Reflections on egocentric, unaware, solipsistic, narcissistic, pathological, omnipotent, irrational, non-persons. Or: children.

Introduction
One of my aims in this paper is to try to discuss certain classical conceptions of child development. The reason I want to discuss these portrayals of childhood is because I think they are used as a kind of arguments in larger discussions about the ontological basis for human understanding. There is a deep rooted tendency to think that the human being ontologically and essentially is a lonely human being. This thought is then often exemplified by discussing children. By taking children as examples, and also by making empirical tests, the theories are also made to look as self evidently true. However, my aim is to try to show that this is not the case, and that the descriptions of children, including the empirical test, on the contrary often are expressive of classical philosophical hang-ups. This paper is one part of a larger discussion of theories on what it means to understand other people.

The original state
A common way to think of a child’s development of understanding takes the following form. First a child is born into a kind of solitary universe of her own mind and her own senses. The child’s senses are deceptive and she can therefore be said to live in a dream world. The outer world affects her senses but she is yet unable to see any pattern in these sense impressions. This way of thinking shows in, for instance, Sigmund Freud’s writings. Freud saw a child as primarily being born into a chaotic world of sense perceptions, having a wish to fulfill her own desires while at the same time living in a dream world; not being aware of the true reality.

The governing purpose obeyed by these primary processes is easy to recognize; it is described as the pleasure-unpleasure principle. [...] the state of physical rest was originally disturbed by the peremptory demands of internal needs. When this happened, whatever was thought of (wished for) was simply presented in a hallucinatory manner, just as still happens to-day with our dream thoughts every night. It was only the non-occurrence of the expected satisfaction, the disappointment experienced, that led to the abandonment of this attempt at satisfaction by means of hallucination. Instead of it, the psychical apparatus had to decide to form a conception of the real circumstances in the external world and to endeavor to make a real alteration in them. A new principle of mental functioning was thus introduced; what was presented in the mind was no longer what was agreeable but what was real, even if it happened to be disagreeable. This setting-up of the reality principle proved to be a momentous step. (Freud, Formulations on the Two Principles of mental Functioning p.219)

According to Freud, a young child lives in a dream world that is formed through her own desires. This way of thinking resembles the Cartesian thought that we essentially are stuck inside our own sense impressions, where we cannot have any certain knowledge about the outer world. Freud also describes this state of infants living according to the pleasure principle as them being in an autistic state comparable with a bird’s egg. When the child eventually comes to realize that the world does not always correspond with her needs she becomes aware of reality. Reality is in that sense something negative, something intruding. The sense organs also primarily have
an individual character; they are organs directed towards the world in our individual efforts to obtain pleasure. No other people are involved here, nor any language.

The increased significance of external reality heightened the importance, too, of the sense organs that are directed towards that external world, and of the consciousness attached to them. Consciousness now learned to comprehend sensory qualities in addition to the qualities of pleasure and unpleasure which hitherto had alone been of interest to it. (Freud Ibid, p.220)

Martha Nussbaum, again, in referring to Lucretius, describes a child’s first breath of life as:

the early drama of its infancy is the drama of helplessness before a world of objects—a world that contains both threatening things and good things, the things it wants and needs. (Nussbaum p.182)

Also Nussbaum appears here to think of the child’s first sense of life as a threatening experience. The child is born into a chaotic world of outer objects; threatening things and good things. Nussbaum notes also that there are people whom the child has a relation to in the sense that the child sees them as fulfilling his needs. But these others only have meaning for the child in this one dimensional and self centered sense, through them fulfilling the child’s needs. these other people do not actually have meaning except by fulfilling certain needs.

Its relationship to them focuses, from the first, on its passionate wish to secure what the world of nature does not supply by itself-comfort, nourishment, protection. (Ibid p.182)

Nussbaum thinks that a child’s first contact with life is an experience of desires and needs, and that it is through fulfilling these needs that a child comes into contact with others. She then follows Lucretius in concluding that all children live in a state of self centered omnipotence.

[...] the omnipotence of the infant, its sense that the world revolves around its needs, and is fully arranged to meet its needs. (Ibid p.185)

This resembles Freud’s description of the child’s early solipsistic bird’s egg-state. Accordingly the child is not really aware of others or of reality, but lives in a dream state of egocentric omnipotence. Other people only come into the child’s life in the form of fulfilling her needs and desires. Nussbaum also concludes that when a child becomes aware of others and aware of herself, one of the basic emotions is a feeling of shame over her own incapacity.

All infant omnipotence is coupled with helplessness. When an infant realizes that it is dependent on others, we can therefore expect a primitive and rudimentary emotion of shame to ensue. For shame involves the realization that one is weak and inadequate in some way in which one expects oneself to be adequate. (Nussbaum p. 196)

To become aware of the outer world is a negative experience, and to become aware of others leads to a sense of shame.

There are certain patterns in these descriptions. One pattern is the thought that we are originally born into a chaotic world of sense perceptions. Another pattern is the thought that sensations of a world of objects is more primary for the child than a contact with other
people. A third pattern is the thought that our understanding of the world basically takes a subjective and egocentric form in being based on how the child finds something desirable or not. A fourth pattern is the thought that a child becomes aware of other people through her on the one hand needing to fulfill her own desires and realizing that other people can be an obstacle to this wish or a means to obtain her wish. That is, other people only have meaning in a self-centered sense as fullfillers of my desire or as a threat to my desires. The thought also seems here to be that children cannot have a genuinely interpersonal relation to others. A fifth pattern is that language is considered as originally having no role in a young child’s life.

