Inner dialogue [1]

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I wish to thank the organisers of this conference for inviting me to contribute to its programme. As the theme of this conference refers to the Springs of Dialogue, Peter Rober and I considered that discussing the inner dialogue as a wellspring of consciousness and of dialogical thought would appropriately fit into its programme.

The terms ‘inner dialogue’, or ‘inner speech’ refer to various forms of intrapersonal communication, that is, of the Self speaking to oneself. Extensive literature on this subject shows that there are different kinds of inner speech and inner dialogue, as well as of different interpretations of their functions and meanings. Among these, two main and mutually opposing approaches dominate literature.

One approach considers inner speech in terms of theories of cognition and behaviour. This approach defines inner speech as the subjective language, which is not overtly articulated, and which serves an important role in self-regulation of cognitive processes and behaviour. It focuses on scientific studies of inner speech in searching for its neural correlates in the brain, for psycholinguistic functions, and for methods that could experimentally explore inner speech in the laboratory. Some of this research refers to ideas of Lev Vygotsky on child development and it emphasises that in addition to the cortical organisation of brain maturation, social interaction and communication facilitate the transformation of external speech with other people into inner speech with oneself. However, despite acknowledging the facilitative function of social interaction, this approach views inner speech as a scientific challenge to explore its cognitive, neural, and psycholinguistic structures enabling the self-regulation of mental functions and behaviour.

The other approach views inner speech as a dialogue with oneself. Already Plato in ancient Greece considered a dialogue within the Self as a well-established phenomenon. It referred to questions such as what the right and wrong conduct was and how one should make judgements of one’s and others’ thinking and activities, among other moral issues. Closer to our time, inner dialogue was studied both in children and in adults. Already mentioned Lev Vygotsky conceived inner dialogue as a fundamental part of the developmental process in a child. He assumed that linguistically mediated social exchanges between the child and the caregiver become gradually transformed, or internalised, into inner dialogue of the self with oneself. In other words, through external social and cultural verbal mediation with others, children internalise external speech and learn to regulate their own activities.

These two approaches in the study of inner speech, the one based on self-regulation of cognitive functions and behaviour, and the one based on social and cultural mediation of external messages, have diverse theoretical and clinical implications. Whilst acknowledging their diversities, we shall focus today on the latter, that is, on the dialogical perspective of inner speech. In this perspective, inner speech has a multitude of functions, and in many respects, it can be viewed as an elaboration of external dialogues with others. Specifically, we shall be concerned with [2]

* Inner dialogue and the Self
* Some reasons for having inner dialogue
* Intuition and rationalisation
* Inner dialogue in family therapy, and inner dialogues of the therapist

1. *Inner dialogue and the Self*

[3] Even before we pose the question such as ‘why does one talk to oneself’? let us suggest that inner dialogue is a universal human phenomenon, that is, just as every human being develops thinking, language, or imagination, he/she acquires the capacity of talking to oneself.

If inner dialogue is a universal human phenomenon, what about people who, due to various kinds of disabilities, cannot acquire verbal language, for example, people with congenital deaf/blindness? Congenital deaf/blindness is a conditionwith which the child is born, or which develops in the individual before he/she acquires verbal language. People with congenital deaf/blindness may be totally blind and deaf or they may have residual vision (e.g., recognising darkness and light) and/or residual hearing (awareness of sound). Their main resource of communication is touch. The individual’s capacities to use tactile and motor signs are unique in each case, and the communication partner must learn such signs through communicative experience with that specific individual. Therefore, the foremost challenge for an individual with deaf/blindness and his/her carer, is to use senses like touch, smell, taste, and body awareness as unique dialogical resources in communication. The child and the carer co-construct symbols and concepts in and through replaying events in which these symbols and concepts were used previously.

