CHAPTER SIX

The Impact of Conceptions of Development on Approaching Imaginal Dialogues

It is not a question here of how we must turn, twist, limit or curtail the phenomenon so that it can still be explained, if need be, by principles which we once agreed not to exceed, but it is a question rather of the direction in which we must expand our ideas to come to terms with the phenomenon.

—Schelling, 1857 (quoted in Otto, 1981, 46)

Thus far we have been speaking of developmental approaches to imaginal dialogues without directly focusing on how the conceptions of development implicit in the theories presented have impacted the phenomenon under discussion. The critique of these developmental conceptions comes mainly from the organismic-developmental model.

Disentangling Development from Ontogenesis and Chronology

All of the developmental theories presented in Part I discuss the development of imaginal dialogues from an ontogenetic point of view. In other words, they discuss the emergence of and changes in such dialogues in private speech and thought from early childhood onwards. As Kaplan (1974) points out, many of our contemporary developmental theories, like evolutionaory theories forfore them, fuse the idea of development with history and biography, such that
temporally earlier forms are interpreted as relatively imperfect—destined
to be extinguished, displaced by, or transformed into later, presumably
higher, more perfect forms. Thus we see imaginal dialogues in play
replaced by abstract thought, or those in private speech transmuted
into the monologues of thought. For instance, the early display of imagi-
 nal dialogues in the symbolic play of childhood is ignored as possible
evidence for the centrality and persistence of imaginal dialogues
throughout life, or for the sophisticated ability of the preschooler to
de-center, to speak for the imaginal other, to symbolize, to meet the
rules of dialogal speech. Rather it is almost radically interpreted as
something which is and ought to be lodged in childhood. Insofar as it
appears in later life it is taken as persistence of primitivity. Much of
developmental theory is constructed such that, except in cases of
pathology, what is conceived of as "good" is evidenced in adult-
hood, and what is thought to be inferior is found in childhood and
hopefully abandoned there. So too with our evaluations of ways of
thinking in the earlier "childhood" of cultures before ours.

If this form of theorizing were not so prevalent, the child might
indeed be "father of the man" with regard to imagination, as Blake
suggested. What the analyst must infer about "self- and object-
representations," from the adult patient's thoughts, feelings and
interpersonal relations, the child spontaneously enacts in play—
revealing the dramatic structure of psyche. What a curious state of
affairs we have created when child analysts consistently refer the
plethora of characters arising from play back to the self and the actual
others of the child's daily life, while the adult analyst listens for the
characters, the self- and object-representations, in the patient's talk
of self and others! Were the adult not to relinquish the child's ability
to "hear voices," then he and the analyst would be spared the task of
making such inferences about the underlying imaginal structures of
personality and perception.

Development Concerns Not Simply What Is
But What Should Be

The conflation of development with time encourages the miscon-
ception that developmental theorists simply observe what children
do over time and report these "facts," adding to their inventory of
skills the child's achievements through time. These "facts" are of
course usually organized into some set of stages which are supposed to unfold over time, delivering a more perfect, more highly developed person (namely, the adult). Of course, this misconception serves to make developmental psychology akin to natural science. But development cannot simply be read from the "facts" of growing up. It is a perspective through which observations can be ordered.

Development is a norm or standard for interpreting and assessing actualities, and cannot itself be derived from empirical observations or experimental analyses. (Kaplan, 1981b, 8)

The "facts" which theories claim are to be found in reality are, from this perspective, produced by the given theory. Different theories produce different sets of facts, depending on the views of the nature of mind and reality that inform them. The degree to which it appears that children do go through the stages outlined in a particular theory may be seen not as a sign of the unfolding of some natural process of development, but rather as a reflection of the extent to which children have been enculturated to share the goals of that theory and the culture that created it (see Toulmin, 1981, 261). There are limits to this viewpoint, including obvious exceptions such as the development of rudimentary motor skills or physiological development in general. Beyond this rudimentary level of development, however, we find that values organize the preferred telos.

