CRITIQUE OF PIAGET'S
THEORY OF INTELLIGENCE:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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There seems to be something lacking in Piaget's theory of intelligence. Piaget states that the final level in the development of intelligent thought is that of "formal operations" whose structure is constituted by the rules of formal logic. This may very well be true, but it does not tell me anything about what intelligence is for me as a human being. The question Piaget cannot answer is: How is it possible for me to solve a problem (e.g. conservation, scientific experiments) intelligently and correctly without being aware of the principles of logic that structure my intellectual thought? This type of question undercuts Piaget's theory, for it is based on the assumption that an understanding of the meaning of intelligence is only relevant to man when taken within the context of human experience. So, it seems to me that the fundamental ground from which to launch any investigation concerning human activity is that of experience; in this case, how is intellectual activity experienced? If we take this to be the case, then we cannot dismiss Piaget entirely, for he does begin with experience when he investigates the development of the child and how the phenomenon of intelligence emerges. Then where does Piaget go wrong? Once this phenomenon has emerged, his error is that he leaves the realm of experience to investigate it and never comes back to it. That is, Piaget fails to uncover the essential meaning of in-
Intelligence most relevant to the way man lives, i.e., intelligence as it is lived, rather than as it is conceived. I believe that this inconsistency in the method of investigations is due to Piaget's approach. The compromise is Piaget's genetic-epistemological approach which 'hangs' somewhere in between the conflicting approaches of natural science and phenomenology. Piaget, dissatisfied with natural science and not willing to move to the other extreme, created a "middle road." It is my belief that had Piaget taken up the phenomenological approach his method of investigation would not have been internally inconsistent and that he would have arrived at a theory of intelligence more appropriate to man.

Before investigating the claims that have been set forth, I think it is important to first understand just exactly what the phenomenological approach is and its implications for psychology, describing the method of investigation of Edmund Husserl, then relate it to psychology and finally to the subject matter of this paper.

The question that concerned Husserl was how is it possible for us to know something to be absolutely certainly true, which leads to our own question: How is it possible that we can know anything at all? His purpose then is to discover the ground for absolutely certain knowledge. This ground is experience. But experience cannot validate the truth of experience. It becomes evident to Husserl that in order to give meaning to experience, he must leave that realm—transcend it—investigate it, and finally come back to experience. In Husserl's own words, then, the purpose of transcendental phenomenology is:

"...the task of carrying out all phenomenological investigations within the unity of a systematic and all embracing order by following, as our mobile clue, a system to be found out, level by level, the system namely of all objects of possible consciousness, including the system of their formal and material categories—the task, I say, of carrying out such investigations, as corresponding constitutional investigations, one based upon another, and all of these interconnected, in a strictly systematic fashion."2

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1Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) is considered to be the "Father of Phenomenology." His method of investigation (T.P.R.) is the basis for the phenomenological approach which is discussed in this paper.

2Edmund Husserl, Cartesian Meditations, p. 54.