Henri Wallon’s Theory of Early Child Development: The Role of Emotions

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The present paper gives an account of part of the stage theory of early child development of the French theorist Henri Wallon (1879–1962). Unlike his contemporary Jean Piaget, Wallon concentrated his efforts upon a description of the child’s emotional development and the role emotions play in establishing the bond between child and caregiver. The description of Wallon’s stage theory is preceded by biographical information and a presentation of his methodological views. It is argued that Wallon’s theory is unique in its focus, exerted influence upon theorists such as Lev Vygotsky, and is basically compatible with modern insights about the nature of child development and the growth of intersubjectivity.

The work of the French developmental psychologist Henri Wallon is not very well known in English-speaking countries. His ideas are rarely discussed (e.g., Netchine-Grynberg, 1991) in scientific journals and in well-known textbooks on developmental psychology his name is entirely absent (e.g., Cole & Cole, 1993; Crain, 1992; Miller, 1993; Sroufe, Cooper, & DeHart, 1992). The publication of a volume with selected writings two decades ago (Voyat, 1974) thus does not seem to have been very successful in diffusing Wallon’s ideas.

Why the ideas of certain scholars become popular while those of others remain little known must ultimately remain a mystery. Boring (e.g., Boring, 1950) used to invoke the problematic notion of a Zeitgeist, whereas Janet (e.g., Janet, 1928, p. 321) profanely compared the cyclic scientific interest in certain topics with the fashion in ladies’ hats. Neither of these explanations (or, rather, descriptions) is fully satisfactory.

In Wallon’s case one can think of at least three factors which taken together probably did not facilitate the reception of his work in the Anglo-Saxon world. First, there is the language barrier. Wallon wrote exclusively in French.
and due to his complex style of writing and breadth of interests his work is at times quite difficult to understand even for native speakers of French. Second, the later Wallon defended a dialectical, Marxist point of view which hasn’t always been very popular in English-speaking countries. Finally, Wallon was not primarily a skilled experimenter whose ideas were easy to replicate in laboratory settings. The waves of interests in Piaget’s work, for example, may be partially understood by the fact that Piaget illustrated his theories with empirical findings that are both intriguing and easy to replicate. Although we believe these factors to have played some role they hardly can have been decisive as the current popularity of “difficult” French thinkers amply demonstrates.

Meanwhile, French psychologists and researchers in the Soviet Union, Southern Europe, and Latin America have proclaimed Wallon a profound developmental psychologist whose works, among other things, correct or complement those of his contemporary Piaget (cf. Gratiot-Alphandéry, 1976; Nadel & Best, 1980), a precursor of attachment theory (Zazzo, 1979a, p. 29; 1979b, p. 47), a proponent of a sociogenetic account of child development (Zazzo, 1979a, p. 46), a great psychologist (Tran-Thong, 1969, p. 5), one of the central figures of materialistic thinking of our century (Tutundzhan, 1966a, 1966b, p. 161), and a founding father of modern scientific psychology (Jalley, 1982, p. 21). The truth of each of these claims would justify a thorough study of Wallon’s work or in any case a brief presentation of his main ideas in English.

The present paper is an attempt to provide a presentation of only part of Wallon’s thinking, namely his stage theory of early child development. The focus will be on Wallon’s account of the role of emotions in child development and no attention will be paid to his equally interesting but very complex analysis of cognitive development (Wallon, 1945a, 1945b). To facilitate the understanding of his theory and to allow the reader to understand the context of Wallon’s theorizing, the account of this stage theory will be preceded by some biographical notes and by a few remarks about Wallon’s methodological approach. We will then precede to the description of the general principles of his dialectical stage theory and subsequently discuss the first stages of development. Finally, we will say a few words about the relationship of Wallon’s thinking to both older and contemporary theories of child development.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

In the typical French tradition, Wallon (1879–1962) combined a wide range of scientific interests with a political “engagement” in the socio-historical events of his lifetime (cf. Jalley, 1982; Martinet, 1972; Zazzo, 1979a). Politically, he belonged to the left wing. Wallon was active in various leftist organizations and became a member of the Communist Party during the German occupation of France when he was participating in the resistance
(Jalley, 1982; Voyat, 1984; Wallon, 1936b, 1937b). He pleaded for a less elitist and more democratic system of education and was the co-author of a plan for the reform of education which was never effected (cf. Wallon, 1945c/1959, pp. 445–446; 1949/1968, p. 149; 1953/1968, p. 36; 1958b/1968, pp. 64–65). His political preferences probably co-determined his interest in the Soviet educational system which he praised (Wallon, 1952a/1959, 1954/1959) and in Soviet psychological theory. In this connection, Wallon maintained active contacts with Soviet psychologists such as Vygotsky’s former collaborator Leont’ev (cf. Leont’ev, 1963). In fact, it was after meeting Leont’ev in Paris in 1954 that Wallon was seriously injured in a car accident. He survived but remained handicapped for the rest of his life (Zazzo, 1982, p. 539). He died in 1962, 2 years after he had published a paper on the problem of life after death in which he concluded that man may only hope to live on in the memories of his fellow men (Wallon, 1960b/1968).

Scientifically, Wallon belonged to the famous French school of pathopsychology created by such thinkers as Maine de Biran, Broussais, Comte, Bernard, Ribot, and Janet. The main tenet of this school was that diseases serve as natural experiments or instruments of analysis and dissection which can help us to uncover the hidden structure of the normal mind (Dumas, 1924; Janet, 1896; Reuchlin, 1986; Wallon, 1920a; 1946b/1968; 1953a/1968; cf. Zazzo, 1979a, pp. 152–153). It follows that it makes sense for persons who are interested in the workings of the mind to study medicine, which is what Wallon did after he graduated in psychology. Working as the assistant of the histopathologist Nageotte at the Salpêtrière, Wallon began studying deeply retarded and diseased children (Voyat, 1984, pp. 247–248). The observations made at the Salpêtrière combined with the observations of disturbed children at various other clinics formed part of the material used in his doctoral dissertation ‘‘The turbulent child’’ (1925). It soon became clear, however, that Wallon’s interests were not restricted to psychopathology: gradually, he developed his own views on normal child development, educational psychology, the need for educational reforms in France, etc. He combined clinical work with positions at various universities and finally was appointed at the prestigious Collège de France.

The broad range of Wallon’s interests—from brain dysfunction to the need for educational reforms—accurately reflects what would be one of the fundamental tenets of his thinking: that the human person is a bio-social being whose mental functioning is determined by both his biological equipment and the surrounding society. Simple as this claim may seem, it led him to fight contemporary reductionists of various kinds and in particular those who saw child development as a simple maturational process. Against this strictly maturational view he argued that individual children or adults cannot profitably be studied in isolation as they form part of social collectives that fundamentally influence their being. We therefore have to study the developing person within his family, school, or work environment, in relation to the
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society and (sub)culture he lives in. Or, to put it in Wallon’s (1942/1970, p. 38) own words:

[One cannot find the] elements or factors of mental life in the isolated individual. It is as if he had, like Robinson on his island, the required aptitudes to draw the material substance and the tools that civilized man needs or that the exercising of thinking requires directly from the surrounding nature.