Kaplan proposes that development be seen as a movement toward perfection. A developmentalist's task then is to describe not simply what is, but what should be (1981b, 5). When one looks in this way at theories of development, one sees what the given theorist specifies implicitly or explicitly as the primary goal, and how phenomena are then selectively gathered or discarded based on their ability to explain the primary problem. For instance for Piaget this "selection pressure led to a narrowing of the range of phenomena to those that seem most capable of relating to the development of logically necessary judgments...as the problem of logical form was taken as primary" (Glick, 1981, 11-12).
**Formal Similarities**

The ontogenetic approach toward imaginal dialogues has introduced confusion into what might otherwise have seemed straightforward. For instance, Piaget argues that symbolic play (and we should add its imaginal dialogues) is replaced by rule-governed games. Such games do indeed follow the early proliferation of imaginal scenes enacted by the child, and were symbolic play to be transmuted into such games, Piaget’s thesis of a movement toward increasingly abstract and logic-oriented thought would be bolstered.

However, if we leave time as a measure of relation between two phenomena, we can focus on the degree of formal similarity instead. This focus allows us to see a clear relation between such things as the child’s imaginal dialogues in play, adult fantasy, playwriting, and praying. In all of these there are two or more roles or characters, a scene and dialogue which function to create a world—fantastical, representative, or some mixture of the two. Instead of linking imaginal dialogues in the early play of children to logical thought, would not common sense have us see them as related to dialogues in dramas and novels, to authors’ and poets’ (and eventually readers’) experiences of speaking with characters, to the imaginal dialogues of fantasy which suffuse adult thought, to adults’ experience of dialogue with God or with aspects of nature? If we can agree on this, then it should be clear that development in these realms can not be defined by the achievement of a process of de-personification of the characters or by an integration of the multiplicity of characters into a single one. These two moves would dissolve the dramatic nature of these; dialogues and make it impossible for there to be dialogue at all! How would we go about saying what development would be?

*The Preferred Telos of a Phenomenon Specifies What Constitutes Development*

The level of development of a phenomenon cannot be assessed without taking into account the particular context of the phenomenon at a given time and the given telos or goal:

...there is no single “developmental course” or “sequence” in an individual's life. With different teloi, the relevant developmental “sequence” will be different. (Kaplan, 1981b, 17)
A phenomenon, such as speaking with an imaginal figure or primary process thought, therefore, would never be primitive *per se*. Most psychoanalytic discussions assume that “the primary processes and secondary processes are mutually antagonistic and that the former have, in health, to be relegated by repression to a curious underworld” (Rycroft, 1979, 158). But the kinds of thinking Freud claimed were characteristic of dream speech—distortion, condensation, displacement, over-determination—are not just “inferior kinds of thinking (looked at from the naturalistic viewpoint) but ways of speaking poetically, rhetorically, and symbolically” (Hillman, 1975b, 85). To judge whether an imaginal figure accurately represents someone “in reality” may miss the crucial distinction between the goal of representation of and the goal of representation as (Kaplan, 1981a, 23). This confusion has led many object relations therapists to use the kind of figures in dreams and fantasies to indicate level of object representation, rather than reading them as expressive of the psychological reality of the patient (see Watkins, 1978). For instance, a woman’s dream of an imaginal figure, a haggard husband whose body is a wooden barrel, with glass chips pressed into the wood might be taken as evidence of the patient’s inability to differentiate the inanimate and the animate—despite her proven ability to do so in her capacity to relate the dream in words to a human therapist, and regardless of (perhaps) the high degree of fit between the symbol and the symbolized.

Let us illustrate further how altering the *telos* changes the assessment of the phenomenon. For Piaget the high degree of assimilation in symbolic play contributed to his pejorative assessment of it. This of course would be required if the primary developmental goal were accommodation and adaptation to the demands of external reality. But for poet William Blake assimilation was not just tolerated but given the highest value. A high degree of assimilation was not egocentric, because by first assimilating the world into oneself, one could create other worlds (Engell, 1981, 248). The creation of imaginal worlds was the primary goal. Whereas Piaget saw play as egocentric, the Romantics (and Mead as well) would have seen its imaginal dialogues as instrumental to the development of “sympathy.” That is, through such dialogues the child, like the poet,

may be said, for the time, to identify himself with the character he wishes to represent, and to pass from one to
another, like the same soul successively animating different bodies. (William Hazlitt, quoted in Abrams, 1953, 245)

The imagination, far from being a domain of self-centered wishes, was for Shelley and others the organ by which the individual could exercise sympathy, understanding, and moral goodness by identifying himself with others.

