My presentation will draw upon an analysis of a conversation between a group of three nine year old children in a Primary School classroom. They were talking about the existence of God. This transcript is taken from:


Discussion on God

1. (David opened by asking Helen and Julie if they were Christians.)
   
   Julie: Yes.
   
   Helen: Yes.

5. David: Do you believe in God?
   
   Julie, Helen: Yes.
   
   David: Why?
   
   Julie, Helen: Because we're Christians.
   
   David: Why are you Christians?

10. Julie: Because of the legends in the Bible.
    
    Helen: Who else could have made all things? God is a symbol is kindness.
    
    Julie: He's a spirit.
    
    David: But why, then, doesn't God make me believe in Him?

15. Julie: He's not really got control.
    
    (On re-reading the notes, Julie said that she had really meant: 'He doesn't want everyone to believe in Him.')</n    
    
    Helen: He likes you to do as you please. It's a free world.

20. David: Why does God let wars happen?
    
    Julie: There wouldn't be a President of the United States if it wasn't for wars. We don't know everything. These wars could be good, or they could be bad, we don't know.
25. **Helen**: We have wars because different countries believe in their own rights.

**David**: But thousands get killed for no reason.

*Julie and Helen replied that people go to war for their Queen or their country.*

30. **David**: Why have battles? Why doesn't God do it? (He explained that he meant 'why doesn't God solve the problems which lead to war?')

*Julie and Helen both reiterated their point that God does not wish to control the world.*

35. **Helen**: People (fight to) defend their laws.

**Julie**: Some people want to satisfy their Queen and so on.

*There then followed further unrecorded discussion of this point, but no substantially new argument.*

**David**: Who made God?

40. **Helen**: God is a miracle.

**Julie**: God made Jesus and Jesus did most of the work.

**David**: But who made the miracle?

**Helen**: Nobody makes a miracle. Miracles just are. God is a miracle.

45. *(Further unrecorded discussion.)*

**Helen**: We believe through our families; father to father and so on.

*Next, my only significant intervention. At my suggestion Helen and Julie asked David why did he not believe in God.***

**David**: If God exists, who made God? If God is a spirit who made the spirit?

**Helen**: No, but God is a miracle. Nobody makes miracles. *(She explained that she had already made this clear.)*

50. **David**: Who made Adam and Eve?

**Julie**: We don't know. We believe what we're told; what's in the Bible.

*They then added that they did not believe everything anyone tells them but that they do, for example, believe their teacher.*

**David**: That's not what the scientists say.

55. *(David then suggested that they look in the Bible to see what it says. Together they examined the first verses of Genesis 1 which Helen read aloud.)*

**David**: That's not what the scientists say.

60. *(Helen said that since scientists know more than other people about science they are in a position to deceive the rest of us.)*

*However, she then explained that the world was made 'like a big volcano'. The cracks in the world then filled up to become rivers, the larger ones forming lakes and seas.*
The moon was a bit that was blown off.
She said this was what she believed but that other people might believe differently, we didn't really know. Julie agreed with this account. They both said that God made the world before this explosion. David then interrupted.

David: Excuse me! What did he make the world out of?
Helen: Clay.
Julie: No, don't be silly. There wouldn't have been any clay before the earth was made.
Helen: Oh yes. It wasn't clay. It was a miracle.

(David then returned to the question of war, in particular World War II).

Helen: We think that the Germans started it. They think we started it. God says that they should do what they think is right.
(The discussion then returned to the source of belief. Helen and Julie said that people believed what their parents believed. They then argued about whether or not this was a Christian school. Julie and Helen said it was.)

David: No it's not. I'll do a survey.
Helen: I bet you'll be outvoted. It's just that your family doesn't believe in God. They don't believe because their parents didn't believe.

David: Yes, my Nan does believe in God. I'm challenging you to a survey!
Helen: It'll cause trouble

After a little more discussion, going over ground already covered, Julie and Helen returned to their table. Julie said she thought all this discussion was pointless, although her beliefs were important to her. Helen disagreed. She felt that we should discuss whatever is important to us. Helen appeared then to succeed in persuading Julie of this point. But Julie still maintained that one should stick to what one believes. 'It's like this project', Julie said, pointing to her folder of work. 'Once I've started it, I should stick to it until it's finished.' Helen said that belief in God is more important than a project and that one should therefore be prepared to be influenced by argument.

We then read over my notes and Julie made the slight, but important change (lines 17-18). They verified my account of what had been said.

