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Chapter 16
Natural and Supernatural Agents: Children's Representations of Gods and Dead Entities

Ramiro Tau

> *[…] death, which of all human events is the most upsetting and disorganizing to man's calculations, is perhaps the main source of religious belief.*
>
> *Bronisław Malinowski, 1931*

Abstract When children face the task of having to draw something related to human death, their drawings are based on imaginary, figurative and schematic resources. These representations usually reveal children's resolution of two fundamental problems regarding the comprehension of death; (a) which type of entity dies with death? (b) what are the characteristics of the space of the dead? From child's perspective, what dies with death, and the place of the dead, are regulated by a specific legality, different from the one prevailing in his daily life. The physical, biological and psychological principles that children recognize as necessary in everyday experience are cancelled, inverted or alternated with death. This subversion becomes evident in drawings and is analogous to the one found in children's representations of deities, supernatural agents, and divine spaces. The cognitive and figurative correspondence between the attributes children confer to the dead, the gods and the spaces they inhabit are analysed and discussed using data from two exploratory studies conducted in Argentina, with children from agnostic, atheist and Christian families. We address three broad axes: *what*, *where* and *how* children draw dead and supernatural entities, highlighting the te Luoreda Lamas, 2001; ndency towards anthropomorphization, the inaccessibility of the places inhabited by these beings and the attribution of non-normal capacities.

Keywords Drawing · Representation · Children · Death · Dead · God · Supernatural agents

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In this chapter, we will present a brief analysis of drawings of gods[1] and dead entities, which were made by children and young adolescents. These drawings have some particularities due to the objects to which they refer. They are paradoxical objects because gods and dead entities are, simultaneously, outside and inside the sphere of the daily experience of the participants. Death and God are highly abstract notions, although, at the same time, they have an objective anchorage in a series of phenomena of everyday experience: instituted practices, myths, rituals and social representations. In this sense, they are built from ordinary knowledge, which involves interactions always mediated by other objects that, in turn, orbit the periphery of an inaccessible nucleus. More so, even though they are the result of particular and cultural constructions, they appear with the universality of nature: they are unavoidable and almost necessary notions.[2] Indeed, there are no known cultures that have not taken a stand on the afterlife and on some variety of the divine, through more or less sophisticated shared meaning systems.

As we will try to show, children appropriate representations, discourses and practices around these issues from early on in development. Before they have a clear idea of what death implies from a biological point of view, or what God can mean to an adult, children are able to represent these notions in drawings. Some aspects of these representations show a developmental rising curve in their understanding and, consequently, it would be possible to identify stages of progression. From a figurative and conceptual perspective, these transformations are remarkable and, in very general terms, advance towards greater complexity and abstraction. However, it is not possible to establish an evolutionary pattern or some kind of overall hierarchy in general terms, since notions about death cannot be reduced to knowledge about biology. The same can be said about ideas with reference to gods, which do not correspond to an exhaustive understanding of the principles of the natural world that would give rise to the characterization of a supernatural, creative, or omnipotent being, among other aspects. Different dimensions of the understanding of death or God do not present an increasing transformation. In fact, beyond knowledge about the body and certain physical-biological laws, these beliefs assume ideological values and elements that do not show development. The acceptance, or not, of the existence of God or of some kind of post-mortem continuity is a clear example of this and it is enough to remember that these are not homogeneous concepts. Such notions, in fact, configure fuzzy areas of polyphasic and contradictory meanings. Consequently, we characterize the knowledge about death and God not as

[1] Why the term *god* begins sometimes with an uppercase letter G, sometimes with a lowercase letter g, and why it appears sometimes in the singular and sometimes in the plural, is explained in the introductive chapter of this book (Chap. 1, this volume).

[2] This universality is obvious with respect to death since it supposes a fundamental and unavoidable biological phenomenon that requires a meaning-making process: the cessation of the homeostasis of the biological systems. On the other hand, the reasons and motors of religiosity and spirituality in psychological terms are not so evident—although psychoanalytic theses seem to be the ones that have most contributed to understanding this; one particular proposition for this problem has been the idea of an original alienation that implies the emergence of the subject in the field of the Other.

advancing towards coherence, but as zones of knowledge, beliefs, values, and social meanings of different order. In other words, they are *systems of objects* that gravitate around the *observables*[3] of the subject.

There is no doubt that children's characterizations are partly dependent on the representations of the culture, as well as the practices of the group they belong to. In the cases analysed here, the drawings represent a particular graphic resolution, which is not completely independent of social representations and meanings. Admitting this thesis implies recognizing that drawings are a way to explore semiotic dimensions that are, simultaneously, individual and social. In fact, when children face the task of having to draw something related to human death or God, in an interview, their drawings are based on imaginary, figurative, and schematic resources offered by culture and the peer-group's social representations. This is done in the process of generating an original image, modulated by the participant's own knowledge. But at the same time, a drawing is never a copy of an external model because, even in quasi-photographic images, there is always a selection that preserves and excludes, and that fixes relations and points of view that account for the original activity of its author. This is even more evident in a child than in an adult because "[...] he does not draw what he sees, but the idea that he has made; he draws what he knows; in other words, he draws his interpretation" (Piaget [Yale] 1977 [t][4]). This is one of the central reasons that justify the reference to a theory from which the processes of meaning making are considered always in a certain context.

Beyond the complexity pointed out and the levels of development that could be recognized in some of the implied notions, we will show that gods and the dead are represented by children as consistent agents who inhabit an inaccessible space with similar qualities. At the same time, we will argue that the properties conferred to these entities are distinguished from those characterizing the living and inert objects of our everyday world. We will do this by examining, in the drawings, the relationship between the attributes of these supernatural agents and the places they occupy, spaces where the principles of ordinary experience are subverted or transgressed. This will be done in order to contribute to understanding the complexity of children's thinking about social and cultural objects.