**Objects**

All these above mentioned pictures basically build on an individual empiricist first-person perspective on understanding in the way the individual’s own senses are considered as the basis for understanding. Contrary to these empiricist pictures of understanding there is the logical perspective represented by Jean Piaget. Piaget did not consider understanding as a psychological concept depending on our private likes or dislikes. Instead he argued for the logical character of understanding. What it means to understand something is, according to him, dependent on our being able to see certain logical connections in the world. However, he also joined the quire in defining children as solipsistic and egocentric. “During the earliest stages the child perceives things like a solipsist who is unaware of himself as subject and is familiar only with his own actions.” (Piaget, 1971, p.397)

For Piaget the question of children’s development of understanding is, however, essentially a logical matter, and therefore not simply something that can be described through the child’s likes or dislikes for things. He writes for instance the following about our knowledge of an outer reality.

> A world composed of permanent objects constitutes not only a spatial universe but also a world obeying the principle of causality in the form of relationships between things, and regulated in time, without continuous annihilations or resurrections. Hence it is a universe both stable and external, relatively distinct from the internal world and one in which the subject places himself as one particular term among all the other terms. A universe without objects, on the other hand, is a world in which space does not constitute a solid environment but is limited to structuring the subject’s very acts; it is a world of pictures each one of which can be known and analyzed but which disappear and reappear capriciously. [...] As far as the boundaries between the self and the external world are concerned, a universe without objects is such that the self, lacking knowledge of itself, is absorbed in external pictures for want of knowing itself. (Piaget p.1-2)

Piaget thinks a child’s mind develops in a systematic way. First it works by the form of *syncretism* and then slowly, through experience and practice, develops to a more logically reasoning way of functioning. The concept of syncretism is, for him, a way of describing the child’s structure of the mind, how it works. Children’s minds first put things together in ways that have not to do with logic but with other factors, with how they look alike, by association etc. This syncretic state of the child’s mind means, according to Piaget, that the child is not truly aware of reality, or of
other people, nor able to reason. This is for him a primary state that empiricist philosophers think is all that understanding is about. In that sense his conception of children living in a solipsistic dream world is wider than Freud’s conception, for Piaget would say that Freud never gets people out of this dream world since he never sees the world as logical. The mental development from the syncretic state to a fuller logical way of reasoning and understanding means that the child eventually becomes able to see certain logical relations in the world and thus becomes aware of reality. However, this is still an outer reality of objects, not a shared reality with other people. And it is a reality where language yet does not come in at all. Piaget’s logical conception of the development of understanding follows in this sense the old individualistic trend of thinking that our primary relation to the world is a lonely relation to a world of outer objects.

Even if it might appear as if Piaget distanced himself greatly from the empiricist tradition, he is still stuck in the idea that the development of understanding is to be understood from a lonely first person perspective. It is still the lonely child who is born into a world of objects that is the basic starting point for Piaget. But for Piaget these objects are not mere sense impressions but a kind of abstract logical background patterns where the specificity of the situation is not part of this logical understanding. This shows in the above quote. His “logical-practical” view on understanding shows also, for instance in his description of a child sucking the mother’s breast.

OBS. 67.I. From 0;0 (2) and 0;0 (3) Laurent searches for the nipple when it escapes his lips. From 0;0 (12) he searches systematically on the side where he felt contact between the breast and his lips [...]. At 0;0 (21) he describes with his mouth a curve tangential to the breast, alternately going away from and approaching the nipple which he seeks, grazes, and goes beyond to recommence in the other direction in an accelerated rhythm [...]. So also, at 0;0 (24) he raises his head when he knocks against the nipple with his upper lip (same obs.).

II. From 0;1 (3) there is coordination between hand and mouth in thumb sucking: the hand goes toward the mouth at the same time as the mouth seeks the hand [...]. See also obs. 19 and 20, showing how the hand acquires the right position to enter the mouth, how it wanders over the nose, cheeks and eyes when the baby lies on his back, to rediscover its route when the child is raised up. Finally, see in obs. 21 how the mouth has oscillated at 0;1 (21) between the right and left thumbs.

III. From the 0;2 (28) Laurent knows how to carry to his mouth an object grasped independently of sight and how to adjust it empirically [...]; for example, he puts a rattle between his lips. At 0;3 (5) he puts a clothes pin in his mouth, adjusting its position so that he may suck it. (Piaget p.118-119)

The description above is in one sense very specific and in another sense very distorted. Piaget notes in a very detailed fashion how a baby actively tries to suck the breast and how the baby searches and tries again and again. He is here trying to describe a child’s efforts as a means of slowly learning to use his own body and then also slowly getting a logical understanding of the physical world. The good thing with Piaget’s example is the way he, contrary to behaviorists such as John Watson, emphasizes the activity of the child and sees a child’s activity in a lot of different situations as slowly developing the child’s broader capacity to move about and
respond to things. Children are not merely passive pieces of clay that are formed by adults to respond to specific stimuli, and understanding is not merely a single response of pleasure or displeasure or fear in a single specific situation. However, the problematic thing with Piaget is that he does not consider other people as having any role whatsoever in the child’s growth of understanding. He thinks a child primarily has a relation to objects. He distorts social and emotional situations into mere individual practical activities with “objects”. In the quote above the mother is strangely absent in the description; there is only the child trying to reach the breast. No mother is talked about here; there is just a breast or a nipple that somehow is there and that the child tries to reach. Consequently he considers the child’s sucking of the mother’s breast as an example of how a child slowly moves from a dream state of sense impressions into a logical understanding of, and handling of, the physical world of objects. He does not consider the situation above as showing how children are born into a close human relation where emotional closeness and presence of others is an essential part of the child’s life. Nor does he see that it is an essential feature of how a child learns to suck a breast that there first is a parent who takes the child in her arms and helps the child.