Wallon clearly did not believe in such an asocial and ahistorical notion of child development and he referred to the story about Robinson Crusoe—discussed from different viewpoints by both Marx (1867/1981, pp. 90–93) and Rousseau (1762/1966, pp. 238–241)—to make his point. Child development in his view was not an act of “autocreation” in which the individual finds the sources for his development ready-made in some abstractly defined environment. Rather, he defended the thesis—inspired by the works of his teacher and life-time friend Lévy-Bruhl (1911, 1922)—that collective thought fundamentally influences individual development and concluded that mental life is determined by both “the heritage of the society and that of the species” (Wallon, 1942/1970, p. 38).

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL POINTS OF VIEW

The understanding of Wallon’s complex system of thought is facilitated by an appreciation of his viewpoints on epistemological and methodological problems, and in this paragraph several of them will be presented. Others will become clear in the discussion of Wallon’s stage theory (cf. Martinet, 1972, pp. 19–42; Wallon, 1938/1982, pp. 113–168; 1941/1968, pp. 5–31; 1942/1970, pp. 5–40).

The first thing to understand is that unlike many modern researchers, but in complete agreement with his contemporary Piaget, Wallon attached little value to the gathering of scientific “facts” when this fact-finding was not guided by some explicit theoretical point of view. He did not believe one could investigate an issue from a purely objective point of view, that child development, for example, could be somehow objectively “registered.” Rather, he claimed that researchers always select from the multitude of phenomena and that “there is no such thing as a fact in itself; a fact is always more or less shaped by the one who establishes it” (Wallon, 1934/1983, p. 7; cf. 1941/1968, p. 19). Clearly, then, he did not believe in the doctrine of positivism which he considered to be “a philosophy of abstention, but a philosophy nevertheless. . . a superstitious worship of facts and methodology, which is itself a philosophy” (Wallon quoted in Voyat, 1984, pp. 250–251; cf. Wallon, 1958a/1963, p. 104).

Wallon realized that in psychology the object of study is changed by the very fact of its being observed, a circumstance which reminded him very much of Heisenberg’s indeterminacy principle (e.g., Wallon, 1951c/1963, p. 43). Human beings are no passive observers; they act when they study their
subject of interest and there is no way to avoid the results of one’s own acting, to escape oneself. Consequently, just like in the natural sciences, we have to ‘‘take man into consideration as a force that intervenes in all the effects’’ (Wallon, 1938/1982, p. 120). Wallon’s acknowledgment of the subjective factor in scientific research followed from his general view of human conduct and led him to reject the behaviorist project. In his view one should never ignore the inner world of subjects and restrict oneself to the study of observable phenomena or, to put it in Martinet’s (1972, p. 23) words, one should not ‘‘confine oneself to the strict religion of exteriority, which is erroneously considered to be the sole norm of objectivity.’’ Such a behaviorist attitude makes it impossible to study the most important and most human aspect of mind: consciousness. For Wallon consciousness was a reality like any other and to dismiss its study was equivalent to ‘‘amputating that which best characterizes the human species’’ (Wallon, 1958a/1963, p. 104).

In line with this thinking Wallon attached a role to introspection in psychology, albeit a rather modest one (cf. Wallon, 1931/1959, pp. 207–208). In his view introspection was ‘‘a simple testimony, a simple psychic manifestation amidst many other more direct and spontaneous others’’ (Wallon, 1938/1982, p. 121). Introspective evidence, therefore, had no privileged status and should be checked against other experimental evidence and critical reasoning. Further, the use of introspection was limited to those mental processes that the subject is consciously aware of (Wallon, 1920b). More generally, Wallon thought that psychology should strive for empirical verification of its hypotheses and had to be a study of behavior (Martinet, 1972, p. 21; Wallon, 1932a/1959, p. 241).

It is interesting to note that Wallon shared several of these viewpoints (the critique of positivistic fact-finding and behaviorism; the conviction that we cannot dismiss consciousness and other higher mental processes; a modest role for introspection; the objective, i.e., non-hermeneutic approach) with his contemporary Lev Vygotsky. Elsewhere it has been argued that at least part of this similarity was due to their joint knowledge of Janet’s theory of ‘‘conductism’’ (Besse et al., 1959/1968, pp. 17–18, Van der Veer, 1994; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991a; Wallon, 1960a/1968).

One of the key notions in Wallon’s thinking (1938/1982, pp. 120–121) was the notion of ‘‘ensembles’’ or structural wholes. It was a methodological principle, a warning against the tendency to concentrate on only one aspect of child development and ignoring the others. Wallon repeatedly pointed out that no analysis of a certain age period in child development is complete without an analysis of the physiological background of the behaviors displayed, without an analysis of the social context, without an analysis of the particular child’s past, etcetera. He constantly attempted to see the structural whole, the ensemble that is characteristic of a certain age period and criticized others for not doing so. With researchers such as Stern and Koffka he argued that to concentrate on elements of behavior, to dissect a particular conduct
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and then to reassemble it, is an inadequate research method as one looses
sight of ‘‘a sort of profound unity, an essential link, the personality of the
subject’’ (Wallon, 1941/1968, p. 7). In his criticism of this ‘‘atomistic’’ or
‘‘pointillistic’’ attitude, Wallon found himself in the company of the Gestalt
psychologists whose work he much admired (Martinet, 1972, pp. 31–32).
Like his contemporaries Vygotsky and Piaget, however, he was critical of
the ahistorical approach of Gestalt psychologists: Wallon was acutely aware of
the need to study the development of the ensembles and constantly advocated a
genetic approach in psychology.

One might say that Wallon was a developmental psychologist but then
only in a very special sense of the word, for he was not a psychologist studying
exclusively or even primarily child development. Rather, he considered the
study of the development of behavior to be the key method in any of psycholo-
y’s traditional subdisciplines (Wallon, 1951b/1963; 1956a/1959). To put it
in Wallon’s own words:

Explication rests on the indissoluble complex that is formed by the determining situa-
tions and the subject’s dispositions. The initial fact is the act of adaptation that unites
them. All the rest is but analysis. But in biology there exists a procedure of analysis
that does not risk to dissolve the essential unities: it is the genetic study of beings and

This genetic approach Wallon shared with many of his contemporaries
(e.g. Piaget, Koffka, Vygotsky, and Werner) and like them he was drawn
into the study of comparative domains of development (Wallon, 1928a, 1956a/
1959, p. 221). In several of his writings he considered the evidence found in
ethnographic studies, animal research, and adult pathology as to their rele-
vance for the understanding of normal child development. Wallon was careful
not to draw facile conclusions from the comparisons of these domains (cf.
Wallon, 1956a/1959, p. 223). He did not claim, for example, that ‘‘primitive
people’’ were like Western children in their mental makeup. In so far as we
see similarity it is caused by the fact that Western children have not yet
mastered the intellectual techniques their culture provides, whereas the primitiv-
esimply do not have these techniques available. Studying the so-called
primitive people he considered useful as it makes us realize to what extent
thinking of modern Western children is dependent upon the cultural tools