We will, thus, present the systematization of some results achieved in two studies through which the drawings of God, death, and dead entities were obtained. Specifically, *what* the children drew, *where* they placed it, and *how* they presented and described it. The objective will be to discuss some hypotheses about the common psychic processes involved in these visual productions. To do so, we will also explain the theoretical approach and justify the use of drawing as one of the ways of exploring children's thinking and its relation to culture.

[3] An observable, even if it implies a sensory register, is the empirical verification of the subject's knowledge, guided by his schemes of action. In other words, it is what the subject believes to find in the facts (Piaget, 1974, 1975; Piaget & García, 1982) and it is not confused with something "perceptible" as a passive register of experience.

[4] [t] signifies that this is the author's translation.

A Theoretical Approach to Explore Children's Drawings

Research on notions and representations (Gaillard & Urdapilleta, 2013), such as death or God, can be conducted through the adoption of many different methodological strategies and the use of several instruments for the collection of data. These depend on the theoretical framework, the research questions and the ontological assumptions of the researcher. In order to justify the decisions of our empirical inquiry, we will briefly refer to our the selected conceptual framework.

Our theoretical perspective belongs to a constructivist psychology of social knowledge development. This field can be characterized by its focus on three broad problems: (a) the explanation of the *emergence of psychic novelties*; (b) the *characterization of changes* that occur in a complex system—i.e., what changes and how it changes, in a system of irreversible time (Eddington, 1929; Valsiner, 1994); and (c) the *identification of non-teleological orientations* of transformations (Chapman, 1988; Lenzi et al., 2011; Munné, 2007; Overton, 1994, 2003; Valsiner, 2006). Within this general approach, we follow the fundamental theses of the Piagetian genetic psychology (García, 2000; Piaget, 1970) in its "critical version" (Castorina, 2010). From this approach, it is assumed that knowledge is the result of a progressive construction that emerges from the culturally guided interactions between the subject and the object (Castorina et al., 2003, 2005; Valsiner & Winegar, 1992). These perspectives do not constitute a "literal" extension of the Piagetian program, based on the development of physical or logical-mathematical knowledge and projected towards the field of social objects (Castorina, 2005). On the contrary, in line with the latest developments of the "functionalist" period of the School of Geneva (Martí, 1990), current constructivism is interested in the processes and mechanisms of production of meanings, as well as in the inquiry of the relations that these maintain with the epistemic frameworks, values, representations and socially instituted practices (Becerra & Castorina, 2016; Campbell, 2009; Castorina & Carretero, 2013; Piaget & García, 1982, 1987; Valsiner, 2006).

On the other hand, as we mentioned before, the data that we will discuss in this chapter is mainly made up of images: children's drawings about death and gods. In psychology, the employment and analysis of graphic productions is quite frequent (Baldy, 2010, 2011; Wallon et al., 1990), although their use to explore children's knowledge requires some justifications. Indeed, "the activity of children's drawing has been described as everything, from a child's physical exercise, or a first language system, to a genuine art form" (Kelly, 2004, p. 4). Within this wide range, two broad paradigms of research can be recognized at both ends: the "psychological mirror" and the "aesthetic window" (Kelly, 2004, p. 5).

The first of the two traditions, the *mirror paradigm*, refers to psychological explorations that do not recognize any aesthetic or social attribute in drawings. As if it were a reflection, a projection, or an externalization, the traces of children would produce an image of the *identity*, of the *personality* or of the essential, deep and not evident aspects of subjectivity. In this way, drawings would offer, in a visual product, something central and rather hidden of psychic life. This approach

emphasizes the singularity of the drawings and the need to interpret them as a whole, while objecting any system of equivalences or hermeneutic code to understand culture.

The second paradigm, the *aesthetic window,* implies philosophical, psychological and historical trends. Such trends eventually show themselves via subjective expression in drawing, but scholars mainly consider this paradigm as a way to access to the values, meanings or aesthetic and cultural parameters of an era (Pearson, 2001).

It is evident that the subjective dimension of the drawing does not contradict the possibility of recognizing some shared meanings of the participant's group (Baldy, 2011; Milbrath & Trautner, 2008). Indeed, both paradigms can be coordinated and complemented within a dialectical psychology in which individual knowledge-constructions activities are always carried out as part of social processes of production and reproduction of culture (Castorina & Lenzi, 2000; Piaget & García, 1982). This relationship is unavoidable in drawings of death or God. These images are always an original expression of each participant, although they are composed by "readymade" representations and semiotic resources offered by culture (Kaufmann & Clément, 2007).

Now then, whether as an expression of the subjectivity of an era or of an individual subjectivity, the drawing used in the framework of a psychological research has, for us, a series of fundamental characteristics that we would like to underline.

First, a drawing is a metacognitive synthesis. Like all external representational systems (Martí, 2003), it offers objectified relations and meanings, usually supported on the characteristics ascribed to a referent (Pérez-Echeverría et al., 2010). In these relations, a summary reorganization is usually observed and it results from focusing on figurative aspects or in connections between elements (Klepsch & Logie, 1982). Its synthetic aspect consists in preserving or suppressing certain relations, while the meta-referential function takes place when the drawing acts as an instrumental support for the thought to be directed on itself or on social meanings (Alba, 2010).

Second, visual images offer a synchronic representation of ideas. The spatiality of the sheet imposes coordinates and topological relations that the trace expresses in a relatively synchronic production (Berger, 2008).[5] It is possible to recognize, in drawings, elements that can differ in number and can be combined in a diverse way (Goodnow, 2001), metaphorizing the relations between ideas, through topological resources such as distance, density, or positioning (Lange-Küttner & Vinter, 2008; Luoreda Lamas, 2001; Matthews, 2003), as well as contours and proportions. In that new system, we can rediscover properties of the represented thought or mental images, although new meanings emerge from it. Indeed, drawing is not a transcription or a sub-product, but a genuine meaning-creation tool in the domain of simultaneity. Even in the case of iconographic representations, that appeal to usual

[5] Although drawings, photographs and other static images are traditionally considered as synchronic, many scholars believe that the constant shifts of the eye focus on different areas that result in a necessarily sequenced and diachronic perception.

schematisms or *clichés*, specific principles, such as extension and coincidence in space, prevail (Martí, 2003).