The second problem with Piaget is that he considers a child’s practical handling of objects as merely a preliminary stage of understanding which eventually will lead to a logical apprehension of the world as physical. That is, he does not really think the concrete situations are important for our understanding of reality. To really understand reality is to see it according to a general logical background pattern of something like geometry and physics. This also made Piaget conduct certain so called “object hiding tests” in order to find out when children are aware of the outer world of physical things. The point with the test was to see at what age children learn to understand that an object can be hidden. This was then taken as showing when a child becomes aware of an outer reality. The test worked like this; first the child is shown an object. Then the object is hidden or taken away and the researchers study the child’s reaction. If the child seems to look for the object it would prove that the child can imagine that the object exists even if it is not possible to see it. If the child does not appear to look for the missing object it would prove that the child is unable to understand that objects have existence even when not seen. Piaget conducted these tests in ordinary home surroundings. Here are some examples of his empirical studies:

In the realm of sight, Jaqueline, as early as 0;2 (27) follows her mother with her eyes, and when her mother leaves the visual field, continues to look in the same direction until the picture reappears. (Piaget p.8)

OBS. 6. Laurent’s reaction to falling objects still seems to be nonexistent at 0;5 (24) he does not follow with his eyes any of the objects which I drop in front of him. At 0;5 (26) on the other hand, Laurent searches in front of him for a paper ball which I drop above his coverlet. He immediately looks at the coverlet after the third attempt but only in front of him, that is, where he has just grasped the ball. When I drop the object outside the bassinet Laurent does not look for it (except around my empty hand while it remains up in the air.) (Piaget p.14)

And some further examples:

OBS 7. At 0;7 (30) Lucienne grasps a small doll which I present to her for the first time. She examines it with great interest, then lets it go (not intentionally); she immediately looks for it in front of her but does not see it right away.
When she has found it, I take it from her and place a coverlet over it, before her eyes (Lucienne is seated); no reaction.

OBS. 13. At 0;8 (20) Jaqueline takes possession of my watch which I offer her while holding the chain in my hand. She examines the watch with great interest, feels it, turns it over, says \textit{apff}, etc. I pull the chain; she feels a resistance and holds it back with force, but ends by letting it go. As she is lying down she does not try to look but holds out her arm, catches the watch again and brings it before her eyes. [...] But this permanence is solely the function of prehension. If, before her eyes, I hide the watch behind my hand, behind the quilt, etc. she does not react and forgets everything immediately; in the absence of tactile factors visual images seem to melt into each other without substance. As soon as I replace the watch in Jaqueline’s hands and pull it back she searches for it again. (Piaget p.22)

Piaget’s conclusion from these studies is that children first only perceive things as a kind of pictures that appear and disappear. He also concludes: “It remains what an occult spirit is to the magician; ready to return if one catches it successfully but obeying no objective law.” (Piaget p.12) However, eventually through practice and experience the child develops a sense of things as existing and a sense of physical reality which also enables them to engage with things in new ways. Piaget put much effort in studying many varying normal life situations a child is involved in, and I do think these descriptions show in an interesting way how a child’s sense for things grows. However, even though he considered the capacity to go on with a task as an important expression of understanding, he still saw a child’s development of understanding of objects as a development that ought to develop in a certain specific direction; namely into an abstract understanding of the world as \textit{physical}. That is, there is a problem in the way Piaget thinks that a true understanding of objects means that one learns to treat objects as physical things in a geometrical sense. This means that he did not really consider the specific characters of the situations as having any relevance for what it means to understand a thing. So, for instance while toys largely have their role through our playing \textit{together} with others, this has no importance for Piaget’s definition of what an object is. He writes:

Now three criteria seem to us to contribute to the definition of the object peculiar to the sciences: in the first place, every objective phenomenon permits anticipation, in contrast to other phenomena whose advent, fortuitous and contrary to all anticipation, permits the hypothesis of a subjective origin.

[...] a second condition must be added to the first: a phenomenon is the more objective the more it lends itself, not only to anticipation, but also to distinct experiments whose results are in accordance with it.

[...] only a deduction of the totality succeeds in dissociating the subjective from the objective: only that phenomenon constitutes a real object which is connected in an intelligible way with the totality of a spatio-temporal and causal system (for example, luminous waves constitute objects because they have a physical explanation, whereas quality is dissociated from the objective system.). These three methods are found to be the very same which the little child uses in his effort to form an objective world. At first the object is only the extension of accommodation movements (anticipation). Then it is the point of intersection, that is, of reciprocal assimilation of multiple schemata which manifest the different modalities of the action (concordance of the experiments). Finally, the object is fully constructed in correlation with causality to the extent that this coordination of schemata results in the formation of an intelligible spatio-temporal world endowed with permanence (comprehension
related to a deductive system of the totality). (Piaget pp.97-98)

Piaget describes a child as a kind of scientist and he emphasizes how a child is actively involved in trying to understand the world, where understanding consists in coming to think about reality in certain systematic ways.

This abstract “logical” understanding of what an object is has also been adopted by modern researchers, where the object hiding tests have been taken to extreme levels of abstraction. Consider the following test of children’s awareness of objects, from an article published in 2003. (I presume the test was made around that time also.)

The participants were 24 healthy term infants, 12 male and 12 female (age range: 4 months, 18 days to 5 months, 18 days, \(M=5\) months, 4 days). Another eight infants were eliminated because they were fussy (4), active (2), distracted (1), or required a diaper change (one). Six infants were randomly assigned to the four groups formed by crossing the two box (thick- or thin-box) and the two delay (3- or 4-min) conditions.

