interchange with others, by openly becoming aware that the norms are a necessary agreement for the group's functioning as such (like the Type C arguments or Institutionary or Equalitarian-Individualistic type, which were, as we shall see later on, the most common among the group of children who belong to families of employers or high-government officials, or on the contrary, as it happens with some children, who quote the norms as obligatory but on the basis of fear of what that relationship with others might bring to them in a direct form (Type B, or Adaptive-Pragmatic, arguments) and which were the most frequent among children of blue collar families.

Many of the older children in this second group affirm, for example, that "to tell lies is to say something that is not true" and this is not good because "(parents) may scold or punish you," that it is OK and "is normal for a clerk in a store to first attend adults, then children, even if the latter arrived first, because 'the clerk knows adults have more money and since they are older, they become exasperated sooner and they shout if made to wait'," and it is correct for the mother



to give larger portions of cake to the obedient daughter than to the disobedient one "because mothers love more their obedient children."

The children of employers grasp with more frequency the importance of participating with others when making reference to the fact that moral norms are justifiable because of the stability accomplished by the respect for equalitarian principles. These children mention, for example, that "to lie" is "to deceive others", and this is not good because "if you don't want them to lie to you, you shouldn't tell lies," adding likewise, that it is not good for a clerk in a store to first attend adults if a child arrived there first, because "they should serve first the one who arrived first" and that the mother who gave a larger portion of cake to the obedient daughter and a smaller piece to the disobedient one, "was doing something wrong, because she should love them both the same, and give them the same." (6)

Class Determinants in "Moral Utilitarianism"

Once the children's answers were classified in these four groups (no longer considering the age) and even when one may affirm that the institutional or "equalitarian-individualistic" were generally the most common, among all the children interviewed as a whole (7), we also noticed, as mentioned before, that two of them (utilitarian or adaptive-pragmatic and the institutional or equalitarian-individualistic) were related to the social group to which the children belong. Utilitarian or



adaptive-pragmatic were the most common among children of blue collar workers, and the institutional or equalitarian-individualistic were so among the children of employers and high-government officials.

The first group signal their fear of being discovered and punished for their disobedience, like the arguments which lay the foundations of all moral criteria, and the second group, on the other hand, makes reference to the interchange and stability or mutually shared benefits, like the last consequences which recommend observance.

The differences found (consistent and confirmed by statistical criteria) (8) within these groups of children, suggest the evidence of two different ways of moral maturation, two positions that seem equally objective or valid in their respective environments.

The instability which accompanies the daily life of the first group, can easily demand from them to be on the watch for events in order to avoid adverse and non-generalized consequences, since events are not always foreseeable and, the urgency of the moment forces one to resort to improvised solutions, related to the circumstances. The security which characterizes the environment of the second group, implies, most probably, the need to trust that others will correspond to our deeds in a similar manner, that is, that they will follow an equitable standard, - moderated by mutual coexistence - in the interchange



with others.

Behind the moral criteria of the majority of the blue-collar workers' children who were interviewed by us, a philosophy of scantiness is felt (each one of them, on his own, should come out ahead in the event of difficulties). Behind the majority of the moral criteria of the other children, sons and daughters of employers and high-government officials, one can feel a philosophy of abundance, stability and trust, which permits to count on foresight, strategy and planification for the equalitarian distribution of benefits among "all" and on the basis of the fact that there is no hurry or urgency to come out of conflicts.

Children of one group and the other are in their respective environment, in worlds totally different and, only by examining the motivations of both can we fully understand them.

It is more common for children of proletarian families to imagine their parents using openly repressive systems (blows, deprivations, grave threats and insults) as a form of correcting the children when these have committed an infraction. And most frequently among children of well-to-do families, to mention educational methods – restitutives, ways of repairing the damage or to remedy whatever they did, much like the way parents would respond. (9)

If we think that this is the most probable situation within the actual daily practice in the life of these children, we will understand that the parents of the first group are most probably



impelled by the urgency, the need to obtain a rapid change in the children, and to the parents of the second group, is patience what motivates them, the possibility to wait for the results of their interventions which, in the long run shall bear fruit, even though it may be necessary to do this slowly.