The multiplicity of developmental courses suggested in the literature concerning imaginal dialogues results from theorists' advocating different teloi as primary: the development of abstract thought, of social discourse, or of adaptation to reality. These different teloi, of course, would lead one to select different series of changes during childhood to focus on. For instance, the child first knows the imaginal other (the doll, the imaginary companion) through her own activities. The imaginal other is at first a passive recipient of the child's attention and action. Only gradually does the doll become animated and act as an agent in its own right. Also at first, the doll is used to represent either the child herself or people the child knows intimately—brother, sister, mother, father. Then there is a shift to people the child knows less well (mailman, teacher), then to people the child has heard of but never met, and finally to totally imaginary beings. Thus characters are gradually released from being props to the ego's actions and pale reflections of the already known. As characters become animated and autonomous it is possible to find out about the details of their relationships and their world, not just how they impinge on the self.

If we follow these lines of development we find ourselves rehearsing not for Piaget's scientific audience, not for actual social discourse, and not for action or a harsh reality, but rather, as Hillman has said, we find ourselves rehearsing for imaginal life itself—that other life where we are also housed, clothed, and cared for. That other life of dialogue also creeps into our gestures, our turns of phrase, the very structure of our thought, just as surely as it presents itself in our dreams and waking dreams, in art and poetry, novels and prayer. Robert Kiely points out in his discussion of Virginia Woolf that:

...through the imagination, the individual can escape exile and confinement and dwell momentarily with shepherds and queens. But the exercise of imagination involves more than inventing situations and characters, it is...a movement of mind and heart from one vantage point to
Another. It is not merely a multiplication of flat scenes, but an entrance into the dimensionality of experience beyond the self, a leap from the balcony to the stage, from silence to speech. (1980, 223)

Imaginal dialogues can be a means of creating worlds, of developing imaginative sympathy through which we go beyond the limits of our own corporeality and range of life experiences by embodying in imagination the perspectives of others, actual and imaginal. Through this relating to imaginal others (whether they be created by a novelist, by the self, or whether they arise spontaneously) our own habitual point of view (often called the ego’s) may be relativized and placed in relation to those of others. Virginia Woolf speaks of this function with regard to literature:

For we are apt to forget, reading, as we tend to do, only the masterpieces of a bygone age how great a power the body of literature possesses to impose itself: how it will not suffer itself to be read passively, but takes us and reads us; flouts our preconceptions; questions principles which we had got into the habit of taking for granted, and, in fact, splits us into two parts as we read, making us, even as we enjoy, yield our ground or stick to our guns. (1925/1953, 49)

When one is moved by the existence and autonomy of imaginal others and their worlds, one often experiences a luminous or religious quality to these dialogues; one comes upon prayer. The symbolic possibilities of imaginal dialogues are most highly developed in poetry, novels and plays, but are present in our fantasy as well.

*A Phenomenon is not Pathological in and of Itself but with Respect to a Given Telos and Context*

But of course not all imaginal dialogues would be means to these dramatic, symbolic, or spiritual ends. Clinicians know that some such dialogues can have an obsessive and repetitious quality that monopolizes thought without taking it further. Other such dialogues are confused with perception. Some are hallucinatory in character. Others are examples of extreme egocentricity, where all the characters are known shallowly or only from the point of view of the ego. Our task
will be to specify the kinds of imaginal dialogues that would be means to the teloi specified, and in so doing to take up the issue of pathological dialogues—those that would not further these ends. Once again the teloi and the context—just as they pick out some changes in childhood to be developmental and not others—also pick out what is to be considered pathological and what is not. A particular kind of imaginal dialogue is not pathological in and of itself, but only with respect to the given telos and context.