2.1.2. Apparatus
The apparatus consisted of a wooden cubicle 126 cm high, 102 cm wide, and 27 cm deep, mounted 76 cm above the room floor. The infant sat on a parent's lap and faced an opening 47.5 cm high and 95 cm wide in the front of the apparatus. Between trials, a muslin-covered frame, 60 cm high and 101 cm wide, was lowered in front of the opening. The floor of the apparatus was covered with gray marbled contact paper, the side walls were painted white, and the back wall was covered with black marbled contact paper. At the bottom of the back wall was an opening 5.5 cm high, 102 cm wide, and filled with a black fringe. In the left wall (from the infant’s perspective) was a window 51 cm high, 15 cm wide, and filled with a muslin curtain; an experimenter, wearing long white gloves, used this window to manipulate the box and cylinder.

The screen was 16 cm high, 22.5 cm wide, 0.5 cm thick, and made of foam core. It was centered on the apparatus floor, 15 cm in front of the back wall. The front of the screen was covered with blue contact paper, and the back with the same gray marbled contact paper as the floor. The screen was mounted on a wooden dowel with two metal clips. The dowel was 1 cm in diameter, 63 cm long, and fastened to the floor by two plastic brackets. The dowel's right end protruded through a hole in the right wall of the apparatus; an experimenter rotated this end to raise the screen.

The boxes were 13.5 cm high, 17 cm wide, made of foam core, and covered with red and green striped contact paper. The thick box was 14 cm thick, and the thin box 0.5 cm thick. Two cylinders were used, one in the last familiarization trial and the other in the test trials. Each cylinder was 30 cm high, 8 cm in diameter, made of white cardboard, and decorated with small blue dots, a 1-cm blue stripe at the top, and a 2.5-cm blue fringe at the bottom. The test cylinder was mounted on a hidden carrier 0.2 cm above the apparatus floor. This carrier consisted of an L-shaped rod; the vertical portion of the rod was attached to the back of the cylinder, and the horizontal portion protruded through the opening at the bottom of the back wall. Behind the wall, the rod was attached to a felt-covered base that rested on a Plexiglas track. As an experimenter slid the base along the track, the cylinder moved smoothly and silently across the apparatus, its fringe brushing noiselessly against the floor.

2.1.3. Procedure
Two observers monitored the infant's looking behavior through peepholes in large cloth-covered frames on either
side of the apparatus. The primary observer's looking times were used to determine the endings of the trials (see below). Interobserver agreement during the familiarization and test trials was calculated for 23 of the 24 infants and averaged 93% per trial per infant. (Reasoning about a hidden object after a delay: Evidence for robust representations in 5-month-old infants, 2003)

The predilection for these kinds of abstracted tests is partly expressive of a modern scientistic view on psychological research where the more abstract surrounding the more scientific the tests is seen to be. Bronfenbrenner describes this scientistic tendency with a few words:

The study of the strange behavior of children in strange situations for the briefest possible period of time”  
(Bronfenbrenner p....)

The abstract form of the tests is, I think, also expressive of a certain individualistic mental approach to understanding which is connected with a classical conception of logical reasoning deriving from Piaget. Notice how the researchers have worked really hard to make the test “standardized” in a way so that there is no ordinary life situation left. There is no ordinary situation of children paying attention to different things, taking an interest in one thing for a while and then changing their interest etc. In the experiment the child is forced to take an interest in only the specific test situation. And all colors are reduced as much as possible, into as boring colors as possible so not to “distract” the child. Notice also how hard the researchers have worked with making other people absent in the test. The researcher wears long white gloves so as not to influence the child’s reaction to the object. There is, for instance, no situation of a parent and child playing together with a toy, or a child lying on the floor in the kitchen playing with some kitchen tools while a parent makes food. Social life is only considered as distracting the child and as distorting the results. It is clearly taken for granted here that a child’s relation to the world of physical things has nothing to do with her relation to other people. The researchers in the modern tests are following the old tradition of thinking that our primary relation to the world is a relation to objects, not to other people.

Piaget and also the above mentioned researcher’s preference for an individualistic description of the physical reality as a reality without other people is connected with their having a classical conception of logical understanding as consisting of the ability to see general abstract background patterns. This is at the same time connected with a classical conception of what a human being is. A human being is essentially seen as a rational agent who acts in an outer world of objects. This picture forms what is considered as logical reasoning. Logical reasoning is considered as something that must concern my individual practical relation to the outer world of physical things. This is, for instance, evident in the way Piaget pays no attention at all to the emotional relations between parent and child and the way a child shares a daily life with her family. Instead he is mainly interested in the child’s capacity for practical action. However this individualistic picture of the origin of human life is not only a thought that runs through logical conceptions of understanding; it is a thought that runs as deep in the empiricist approach.

The first person perspective
Is the individualistic first person perspective ontologically first? And is our primary relation to life a lonely relation to outer objects? Is language a secondary feature, a kind of practical tool that we learn to
use in order to convey our likes and dislikes? Or is language a communication device that is dependent on logical reasoning?