Much the same can be said for the domain of pathology: although Wallon
attached great value to the findings from brain pathology, he warned against
hasty conclusions and insisted on independent verification of hypotheses
drawn from pathological research (cf. Wallon, 1926). In no sense, he argued,
can adults be said to regress toward their juvenile state in cases of brain
pathology. The effects of what Monakow called ‘‘chronogenic localization’’,
i.e., the localization of mental functions in developmental time, are irreversible
(Wallon, 1925/1984, p. 315). Against strict localizationism Wallon argued
that there is no one-to-one correspondence of brain sites and mental functions
and that destruction of certain brain parts can result in other parts taking over control or in the disinhibition of still other structures and their corresponding functions (Wallon, 1941/1968, pp. 24–26; 1951b/1963, p. 37; 1952b/1963, p. 52). This cautious view of the findings of brain pathology was connected with his understanding of the development of mental structures and their brain substrate. Wallon argued that more primitive functions become controlled by later and higher ones to form complex systems and that they do not fully disappear. Rather, they become superseded, i.e., they lead a subdominant life only to come to the fore again when the higher centers become somehow disturbed or damaged. This was a view that was quite popular at the time (cf. Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991b, 1994) and that goes back to the work of Hughlings Jackson, Head, Janet, Kretschmer, and Sherrington (cf. Head, 1923; Wallon, 1937a/1959, p. 197; 1951b/1963, p. 38). Wallon used to quote approvingly Hughlings Jackson’s saying that “a disease does not create anything; it liberates from the control of the ruling functions those [functions] that should normally be subordinated to them” (e.g. Wallon, 1946a/1959, p. 286).

We may conclude that Wallon defended a comprehensive methodological and theoretical approach in psychology. The genetic point of view led him to seek the understanding of mental phenomena in their history and to compare different domains of development, such as phylogeny and ontogeny and (regressive) development in pathology. His medical work made him acutely aware of the need to study the nervous substrate of mental processes and of the complex relationship between brain and mind. His broad knowledge of the work of Freud (cf. Jalley, 1981) and Janet led him to believe that consciousness and the subconscious exist and can be studied in objective ways. Finally, his reading of Hegel, Marx, and other thinkers taught him dialectical thinking as well as enabled him to see the shortcomings of positivism and the need to study man in his specific society. It was Wallon’s combination of these various viewpoints into a complex “ensemble” that made his studies at the same time worthy of our attention and at times hard to understand.

WALLON’S DIALECTICAL STAGE THEORY

One of Wallon’s most remarkable contributions to psychological science was his stage theory of child development (cf. Tran-Thong, 1967). Naturally, the notion of the ensemble and the principle of genetic analysis played an important role in the development of this theory, but gradually another intellectual tool entered Wallon’s thinking: dialectical materialism. Influenced by his reading of Marx, Engels, and Lenin (e.g., Wallon, 1936a/1963, 1951a/1963, 1951b/1963, 1954/1959), Wallon arrived at the conclusion that science, and psychology in particular, was divided in theories favoring a materialist approach on the one hand and theories favoring an idealist approach on the other hand. Just like Vygotsky had done (cf. Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) he traced this bifurcation back to the writings of Descartes (Wallon, 1950/
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1968) and just like Vygotsky he believed that dialectical materialism could bridge the gap between a materialist approach that neglects higher mental processes and consciousness (e.g. behaviorism) and an idealist approach that ignores the mental substrate of the mind (e.g. Bergson and others). It is interesting to see, however, that Wallon, not knowing Vygotsky’s ideas, went along with the Soviet orthodox views of the time and welcomed Pavlov’s theory of the higher nervous processes as the theory that could bridge the gap between these two extreme approaches in psychology (Wallon, 1946c/1990, 1951a/1963, 1951c/1963, 1952b/1963, 1953b/1963, 1953c/1963, 1955/1963, 1956d/1967, 1958a/1963).

Wallon argued that it was Pavlov who showed how the discontinuities between physiology and psyche, vegetative and sensori-motor functions, and humanity and the animal kingdom could be bridged through the mechanism of classical conditioning (Wallon, 1955/1963, pp. 80–81). Pavlov showed how originally organic processes become conditioned to external stimuli, how vegetative and sensori-motor reactions are combined in the cortex, and that human and animal behavior are both based on the mechanism of classical conditioning. By showing that organisms learn to view environmental stimuli as “signals” for things yet to happen Pavlov bridged the gap between the organism and its milieu. By showing that words can be viewed to form a secondary signal system Pavlov explained the principal difference between animals and human beings without the need to introduce an explanatory principle other than the conditional reflex (Wallon, 1951c/1963, p. 46).

Wallon’s favorite example to demonstrate the value of classical conditioning was one of his own making: that of emotions. The infant’s emotions are originally purely organic reactions to internal and external stimuli, but gradually acquire a social significance as they are continually anticipated and followed by events in the social environment or, in other words, as they become conditioned. In this way “purely physiological processes become means of expression” and begin to form a sort of preverbal language that results in a “affective symbiosis” between the infant and his social environment (Wallon, 1951c/1963, pp. 48–49). Emotions link the infant to the social world and thereby humanize him.

We may conclude, then, argued Wallon, that Pavlov’s theory allows us to see humans as active beings who learn to see environmental stimuli as predictive of events to follow. As the impulses from both internal and external sources are combined and analyzed in the cortex it makes no sense to separate organism and environment even for analytical purposes. The active human being is social from the very beginning as his innermost processes become conditioned to stimuli from the social environment (“It is the social milieu that is the most important... not the physical milieu”; Wallon, 1951c/1963, p. 49). Finally, language can be seen as a second-order signalization system which preserves the methodological unity of psychology as now both lower and higher processes can be explained by one principle: the conditional reflex.
By showing how the process of classical conditioning could bridge the gap between organic and environmental processes—and between body and mind—Pavlov supposedly proved the correctness of dialectical materialism in practice.

This viewpoint and several others to be outlined now had a clear impact on Wallon’s discussion of the various stages in child development. That the notion of stages in child development as such is a useful one Wallon did not doubt (cf. Wallon, 1941/1968, pp. 193–200). He argued that, although many processes are operative in the child’s behavior at the same time, one of these can always be said to be characteristic of a particular developmental period. In his view, developmental psychologists cannot ignore these characteristic features and he claimed that virtually all of them use the notions of stage, period, or phase (Wallon, 1956a/1959, pp. 224–225). He was critical of a quantitative approach in child development—an approach that he observed even in stage theories—that pictures children as adults minus certain specified abilities and he warned against “adult egocentrism,” i.e., the tendency to view the ways of thinking and feeling of adults of a particular milieu and epoch as ineluctable (Wallon, 1941/1968, pp. 12–13). Although the child is born into a world dominated by the adults’ culture—which no doubt guarantees a degree of uniformity in child development—it is the child who selects from this culture.

The manner in which the child assimilates [culture] can have no resemblance at all with the manner in which the adult himself uses it. If the adult surpasses the child, the child in his way surpasses the adult. (Wallon, 1941/1968, p. 15)

Against these views of child development, in which adult behavior provides the norm against which to evaluate the child’s behavior, Wallon argued that one should study child development in its own right by carefully observing the respective age periods and noting the contradictions between the stages. Through such a study one can grasp the discontinuous nature of development: as a rule, the activities characteristic of the next stage do not simply continue those of the preceding one but may actually oppose or suppress them. Often the leading activities of consecutive stages are clearly contradictory, which results in genuine developmental crises. The transition of one developmental stage to another, then, may be and often is accompanied by conflicts and crises in the child’s behavior. To designate this dialectical situation of activities that develop into their opposites, Wallon used to invoke the twin concepts of filiation and opposition: whereas the new stage contradicts its predecessor (opposition), it is nevertheless dependent on it (filiation) (cf. Martinet, 1972, pp. 34–35; Wallon, 1941/1968, p. 13). Another reason why the transition from one stage to the next need not be smooth is to be found in the changing orientation of the child’s behavior. Wallon claimed that in some stages the child’s behavior is oriented toward the development of the self (centripetal), while in others the child is oriented toward the outside world (centrifugal),

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i.e., in these stages the focus is on the enhancement of the child’s knowledge of the environment. The stages of emotional development and personalism, for example, are focused on the development of the child’s personality, whereas the intermediate sensorimotor and projective stage is focused on the enhanced knowledge of the physical world (cf. Jalley, 1982, p. 33, for an overview of the stages with their orientations).