Third, based on the abovementioned, drawings can also be a way to extensively represent ideas and notions that do not have a substantial referent in "real life". In other words, drawings are one of the representational ways of what does not belong to the domain of concrete experience. And, for this very reason, they are one of the sources for the creation of possible representations that go beyond the real (Piaget, 1981). They are, primarily, motivated systems of spatial relations (Pérez-Echeverría et al., 2010).

> The representation of an object to be drawn must be translated into the drawing by lines that go to the eye, it necessarily takes the form of a visual image, but this image is not the servile reproduction of any of the perceptions provided to the drawer by the sight of the object or of a corresponding drawing. It is a refraction of the object to be drawn through the soul of the child, an original reconstruction that results from a very complex process in spite of spontaneity. (Luquet, 1978, p. 57 [t]).

Whether it is a material object with which the drawing bears a relation of figural homology, or an insubstantial and abstract object, the drawing fulfils its function of extensive re-presentation (Landy, 2001). In other words, drawing re-inscribes what is represented in the domain of sensorimotor knowledge.

Fourth, a drawing is not a mere visual translation of oral language. This statement is an objection to the thesis according to which oral language (or narratives) is always the privileged source to explore knowledge and beliefs. If the drawing performs some kind of "translation" (Luquet, 1978), it consists in a projection of certain relations, but not in an equivalence between traces and signifiers. The rules and resources for visual expression are different from those of verbal expression. Thus, the properties of the image as a system cannot be equated to the attributes of language, even though the latter is the broadest semiotic system and can also function as a meta-language of itself (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Lange-Küttner & Vinter, 2008).

At the same time, drawing implies relating one's own perspective to that of the others. Before the age of 7 or 8, approximately, the child draws according to a series of intuitive spatial relationships, such as the distance between elements or overlappings (Piaget & Inhelder, 1967). Later on, children not only draw what they know or imagine, but also what corresponds to a particular point of view; this has been called *visual realism* (Luquet, 1978; Matthews, 2003). In this way, the drawing implies coordinations between parts, according to an overall plan (Lovell, 1977). When the child finally manages to arrange in a single system the possible and necessary disposition of elements of the trace, and also the gaze of the observer, s/he avoids overlappings and impossible viewpoints (Matthews, 2003). Likewise, once the child has mastered the basic technics of perspective and superpositions, the transgressions to these parameters tend to be intentional attempts to represent inconsistencies, paradoxes, or contradictions and, for that reason, they are extremely interesting for psychological analysis.

Finally, with regard to its use in the context of a research interview, drawings can be considered a semiotic resource that complements oral language: it is a

production of meanings, "inscribed halfway between symbolic play [...] and mental image" (Piaget & Inhelder, 1967, p. 70). Although classical authors, such as Luquet (1978) emphasized its playful dimension, drawing also has a purpose and directionality, partially equivalent to those of spoken language. When drawing is the answer to a requested task, children usually begin the activity with an intention that culminates in an interpretation. Between these two moments, they direct their actions according to something that they want to represent or that they believe they recognize in their strokes as they move forward. In a dialectical interplay of searching for coherence between what has been tried and what has been found, something readable and intelligible emerges (Bohnsack, 2008; Sainz Martín, 2002). For this reason,

> [...] all psychologists agree that the child has to discover that the lines he draws may mean something. Sully illustrates this discovery using the example of a child who, by chance, drew a spiral line, without any meaning, and suddenly caught a certain resemblance to something, joyfully exclaiming, "smoke, smoke!". (Vygotski, 1935, p. 170 [t]).

When the child draws, s/he does so "as a narrative, telling a story, just as he would do it by speaking", so drawing is a sort of "graphic language" (Vygotski, 1935, p. 169), but with its own rules and constraints. For this very reason, it is a resource of thoughts that provides the subject with semiotic elements for cognitive action (Fernández et al., 2003). In this way, "it allows the child to express himself in personal symbols that are more hidden than those of the word; being able to deal with topics that would otherwise be difficult for him to address" (Frank de Verthelyi, 2005, p. 75). This process involves a complex relationship between the intentionality of the child, the image, the observer, and the world (Freeman & Sanger, 1995).

The Use of Graphical Representations in Two Methodological Designs

Based on the above, we will now discuss some specific features of children's drawings about God and death. For this, we will first mention the general strategies for data collection in two different studies. Given that the main purpose is just to present a general overview of the procedure, we will omit the methodological details and the reasons why we make certain decisions to establish our design.

Study 1: Children's Comprehension of Human Death

In a first study, we explored the development of children's understanding of human death (Tau, 2016, 2018). The sample (non-probabilistic) was composed of 60 children from 5 to 10 years old from atheist, agnostic, and religious families that belong to middle-class sectors in Argentina. To address this broad problem, we designed a model of semi-structured individual interview, following the dynamics of the

clinical-critical method (Castorina et al., 1984; Ducret, 2016; Tau & Gómez, 2016). Each interview had three phases: an oral moment of thematic inquiry; a graphic production phase, in which a drawing "related to what we spoke of before" was requested; and, finally, a second verbal exploration, based on the drawing produced by the child. We provided the children with white A4 size sheets of paper and 12 coloured markers. Among others, the notions of causality, universality, irreversibility, and inevitability of death were explored, as well as alive-dead continuities and discontinuities, and representations about the "after death" (Bonoti et al., 2013; Tamm & Granqvist, 1995; Yang & Chen, 2002). In this chapter we will exclusively focus on the drawings obtained during the interview, which are, however, considered under the light provided by children's verbalizations.

