Imaginal Dialogues and Reason
Chapter 4 of:

INVISIBLE GUESTS
The Development of Imaginal Dialogues

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CHAPTER FOUR

Imaginal Dialogues and Reason

Come...let us reason together. —Isaiah 1:18

[Thinking is] the dialogue of the soul with itself. —Plato

[Imagination is] reason in her most exalted mood. —Wordsworth

The Greater Hippias, purportedly by Plato, sets the stage for imaginal dialogues to be seen as fundamental to reason. It is about what happens when we come home to ourselves. When Hippias, a rather thickheaded man, goes home at night he remains by himself. This is not only because he lives alone, but because “he does not seek to keep himself company. He certainly does not lose consciousness; he is simply not in the habit of actualizing it” (Arendt, 1971, 188).

In contrast, when Socrates goes home, he is met by a voice: “a very obnoxious fellow who always cross-examines him” (Arendt, 1971, 188). Socrates describes this fellow as follows:

He is a very close relative of mine and lives in the same house, and when I go home and he hears me give utterance to those opinions he asks me whether I am not ashamed of my audacity in talking about a beautiful way of life, when questioning makes it evident that I do not even know the meaning of the word “beauty”[…]

And yet, he goes on, how can you know whose speech
is beautiful or the reverse—and the same applies to any action whatsoever—when you have no knowledge of beauty? And so long as you are what you are, don't you think that you might as well be dead? (Plato, 1961, 1559)

Socrates wants to come to some agreement with his relative, to become friends with this voice; after all, they must live under the same roof. Hippias avoids this voice by ceasing to think, by refusing to open a dialogue.

Here dialogue is synonymous with internal dialogue; in Plato's words, thought is that "voiceless colloquy of the soul with itself." When we come home to ourselves, we can either invite the inner voices or disregard them—although sometimes, of course, they come uninvited, taking us deeper into the perplexities and complexities of an issue. Despite our familiarity with these voices of thought, many of our theories derogate this imaginal multiplicity, pitting reason against imagination, separating reason from its roots in argument and discussion with another, such as in dialogue.

Before we return to our colleagues Piaget, Vygotsky, and Mead, let us pause for a few moments outside of this century and the contemporary discipline of psychology to look at the ways in which relations between imagination and reason have been conceived of in other times and places. From this distance we shall be able to see that neither the modern divorce of imagination from reason nor the subordination of imagination to reason are intrinsic and inescapable facts of development, impartially described.

In a recent study on imagination, the philosopher Edward Casey (1976b) observes that, throughout the history of philosophy, imagination has been cast by thinkers into three main roles: imagination as subordinate to other faculties, where images are only imitations of imitations (Plato); imagination as mediator between perception, sensation and intellect (Aristotle, Hobbes, Kant); and imagination as superordinate to all human faculties including reason itself (German Romantics). Each of these views, dissimilar as they are, reveal in common a failure to acknowledge what Casey (1976b) calls the "multiplicity of the mental," a multiplicity which would preclude any rigid hierarchical structure among faculties (19). Abandonment of the effort to form a hierarchy, in which one favored faculty reigns in one century, only to be deposed in the next, would result, Casey holds, in
a conception of imagination as “nonderivative, as a phenomenon to be evaluated on its own terms” (19). When applied to imaginal dialogues, this conception would lead us to approach actual instances of imaginal dialogues with the expectation of finding a multiplicity of relations among imagining, remembering, feeling, knowing, and sensing. Were all instances of imagining to be forced because of a *prèjuge du monde* into a single continuum of value, the multiplicity would be falsely narrowed and homogenized.

Such homogenization is indeed what we find in the writings of Piaget, where formal operations are undoubtedly given a privileged position in the totality of functions. Kaplan (1983b) wonders,

> Is it possible that what Dewey calls an “occupational psychosis” has led many “cognitive-developmental” psychologists to presuppose formal operations or intelligence as the telos of development, and to represent ontogenetic changes solely in terms of those actions-instrumentalities pertinent to logical thought? (66)

Piaget, in his concern with the development of communicative language and formal-operational thought, lets imaginal dialogues fall between the rigid fingers of his arguments and preoccupations. He uses what he calls “egocentric speech” as one kind of evidence to support his claims about the child’s intellectual immaturity, or egocentricity. It was his intention to demonstrate a gradual development from the child’s egocentric stance to the adult’s ability to decentralize. Therefore he characterizes the young child’s imaginal dialogues negatively. They are taken principally as evidence of incapacity. The young child is described as being unable to fully differentiate self as speaker from the other as auditor; unable to take into account the listener’s viewpoint; and unable to construct speech adequate to the goal of communicating. The child, in speaking, does not collaborate with an audience or evoke a dialogue from the other. Interestingly, when Piaget in *Play, Dreams, and Imitation* (1962b) turns his attention to play, bountiful examples of imaginal dialogues are given. This is in contrast to his single example in the earlier work on language and thought (1955).