Wallon made it quite clear that the various phases and stages of child development can only come into being after the maturation of specific brain structures has been completed (Wallon, 1934/1983, p. 297; 1941/1968, p. 194). As will be seen below, he accused other theorists of neglecting the role of maturation in child development. Recognizing clearly the role of the social environment in determining the level and form of child behavior, Wallon nevertheless viewed the maturation of the nervous tissue as a process that was not dependent on environmental factors (except for such crude influences as malnutrition). This factor contributes to the capricious nature of child development as there is no way to predict when specific structures will have matured sufficiently.

Wallon concluded that developmental and chronological time do not coincide: sometimes the maturation of nervous tissue may take its time and mental functions may appear—because by chance all determining conditions were positive—and then suddenly disappear again for long periods of latency. This lack of a one-to-one correspondence of chronological and developmental time is characteristic of child development which can be characterized as a revolutionary and—as we would add—essentially unpredictable process (Wallon, 1941/1968, pp. 193–195).

Following Martinet (1972, pp. 36–37), one might summarize Wallon’s stage theory of child development with the following global hints to the developmental psychologist:

(1) Describe the behavior that is characteristic of a certain age period—that makes up its style—and seek to define the ensemble of conditions that determine it. These conditions include the maturation of nervous tissue and the physical and social environment of the child;

(2) Show that this specific stage is prepared to an extent by its predecessor and in its turn prepares its successor. Explain that the behavior has functional value for the child in the sense that it ensures the child’s adaptation to his environment making use of the resources available to the child.

Proceeding in this fashion, Wallon attempted to analyze the multifaceted stages in the mental development of the child. In doing so he believed that each of these stages presents a great coherence both in its proper structure and in its links with the evolutionary structure of the individual. The two points of view are inseparable. The appropriation of the means for the needs in each period is dominated by the gradual appropriation of each period by the next and by the appropriation of all by the future of the individual who integrates himself in more and more vast systems.

(Wallon, 1934/1983, p. 298)
Retrospectively, one might wonder what dialectical materialism actually contributed to Wallon’s theorizing. After all, one can emphasize the discontinuous nature of child development and acknowledge the intricate interplay between organism and social environment without embracing the dialectical-materialist world view. Likewise, one can wonder, as one perceptive critic of a previous version of this paper has done, whether Wallon always used Pavlov’s theory of conditioning in a neatly circumscribed way or whether it acquired the character of a global theory describing the ‘‘dialectical’’ relationships between human beings and their environment. The answer seems to be that for Wallon—who was already a mature thinker when he first seriously studied these ideas—both dialectical materialism and Pavlov’s theory of the higher nervous processes provided a global framework within which he could fit ideas which he to a large extent already held. Wallon embraced these world views not because they were a rich source of new hypotheses but because they provided a way of conceiving the complex patterns he encountered in his study of child development.

Having discussed Wallon’s methodological viewpoints and the global nature of his dialectical stage theory, we are now ready to discuss the specific developmental stages in some detail (see Thran-Thong, 1967, for a detailed account of Wallon’s stage theory and a comparison with the stage theories of Freud, Gesell, and Piaget). As said before, the focus will be on the first few stages.

THE STAGE OF MOTOR IMPULSIVENESS

In Wallon’s thinking the first period of child development was termed the stage of motor impulsiveness, as the infant is primarily reacting to internal and external impulses and his movements can be viewed as simple muscular discharges of energy. This centripetal stage—which cannot be clearly distinguished from the next stage of emotions (Tran-Thong, 1967, p. 154)—begins when the ‘‘continuous sleep of the fetus’’ (Wallon, 1938/1982, p. 185; 1956c/1963, p. 73) is interrupted by the birth of the child and lasts for approximately 6 months. The infant is sleeping large parts of the day, which profoundly limits his interaction with the environment (‘‘la vie de relation’’), but he is not altogether passive. Wallon sensed that the infant is selectively conscious of the environment during sleep and argued that sleeping and dreaming are different forms of consciousness in which the mind monitors ‘‘sensations of an organic origin that are normally eclipsed when we are awake’’ (Wallon, 1938/1982, p. 186). The fact that we can wake up by ourselves at a specific time and sometimes even solve problems during sleep he considered other evidence for the fact that sleep ‘‘is not a simple arrest of activity,’’ but an altered state of consciousness (Wallon, 1934/1983, pp. 31–32).

Birth itself he considered to be a dramatic event after which the infant has to communicate with the world through two surfaces: the lungs and the digestive tract. Rejecting Lucretius’s and Freud’s romantic versions of the
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The significance of the first cry of the new-born, Wallon (1941/1968, p. 120; 1934/1983, p. 38) emphasized the profound importance of the respiratory apparatus: for the rest of his life, respiration will be the most sensitive physiological indicator of the person’s mental activity. Nutrition, too, is of fundamental importance to the infant and it is only natural that the sensorimotor coordination of the mouth is so well developed at birth and that the mouth will be the infant’s first instrument to investigate the world. But before the infant starts exploring the outer world he is being determined by organic sensations: to a large extent his behavior reflects the sleep and digestive cycles. Wallon (1934/1983, pp. 36–38) agreed, therefore, with Freud (and Stern) that the infant goes through a bucco-anal period in which he derives pleasure or distress from the sensations experienced in the mouth and anus. He denied, however, that such sensations have any erotic significance: while the sensations may undoubtedly acquire such a significance later on, it is an error to mix up the original version and the later differentiation of the feeling.

Several times Wallon (1925/1984, pp. 19–20, 1934/1983, pp. 43–46; 1938/1982, pp. 190–191) listed the reflexes that very young infants display when stimulated properly and stated that they do not yet enable the infant to master his environment. In his view, the infant was constantly reacting to the internal sensations of his own body and was not yet equipped to enter full-fledged social interaction or to explore the environment:

Nothing in the infant’s activity, then, can serve him the least in his relations with the external world. (Wallon, 1938/1982, p. 191)

The infant’s movements and his vegetative life form as it were a closed circuit (Wallon, 1934/1982, p. 47) and, in fact, the only link with the external world is formed by the mother’s breasts. Naturally, his first gestures will be coordinated around these breasts: the infant’s lips and hands will start looking for them and he will learn to move his head and eyes in their direction.

But it is only around the age of 6 months—Wallon (1938/1982, p. 191) claimed—that the infant has fully matured to be able to leave this stage of organic (well-)being and seclusion. First, he starts to interact emotionally with the persons in his environment. Second, he can initiate movements regulated by the cerebral cortex, because by now the necessary fibers that connect the cortex with the mesencephalon and the medulla have myelinated. As a result, the infant’s transactions with the external world will start generating stimuli that suppress the internal stimuli that so far dominated his behavior.

