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SUMMARY

The Genevan scholar, Jean Piaget, made a highly significant contribution to epistemology that has not generally been adequately recognized by philosophers.

His purpose was to remove epistemology from philosophy and make it a strictly scientific endeavour separate from philosophy. Yet an examination of main themes in his theory of knowledge shows the clear outline of a philosophical framework - using his own definition of philosophy. An examination of a number of criticisms, shows that, underlying philosophical differences constantly emerge as the major factor separating Piaget and his critics. That Piaget failed in his purpose of establishing a scientific epistemology independently of philosophy is corroborated by a comparison with the psychologist, Rudolph Arnheim.

The Piagetian philosophy - which, though within the mainstream of twentieth century philosophy, has its own quite distinctive features - leads to a shaping of the experimental data in terms of a constructivist, monolithic hierarchy of knowledge, not as a static structure but as a continually structuring activity. In this structuring activity knowledge develops in a continual interaction of subject and object in which the object feeds the cognitive structure of the subject and the subject, by its logico-mathematical structure, gives order to the object world. There is a conflation of the logical and mathematical and a blurring of the distinction between the logical function, as a primary functional mode, and the formalization by which we extend knowledge of the logical function with the aid of symbols. Cognitive normativity is seen as provided by a formalization of logic, rooted ultimately in the universal biological structure of the organism.

As an alternative, and more satisfactory, empirical philosophical framework the outline is given for a multi-dimensional theory of knowledge within a lawfully ordered, dynamic, relational field. Within this context, it becomes apparent that the Piagetian experiments do not trace the development of thought or the growth of knowledge or of logic as such, but have the more limited scope of tracing the development of one mode of knowledge; a mode of knowledge which is nevertheless important because of its role in science.

The evaluation of Piaget and the proposed alternative make constant appeal to empirical data. At the same time, it is acknowledged that an explicit Christian commitment also plays a part just as Piaget's commitment played a part in shaping his theory.