Study 2: Children's Drawings of Gods

In the second study, and following methodological guidelines for cultural research on the development of the notion of God through the analysis of graphic representations (Dandarova-Robert et al., 2016; Brandt, 2009), we collected the drawings of 140 participants from 7 to 16 years old. The sample was non-probabilistic (convenience sampling) with participants from atheist, agnostic, and religious families that belong to middle-class sectors in Argentina. The participants were selected from schools, clubs and sports institutions. Interviews were always individual, without interruptions. Each participant was provided with a white A4 size sheet of paper, 10 coloured pencils and a black graphite pencil. The procedure involved four segments, (1) We started by asking the following question: "Have you ever heard the word god?" With this trigger formula, we asked them to "use the sheet of paper to draw that". In order to evaluate the understanding of this first activity, (2) they were invited to write, on the backside of the paper, the instruction received. Next, (3) they were asked to describe the drawing in a written form, imagining the explanation they would give, by telephone, to someone of their age who cannot see it, but wants to make exactly the same drawing. To conclude (4), they were asked to respond to a brief survey referring to their religious experiences, practices and beliefs.

The Gods and the Dead on a Sheet of Paper

The drawings obtained in both studies were produced as an answer to the specific instructions of each design, and the problems that guided both inquiries were different. However, on the basis of a series of recurrences in terms of form and content, we believe that it is possible to make a systematic comparison of both samples, in order to introduce some interpretative hypotheses about common processes. To do this, and as we have previously mentioned, we will focus on three main axes: *what* the children drew, *where* they placed it, and *how* they presented and described it.

Each one of these dimensions offers the opportunity to consider the relationships between the produced image and the particular comprehension reached by the subject.

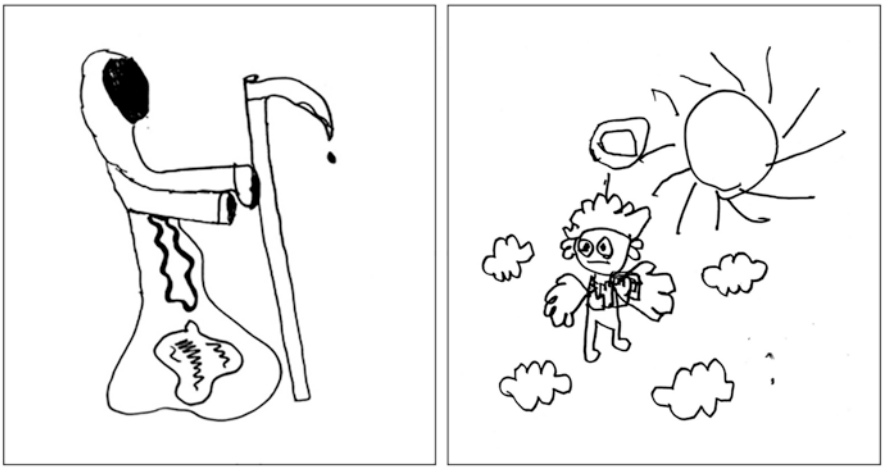
What Did They Draw?

Within the sample from the study of the notion of death, 78% of the images include a human-like figure representing death or the dead—most of them without colour. In the second study, more than 70% of the drawings contain colourful human-like figures that represent the deities (see Figs. 16.1 and 16.2, Figs. 16.3 and 16.4). These values are distributed without considerable variation among children belonging to religious, agnostic and atheist families (Hood et al., 2009).

In accordance with our theoretical framework, any attempt to explain this psychological bias must be complemented with the cultural study of the social institutions in which the participant partakes. Catholic religion is one of the main sources of representations and social meanings of the society to which the participants belong.[6] The contemporary and consecrated form of the predominant Catholicism

Figs. 16.1 and 16.2 Colorful anthropomorphic representations of God (study 2, above) (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/TIO=FrgvSKKAujbXrfDMFgU.20191211T064541810723Z, http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/OR8fjNkMTtO9nXTJ80wXbwF.20191211T06380290113Z)

[6] Nine out of ten Argentines believe in a God and, furthermore, Catholicism/Christianity is the most widespread religion. It represents 76.4% of the population (Mallimaci et al., 2008).

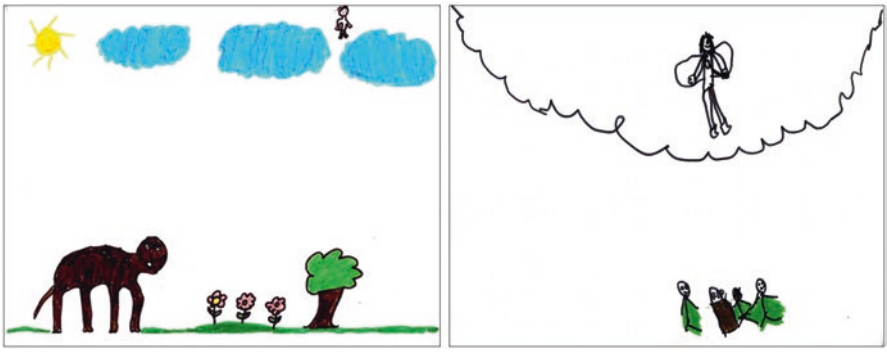


Figs. 16.3 and 16.4 Black and white representations of death and a dead person (study 1, below) (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/ybfxpQhlQouhXXDlcUw1pQi.20210117T102334340927Z, http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/EbpNtFqwRhKuxGUYzeXp_wn.20210117T102041785839Z)

