

OUTLINE OF THE UNPUBLISHED BOOK

(Extracts from a letter from Dr Geoffrey Waldon to a colleague)

You ask about the **form** of the exposition I am trying to write. It purports to be an explanatory description or 'theory' of learning and the form of the development of understanding in humans and I have tried to lay it out in five parts, each intended to consist of three sections.

The **first** introduces **intersection and disjunction of pattern – 'sorting and matching' - as the ultimate source of experience**, and defines the **observation as the functional unit of understanding**, as well as the source of the impressions witnessed by others as **behaviours**.

Part Two deals with **motivation, learning, reinforcement and control**. This section discovers much about learning which seems to contradict the validity of many commonsense - or, at least, generally accepted - methods of teaching. This is, of course, the part which has most obviously given rise to the 'Waldon Approach' to education which emphasises the importance of the 'learning atmosphere' or general conditions, eschews the use of non-specific 'rewards' and the show of teacher interest, avoids the primary use of conventional language, and dismisses such notions as 'rightness/wrongness', 'success', 'achievement', 'easiness/difficulty' etc., as unnecessary to fundamental learning and pathological and burdensome as tools of teaching.

It is **Part Three** that is perhaps the most difficult, and certainly it is the part that is giving me the most difficulty, for it concerns the raw materials of understanding: **how movement gives rise to 'meaning'**, and it must show how **learning and the creation of experience** occurs before there is an **organism capable of learning!** It is called **Tolerance and Constraint**.

Part Four has to do with **the formation of the organism and the structuring of its space** - the formation of primary and secondary reference frames based on bodily movements 'acting from' reference axes and planes first established 'within' the body.

This outlines the manner of creation of the world by an individual and establishes the syntax of general understanding, the consistency basis of human 'reason', and the common structure for conventional language, whichever particular tongue that happens to be.

Part Five summarises the development of general understanding very briefly, introduces ‘cultural particular understanding’, summarises social development, whose formal understanding element is a special case of general understanding, suggests a theory of the origins of social behaviours in human beings, and outlines the relationships between conventional languages and their common basis - general understanding.

. . . My approach to neurological examination through ‘asocial’ play had shown me that children who failed to exercise their bodily movements were often suspected of being deaf, and not infrequently of being blind, but few of my colleagues could take seriously the idea that hearing and vision were primarily oculo-motor and acoustico-motor functions which themselves depended largely on bodily space-structuring in general, even though it seemed clear to me that a lot of children came to ‘see better’ and to be responsive to and interested in sound when one did nothing more than extend the range of the child’s **active effortful movements**.

Not only was this the case but it seemed to me that the forms of the **movement neglect** were exactly consonant with the forms of suspected ‘blindness’ and ‘deafness’ involved.

All this was of course, for me, bound up with my idea that children were not born as organisms (or totally unified actors in relation to a separate environment) but learned during the first few years (especially the first twelve months) to become unified whole creatures. Not only did human babies not seem organismic to me but a little thought suggested that a period of pre-organismic learning could prefer significant advantages on such a necessarily adaptive creature as a human being.

A child could have five or six post-natal months of active movement, to say nothing of some weeks of preliminary foetal activity, **before** its earliest activity as **a whole organism** directed towards its - now truly external - environment, at about six months of age.

Then, as it acts upon objects with its eye *movements* and its arm-hand *movements* it develops, over the next six months, into a creature capable of acting **as a whole** through any part of its body.

During this early period however, as it seems to extend its **realm of interest**, not only are objects interesting to the baby when within *spatial* regions of interest, but objects vary in their degree of interest for the baby according to *where they are relative to the baby*.

It was clear, as might have been obvious, that not only is interest not a property of objects, neither is it primarily a sentiment of the child itself, but *a function of the child's use of space.*

Interest is a property of the space in which an object finds itself. Objects inherit their subsequent 'intrinsic' interest from the space they inhabit.

Of course, by the end of the first year the bodily near-space is normally so well explored that there is little clear differential between one region and another at this first level; however, spatial interest is subsequently further inspissated or deepened by the laying down of structures by means of which objects are located and re-located, and against which changes of position, orientation and form are detected and measured.

Remember, I am not talking about vision or hearing but about general bodily praxis, for there is no reason why lack of eyes and/or ears (when such absences are compensated for[∇]) should interfere with normal space structuring.

I'll not take this any further just now but revert back to the early stages where it is clear to me that, if I am right about the importance of pre-organismic development in humans (and I imagine also certain other mammals) an essential early stage of organismic growth must ensure the establishment of primary bodily reference axes and planes. The fact that vertebrates are bilaterally and **independently** symmetric provides the mechanism for a stereopraxic understanding echoed in the stereoscopy of binocular vision. Such a mechanism means that the final basic stage of the **primary organismic development** is a **fusion between the understanding of the two lateral halves** of the body, and the need for a relative bias in favour of one side in the fused condition. Hence one would expect much cooperation between the two sides of the body during the latter part of the first year without which a **tendency to partial bodily neglect** or bilateral confusion would become a nuisance to survival. *This is exactly what one sees to some degree in most of the children within the special educational system.*

The primary spatial frame of reference (forming the reciprocal of the bodily organisation) annexes anything within its extent and confers on it a location.

I will not here broach the subject of second year spatial structuring and the development of a secondary reference frame nor touch upon the actual manner of such development . . .

[∇] In fact, of course, the 'visual' fixation present from birth leads to rotation, flexion and extension of the head at the neck, and consequently to reflexive redistributions of bodily muscle-tone, very important to early learning. Similarly, equivalent instinctual vestiges of acoustic responses induce postural changes.