There was then some discussion among all of us as to how a survey might be conducted without causing offence or embarrassment to anyone. This was not completed by the end of the day and further discussion in the classroom was provoked by the
This discussion bears analysis in some detail. But first, to summarize the main strands of argument:

1 **Lines 14-19.** David argues that if God were omnipotent, He would make him believe. Helen and Julie reply that He wants men to be free to believe as they wish. The change Julie made, on reading my notes, from 'He's not really got control' to 'He doesn't want everyone to believe Him' is most important since it demonstrates that she recognizes her initial point to be inconsistent with an omnipotent God. As now expressed, the inconsistency is removed: God is omnipotent but grants man his freedom of belief. This point is made again in Lines 33-34 and Lines 85-86. This leads naturally to the second strand of argument, the problem of theodicy.

2 **Lines 20-24.** David implies that if there were a God, He wouldn't let wars happen. Julie's reply shows considerable insight. Since the existence of the President of the USA (assumed to be a good thing) required wars to happen, then wars, though they appear to be bad, may actually lead to a greater good, though we might not be aware of this because of our limited knowledge.

   Julie's argument concerning freedom and theodicy here is somewhat similar to the argument of Leibniz that God created the best of all possible worlds. Here is Russell's summary of Leibniz's argument:

   “Free will is a great good, but it is logically impossible for God to bestow free will and at the same time decree that their should be no sin. God therefore decided to make men free, although he foresaw that Adam would eat the apple, and although sin inevitably brought punishment. The world that resulted, although it contains evil, has a greater surplus of good over evil than any other possible world; it is therefore the best of all worlds, and the evil that it contains affords no argument against the goodness of God” (Russell 1946, p. 570).

3 **Lines 39-44.** Here David hints at the argument he has often presented to me. Helen's response takes him somewhat by surprise as it is not one that David or I had previously considered together. Helen conceives of a miracle as not requiring a cause and thus God was not created. She repeats her point in Lines 53-54. On discussing this point later with me, she explained how most things happen 'for a reason', but that miracles are an exception to this rule. The strength of David's argument rests upon his assumption that everything has a
cause. Now this assumption is challenged, he is unable to pursue his point directly, but later appeals to 'what the scientists say' (Line 64).

**4 Lines 56-60.** Julie now pursues the argument from a different angle concerning the cause of belief rather than its justification. This aspect is taken up again in the final part of the discussion (from Line 87). Julie and Helen accept the authority of the Bible and their parents. But David disputes that everyone accepts the belief of their parents since (Line 95) one of his parents chose not to accept the belief of their mother (that is, David's 'Nan'). Therefore, the fact that one's parents believe in God is not a sufficient reason for believing oneself.

While during the discussion there was considerable repetition of the various points, the flow of the argument was considerably logical and coherent. David has in mind the arguments he wishes to present and is quick to spot the opportunities afforded for him to make them. He plays the major role in structuring the discussion. Nevertheless, Julie and Helen, in replying to his 'cross-examination', see the need for consistency as well as plausibility. Julie’s amendment on reading the notes concerning God's control over man (Lines 17-18) and her correction of Helen concerning the creation of the world (Lines 79-80) demonstrate her awareness of the need for consistency.

The final point concerning the origins of their faith and parental authority, they immediately see as relating to the practical question of whether or not the children in the school are in fact Christians. David's 'challenge' to a survey here is altogether appropriate.

This discussion was preceded by David asking me what philosophy is. While I was unable to reply satisfactorily, feeling that any such attempted explanation would be beyond his comprehension, it is now clear that these children have some ability to investigate some of its problems.

Of course, the beliefs which Helen, Julie and David express here are likely to have been influenced and to a large extent determined by those of their parents, friends and relations and the broader society in which they live. The arguments they produce in support of these are unlikely to have been purely of their own invention. But nevertheless, from the form of the discussion it is clear that their ideas were not blindly accepted. While Julie and Helen are only too ready to admit that their beliefs resulted from what they knew of the Bible and what their parents had told them, the manner in which they represented such ideas in argument suggests that they were not merely voicing a doctrine upon which they had been brought up, but
had reflected upon these ideas and reinterpreted them.

Many of the ideas put forward and the flow of the argument itself suggest considerable reflective awareness. To be able to present in argument such propositions as:

- That if God existed he would make me believe in Him and since he doesn't therefore he doesn't exist (David);
- That it is the limitation of human knowledge that makes some good things appear bad (Julie);
- That scientists are in a position to deceive the rest of us (Helen) - suggests more than merely an acquaintance with certain sophisticated ideas. Rather, it presupposes an ability to focus the mind upon ideas remote and highly abstracted from immediate experience.