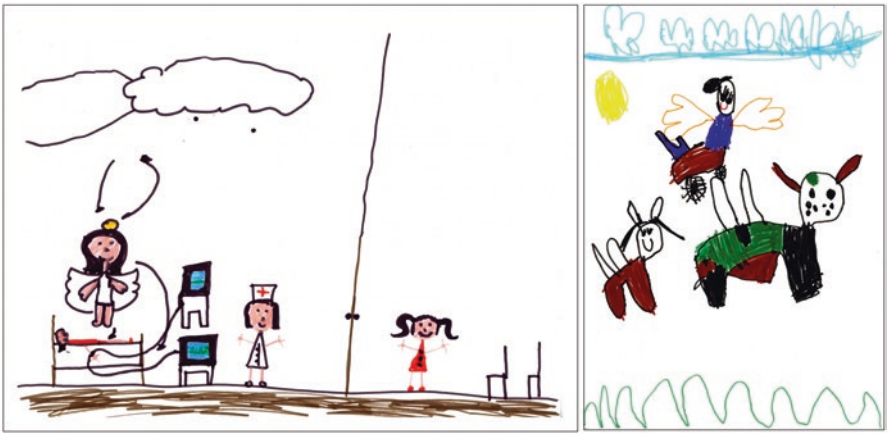
in Argentina is strongly linked to urban life (Di Stefano & Zanatta, 2000; Mallimaci, 2013; Mallimaci et al., 2015), and the corresponding iconography can be found in several religious buildings, as well as in the architectural ornamentation of different public and private secular spaces. Likewise, these signs are found repeatedly in mass media, entertainment activities and, transformed into expressions of the ordinary language. In particular, two central aspects of the Christian tradition, *resurrection* and *exaltation* (León-Dufour, 1985; Mircea, 1995), are typically expressed in anthropomorphic images of God. The *renaissance* as well as the *vivification* and *elevation* use the body of Jesus and the spatial orientations—predominantly the axis above/below—for their representation. These semiotic elements saturate the repertory of local representations and narratives about divinity.

In the case of the study about the understanding of death, illustrations also account for this figurative trend, but in a different way. It is not death represented in an anthropomorphic character, but dead entities in different states and places that predominantly appear. In this regard, Kastenbaum's (2000) observation of the personifications of death—which Nagy (1948) had so frequently noticed in the representations made by Hungarian children, and only rarely found in studies in other contexts—is enlightening: "It is possible that Nagy's respondents were more influenced by folk traditions than subsequent generations of children, especially in the United States, who were far more likely to absorb their stories from television [...]" (Kastenbaum, 2000, p. 53).

In our sample, the preferred recourse consisted in drawing a person, a corpse, or an associated insubstantial entity—soul, spirit, angel, or memory—placed in a context with clear marks of their distance or inaccessibility to the livings (see Figs. 16.5 and 16.6). In addition, it is observed that before children reach some kind of



Figs. 16.5 and 16.6 Dead entities located in a distant or inaccessible space (study 1) (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/es8K4GUuTWOZeP4P3Zb3Ig1.20210117T101536346524Z, http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/uVEGpeJgR1uia3YWbvOMsw0.20210117T102135819606Z)



Figs. 16.7 and 16.8 Cultural signs of death (study 1) (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/O99oYaNtTmujXB6GEot4hQa.20210117T101629463024Z, http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/vMUVfUVLQCiAUJK6UDUPwA5.20210117T101424070829Z)

knowledge about biological processes, as well as causality and irreversibility of death, they introduce into their drawings those cultural signs with which the topic corresponds. In this series, hospitals, cemeteries, beds, or blood are distinguished, also including images of the afterlife, such as clouds, stars, heaven, body-soul splitting, or memorial objects (see Figs. 16.7 and 16.8).

Furthermore, the anthropomorphic bias implies a figurative aspect of the representation—referring to somatic figural representation, not agency or intentionality—as well as the attribution of purposes and powers. Many hypotheses have been suggested on the general character of this tendency (Guthrie, 1993; Westh, 2014; see also Dessart, Chap. 3, this volume, and Dessart & Brandt, Chap. 4, this volume). Nevertheless, it should be remembered that a typical phenomenon observed in children is the

projection of forms and features of living beings on the facts and objects of the world, even those that are inanimate. In a very broad sense, animism is a root present in children's explanations of diverse phenomena (weather, political issues, biological occurrences), and it becomes evident each time they recognize or presuppose the existence of a vital force that imposes will or intention on the observed events. This attribution of agency is also seen in the development of notions that do not have a concrete referent, such as government, homeland, or authority (Castorina, 2005). Indeed, children often characterize these insubstantial notions as being embodied in concrete persons. Beyond the magical-phenomenistic causality of the young child, which is re-edited in adult life through the creation of pseudo-reasons or proto-necessities, animism is also present in forms more or less evident at all ages.

The humanized drawings of gods and the dead seem to reflect these early roots of development, reinforced, in turn, by the representations offered by culture with which they come into resonance. As a whole, these representations may be considered *anthropomorphic supernatural entities* (Boyer, 1996), which share certain characteristics that we would like to highlight: (a) continuity and discontinuity with a previous existence; (b) omnipotence, (c) protection or paternalism, (d) loss or alteration of physical and mental faculties; acquisition of supernatural capacities, (e) specific location in an inaccessible place, regulated by different laws from those of the daily experience, (f) affective saturation—especially love, sadness, or pain—of the supernatural agent and the space it inhabits.

The set of drawings in our sample that did not include anthropomorphic representations shows the typical variability of "original productions" or rejections. Among them, there are explicit oppositions to the idea of God (see Figs. 16.9 and 16.10) or the attempts to graphically present the enigma of divinity and the afterlife (see Figs. 16.11 and 16.12). Although we cannot examine these cases here, it is interesting to note that even in these less frequent representations, there are

Figs. 16.9 and 16.10 Explicit objections to the idea of God (study 2) (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/VUqVhUwrS=q6As0e=ob7ngC.20191211T082709185999Z, http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/Chz47sVNR4GWO6FUuqM30Qd.20191211T081629792962Z)

Figs. 16.11 and 16.12 Metaphors of the enigma of divinity and the afterlife (study 1, above, and 2, below) (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/qG71fsAjQz2tR8hvBvQdUA9.20191217T094221343034Z, http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/8zXrUMfiTA=9dR58WbOvpAW.20210117T102238248501Z)

imaginary elements that compose the constellation of canonical cultural meanings about God and death—crosses, journeys or relocations, heavens, bibles, floating objects, yellow lights, beds, and cemeteries, among many others. Moreover, almost all of the drawings obtained are arranged according to some parameters that will be discussed below and grouped along two major axes: (1) the spatiality that belongs to death, the dead or the gods, and (2) the scene or setting depicted in the drawing.