From his account in “La vie mentale” (1938/1982), it might seem that Wallon considered the very young infant to be an organic being hardly capable of any social interaction in the first few months of his life. This, however, was not what he had in mind, and in other books he corrected this view. Notwithstanding the dominance of the internal sensations, the infant is a social being whose behavior is oriented toward the other from the first few weeks of his life (cf. Wallon, 1942/1970, p. 103). The infant is equipped with
an affective sensibility that ensures a rapid emotional maturation and the
establishment of affective bonds with significant others. Although he rejected
Charlotte Bühler’s claim that the first smiles only occur when the infant
watches a human face, Wallon acknowledged that they soon acquire this
meaning.

Generally speaking, he considered this stage to be a “stage of complete
fusion with the human environment” during which the infant fully depends
on social others for even his most elementary needs (Wallon, 1942/1970, p.
104) and that prepares the infant for the next stage of full-grown emotional
interaction. Paradoxically—or dialectically as Wallon would say—it is the
infant’s helplessness that determines his sociability, or to put it in Wallon’s
own words:

[The infant needs to be helped] not only to feed himself but also to be liberated from
an awkward position, to be freed from a painful immobility, to be moved, transported,
rocked, cleaned when he has wetted himself, to obtain the satisfaction of his most
elementary and urgent needs. The result is that all his activities, all his aptitudes are
polarized towards his auxiliary means, i.e., towards persons. (Wallon, 1947/1959,
p. 307)

Elsewhere (Wallon, 1934/1983, p. 8), Wallon argued that to analytically
separate the individual from his society is to “remove the cortex from his
brain” as the development of the cortex and the capacity for language are
intimately related with society. He emphasized that the child’s environment
is an artificial environment in which the child can only realize his activities
“by means of the instruments that are furnished both by the material equip-
ment and the language used around him” (Wallon, 1937a/1959, p. 196).

Wallon’s reasoning made him critical of Piaget’s idea of the infant’s original
autism and egocentrism, which seemed to suggest an ego that is originally
confined to its solipsistic world and has to become socialized, rather than an
original sociability that gradually results in the child’s individuality (Wallon,
304–308) argued that Bleuler’s term “autism” was meant to designate
schizophrenic adults who had withdrawn from all company, severing their
ties with other people. The situation of the infant, however, is totally different:
here we have no well-defined ego separated from the environment, no closed
system, but a being without internal cohesion and without control upon the
influences it undergoes. The newborn infant is the plaything of internal and
external stimuli and cannot possibly distinguish between them (Wallon,
1956b/1963, p. 88). It is only gradually, in the constant interaction of the
infant with the surrounding persons, that the ego will crystallize from this
original “nebula” (Wallon, 1946a/1959, p. 283). In other words, the ego or
consciousness is not “the individual cell that has to open itself one day to
the social world” (Wallon, 1946a/1959, p. 280), but is formed in social
interaction. This, again, reflects the profound dialectic of child development,
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where complete helplessness leads to amazing competency through the mediation of social others. Or, in Wallon’s words:

[The infant] is a being of whom all the reactions have to be completed, compensated, interpreted. Incapable of effecting anything himself, he is manipulated by the other, and it is in the movements of the other that his first attitudes will take form. (Wallon, 1946a/1959, p. 281)

Wallon concluded that the early Piaget’s picture of child development is mistaken and he suggested that Piaget—who was teaching at the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute—had read his Rousseau rather too well. For in Rousseau’s “Emile,” the environment was pictured as basically foreign and detrimental to the child, while in his “The social contract” Rousseau had realized that the individual egos somehow have to understand and respect each other’s perspective in order to make a peaceful society possible (cf. Wallon, 1958b/1968). Likewise, in Piaget’s thinking, the originally asocial child is forced to acknowledge the perspectives of his peers and to conclude a social contract (Wallon, 1947/1959, p. 306).

Wallon’s emphasis on the social nature of the very first stage of child development was new at that time and was eagerly picked up by none other than Lev Vygotsky (1933/1984, p. 281), who read part of Wallon’s work and may have met him personally at the 7th International Congress on Psychotechnics in Moscow in 1931 (cf. Wallon, 1932b). Having repeated Wallon’s discussion of the peculiar social situation of the infant—without, however, giving his source—Vygotsky concluded:

In this manner the first contact of the infant with reality... is completely socially mediated. Objects appear in and disappear from the child’s visual field thanks to the adult’s actions. The child is transported on the arms of others. The alteration of his posture, even the simple turning around, turns out to be intertwined with the social situation... Due to this situation evolves the unique and unrepeatable dependency of the child, which... gives a completely unique character to the child’s relations with reality (and with himself): these relations always turn out to be mediated by others, they are always refracted by the prism of the relations with another person. (Vygotsky, 1933/1984, p. 281; cf. Van der Veer, 1986)

Popularized by Vygotsky’s followers, this view has a surprisingly modern ring to it and nowadays no one is really surprised to read a sentence like “the infant’s principal ‘tool’ for achieving his ends is another familiar human being” (Bruner, 1983, p. 26). At Wallon’s time, however, it was a radically new viewpoint that formed a welcome alternative to less social views like the one advocated by the early Piaget.

We may conclude, then, that the stage of impulsiveness is characterized by little or no operational activities on the side of the child upon the environment. The infant is affectionally reacting to his own internal sensations and to the surrounding caregivers. It is his complete helplessness that makes the infant a profoundly social being as it forces the social others to take care of him in every possible way. This inevitable social interaction prepares the way

THE STAGE OF EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The second stage in Wallon’s account of child development is the stage of emotions (see Martinet, 1972, for a full discussion of this stage). Like the sensorimotor stage and the projective stage, it was first discussed in Wallon’s classic ‘‘The turbulent child’’ (1925/1984). The existence of an emotional stage and its properties were inferred from Wallon’s extensive and careful observations of variously disturbed children. His most elaborate treatment of the emotional stage, however, can be found in ‘‘The origins of the character in the child’’ (Wallon, 1934/1983), which formed the result of the lectures that Wallon gave at the Sorbonne in the years 1929–1931.

In several respects it can be said that Wallon’s account of the stage of emotions is a typical specimen of his writings. First, it was argued that it is through emotional expression that children, so to speak, establish contact with the social others and gradually become part of a world of shared meanings. This viewpoint formed part of Wallon’s general conviction that individualistic theories of child development are unsatisfactory and that each and every child can only be understood in the context of a specific sociocultural and historical context. Second, the description of the emotional stage allowed Wallon to emphasize another of his favorite themes, namely that of the primacy of maturation. In his view—and perhaps to the surprise of the modern reader—contemporary psychologists such as Piaget had underestimated its role in child development. Finally, the topic of emotions served to compare ontogenesis and phylogenesis. Wallon, just like many of his contemporaries, was prone to compare these domains like he compared the domains of normal and abnormal child development.