**The Universalizing of a Given Telos**

Theorists and their readers tend to universalize the telos under discussion. We have seen this in Piaget’s case where logic dominates the discussion of rather diverse phenomena, and in psychoanalysis where adaptation to “reality” holds full sway. In the former case the child is seen as a budding scientist, coming to fully recognize the necessity of “conforming to the intellectual structures of logic, Euclidean geometry, and the other basic Kantian forms” (Toulmin, 1981, 256). If we were to substitute for Piaget’s goal for thought, the telos of the child becoming a budding dramatist, the “facts” we would read would differ from Piaget, Vygotsky, and Mead’s. For instance, from a dramatic perspective how would we re-see their developmental theories? Vygotsky’s elliptical internal monologues might be seen not as monologues, but as dialogues having the formal features of speech with an intimate other. Mead’s “generalized other” might be seen not as an absence of a specific imaginal other to whom thoughts are directed, but as denoting that the thought/speech, while being directed to a specific imaginal other, is formed in a way that is understandable to a large audience. Or finally, Piaget’s thesis that the dialogues in play develop into abstract thought might be understood not as evidence of the absence of imaginal dialogues in adult life, but as a consequence of the growing child’s identification with the role of being a scientist. Early imaginal dialogues would then be seen not only as stepping stones to abstract thought or social discourse, but as expressive of the dramatic quality of mind (a thesis with many roots in philosophy, religion, aesthetics, and the early
history of psychiatry). This point of view presupposes a re-valuation of the role of imagination in mental life.

**Conclusion**

Instead of proposing a single line of development for imaginal dialogues, we are suggesting that there are several; which one is observed will depend on the chosen *telos*. We are not satisfied with the conclusion that all such dialogues become communicative speech or abstract thought. This leads to the implicit evaluation of imaginal dialogues as inferior processes which are gradually overcome in favor of more adequate communication or more logical and abstract thought. Nor shall we rest with a single line of development from the specific characters of childhood play to the generalized other, denuded of particular character or costume, homogenized and neatened for the purposes of adult thought. We shall focus on the development of imaginal dialogues, not their disappearance or their inadequacy. Our attention will therefore not be directed to the dissolution of imaginal others as they are assimilated into a broader “ego” or “self” through acts of interpretation. Rather, we will be concerned with the development of the imaginal other from an extension of the ego, a passive recipient of the imaginer’s intention, to an autonomous and animate agency in its own right. We will be less concerned with the development of a “generalized” nature of a sole imaginal other, and more concerned with the deepening of characterization of many imaginal others. We will not dwell on how the imaginal other is really ourself, but pursue further how the imaginal other is gradually

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17 We are contrasting a scientifically oriented, logical, abstract thought to a poetic and dramatic one, the former tending toward monologues, the latter toward dialogue. This might also be described not as a contrast between males and females, but between masculine and feminine forms of thought. In the feminine form, others are always taken into account. The agent does not imagine him or herself as at the center (Hermann, 1981, 88). Thought in this instance is either dialogical or at the border of dialogue—occurring as it does in the interstices of the personal. This organization of self in relation to others can be contrasted with thought that has a single, dominant voice, around which all else centers at any given moment. This is akin to Gilligan’s (1982) contrast between a masculine form of morality where abstract principles are applied across situations, and a feminine form where the agent becomes immersed imaginatively in the particular points of view within a given situation in order to come to a determination (again more implicitly dialogical).
released from our egocentrism to an autonomy from which he or she creates us as much as we create him or her. We will acknowledge the experience of our identity shifting back and forth between various personae. However this acknowledgment will not lead us only to the familiar claim that all imaginal others should be not only understood as but also experienced as aspects of self. Rather we shall look at how the self develops through both the experience of being in dialogue with imaginal others who are felt as autonomous, and the experience of even the “I” as being in flux between various characterizations.

From this perspective, personifying is seen as a human propensity not limited to children, members of “primitive” cultures, or cases of psychopathology. It is fundamental not only to mythology, poetry, drama, literature, and religion, but to thought itself. Imaginal dialogues are one of a number of possible transactions with those imaginal “personified” others who arise either spontaneously—as in early play, conversations in thought or dreams—or through a form of practice such as Jung’s active imagination, or the writing of fiction or poetry.