Where Did They Draw Them?

The placement of marks on a sheet of paper, and also the oral and written explanations given through the drawings, tell us about the characteristic of the spaces in which children place gods and the dead. Between both levels of analysis, formal and conceptual, there is a correspondence that shows an effort to use the visual area to express a series of ideas that we will mention briefly.

To understand death is, basically, to face the challenge of making sense of the implied loss: the cancellation of the circuit of ordinary interactions with living beings (Tau, 2016). This is a fundamental restriction imposed by death that children recognize at an early age. By the age of 4 or 5, they usually express that the way to know if a person is dead is by verifying their disappearance or the impossibility of interaction: "we go to his home and we don't find him", "we phone her and she doesn't answer", "we talk to her and she doesn't reply", "he doesn't move", "she wants to come, but she can't because she's too far". Death is a form of unavoidable obstacle for almost all previously established interactions, imposed by an irrevocable separation. And this germinal idea is present and expressed long before the acquisition of the biological knowledge necessary to identify organic symptoms of death.

Fig. 16.13 God as an elevated entity, above the Earth (study 2) (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/zHd3YoUPQwWShqakISQg0gZ.20191217T083655404083Z)

In the same way, the notion of God that we find in our sample refers to an entity that is elevated from the earthly world (see Fig. 16.13) and inhabits a paradise or a kingdom of restricted access. The interactions between the living and God are also deeply limited: "he cannot be seen or heard", "it is impossible to touch him", and "we cannot go to the place where he is". This idea also underlies the conceptions of God as a personal being or as a disembodied and extended nature because connection or interchanges are always indirect or impossible. In addition, in the representations of God made by subjects who reject religious dogmas, the usage of popular idols, real or fictional does not eliminate this fundamental distance. Popular heroes, cartoon characters or idols like football stars also live in a social universe that is not directly accessible (see Fig. 16.14).

These restrictions to interactions are always represented by a distance. The locus of the dead and God defines an unreachable and invariably superior space, both physically and symbolically. However, interactions with the living are not absolutely cancelled and certain ties bridge the gap between the two worlds. Prayers, supplications and other phenomena of communication addressed to the dead or to the gods give an account of a subtle connection modality (see Fig. 16.15). The counterpart of these one-way actions are the interventions of supernatural entities in the sphere of the ordinary life, which must be read, or interpreted in the very facts of human events, as a revelation (see Fig. 16.16). The children from atheist families offer equivalent secularized versions, such as the acceptance of a continuity of

Fig. 16.14 God as a football star, at the upper section of the sheet (study 2) (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/E7Dq7_goTX=EzWCefOYurwa.20191217T095523827954Z)

the existence after death, either in the memories of the living, in the form of a collective memory, or in the legacy of material and symbolic works (see Fig. 16.17).

In any case, the discontinuity of interactions is represented by using the graphic resource of distance and by defining a space that, in relative terms, is always above the earthly domain. This top-down axis not only organizes a hierarchy of the world, but it also expresses the distribution of specific legalities and attributes of the entities that inhabit each of these places. In particular, the physical, biological, and psychological principles that children accept and recognize as necessary in their everyday experience are cancelled, inverted, or alternated in the space of gods and dead. This subversion of the order of the real enable transgressions of elementary principles, such as physical conservations and identity of matter, causality, or

Fig. 16.15 Communication between people and God (study 2) (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/q4pSRgn0QnmmSQIbji56NgQ.20191211T070036241032Z)

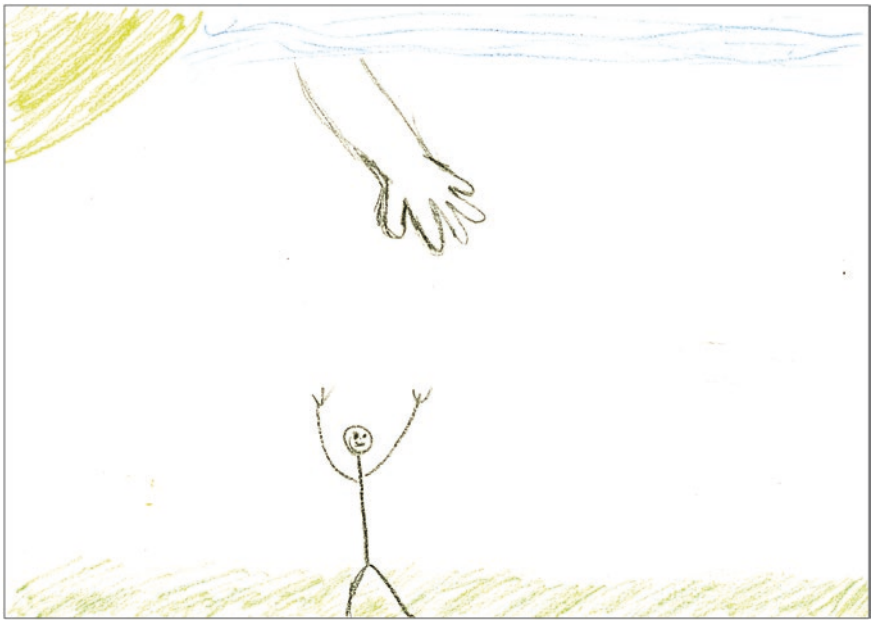


Fig. 16.16 God's intervention in the world of people (study 2) (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/2zFgO=spRU29_yGToalQbgT.20191217T094545321019Z)

Fig. 16.17 Continuity of the existence of the dead person in the memories of the living (study 1) (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/1Mt=4BL3TsuLzu6ASBHvZAz.20210117T101951231936Z)

biological equilibrium. In this way, the interviewees accept and draw transparencies, penetrations, flotations, or multiple deaths of the same entity, in the extra-terrestrial space (see Figs. 16.18 and 16.19), all phenomena and events that are explicitly recognized as impossible in their daily lives.