The Origin of Emotions

To Wallon emotions find their origin in the internal sensations that infants—and even the fetus (Wallon, 1934/1983, p. 44)—experience, notably intero- and propriocepcis (internal sensations in, respectively, the internal organs and the tendons and muscles). External stimulation, or exterocepcis, at first plays no role. Wallon inferred from various observations made by other researchers, such as Preyer (1887) and Stern (1927), the existence of propriocepcis in young infants. These researchers had noted, for example, that infants will stretch out their arms when the adult pretends to let them fall down. Wallon (1934/1983, p. 41; pp. 161–162) distinguished labyrinthic reflexes (notably, the stretching of the body and extremities in infants caused by the stimulation of the labyrinthic system) and cervical reflexes (notably, the movement of the infant’s arms provoked by the turning of the head). By the fourth month of life, these reflexes become subordinated to cerebral control and recede only to resurface again in certain extreme or pathological cases.
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Wallon (1934/1983, p. 41) noted, for example, that autistic and otherwise deeply disturbed children may spend hours in rocking their bodies and apparently experience satisfaction from this simple stimulation of the labyrinthic system (cf. Bowlby, 1969, pp. 291–295). Likewise, adults may subconsciously revert to such behaviors in cases of extreme fatigue, nervousness, or may deliberately undertake steps to stimulate their labyrinthic system by joining in certain games, dances, or sports. The trance-like state reached in many cultures through ritual dances also rest on the stimulation of the labyrinthic system and its relation to the primitive rocking of idiots and autistic children is apparent (Wallon, 1934/1983, pp. 41, 46).

It should be clear, then, that through proprioception and interoception even very young infants experience various internal sensations and that these may be pleasant or unpleasant. Just like Freud, Wallon suggested that many of them are connected with the activities of the digestive tract (Wallon, 1934/1983, pp. 33–40; see above), while others are caused by the movements that the infant is allowed to make (ibid., pp. 40–46). As has been said before, in adults these vegetative factors play a less important role although the bodily sensitivity never disappears: adults as well experience (dis)pleasure from, for example, the digestive tract but in a more subdued way.

Proprioception and interoception both invoke primitive affective reactions and are intimately linked together (Wallon, 1934/1983, p. 42): changes in muscle tone lead to changes in the organs and vice versa. Because of this intimate connection, Wallon—following Sherrington—sometimes grouped them together under the heading of the ‘‘postural, or proprioplastic function.’’ He defined this term as the whole of ‘‘reactions that the organism exerts on itself and through which it modifies its form, that of its organs and even its tissues or the composition of its humors’’ (Wallon, 1934/1983, p. 71). Throughout his work, Wallon devoted by far the most attention to muscle tone as the key element of the postural function and the prime factor in emotional behavior (cf. Stambak, 1963). He distinguished between two highly interconnected aspects of muscular activity: (a) kinetic activity consisting of the shortening and lengthening of the muscles and (b) tonic activity involving the different levels of muscular tension. The kinetic aspect of motor activity is primarily oriented towards the environment and intimately connected with exteroceptive sensibility. The tonic aspect is essentially linked with interpersonal contacts and intimately connected with the interoceptive and proprioceptive field. In Wallon’s view it was therefore first and foremost the muscle tone or muscle tension that gave an accurate idea of the affective state of the infant. Both external stimulation (e.g., caressing) and internal stimulation (e.g., sensations in the digestive tract) will lead to changes in the muscle tone and thus to different affective states. When a high muscle tone is built up through continuous stimulation, a (sometimes violent) discharge will follow.

Both laughing and crying, for example, were seen by Wallon as resolutions of a gradually built-up hypertonia. In the first case, the tension is released in
laughter through spasms of the skeletal muscles. The fact that persons roaring with laughter often fall to the ground and/or drop objects testifies of the complete relaxation of the skeletal muscles. In the second case, the tension is located in internal organs, such as the oesophagus, and relief is attained through tears (often accompanied by spasms of skeletal muscles; Wallon, 1934/1983, pp. 71–78). One of Wallon’s favorite examples of the role of muscle tone in emotional behavior is that of tickling when the gradual buildup of muscle tone first leads to laughter. If the tickling is continued, however, the increasing muscle tone will soon become unbearable, the subject is overwhelmed by spastic muscle contractions, and the original pleasant feeling will turn into its opposite (Wallon, 1934/1983, pp. 71–75).

Convincing as several of Wallon’s examples may seem, it is, nevertheless, not entirely clear how we should conceive of the role of muscle tone and how Wallon distinguished the physiological concept of “muscle tone” and the psychological concept of “tension.” In several examples he suggests that enhanced psychological tension leads to increased muscle tone and vice versa, but he provides no methods to measure these concepts independently. For example, Wallon claims that hard labor or the playing of a football game leads to increased muscle tone and consequently to emotional discharges. Likewise, irritation and conflicts will translate into heightened muscle tone. However, these examples and the few others that Wallon gives are purely post-hoc and anecdotal and do not allow us to understand the proper role of muscle tone and psychological tension in emotional behavior (cf. Frijda, 1986).

The Anatomy of Emotions

Wallon’s description of the neural background of emotions was, understandably, rather concise. He ascribed an important role to the thalamus which he thought might be termed the center of our “protopathic sensitivity,” i.e., of both propriocepcis and interocepcis. However, the thalamus is not only a center for sensitivity and vegetative reactions but also links with the corpus striatum (pallidus, putamen, nucleus caudatus) and, in general, constitutes a relay center between higher and lower parts of the central nervous system. The thalamus gradually gets under the control of the higher brain centers and only in pathological cases or animal research (removal of the cortex in dogs) does the primitive emotions resurface in all their glory. There is thus evidence that the emotion centers develop before the cortical centers have fully matured and subsist after their maturation. Wallon’s theory of the gradual cortical control of the lower emotion centers echoes Spinoza’s wish to bring the passions under the control of the intellect.

Wallon’s (1949/1983, pp. 126–143) detailed description of the various emotions is likewise reminiscent of Spinoza’s “Ethics.” He gives a detailed enumeration of the emotions, such as joy, rage, fear, and sadness, arguing that these develop in various stages of child development. Sadness (French: “tristesse”), for example, develops rather late and apparently requires an
advanced psychological organization. One of Wallon’s arguments for this claim is that deeply retarded children are never sad, whereas they may be very fearful, or have fits of rage.

While emotional reactions are rooted in deep, primitive, organic phenomena, they soon become linked to specific environmental events. Wallon hypothesizes that a key role in this process is played by classical conditioning. This brings us to the theme of the social embeddedness of the infants’ affective states.

The Socialization of Emotions

Characteristic of emotions is that they can be inferred from behavior that is visible to the outside observer. The infants’ emotions are expressed in both motor reactions and neuro-vegetative reactions, such as sweating, blushing etc. Both types of reactions are connected through the postural function. But emotions do not develop in a closed circuit without any intervention from the environment and gradually the role of the internal factors in emotional life will become less important. Wallon pictures this developmental process in the following way.

First, it should be realized that muscle tone is influenced by all sorts of external events. Many stimuli cause an alteration of muscle tone and thereby an emotional reaction. Wallon emphasized that it is not the stimulus as such that causes an emotion but its indirect working through the muscle tone. Proof for this claim is the case of tickling mentioned above. At first, then, situations as such are not negatively or positively emotive. They evoke a process that proceeds relatively autonomously and has its own dynamics. Of course, adult subjects often give reasons for their emotions, but these are relatively arbitrary, Wallon argues. They are more of a justification in retrospect than an explanation. Thus, at least initially, the external events are not really the most important factor in emotions and infants know the world very indirectly, i.e., through the emotions that are caused by environmental events.