Think about the time before a child is born. Before there is a child there are other people who worry about this becoming child, people who talk with each other, tell or avoid telling each other about the coming child, people who hope and plan or people who grieve, people who know that a child will be born soon. The child is acknowledged by others already long before she is born, and people prepare for her life in all sorts of ways. What comes first here is the second person perspective; that we think and talk about the child and act towards her; that we prepare for her life. A lonely first person perspective where other people are not a direct part of this perspective is not first, the second person perspective is first. However, my point here is not only to say which perspective comes first in time, I am trying to make a logical point about what can be meant by a first person perspective. It is an illusion to think there is any such thing as an individual first person perspective. First person perspectives are not individualistic; they are interpersonal perspectives, second person perspectives. But philosophers tend to think that there is some such thing as a lonely first person perspective and that this is the ontological starting point of all thinking. This is a classical Cartesian hang-up, and it is a hang-up that both empiricist philosophers as well as the logical Piaget is stuck in.

This idea of the absolute lonely first person perspective also forms the way philosophers describe the origin of our senses. Our senses are thought of as originating from the lone individual. This picture of our senses as deriving from the lonely individual, is also connected with a physical-anatomical view on the human body; a picture that most evidently runs through Descartes philosophical descriptions of our senses. But is the human body a single physical body and is that how our senses are to be understood? Think about the birth of a child. When a child is born there is always and directly a mother or someone else who will take care of the child. And before the child has expressed any desire for food or rest, before the child can have any desire to lie in the arms of another person; there are other people who take the child into their arms and hold her and who look into her eyes. A child is immediately born into a relation with others, where her senses also immediately get their form in these mutual relations. Instead of thinking that what comes first in a child’s life is her own desires, and thinking that what comes first is her being confronted with a chaotic world of objects, (and in this implying the basic character of human consciousness as taking an individualistic and solipsistic first person form where other people do not have a role) I think it is more correct to say that what comes first is the arms of another, and this is also how a child’s senses primarily get their form; through the presence of others.

Instead of thinking that a child would be born into a chaotic world where the child would be completely on her own with a lot of individual chaotic sense perceptions, I think it is a central aspect of a child’s life that others right away give her senses a certain direction, a tranquility and calmness or a nervousness and tension. There is not in some basic ontological sense chaos that the child must solve by herself; there are other people around taking her along, welcoming her, comforting her, screaming at her, talking to her, parents quarreling with each other or talking quietly. Surely a child’s sense of life can be chaotic, but this is not some form of essence of her solipsistic individual state of mind, nor is it something that would portray her physical body as opposed to the rest of the world. The child’s bodily way of being is something others respond to. We try to calm down a screaming child; we hold her, talk to her. It is not as
if the child has to sort out the world by herself. A child’s sense of life can also be chaotic because she is born into a family with tense relations, born into a life of screaming and quarreling parents, or it can be a life with tranquility because she is born into a family with somewhat more balanced parents. Generally I guess it is a mix of both. But there is no reason to think our senses would primarily have a solipsistic form or an individualistic form directed towards objects. There is no absolute solipsistic starting point of a chaotic mind with chaotic sense perceptions. The idea of a solipsistic starting point for our senses is merely a classical Cartesian residue which has to do with the inability to accept that we are immediately born into a life with others, and this is the form our senses also gets. And one part of the difficulty to accept this also lies in the firm conception of the human body being a single physical body in itself where our senses only spring from this single body; it is an anatomical conception of the body.

It is on the whole problematic to think that a child’s senses could be understood separately from other people. Think about the way a child falls asleep in a parent’s arms. Falling asleep is usually not at all a matter of the child first feeling tired and feeling a desire to sleep and then falling asleep. On the contrary, her whole ability to fall asleep and her sense of becoming sleepy is usually formed through the comforting presence of another. Tiredness can of course be a physical state and if you are exhausted you fall asleep anywhere. But being tired generally makes a child hysterical or angry or irritated rather than that she would relax. When it comes to children; relaxing and falling asleep is dependent on others. As a child grows up she has to learn to sleep alone.¹ A child’s ability to sleep is in this sense dependent on and formed by other people acknowledging her need to sleep. It is through the presence of others that the child comes to sense life. My senses, my consciousness, do not in some original sense spring out of myself. This also means that language is a direct part of a child’s senses because the character of a child’s senses is internal to how others take her along, how others treat her. Language shows in the way others take a child along from the day she is born.

An interpersonal approach

There are psychologists who have been strongly critical of the individualistic view on child development. In his book Mothering (1977) Rudolph Shaffer emphasizes how a child grows up in a constant mutual relation with other people. He writes:

Watch a mother with her one-year-old sitting on her knee in front of a collection of toys: a large part of her time is devoted to such quietly facilitative and scene-setting activities as holding a toy that seems to require three hands to manipulate, retrieving things that have been pushed out of range, clearing away those things that are not at present being used in order to provide the child with a sharper focus for this main activity, putting things next to each other that she knows the child will enjoy combining (such as nesting beakers), turning toys so that they become more easily grasped, demonstrating their less obvious properties, and all along molding her body in such a way as to provide maximal physical support and access to the play material. (Schaffer p.73)

¹ I am here influenced by Drew Leder’s book The Absent Body. In this book he shows how our ability to relax and to be unaware of things is as essential responses to life as is our ability to be aware of things. Generally in philosophy one only considers awareness as the important form of sense for the world. This is, as he shows, a problematic Cartesian perspective.
Schaffer shows how a parent’s engagement with her child is expressive of great sensitivity to the child and openness towards the way the child might be interested in something or gets bored of something. You show things to the child, you put away things she is bored of, one tries to make it easy for the child to grasp things etc. Parents often approach children with considerateness, you listen to your child and you take her responses into account. Schaffer shows how a child’s life essentially is a life that is shared with others, and that it is in this way her understanding also takes a form. This is also connected with the parent’s and child’s engagement with each other from the beginning having a linguistic character. The linguistic character does not so much lie in words being expressed, nor does it lie in certain facial expressions being used. The linguistic form lies in the mutual sensitivity and daily shared life. There is a constant mutual engagement and sensitivity and responsiveness to each other that is inseparable from the daily life. This is a mutual relation that forms the child’s whole way of sensing her surroundings. A parent might leave a child to play with his toy but the parent is still there as a kind of background presence which in itself makes the child relax and concentrate on playing. The presence of close ones is an internal part of the way the child senses the room, the toys, the food, everything. The world of objects gets its meaning through the way we are with other people, and the character of our attitude to objects shows our attitude to specific persons. It is not from an individual or self centered perspective that things in their most serious and most natural sense have meaning in our life.