If, as is apparent, Piaget from the outset observed and recorded numerous examples of imaginal dialogues, why did he not use these to extend his notions of the functions and forms of egocentric speech?
It would seem most plausible to assume that Piaget's interest in the development of the socially adapted individual led him to construe egocentric speech primarily as failed communicative language. Had Piaget looked at imaginal dialogues in his work on children's speech with a less monolithic focus, his insistence on the child's profound egocentricity would doubtless have been called into question. One can see what might have taken place if one considers Shields' (1919) study of nursery-school children. In her observations of the children's private speech during doll-play, she found many instances of dialogues in which the child alternated between two or more viewpoints. These conversational sequences were as long as actual dialogues. They shared the features of actual dialogues (address, turn-taking, speech-act cohesion), and actually carried more referential material than one would have expected, given the claim that the speech of the young child is highly elliptical and abbreviated in form (Shields, 1979, 259).8

The same kinds of imaginal dialogues in children's play that Piaget takes as evidence for the child's egocentrism can be seen—and were indeed seen by the Romantics—as the initial steps in freeing oneself from a self-centered world. In pretending to be another and in engaging in imaginal dialogue with imaginal others, the child, like a young Proteus, breaks free of the bonds of a narrowly construed identity. Piaget, of course, has elsewhere stressed the value of the child's ability to change perspectives, but he fails to do so when he reports on his daughter playing the part of mother toward her doll.

It seems that since imaginal dialogues could not be presented as unequivocal manifestations of children's egocentrism, Piaget ignored them in his discussion of children's speech. This being the case, one must question the relevance for imaginal dialogues of Piaget's (1955) predictions for the fate of egocentric speech:

But as we pass from early childhood to the adult stage, we shall naturally see the gradual disappearance of the monologue, for it is a primitive and infantile function of language. (40)

In commenting briefly about how an adult, when pursuing thought

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8 Rubin, in his study, "The impact of the natural setting on private speech," (1979) concurs with Shields' finding that such private speech dialogues actually present the more advanced communication skills of young children, demonstrating non-egocentric role-taking and turn-taking skills (291).
on an inquiry, imagines himself speaking with his collaborators, Piaget
does not explain this as a later development of imaginal dialogues in
egocentric speech or symbolic play. Piaget does assign a positive
function to this imaginal dialogue with the members of one’s profes-
sion. He considers it a kind of rehearsal which assures that when one
does actually speak to others about one’s ideas they will already be
“socially elaborated” and therefore roughly adapted to the audience.
Thus imaginal dialogues in adulthood aid in the socializing of thought
and in making one’s communication of ideas better adapted to the
reality of the listener. In his example, Piaget radically restricts both
the imaginal audience (fellow professionals) and the circumstances
which evoke such dialogue (pursuing an inquiry). But even without
these restrictions, the functional significance Piaget attributes—the
socialization of thought and the rehearsal of actual encounters—
strengthens his commitment to an adaptationist point of view.

Piaget’s vision of intelligence and conceptual thought narrows
these to a set of formal logical operations not dependent on images.
The model thinker for Piaget is the scientist or the logician, and not
the artist, the dramatist, novelist, poet, or holy person. To the degree
that the child’s thought mirrors Piaget’s image of the scientist’s, the
child is seen as possessing cognitive maturity.

Sutton-Smith (1911), a critic of Piaget’s point of view, argues
that while Piaget defines play as a function of cognition, he does not
define the necessity or even the significance of play for cognition.
From Piaget’s perspective, Sutton-Smith asks, would adaptive thought
be possible without symbolic play?