As said above, the process of linking these global affective states to events in the external world is explained by Wallon in a surprisingly simple way: the mechanism operative here is that of classical or operant conditioning (cf. Frijda, 1986). What happens is that the child’s affective states expressed in global motor behavior are continually interpreted by the social others, viewed as the externalization of certain internal mental states and thereby become expressions of mental states. The transition, then, from purely physiological states to mental expressive behavior evolves via the mediation of the social others, through human intervention. It is, among other things, this emphasis on the social factor in human development which sharply distinguishes Wallon’s theory from that of the young Piaget (Tran-Thong, 1967, p. 153).

The Function of Emotions

The disruptive character of emotions has been noted by many and one might well ask what functions emotions actually serve (cf. Frijda, 1986
for contemporary ideas). On several occasions, Wallon (e.g., 1952a/1959, p. 312) has argued that one of the chief functions of emotions is what he calls the gregarious function, i.e., emotions serve to link the person to social others. Wallon observed that participants in a certain culture come to feel close by sharing the same emotions during ritual festivities, mass events, etc. Developmentally, shared emotions serve to link the infant to his caregivers. It is here that we can see how Wallon could inspire one of the precursors of attachment theory, René Spitz (1948, 1957, 1965). By giving an account of preverbal child development and describing the role of shared emotions Wallon provided potentially useful material for a theory that can explain bonding behavior. In fact, it can even be argued that modern attachment theory along the lines of the Bowlby–Ainsworth theory hasn’t fully exploited this idea about the role of emotions in the development of the caregiver–child attachment.

THE SENSORIMOTOR AND PROJECTIVE STAGE

Wallon claimed that during the emotional stage infants live in a sort of affective symbiosis with their caregivers and are not so much oriented toward the outside world—the material world of things—but he argued that near the end of the first year of life this situation changes (Wallon, 1956c/1963, p. 75). Now the child starts exploring the physical environment, a fact which Wallon (e.g. 1956a/1959, 1956c/1959) in later years connected with the advent of the orientation reflex as described by Pavlov. The child would now feel an inner need to explore and investigate the environment. In this stage, the maturation of the brain has allowed the connection of the sensory and motor areas of the cortex and therefore the explorations of the hand can yield results. At first, however, the child is limited to what was called by William Stern the “nearby space” (“l’espace proche”), i.e., to what he can reach with his arms. The sensorimotor activity has to be amplified by two other activities that develop around the start of the second year of life: locomotion and speech. It is only by moving that the child can grasp the relative positions of objects and integrate the changing environments within the same space, “the space of locomotion.” Speech helps in this process by delimiting objects and detaching them from the perceptual wholes in which they are embedded. It also enables children to make impressions last and to unite similar objects under one heading. Wallon emphasized that the investigative activity characteristic of this stage is uniquely human. Referring to Engels’ (1925/1970) paper on anthropogenesis he argued that there is a complex interaction between the manipulation of objects, brain maturation, and language development. The child’s growing capacity to keep his balance allows him to sit—and later on to walk—and to use both his hands for investigative purposes. Gradually one hand acquires dominance and Wallon judged it significant that for most people the cerebral hemisphere responsible for the dominant hand also houses the speech centers.
This anatomical and functional lateralization has given man simultaneously the power to create instruments to modify the things according to his needs or tastes and signs to duplicate them with a mental equivalent. (Wallon, 1956a/1963, p. 226)

The fact that the beginnings of speech and the bimanual manipulation of objects coincide in time strengthened Wallon in his views.

During this stage of investigating the world of things, another stage is being prepared that resembles the earlier emotional stage and yet is very different. The resemblance is due to the fact that in both cases the focus is on the growth of the child’s personality rather than on his increasing knowledge of the outside world. But the difference is that in the emotional stage the infant is emotionally fused with the world while in the new stage a psychological center is crystallizing that will eventually enable the child to resist his environment, to oppose his ego to those of his socii (Wallon, 1956b/1963).

It is in this stage that the child becomes engaged in all sorts of games that imply turn-taking. They were termed “plays of alternation” (“jeux d’alternance”) by Wallon, because the child seems to alternate between the two poles of the same situation: being the active or passive person, to give and to take, to hide and to seek, and to alternate two voices in a monologue (e.g., Wallon, 1946a/1959, 1952a/1963, 1956c/1963, 1956b/1963). It is as if children in this stage are experimenting with various roles without yet being able to mark off the ego from the alter ego (Wallon, 1956c/1963, p. 76). Near the end of the second year of life, these experiments lead to a provisional end state in the sense that the child is now ready to choose one of two positions or roles, often without having any real preferences. In practice this means that the child will now defend the independence of his own viewpoints versus those of others, which highly promotes the crystallization of his ego as distinct from those of the social others. It is a development that marks the onset of the stage of personalism.

THE STAGE OF PERSONALISM

As said before, like in the emotional stage, in the stage of personalism the growth of the child’s ego or personality is central. It is a stage that is characterized by several phases that often seem to contrast with each other. In the first period—the period of opposition—the plays of alternation virtually disappear and the child begins to replace his own name or the third person singular so far used to designate himself by the explicit “‘I’ or ‘me’” (Wallon, 1956b/1963). The child will now regularly oppose other persons apparently without any reason other than the satisfaction provided by a feeling of independence (Wallon, 1956a/1959). The child will also claim the property of all sorts of objects which do not intrinsically interest him. It is as if the function of his behavior is to make others and the child himself understand that he is a separate and independent person.

After several weeks or months this phase is replaced by a period—termed
the period of grace by Homburger (Wallon, 1956c/1963, p. 76)—during which the child wishes to be observed and admired. The aggressive “No, I don’t want this” and “No, this is mine” are now replaced by “Look what I am doing.” It is a narcissistic phase during which the child wants to be applauded for his feats and seeks to “seduce” the adults (Wallon, 1956a/1959, p. 228).

Finally, during the third period, the child is no longer satisfied with his own merits and begins searching for models in his environment to imitate. The wish to imitate a beloved and often envied person is in a sense the wish to substitute him, and for this reason children may sometimes react guiltily when caught during one of their imitative, usurpative games.

The whole stage of personalism during which the outlines of the child’s individuality become gradually visible has a paradoxical nature. For in seeking to establish his autonomy, the child is greatly dependent on his caregivers: it is they who set the norms, form the audience, and provide the models. As a result the child’s social experiments will not lead to any real autonomy but rather to a feeling of unity with and dependency upon the family. The infant is born into social relations that existed before him, are ineluctable, and seem fixed for eternity. The child cannot separate himself from the place he occupies amidst his parents and siblings and the relationships with them form part of his personality (Wallon, 1952a/1959, p. 314; 1956c/1963, p. 77). That is why changes in the family constellation such as divorce of the parents or the birth of a new sibling will affect the child greatly—often causing feelings of jealousy and guilt—and may even result in protracted psychological problems (Wallon, 1952a/1959, p. 315).