It is interesting to observe that many of the properties that children attribute to gods and dead, such as the omnipotence of observation and other powers, seem to be the result of their location and not an intrinsic property of the entity. In other words, the supernatural existence of the agent would come from the legality that rules the space in which s/he dwells. In this way, dead entities acquire attributes of gods only when they are recognized and drawn in that distant space, that is, after an ascension. On the contrary, supernatural properties are not attributed to corpses or the dead entities located on earth—such as in tombs, hospitals, or beds (except in the case of a fall following a previous ascension).

How Did They Draw Them?

In addition to the contents and legal aspects of the spaces shown in the drawings, a great diversity of narrative themes or plots are presented. When we focus on what happens in the represented figurative scene or on what the entities are doing, we find a regularity that underlies variations. A certain general recurrence can also be recognised in non-figurative drawings, even if they are representations that are neither

Fig. 16.18 Flotations and other physical transgressions of supernatural agents (study 2) (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/qN6C9abPTHGB2IEeVvNqJQ8.20191204T085233910028Z)

personified nor anchored in recognisable figures and spaces. Referring simultaneously to the drawings and subsequent explanations of their authors, we would like to mention here only two outstanding aspects that complement the aforementioned axes. Firstly, that which refers to the activities carried out by the entities; the type of actions children select for their illustrations. This dimension is in close relation to the previous ones, since the way in which the entities are presented (mainly, the activity conducted by the figure) is related to the content of the drawing and the spatiality that is assigned to it. In other words, what the drawn figure is showing, as well as its potential attributes or capacities, is something closely related to the place where it is conceived, as if these attributes depended directly on the surrounding space. Second, if we also understand the *how* as a disposition or way of being, the

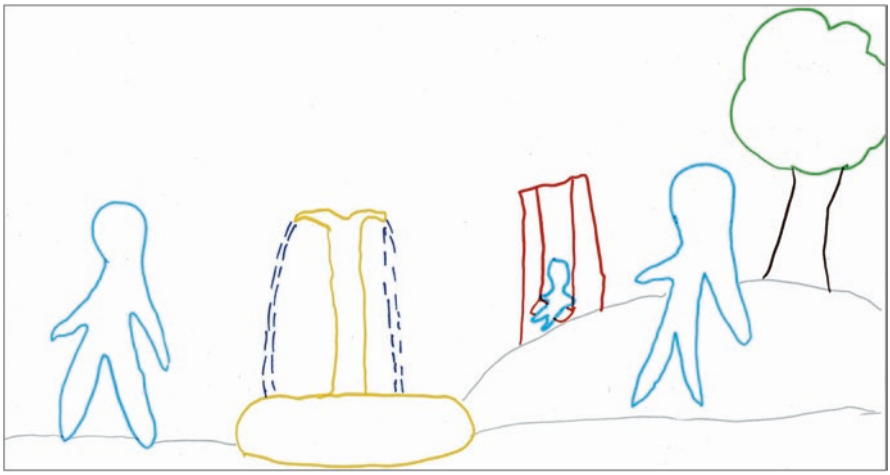


Fig. 16.19 Transparencies and other physical transgressions of supernatural agents in heaven (study 1) (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/5BSFpdGyR4muv3zdVPHAmQt.20210117T102429632621Z)

emotional charge that this type of drawing expresses with different shades is remarkable. In this sense, the *how* refers to the emotional tone captured in the scene.

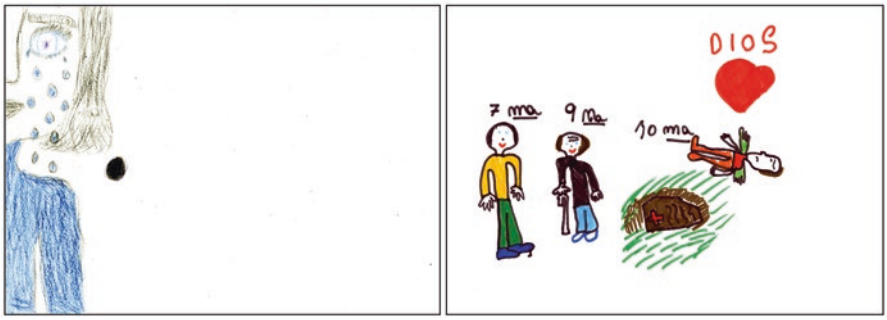
As we have mentioned before, the representation of the actions that gods and dead entities can perform has a common denominator. These are similar activities to those of humans—like cooking or playing—to which certain special powers are added. These faculties consist precisely in the lifting of restrictions, which, as logical necessities, define what the participant considers possible in the ordinary experience. To inhabit two places at the same time, to intervene in the causal series of the world or to protect and observe people remotely are some of the attributes that children draw and make explicit (see Fig. 16.20). Synthetically, supernatural agents are defined by a capacity for action that contradicts the logical necessities and impossibilities (Piaget, 1981) that the participant constructed to explain the daily life experience. To account for this, children use all kinds of graphic strategies that allow them to point out these atypical features, such as yellow colour for the magic illuminations, beams, paradoxical scales, the use of perspective to reproduce a powerful and covering view, wings, or aureoles. Likewise, the kind of activities that these entities carry out always indicate the boundaries of the field of the possible. The entities also appear performing actions that result from volition and not from necessity. They can eat or not, they can play or not, they can sleep or not. In any case, almost everything is potentially performable—translated into omnipotence—something that seems to be a direct effect of the massive suppression of what is necessary and plausible in ordinary actions.