John Bowlby also here follows Schaffer’s line of thought. He writes:

The pattern of interaction that gradually develops between an infant and his mother can be understood only as a resultant of the contributions of each, and especially of the way in which each in turn influences the behaviour of the other. (Bowlby p.204)

In philosophy the concepts of “body”, “practice” or “action” or “tool” or “use” or “object” are often talked about as if they had their primary meaning in an individual sense, through individuals acting, practicing and using their own bodies or using objects by themselves. And this is also how the concept of logic or reasoning often is considered. But these concepts could instead be thought of as primarily social and moral, because holding another in one’s arms, comforting, helping, showing, refusing, teasing, accusing, hitting and doing something together are central aspects of our life and these ways of talking about action are also only understandable from a moral and interpersonal perspective. Birgits text om hammaren....

Lev Vygotski talks in his book Thought and Language, about the importance of others for what it means for a child to learn something. He points out that a child usually learns things much faster when doing things together with others than when doing things alone. As he also notes; we cannot understand what it means for a child to learn something if we merely look at the child as being in a specific state of individual mental development; as if others had no meaning for this development. Learning is not something that is merely dependent on the child’s own present developmental stage. On the contrary, a child can learn more if being put to work with people who are more skilled than the child is himself and who therefore also can make the child inspired to try to achieve goals that are higher than what he would try to achieve if being alone. And another person can show me that things can be done that I never thought were possible to do. Vygotski calls this the zone of proximal

2 Heidegger could be an example of such an approach.
development. However, other people can also make a child lose her confidence in her own abilities; making her feel stupid and useless. The general point again here is not simply the empirical one that other people are often involved with children. It might look like I had only here tried to say that the individualistic pictures on child development are faulty in the sense that they are not broad enough when they do not consider other people as having a central role in a child’s life and for the child’s capacity to understand things. However, the problem is that the individualistic mentalistic approaches to understanding, give a distorting image of the concepts of learning, understanding and language. (jmf Hamlyn s.59) The concept of understanding cannot be understood as a purely mental concept. Nor can it be understood as an amoral concept. This also has implications for how one ought to make empirical studies of children’s development of understanding. Hamlyn writes:

When, therefore, it is said that Piaget seriously underestimates the social in his approach, it is not just that he underestimates the efficacy of social factors in producing deviations from the normal pattern of development which he thinks necessary for the reasons given; it is also that he ignores the necessity of bringing others into the picture as part of the context in which alone the concept of knowledge can get a purchase. (Hamlyn p.59)

Mathematics, language and the concept of understanding
Language is often seen as something that does not concern a young child’s life. At the same time it is also seen as an essential part of our social life. Piaget wrote: “There is, as we have said, no real social life among children of less than 7 or 8 years.” (Piaget p.61) The reason Piaget makes such a drastic conclusion has to do with his view on the connection between language and logical reasoning.

For Piaget communication consists in the ability to reason logically with another person. This ability to communicate also means, according to him, that we are able to answer correctly on questions and that we are, by using a deductive logical method, able to see whether another person’s arguments are false or correct. Piaget has an absolute conception of communication where the meaning of a sentence can be understood no matter what the circumstances are. He also considers communication as something that can only have certain specific right or wrong answers. The ability to see whether an answer is correct or not, lies in the ability to see the sentence according to the abstract pattern of formal logic. This picture of understanding also makes Piaget think that we can make psychological-logical tests with children to see whether they have learned to communicate or not.

Piaget conducted some logical tests with children in order to prove that children at a certain age are yet unable to reason logically and also that children are unaware of other people. Some school children were shown a number of sentences and were then asked to combine these in a way that would show that the sentences mean the same thing or have something in common. (check) Here is one example Piaget takes to prove that children’s mind works in syncretic and not logical ways.

Kauf […] connects the proverb: ”When the cat’s away the mice can play,” with the following phrase: ”Some people get very excited but never do anything.” Kauf, who would understand the meaning of each of these sentences if they were separate, yet declares that they
mean "the same thing." -"Why do these sentences mean the same thing?" –Because the words are about the same. -‘What is meant by ‘some people’...(etc.?) -It means that some people get very excited, but afterwards they do nothing, they are too tired. There are some people who get excited. It’s like when cats run after hen or chicks. They come and rest in the shade and go to sleep. There are lots of people who run about a great deal, who get too excited. Then afterwards they are worn out, and go to bed. (Piaget p.149)

And here is another example:

Nove [...] compares “Filing can turn a stake into a needle” to “Those who waste their time neglect their business,”—“because by filing, that means the more you file it [a stake] the smaller it gets. People who don’t know what to do with their time file, and those who neglect their business turn a stake into a needle; it gets smaller and smaller and smaller, and you don’t know what has become of the stake [therefore it has been neglected].” (Piaget p.152)