Up to this point, we have dealt with "the usual", just like what we saw in these two groups, although this should be studied and lengthen in further studies. In which one should also have access to a direct knowledge of the parents, the way they actually are, how they actually respond by themselves.

Some of the children in both (10) groups, provided answers much more developed, which can be considered as exceptional and which correspond to the most authentic ideals, both humanitarian and solidararian. In these rather special commentaries of the children, it unfolds a "childish and naive wisdom" combined with simplicity, warmth, tenderness and profoundness, which reacts before vital situations of people and upholds humanitarian principles.

We are talking of simple explanations during which the children suggest something more than just their ways of reasoning, translating their overall attitudes with respect to the interpersonal participation and communication. For example, they say, when asked about lies:

A lie is like saying you have a ball and that you will bring it tomorrow, but... you don't have it, and



therefore, you lied to your classmates, to your friends. That's no good, because afterwards they get sad because you lied to them."

Gabriel, 10 years 9 months old.

"To lie is to say something which is not true; it is bad because later the other one is not going to know what you're doing."

Julio, 8 years 1 month old.

"A lie is something that can cause a lot of damage to people; depending on the type of lie. However, this is not correct, for in many cases someone can lie and can also hurt a person, and in that way create more problems."

Sandra, 12 years 11 months old.

"To lie is to deceive people; only on certain occasions is good to tell a lie... for example, if someone is dying and you tell him that it is not true, it is a lie, but does not count as one, because you did it for him not to know."

Martha, 10 years 5 months old.

The reason why "no one should lie" is brought up by all of them in terms of those who may be "affected," "hurt" if someone is in danger, "one must tell the truth," and provide whatever is needed to help them. In some of the children a discriminating capacity is noticeable, since they refer to the fact that there



are different kinds of lies: some can be more serious than others, depending on the context. The concrete implications, unique to each case, are fundamental.

For the children, the most important thing is, above all, what others experience, feel and think by themselves. It is fundamental to take the "other" into account, as a person who has his own appreciation of the facts, and with the desire to provide this person with his welfare and to respond to his own particular conditions.

Let us now see how this form or style of answering manifests itself when referring to a specially active solidarity, as expressed by some children when we told them the story of Margaret and Juliet. The story says that Margaret met a very poor friend of hers on the street, who hadn't had a thing to eat during that particular day, and to whom Margaret gave a piece of bread, which she took from the baker while the latter was not looking; the reason was she didn't have any money. And about Juliet, who took a small toy that she really liked and ran out while the store attendant was not paying attention.

The children said:

"With reference to Margaret, she felt sorry for a friend, but she could have gone to her house and get the money from her piggy bank, and not just grab the piece of bread because the baker was not looking; although she did something good, because



she did it to help."

Veronica, 9 years 8 months old.

"Margaret did both, good and bad; good, because she gave food to a boy who hadn't eaten, and bad because she stole: I think she should have asked for the piece of bread.

Lucia, 9 years 5 months old.

"Juliet did something which was worse, because our parents can give us something if we really want it, and Margaret did something good if she didn't have any money, because she wanted to help the boy who hadn't eaten.

Alberto, 11 years 6 months old.

"Juliet was worse, because she did not do good, on the contrary, she did something bad to the lady because later, they are going to demand from her (the toy), and they are going to blame her, they will say that she took it for her son and herself, when Juliet was the one who had stolen it."

Javier, 13 years old.

In their expressions, we find some alternatives, ingenious ways through which the most important thing, i.e. "to help" the poor boy, to look after a needy person, is preserved. While understanding Margaret's good intentions, they look for more adequate solutions, the kind that actively intervenes in the



affair; sometimes counting on the collaboration of adults and, sometimes without it. They even refer to the fact that "Margaret could have gone home and gotten money from her piggy bank," or that "she could have asked for the bread and they would have given it to her," or that "she could have asked for a piece of bread."