Vygotsky places monologal inner speech at the apex of verbal
thought for three reasons: the functions he attributed to private speech
and to verbal thought, his implicit conception of the self as unitary,
and his consequent lack of focus on the presence of imaginal others
in thought. Vygotsky’s attribution of self-guidance and self-regulatory
functions to private speech have shaped much of the contemporary
research on such speech, as exemplified in a book edited by Zivin
(1979). The research method employed by those sustaining the self-
regulation paradigm has been for the most part to elicit speech by
presenting the child with a cognitive task. It does indeed appear that
speech during such occasions often has the function of planning and
guiding behavior.
But this may be due to a circularity whereby the presupposed function of self-regulation dictates the research design and setting, which predictably produces examples of the kind of private speech favored by the theory. The reduction of all private speech to the function of self-regulation may therefore be an artifact of inquiries conducted within a restricted range of research contexts.

Shields’ work on private speech opens a door out of this particular circularity by studying the private speech that occurs in imaginative play with objects. In the terrain of symbolic play such dialogues flourish. In Shields’ observations the imaginal dialogues in the private speech of doll-play do not appear to show the increase in ellipsis that Vygotsky predicts with an increase in age. Rather the private speech in doll-play looks surprisingly like social speech. Shields does not observe in the imaginal dialogues of play the cognitive problem solving proposed by Vygotsky, or the inadequate attempts at communication proposed by Piaget. Her vignettes are dramatic in form. She sees their function as the creation of a world—much as Vygotsky sees the function of play.

Why wasn’t Vygotsky interested in dialogues in egocentric speech and in inner speech? Let us propose that Vygotsky’s focus on the function of self-regulation led him to data in which there was no clear articulation of characters and roles. When the child is focused on the execution of a task, the articulation of the imaginal process through which that is accomplished is absent. On the other hand, when the child has no goal in action to pursue (i.e, in play) the articulation of characters and scenes becomes more explicit.

To clarify this, let us consider an example from Kohlberg, Yaeger, and Hjertholm (1968). They present the following as an example of the self-guiding function of egocentric speech, calling it a “monologue description of one’s own activity:”

David (engaged in solitary play with a tinker toy, observer at desk at other side of room): The wheels go here, the wheels go here. Oh, we need to start it all over again. We need to close it up. See, it closes up. We’re starting it all over again. Do you know why we wanted to do that? Because I needed it to go a different way. Isn’t it going to be pretty clever, don’t you think? But we have to cover up the motor just like a real car. (695)

In this “monologue” however, we find that the language is
dialogically structured with comment-acknowledgment, question-answer sequences. Further, the two “voices” have different functions or roles: one to put the tinker toy together, the other to facilitate this process, as a teacher might. In play, this dialogical structure might be made explicit through the use of puppets, one a child and one an older person. The child might be working on the tinker toy while the other tries to help, taking the role of a teacher.

*David:* The wheels go here, the wheels go here. Oh, we need to start it all over again.
*Teacher:* We need to close it up. See it closes up.
*David:* We’re starting it all over again.
*Teacher:* Do you know why we wanted to do that?
*David:* Because I needed it to go a different way. Isn’t it going to be pretty clever, don’t you think?
*Teacher:* But we have to cover up the motor just like a real car.

If the primary agenda were completion of a task, however, such an explication of the dialogue would be unnecessary. It might even shift the focus from self-guidance of behavior and execution of the task to an imaginal conversation between two characters.

Vygotsky, like Piaget, did not allow his observations of imaginal dialogues in solitary play to influence his theory of the functions of private speech. Had Vygotsky allowed himself to be guided more by the phenomena of private speech in their multiplicity of appearances and less by his presumption of the centrality of the self-regulation function, perhaps the functions he attributed to play would have transformed his overall conception of private speech.

According to Vygotsky, play is used by the child to satisfy needs that reality cannot. In the imaginary situations which a child creates, unrealizable desires can be fulfilled (1978, 93). The ability to play is the power the child has to create another reality. This power is made possible by the ability of the child to subordinate action to meaning. Play releases the child from the dictatorship of the visual realm and the “incentive supplied by external things” and allows the child to act with meanings, to rely on internal tendencies and motives (96). Rather than stressing play’s egocentrism, as Piaget does, Vygotsky is impressed with the fruits of such a liberation for a child’s continued action in the social domain. In claiming that play is the highest level of preschool development, he attributes to play the propensity for creating
voluntary intentions, to form real plans and volitional motives (103).