For Wallon this period of semi-confusion and inner conflicts between the I and the social others was necessary but full of possible conflicts harmful to the child. For this reason he thought it wise to send children to kindergarten where the environment is less strictly structured and less emotionally charged than it is in the nuclear family (Wallon, 1956a/1959, p. 228). In kindergarten the child is liberated from the yoke of the nuclear family: he is, for example, no more the oldest or the youngest child, but finds himself among a collective of children of more or less the same age. This allows the child to play other social roles and to differentiate himself from the role he occupies in his own family which is helpful in establishing his identity. Kindergarten also prepares the child for the bigger collectives yet to come in elementary school which Wallon found very important, because “Soviet psychologists and pedagogues” had convincingly proved that in each period of child development one has to prepare for the next period (Wallon, 1952a/1959, p. 315).

CONCLUSIONS

The present account of part of Wallon’s stage theory of early child development (not described are the subsequent categorical stage and the stage of adolescence) should allow us to position Wallon in the field of developmental
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psychology, to note points of divergence and similarity with several other theorists, and to point out some strong and weak points of his theory.

First of all, there should be no doubt that Wallon made ample use of the writings of several of his prominent contemporaries and predecessors and that his theory should be seen against the background of the scientific landscape of his time. Among those who influenced Wallon, we find Baldwin whose analysis of the role the social other or *socius* in child development Wallon often referred to. It is significant, however, that Wallon (1946a/1959, p. 284; 1956b/1963, p. 93) repeatedly and erroneously attributed the term *socius* to Janet, a fact which makes one think that he absorbed Baldwin's views primarily via Janet. As mentioned above, the writings of Pierre Janet himself formed another source of inspiration (e.g., Wallon, 1928b; 1960a/1968). More in general, it seems probable that Wallon's emphasis on the role of the social other and culture at large in child development owes much to his acquaintance with the writings of the French sociological school (Mucchieli, 1994a, 1994b).

In his work we find many references to the work of Durkheim, Mauss, Blondel, and Lévy-Bruhl (e.g., Wallon, 1939; 1957/1968).

Other researchers (e.g., Jalley, 1981; Nguyên Thi Thanh Huong, 1976) have traced Wallon's affinities with Freud with whom he shared a strong emphasis on the emotional aspect of development and certain concrete assumptions about the role of feeding, digestion, etc. in early development (see above). Wallon's role as the tireless opponent of Piaget's in his view overly cognitive account of child development would require a separate analysis (cf. Jalley, 1981).

Finally, it has become clear that in later years Wallon embraced the ideas of Hegel, Marx, and Lenin which served as the general framework for his ideas about the social nature of the child, the dialectic discontinuous nature of development, the complex relationships between brain maturation and mental processes, etc. (cf. Wallon, 1936c, p. 15).

All this, however, should not blind us to the fact that Wallon created his own unique synthesis of these divergent ideas. In creating this synthesis he was aided by a thorough knowledge of the fields of mental retardation and brain pathology, a knowledge which is not very common in developmental psychology and which allowed him to make bold speculations about the course of normal development. In fact, having discussed part of Wallon's thinking about child development we may now venture a fourth hypothesis in addition to the three mentioned in the introduction for the fact that his ideas are so little known: his versatility. Few developmental psychologists are in a position to judge the soundness of Wallon's physiology, his account of the origin of emotions and the emergence of intersubjectivity, and his general stage theory (and I am deliberately leaving out Wallon's account of cognitive development and his non-developmental work). This brings us to the strong and weak points of Wallon's account of early child development.

Wallon's claim that emotions matter in child development and form a legiti-
mate subject for study is now generally accepted. Many researchers have underlined the importance of children’s first emotions (e.g. Bowlby, 1969; Bradley, 1989; Stern, 1985) and have argued that emotions are inextricably linked to cognition (e.g. Damasio, 1994; Frijda, 1986). Wallon’s account of the nature of emotions also seems to be compatible with modern research. Muscular tension is acknowledged by Frijda (1986) as one important component of emotions. In this connection, he observes that mothers will often open the clenched fists of their distressed infants to make them relax. Stern (1985) has mentioned the role of proprioception. But no one so far has attributed so much value to these factors as Wallon did. Wallon’s account of the neurological background of emotions is also basically in accordance with modern insights, although our present knowledge of the limbic system and its links with other brain parts is much more detailed, of course. That emotions such as crying and laughing may serve to increase group cohesion, as Wallon claimed, is still part of our knowledge (Frijda, 1986). This brings us to Wallon’s account of the socialization of emotions and the origin of intersubjectivity.

Wallon’s general idea that the infant is completely fused with the social environment and that many of the infant’s activities are oriented toward the social others (his “auxiliary means”) is now generally accepted. In his own time, this account formed a useful antidote against the pictures of infancy (by psychoanalysts and the early Piaget) as a primordially autistic period. Wallon’s argument that the infant’s ego is not a ready-made individual cell that only has to open itself to the social world but a structure that is constructed in the process of social interaction was well founded. It is a view that has much in common with the theories advanced in about the same period from similar theoretical perspectives by Norbert Elias, George Herbert Mead, and Lev Vygotsky (Valsiner & Van der Veer, 1988, 1995; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1988).

That emotions “serve as the first means of communication between the mother and her infant” was already stated by Darwin (1872). Exactly how emotions become means of communication and acquire social significance has been the subject of much research (e.g. Harré, 1986). It seems that Wallon’s theory that the child’s emotional states are accompanied by global motor behavior which becomes interpreted by the social others as if it were the expression of mental states and that it is this interpretation by the social others which turns the initially purely physiological process into the expression of a genuine mental state is still basically valid. The work of researchers such as Brazelton, Emde, Kaye, Stern, Trevarthen, and others (e.g., Emde, 1980; Kaye, 1982; Olson, 1980; Schaffer, 1977; Stern, 1985) who, incidentally, had no knowledge of the work of Wallon, has validated this view. It is a view which has much in common with the more well-known views advanced somewhat later by Lev Vygotsky who also stressed the role of social and cultural mediation in the development of higher mental processes (cf. Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).
Finally, Wallon’s account of the role of emotions in the growth of attachment relationships between caregiver and child deserves to be mentioned separately. It is an account that is well in line with the tenets of the Bowlby–Ainsworth attachment theory and one that is compatible with other systems that combine psychoanalytic insights with developmental findings (Bowlby, 1969; Stern, 1977; 1985).

This is not to say, of course, that Wallon’s theory is in complete accordance with modern insights. His account originated in the first half of this century and there is no doubt that many of the finer details of Wallon’s theory are now outdated. We now know, for example, that the embryo is not constantly sleeping during the gestation period. Other ideas will need to be revised or complemented in the light of the newest findings and insights. Wallon’s idea, for example, that turn-taking (his ‘‘jeux d’alternance’’) becomes prominent in the sensori-motor and projective period and plays a role in the construction of the self is truly interesting. However, modern research, in the person of Bruner (1983), has argued that turn-taking is already present before this stage and that it may (also) provide a structure for the acquisition of language.

However, such critical comments can be made about any classic developmental theory and they shouldn’t stop us from reflecting about the merits of Wallon’s thinking. These merits, we believe, are undeniable and above we have briefly indicated that several of Wallon’s major intuitions have been rediscovered and corroborated by modern developmental theorists. This fact alone justifies that Wallon is acknowledged as the major developmental psychologist he was and that his work gets the attention it deserves in the developmental psychological literature.

REFERENCES