This Piaget takes as showing that the child is not able to reason logically but instead thinks in a syncretic way that shows in the child combining anything that he for some reason thinks has similarities. The child does not analyze in a logical deductive manner the meaning of the sentences in order to come to his conclusions. It is difficult to know really how Piaget actually wanted the children to answer since he does not give any example of what would have been a correct answer to his questions. Presumably a correct answer should have had some kind of deductively logical form. Piaget concludes:

The child who fuses two heterogenous sentences in this way does not realize that he is doing anything artificial; he thinks that the two propositions united in this way involve one another objectively, that they imply one another. (...) To reason syncretically is therefore to create between these two propositions relations which are not objective. (...) Syncretism is a "subjective synthesis," whereas objective synthesis presupposes analysis. (Piaget p.151-152)

And a bit later he writes:

[...] syncretism is the outcome of childish ego-centrism, since it is ego-centric habits of thought that induce the child to fly from analysis and to be satisfied with general schemas of an individual and arbitrary character. We can now understand why it is that the justifications of children, rooted as they are in syncretism, have the character of subjective and even of pathological interpretations due to a regression to a primitive mode of thinking. (Piaget pp.160-161)

Piaget’s thought is roughly that there is a certain form of reasoning called abstract logical reasoning, and it is this ability that we adult people have and that children under a certain age do not have. This ability for abstract reasoning makes us able to consider each other’s arguments as right or wrong, true or false, and this is also what
enables us to be aware of each other. Since children under a certain age lack such a capacity for logical reasoning the children answer incorrectly on Piaget’s questions (he thinks).

However, before discussing Piaget’s conception of reasoning and understanding, let us first take a look at this test. It seems that Piaget in testing these children had not made fully clear to them what he wanted them to do. The children seem to have understood Piaget as wanting them to solve a riddle or play a word game. This is also how the sentences themselves look; they are not ordinary sentences but sentences that already have a poetic character, so it is not strange that the children took the assignment to be to continue to treat the sentences in a poetic manner. Piaget, on the other hand, apparently expected the children to give a certain specific “right” answer and to show through logical arguments how they came to this answer. Piaget’s questions resemble in this sense a concealed mathematical task.

The first problem is then that Piaget apparently did not explain enough what he wanted the children to do. The second problem is that when the children fail to answer correctly he does not try to explain to them another time how to do. When the children do not answer as he wishes them to answer, he merely concludes that the children do not yet have a capacity for logical reasoning. This is the difference between a psychological test and teaching. In a normal school situation the teachers usually try to explain in several different ways to the children how to do something, until the child finally understands. Or if the child does not understand then one does something else instead that the child is capable of doing. This is also something parents do all the time, and the ability or inability to form one’s explanation so that a child understands, or the ability to go along and find something else to do instead that might inspire the child, it is in itself expressive of a moral sensitivity or insensitivity for her.

There are two reasons for why Piaget takes such an unresponsive attitude towards the children and thus for why he chooses to test them at all. On the one hand, he is stuck in a conception of the development of understanding as an individual mental matter. On the other hand he is also stuck in a rigid mathematically inspired conception of what it means to talk and reason. Piaget’s one sided perspective on understanding as consisting of an individual mental development shows in his unwillingness to explain to the children how to do, an inability to go along with the children and to try to explain repeatedly in different ways; to form his explanations so that the children see what he is after. This is what Vygotski talks about when he talks about learning as a proximal development. In that sense Piaget’s individualistic perspective on development, combined with his rigid perspective on language and reasoning, makes him take an unresponsive attitude to the children’s responses. Since he sees language as consisting of conversations where there is always one single correct answer, he cannot see that the children are not answering in a meaningless way even though they do not give the answer he expects. This view on reasoning also makes him take an

Had it been sentences of the quite usual philosophical character such as “If person S goes to the object O and acts in accordance with X then...”; the kids might have recognized that the questions had a mathematical character demanding one right answer rather than being poetic riddles demanding imagination and inventiveness.

However, psychological tests do not have to have such a rigid character, even if they often do have such a form.
unreflective attitude to himself as necessarily always being right. Nor does he then see the difference between misunderstanding a task and not being able to think. Neither does he see that an inability to understand is not something we generally merely conclude as a fact. On the contrary, we adapt our behavior towards the child depending on her abilities. We try to encourage the child not to give up, or we try to find other things to do so not to exhaust and bore the child, or we lose our temper etc. Of course we often also fail and we are often too rigid and pressing in wanting a child to learn something, but we always respond in some way or other.

For Piaget there is one true form of understanding and this is a mental capacity of logical reasoning which enables us to reason with others and to take each other’s arguments into account. It is this conception of understanding as a matter of following an absolute abstract logical rule that also makes him test the children instead of trying to really talk with them or respond to them or help them. The point here is that the whole idea that a psychological test is a good measure when studying a child’s mental development shows how Piaget’s individualistic and absolute mathematically logical conception of understanding is an expression of a conceptual confusion. For him understanding and communication are individual mental capacities to follow certain absolute logical rules of thinking. And it is also this conception of understanding that makes Piaget consistently blind to his own studies of how children behave.