By defining inner speech as speech for oneself and external speech
as for others, Vygotsky leaves no room for imaginal others—be they
aspects of self, representations of known others, or wholly imaginary
others. He assumes that the internal speaker knows what he or she is
talking about and perceiving. There is no separate interlocutor or
listener. But if we were to introduce a notion of the self as non-
unitary, as having multiple points of view among which it alternates,
dialogue would no longer be an inferior form of thought. Perhaps
monologue would be appropriate in many instances. The degree of
ellipsis (when present) might be understood as it is in speech (see
E. Kaplan, 1952)—as reflecting the degree of intimacy among conver-
sational partners. Vygotsky compares the degree of ellipsis in inter-
ral speech to that found in conversation between lovers, which he
illustrates with a dialogue between Tolstoy’s characters Kitty and Levin.
But Vygotsky assumes that inner speech is elliptical not because the
self is speaking with a character or figure it knows well, but because
the only speaker is also the listener. Ellipsis in internal speech might
also be due to the degree of intimacy among conversational partners.

Vygotsky argues that the monologue is superior to the dialogue
(1962, 144), but to reach this conclusion he compares the monologue
of thought to the dialogue of social speech. Can we assume that the
latter is the same as the dialogue of internal speech? I think not. In
the imaginal dialogues of thought, self and other do not necessarily
share mutual perceptions. Thus when self and other are differenti-
ated, one would expect internal speech to become less elliptical and
more akin to spoken and written speech (the latter being, from
Vygotsky’s point of view, the most elaborate form of speech). In
internal speech when self and a voice, or two voices, hold different
perspectives, their views must be more fully elaborated than if one is
treating and explicating a single view in a monologue. Through
inner dialogue, a thought can be expressed by an imaginal other or by
the self, questioned or furthered by another. Dialogue intensifies the
way in which language carries us toward what we are going to un-
derstand, but as yet have not. “Thought germinates in speech” between
others, says Merleau-Ponty, (1973, 131), and this is also true for the
dialogues of thought. Before reasoning became synonymous with
logical thought, its archaic meaning was “to engage in conversation
or discussion” (Morris, 1969, 1036), as in Isaiah (1:18): “Come... Let us reason together.” This conversation could have both actual and imaginal partners.

Turning next to Mead, we find that this understanding of reason is foundational to his psychology of thought. It is his notion of a development from the particularized imaginal others of children’s play to the generalized other of adult thought that we wish to examine. In the nineteenth century—which Mead himself wrote about in fine detail—generalization was widely considered to be “necessary to the advancement of knowledge,” but “particularity” was seen as “indispensable to the creatures of imagination” (Thomas Babington Macaulay 1825, quoted in Abrams, 1953, 316).

One anonymous nineteenth century writer, joining many of his contemporaries, equated science with:

...any collection of general propositions, expressing important facts concerning extensive classes of phenomena; and the more abstract the form of expression—the more purely it represents the general fact, to the total exclusion of such individual peculiarities as are not comprised in it—the more perfect the scientific language becomes.

Science is the effort of reason to overcome the multiplicity of impressions, with which nature overwhelms it, by distributing them into classes, and by devising forms of expression which comprehend in one view an infinite variety of objects and events. (quoted in Abrams, 1953, 317)

Mead’s emphasis on the generalized other clearly echoes these statements, affirming what might be described as a “scientific” form of thought rather than a poetic one. The generalized other is “the most inclusive or widest community included in one’s organization of attitudes” (Miller, 1973, 49). In its highest development, says Mead, this would be analogous to a community of logicians.

The development of the generalized other is the development of socialized thought, wherein particular thoughts have the capacity to be conveyed to the widest possible audience. Such a generalization of imaginal others—a homogenization, it often sounds like—seems to be an important line of development. Its corollary, the fading out of the dramatic personae of thought, contradicts and obscures the
development of particularized others, which "taken together, form a heterogeneous, accidental collection, a teething ring for utterances and not a ball team" (Goffman, 1981, 151).

Would it not make sense that these two developments—of particularized and generalized others—are not mutually contradictory but rather mutually dependent; that the generalized other does not always supplant particularized others, but that the form of the other (particularized or generalized) is dependent on the functions of the thought in a particular instance? If so, then for Mead to construct a developmental sequence from particularized to generalized other, his preferred *teles* must have again been scientific thought based on the model of nineteenth-century science. For Mead, imaginal others symbolize absent actual others where the imaginal is an internalization of social reality, whose purpose is adaptation to and preparation for social reality. When the imaginal is seen in this way, as merely a station between two moments of time in social reality, other functions of imaginal others are surely neglected.