Responsibility before a needy person, grants a certain freedom of action; at the center of their reasoning seems to lay hope, an interest in others.

These children seem to reflect an internal experience of a trustworthy world, in which adults procure welfare for children, and these in turn, can look after someone in a disadvantageous situation, and make up for the shortage of those who cannot satisfy their own necessities.

In the process of "rescuing the good" as expressed by the children's commentaries, it is reflected how important it is for the children to feel within an environment of trust in order to maintain a posture of solidarity ("they would have given it to her," "she should have asked for it.") Thinking that others are willing to help or give support to the situation, and to assume this to be true, suggests very clearly that these children's hopes are not blossoming in the emptiness of indifference since they denote faith in others that results in encouragement and commitment towards good, in search of solutions to help the needy ones. (11)



When asked about their impressions when they were served after adults in a store, even though they had arrived there first, we found answers which point out to the same phenomenon: each person is seen or recognized, by some children, on the basis of their specific needs and in accordance to what "actually" may be happening within reality; some of the answers were in this fashion:

"If they enter the store after me, Hah!, what are we going to do? it wouldn't matter to me, although it depends, if I were not in a hurry and they were, I would let them be first, but if I were in a hurry, (and they were served first) I would not like it."

Miguel, 11 years 7 months

"If I am in a hurry it would matter, if not, then it wouldn't matter."

Julian 11 years 11 months

"I think it's OK because they need to buy things for their children."

Olivia 10 years 9 months

"Well, if they are elderly people... I would allow them, because they are probably in a greater hurry or... because they are pitiful, however if it's a young man, well, I would tell him I got there first, but I think it wouldn't matter to me... if



I weren't in a hurry... it wouldn't matter."

Gloria, 10 years 11 days old

"Fine, ... they're older and have more rights...
... because they're adult persons and I'm in the store maybe just to buy chewing gum, while they are there for more important reasons; well, sometimes it's wrong, because if they're there just to buy something foolish, well... (in that case) no."

Ma. del Carmen, 10 years 11 months old

"It's OK because sometimes ladies leave the milk on the fire and (if delayed) the milk will boil over."

Roberto, 6 years 5 months

So, for them, before a concrete fact, what matters is not just a cold and generalized equality. The need and specific circumstances of every individual are more important: "if I were in a hurry," "because they are buying for their children," "because they buy more important things," "because they leave milk on fire" are reasons to enjoy a certain priority. Responsibility or destitution are essential elements which should be accounted for to specify what is just.

In these commentaries, children show that to give one's place to the elderly is not always blind submission to authority; they specifically refer to circumstances which justify a privilege, but not in the absolute or abstract sense, but rather



on the basis of needs or responsibilities well specified. With this, they allude to an understanding of what a reasonable solution implies; they defend a pertinent position with respect to occurring matters. Nor do they submit themselves blindly to traditional values – purely conventional, nor do they attack in a defensive way the solutions of adults; they justify, understand, elaborate, and recreate them on their own, and without contempt for themselves.

Finally, let's see what some children said with respect to the story of the mother who gave larger portions of cake to one of her daughters, because this daughter was the one who obeyed her:

"Not so, I think it's wrong because she should treat all her daughters alike, if you have five children you're not going to favour only one. You have to take care of the five, and if one lies to you or something like that, well you would have to tell him not to lie."

Roberto 12 years 2 months old

"I think that's wrong, because maybe the disobedient did what she did because of that, since her sister is pampered... maybe the girl was disobedient because she was envious of the other girl who was always pampered..."

Luis, 12 years 8 months



"I think the mother should educate more the disobedient daughter so both would be the same."

Edna, 9 years 2 months old

"No, ... I would tell the one who misbehaves that if she would like to get larger portions of cake, she would have to behave good, like her sister, but I wouldn't give the larger portions to the girl who behaves well because the girl who misbehaves would continue to misbehave because they wouldn't give her cake."