Rush Rhees has been critical of the idea that understanding and conversations could be compared with our ability to calculate. He writes:

In mathematics you do not say anything. And this has to do with the fact that you can calculate what can be said. Or: that no one brings anything to the game: there is nothing like an interesting remark, although there may be problems. (Rhees p.62)

And a bit later:

Understanding what is said in a discussion is not a matter of capacities: not in the sense in which knowing Welsh or knowing arithmetic is a capacity; or being able to read. (Rhees p.68)

Rhees says something very important here. He does not talk about “communication” as mainly taking the form of deductive reasoning. Instead he talks about “conversations”. Calculating is quite different from being involved in a conversation. For instance, in conversations we tell each other about our life, we help each other, we show each other how to do something, we confide in each other; we apologize to each other; we accuse each other and give excuses, we comfort each other and so on. all these ways of talking are part of and get their meaning from our standing in certain personal relations to each other. But none of this is done in a calculation. I think, however, that it is still important to see that when we teach someone to count, we are involved in a kind of conversation. When we teach someone to count we hopefully try to take the other person’s difficulties and life into account, and we also approach the pupil in many different ways. Some math teachers are kind and considerate while others have a skill of making the pupil feel stupid when failing. These attitudes are internal to the way a child learns to count because teaching someone to count is a way of engaging in the other person. However, I agree with Rhees that eventually, when a child has learned to count, this ability in itself will not be the basis for or the general form of what it means to communicate.
Conclusion
One thing I have tried to show in this paper is that there is a certain classical problematic individualistic conception of human life and understanding that forms how philosophers talk about children. Such classical conceptions are the idea of an original solipsistic first person perspective, the idea of our senses originally only being directed towards an outer word of objects, and the idea of understanding as consisting in logical reasoning and language as a kind of mathematical capacity.

Another thing I have tried to show is that there is a continuous tendency among philosophers to tend to define children as in some way or other not being aware of reality and as not being aware of other people. However, this is a thought that is connected with both a scientistic and an epistemological picture of what we mean by reality. Instead of thinking about reality as something that would be something adult people had monopoly on through their ability to think of it as physical and through their ability to reason “logically” with other people, I think it is important to see that the concept of reality has a moral meaning. Our world is formed through each other. The way philosophers talk about children not being aware of others makes it look like adult people constantly treated their children as if they were undeveloped beings. What one ignores then is that this is not necessarily the way people approach a child. It is, for instance, a common way of playing with a small child to play peek-a-boo with her. This is in itself an expression of the way one takes the baby into account. It is because the baby enjoys this game that one does it, not because one wants to prove that the baby is stupid or unable to realize that objects can be hidden. Nor does one try to teach the child anything when playing like this. The way one takes the child into account here has the form of just being with the child, and the form of the adult letting the child take her along in having fun together; through this the adult enjoys this game. That is, it is not only that adult people try to teach children how to understand the “objective” adult reality; instead we engage in the child’s reality, in her way of being and in a shared way of being together. This is also how joys and objects here get meaning for the child. It is not as if the child first feels a need to have fun and hopes that the parent will play peek-a-boo with her and then the adult responds to this need. On the contrary, it is as if they both in being together and enjoying each other’s company suddenly just came to notice that this was fun. But the point is that it is through both being taken along with each other that both also have fun. There is no original individual need and no original desire here. It is a way of having fun that is born out of them just being together. What reality is for us depends on how others come into our life, and this is a moral matter of our openness to each other. A child can change an adult person’s sense for life and apprehension of things as much as an adult can change a child’s. And this is essential if we are ever to be able to really listen to a child, to be caught by her questions, and to want to take her along in life. This is the root of language.

We rarely talk about someone being aware or unaware of reality, and those times we do say so it is often a specific moral expression concerning a very specific situation rather than a general epistemological or logical expression concerning an absolute attitude towards all people and all objects all the time. It is mainly
philosophers who would say that a child is unaware of reality. Normal people would simply say that the child cannot yet tie her shoes, or one would say that she cannot yet grab things. But we would not say she is unaware of reality because that is an empty expression, and when it is not empty it is simply patronizing and mystifying to say so. I am not saying that it would necessarily be wrong to say that a child’s understanding is on a certain mental level. But it is important to remember that when we say so we are talking about a specific issue, not about some absolute state of being in the world. And when we say something about a child’s capacities we also say something about other people’s obligation to try to help this child or to try to teach her. The word “child” is a relational and moral word; it is not basically a psychological word defining certain people as solipsistic, irrational, omnipotent, egocentric and undeveloped. Likewise concepts such as knowledge, consciousness, ability, inability and reality get their meaning through the way we approach each other. Thereby the concepts have a moral character rather than being neutrally epistemological concepts or psychological concepts having meaning from a first-person perspective. What it means for a child not to be able to do something gets its role through other people’s attitudes towards this inability. So a parent might get angry when the child has difficulties to do certain things, or she might instead encourage the child or help the child without emphasizing how “clumsy” or “stupid” the child is. We take a lot of different attitudes towards children’s inability to do certain things, and it is these attitudes that give meaning to the concepts of ability, inability and reality. They are concepts that get their role through our treating people with care or with callousness, and the way we use these words is in itself an expression of our moral sensitivity or insensitivity to others.

Martha Nussbaum writes:

All infant omnipotence is coupled with helplessness. When an infant realizes that it is dependent on others, we can therefore expect a primitive and rudimentary emotion of shame to ensue. For shame involves the realization that one is weak and inadequate in some way in which one expects oneself to be adequate. (Nussbaum p. 196)

According to Nussbaum, when a child becomes aware of others and aware of herself, one of the basic emotions is a feeling of shame over her own incapacity. Nussbaum is clearly influenced by Sartre here. She takes for granted that being undeveloped or needing help must mean feeling inferior to another person and consequently must also mean feeling shame over the need for help. I have tried to show that we take many different attitudes to children, and it is in no necessary sense the only or the most central way of approaching a child to make her feel stupid and helpless. The same concerns handicapped people. That I help a person does not mean that I must make the person feel inferior and helpless. Surely it is one approach I can take, but it is not the only approach. Nor is it some form of basic existential state of development of an awareness of others that a child should feel shame in front of others.

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