In addition to this, we can recognise signs of intense emotions in the drawings, both in the main figures and in the general scene, or in the later verbal descriptions. Although they are not always expressed through graphic marks, these feelings are alternatively attributed to the characters drawn or to those who do not belong to the

Fig. 16.20 God mastering the time and space of the universe (study 2) (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/B3J2zfA5ScqA3XBrHPPhtQW.20191211T071050900893Z)

visual scene, but who integrate the story that the drawing tells. We identified the emotional tones by using three general categories: *no evident emotional tone*, *sadness/anger/pain/suffering*, and *love/joy/pleasure/well-being*. The polarity of these categories was not an *a priori* criterion, but the confirmation of the lack of middle shades and the paradoxical superposition of different and extreme emotions.

God, is conceived as a joyful entity, a source of intense and endless love and as kindness or compassion. At other times, s/he is represented as a suffering being, who laments the sins of humankind and the misfortunes of our world. In the case of a dead entity, the prevailing affect is that of sadness that results from the distance



Figs. 16.21 and 16.22 Signs of sadness (study 2) and love (study 1) in the agents (http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/KNVPDNDTTTSQV5iYAuPdxAH.20191204T072310054259Z, http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/1/0105/__XSprF4RjmVYJPWtyCYmgN.20210117T101800679673Z)

from the living or the pains and torments that led to death (such as illness or accidents). But there are also many depictions of the dead who are happy to meet God, to end their sufferings, or to be reunited with other beloved dead people. This emotional constellation with a predominance at the extreme ends, love-sadness, is equally attributed to those who are related to the dead and gods. The bereaved in their affliction, the believers in their love and gratitude, or the protected blissful ones, they all show the same radical and intense feelings. The corresponding visual elements are predominantly red hearts, warm tones, or facial expressions of sadness and cool tone-coloured tears (see Figs. 16.17, Figs. 16.21 and 16.22).

Final Comments

Rigorous justification of the cognitive and figurative relationships of children's ideas about the dead and gods requires a detailed analysis at multiple levels. Although this chapter deals superficially with the topic, some lines of inquiry seem to be clear. The constant intertwining of different systems of meaning (e.g., the field of religion with the field of physical-biological knowledge) appears to be one of the key problems for this type of research. Accepting this implies a shift away from the classical tradition that has studied the understanding of death and religious ideas, either as the development of naive biological knowledge or as a passive appropriation of the social representations of the group. Cultural representations of gods and the dead are constantly intervened and limited by knowledge from sensory-motor experience and biological knowledge, and it does not seem reasonable to reduce the problem to one domain or another.

In this sense, an approach to children's thinking through drawing is a necessary way to complement the constraints of oral language. The images allow us to capture some of the naïve representations about bodies, their interactions, and the laws that regulate them, through the relationship of the visual elements, something that introduces a specific dimension for the analysis. The spatiality of the page and the arrangement of the graphic elements quickly highlight the sensorimotor dimension involved in the representations of the participants. As we have seen, the problems related to *what, where*, and *how*, open a number of issues that can hardly be fully traced in exclusively oral interviews. Furthermore, drawings are an opportunity for the formulation of questions about temporal sequences, homologies, and figurative differences, relationships between the entities and their context, among many other topics.

Provisionally, we have shown that the representations explored in both studies exhibit a series of common aspects that are in agreement with not only the system of beliefs and cultural meanings—such as icons and established representations—, but also with certain basic processes of knowledge construction, such as the deep relationships between the attributes of an entity and its location in spatial terms. The observed anthropomorphic bias, as well as the spatialization and distribution of different legalities of the real as a function of distance from the earthly world, seem to be the central aspects of this attempt to read our two studies in parallel. Both, the dead and the gods drawn by our children, seem to be regulated by a series of common principles.

The comparisons we introduced here have an exclusively descriptive value. We cannot propose any type of analysis on the development and on the interference of these representations, mainly because the ages of the participants of both samples coincide only partially: Study 1 was based on drawings collected from children aged 5–10 years old, while Study 2 was based on drawings collected from children aged 7–16 years. However, our comparison organized around three common axes—what, where, and how—offers some fundamental clues for future research in those fields. First, the tendency to anthropomorphize God and the dead is clear throughout the sample. In the case of the dead, this anthropomorphization can adopt different forms: a person, a corpse, a skeleton, or an associated insubstantial entity—soul, spirit, angel, or memories. Likewise, these entities are conceived as holders of certain capacities impossible in the field of the participant's daily experience. These attributes are systematically associated with an inaccessible space. The supernatural qualities of an entity correspond to a space that is also supra-terrestrial, in spatial and symbolic terms. This fundamental double split between the living, on the one hand, and the dead and the gods, on the other, seems to have consequences on the way participants present and conceive them. Thus, when referring to the actions, capacities, or dispositions of these entities, children introduce graphically or verbally diverse physical transgressions. The deities and the dead, unanchored from the space of the living, are conceived in a context in which almost any kind of violation of the necessities coming from the organization of participant's experience are possible. Reciprocally, the powers attributed to these supernatural agents can only be expressed in a space that does not impose the restrictions to which the living are

subjected. Nevertheless, beyond this radical division, the connection between the two worlds does not appear to be completely extinguished. Although asymmetrical, a relationship persists: the living can recognise the intervention of supernatural entities, and the gods and the dead can affect the world of the living in different ways. This capacity to influence the universal order, usually conceived in the form of a protection or as an instance of control, domination, observation, or censorship, is always unidirectional and leaves the living limited in their access to the dead and to God. On this fundamental split scenario, extreme emotional tones characterize the affective dimension, corresponding to this way of understanding the relationships with those kinds of supernatural agents.

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