Lourdes, 10 years old

Again, in these commentaries, hope, the desire or disposition to give a chance to "others" to correct themselves, make their appearance. They want to correct others by telling them "don't lie", instead of condemning them in an overall form. Some of these children emphasize that even as an educational system, the mother's attitude condemns and leaves no exit door for the disobedient daughter, and therefore, she tends to perpetuate her daughter's faults and "desperation."

They combine an interest for the girl's feelings and a prevention of "a repetition of the wrong doing," and that is how they project themselves, like warm, understanding, and affectionately responsible authorities.

The four kinds of moral values shown by the children, give light with respect to four different philosophies, four ways of



confronting experiences, which we, as adults, can strengthen in our dealings with children.

The first, or most primitive, seems like an indispensable phase in the development of children when they are still very young, but the others seem to deal with fear, respect or confidence and good faith which they breathe in their environment. The best way to encourage the moral development of children is by honoring those who are more developed, the ones that provided humanitarian-solidarity answers, since they show confidence in the fact that, themselves as well as the main characters in the stories, deserve and should actually be treated and understood within their specific needs and circumstances; for this reason, it is necessary to pay attention and to listen carefully to what they say and how they live, that is, to know them.

- (1) Refer to "El Criterio Moral del Niño" by Piaget. Edited by Fontanella, Barcelona, Spain, 1971.
- (2) E. Fromm and Michael Macoby in "Sociopsicoanálisis del Campesino Mexicano, Edited by Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 1970.
- (3) To elaborate on humanist ethics and the significance it has on psychoanalysis, refer to: Ethics and Psychoanalysis by E. Fromm, Breviarios del Fondo de Cultura Económica; and "Y Seréis Como Dioses," Edited by Paidós, specially the last chapters.
- (4) Gojman, Sonia: "Una Mentira Social," in "Memorias de la Sociedad Psicoanalítica Mexicana," Volume II, Mexico, 1981.
- (5) In "El Desarrollo Individual y la Polaridad Deterioro Crecimiento," (in Erich Fromm and the Humanist Psychoanalysis, S. Millan and S.G. Millan, Edited by Siglo XXI Editores) I attempted to make a summary of Fromm's expositions in respect to moral development and, since it is more important



to correct mistakes than to experience guilt or condemn "sins" in ourselves or others.

- (6) Although with a different interpretation we find similar results in the book of William Kay: "La Educación Moral." El Ateneo, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1975.
- (7) 42% of all the answers obtained from the children, belonged to this type.
- (8) The test of the X^2 per question was carried out, the results were significant in each case.
- (9) We found a rate of 66% of repressive answers and 34% of restitutory answers among the first group; and 40% repressive to 60% restitutory answers in the second group, a difference that treated statistically by X^2 reaches significant levels of .05.
- (10) We obtained 18% of answers of this type, but the difference between the two groups was not significant.
- (11) Some of these children consider the store attendants as regular persons; who do the things call for in the scene, and resulting involved in themselves, in their commentaries. The repercussion on third parties which our own deeds may have, are something to worry about. The duty of doing things – in one girl's answer – makes reference to the fact that someone, in this case the lady in charge of the store, may find herself unjustly harmed, denoting a special vision, a way of taking into consideration all the different characters in an anecdote, and the ability to find the most adequate solution, one that would involve all the participants of those interpersonal acts – each one of them has his own point of view, his effective participation, his weaknesses, his needs and his miseries and one can't or shouldn't forget this, the children seem to tell us, while showing a natural respect with what they sense about others, in the different situations, how for them consciousness strengthens itself with respect to the implications of these peoples' jobs, lives and specific circumstances. Some of these answers remind us of what Carol Gilligan described in her book: "In a Different Voice" as characteristic of the feminine moral development; within this moral development all are taken into account and included and most particularly, the destitute, in an altruistic way.