Indeed, their ability to use such propositions critically, with due regard for such logical axioms as consistency and interrelatedness, requires an awareness not only of the subject of their argument, but also of the manner in which it is to be expressed, that is, an awareness of the form of the argument itself. This exercise of critical faculties as demonstrated in their discussion suggests that their beliefs, while being socially derived, are a reconstruction of the ideas which have been communicated to them rather than a copy of such ideas.

Furthermore, the form of the argument between David and Julie and Helen strongly suggests that they have built up some kind of system to support their beliefs. They each express not an unrelated set of opinions, but an interrelated set of arguments and beliefs within a consistent framework.

When Piaget speaks of the inability of children, below the age of about 12, to construct 'systems', he bases his theory largely upon the results of experiments designed to provide evidence for the existence of specific logical systems underlying the child's thinking. Of children less than about 12, he says:

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The child does not build systems. Those which he possesses are unconscious or preconscious in the sense that they are unformulable or unformulated so that only an external observer can understand them, while he himself never 'reflects' upon them" (Piaget 1964 p570)

The evidence of the above discussion would appear to conflict with this claim. Piaget does not intend his age limits for the various stages of development to be rigidly invariable. However this, and many other examples of the work of the children in Chris Harris's class, indicates an ability to think in a way more characteristic of Piaget's formal operational period (claimed to start at around 12 years old) than of the concrete operational period (from 7 to 11).

Piaget's findings have been criticized (Donaldson 1978, Zaporozhets 1971) on the basis that the children's interpretations of the experimental situation often did not correspond to the intentions of the experimenter. They were often placed in
unfamiliar situations which they interpreted in ways which conflicted with the assumed interpretations on which the tests were based. According to research which Donaldson quotes concerning earlier developmental stages, the child's performance improves when tests are constructed in a linguistic and cultural setting that is less abstract (in the psychological sense of being less remote from their everyday experience) and is therefore more meaningful to them. However, any experimental setting is bound to cause problems concerning the meaningfulness of the test to the child. But when selected spontaneous activity, such as the above discussion, is analyzed, we can observe children grappling with ideas which are not only significant and meaningful to them, but which lead them to the frontiers of their reasoning ability. Because the children controlled the situation, they had the opportunity to use their language for their own purposes, were not compelled to interpret those of an experimenter, and were thus likely to operate at their highest level, a level at which they would be unlikely to work within the confines of an experiment.

No doubt Susan Isaacs had this in mind when she viewed Piaget's earlier work. Gardner says of her:

“I think it may be said that even in Piaget's earliest studies she would agree that what he claimed to be true of the thinking of young children did apply in many situations, for example, where questions were asked of children or thinking was required of them by others, but that their intellectual powers were sometimes released at a higher level, especially in situations of spontaneous investigations through their play .... Piaget had shown teachers the most that can be expected of young children in test situations or when receiving formal teaching.” (Gardner 1969, p.11)

Conclusions
This example serves as an illustration typical of the wider research study over two years which provided ample evidence of the rationality of children.

This raises questions about the place of rationality, and assumptions that may be made regarding rationality, in research methodology.

Some of these are:
1. The research started from the assumption (common to a range of approaches including Critical Theory and Humanistic Psychology) that research subjects should be treated as rational and sincere until we have evidence to the contrary. Where such evidence does appear, it can often ‘explained away’ by more detailed enquiry, leaving the assumption of rationality in tact. It is therefore difficult to ascertain whether rationality is a research assumption, a research finding or both.
2. The treatment of children as if they were rational appeared to lead to more plausible explanations of their behaviour than to treat them as being limited by certain cognitive stages of development (qv Piaget). There is, however, a circularity here, since the criterion of ‘plausibility’ of an explanation is itself premised upon its rationality.

3. Treating the children as if they were rational appeared to have the effect of encouraging their exercise of reason. It therefore functions as both an effective assumption of research methodology and an effective assumption of pedagogy.

4. The research took place in a wider educational environment – often referred to as ‘progressive’ – in which value was placed upon the autonomy of the child learner. Freedom to explore and investigate was encouraged. It is more difficult to see how research of this kind might be conducted in the current context of schooling in UK, where the ability of the child to make rational decisions is subordinated to the requirement that the child achieve certain targets. The extent to which the young child is viewed as being rational may therefore be the consequence of wider political, social and ideological presuppositions.

In the context of the wider classroom study, from which this is extracted, the following questions are raised in relation to rationality:
1. Treating children as if they were rational tends to lead to more plausible explanations of their activity.
2. When children’s writing, talking and exploration is treated as if
1. The question is not so much whether children (or people) are rational or not, but whether it is appropriate to treat them as being rational

References