Consider the following case: Gunnar Vege (2009), who worked as carer of children with deaf/blindness became interested in communicative moments of hesitation of the young woman before she made a gesture or a sign. Vege maintained that these moments showed her attention shifting away from external dialogical interaction. During such moments the young woman stopped responding, her face showed a disengaged attitude by turning her head a bit away from Gunnar and froze her head position while hesitating and thinking. Vege observed a specific progression of this process also in other instances and referred to them as an inner dialogue: from an intense state of concentration and a state of tension, the young woman progressed towards smiling and expressing a gesture. Vege supposed that different elements in this process displayed a narrative structure of inner dialogue. Other examples of inner dialogue of people with deaf/blindness were noted by Nafstad and Rodbroe in Denmark and Norway, and by Maslov in Estonia.

If inner dialogue is a universal phenomenon, what is it for? To suggest an answer to this question, let us follow one of the main founders of dialogism Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin insisted that the whole psychic life of humans is inner dialogue, and that, therefore, inner dialogue is fundamental for the development of the Self. The concept of Selfhood can be meaningful only if we recognise that it originates and develops in and through interaction with Others. In other words, the concepts of the Self and of Others arise, are maintained together, and make sense only when considered in a dialogical manner.

Let us illustrate this point by examples. First, consider some extreme cases from Bakhtin’s writings. In his analysis of Dostoyevsky’s novels, Bakhtin places the utmost importance on the capacity of the Self to respond to the Other, and he uses inner dialogues of Dostoyevsky’s anti-heroes to demonstrate the interdependence between the Self and Others. Bakhtin focused in these inner dialogues on the Self’s formation of images of Others, and on the impressions by which the Self attempts to deceive Others.

Let us take one instance, in which Bakhtin shows that the individual can be totally gripped by the anticipated content of the response from his/her dialogical co-author. In other words, the anticipation of rejection or of sympathy from the Other, takes control over the individual’s words, their expressions, and their internal polemic. In Dostoyevsky’s novel *Notes from the Underground (cesky: Zapisky z mrtveho domu)* Bakhtin’s analysis takes place on several levels. To start with, the hero internally imagines the dialogue with Others and their responses to him. He then tells them what they imagine. Finally, he tells them that their imagination (which in fact is his own imagination of their thoughts) does not matter to him. The hero continues to reveal his imaginations of the Others’ negative responses in order to reject them. While he would like to be independent from the Others’ judgements of himself, he cannot get his independence because he *fears* that the other might think that he *fears* the Other’s opinion. The intensity of the interaction between the Self and the Other arises from the fact that the recognition of the Other has the utmost meaning for the Self. Interpersonal interaction has a fundamental impact on how the Self feels and thinks about oneself. For example, the Self’s dialogical partner could be a parent, a close friend or someone on whom the Self emotionally depends, and whose refutation could destroy the Self’s confidence or self-respect.

The interdependence between the development of the Self and dialogical imagination is even sharper in Bakhtin’s analysis of Dostoyevsky’s confessors who committed crimes against humanity, for example murderers. Confessions are complex dialogical phenomena because the confessor necessitates the Other not only to tell his/her sins, but also demands to be acknowledged by the Other as a worthy human being. Thus, we see that dialogue fulfils several functions. One of the strategies of coping is the confessor’s simultaneous use of phrases with multiple possibilities of interpretation, such as when the confessor says ‘I am a sick man … I am an unpleasant man’. Dialogically speaking, such an utterance does not stand on its own: it is directed at the Other, and it requires and anticipates a response from the Other. Therefore, the utterance ‘I am a sick man’ awaits either acceptance or refutation of its meaning from the recipient. The confessor leaves open the possibility that the listener might agree with his/her self-condemnation and despise and reject those who accept their condemnation. Such extreme and acute dialogicality shows an extraordinary dependence on, and orientation of the Self towards the Other. At the same time, it shows an intense animosity and rejection of the Other’s evaluation and judgment, should it prove to be undesirable.

These examples from Bakhtin’s analyses show how imaginations expressed in inner dialogue mix with external dialogues and with interpretations of participants’ responses. They show concrete instances in which the Self undergoes transformations in and through imaginative dialogue with the Other on whose judgement the Self is emotionally dependent. Although these are extreme examples, even daily discourse does not escape Bakhtin’s insights, because it is filled with the Self’s and Other’s justifications and evaluations, with their ethical stands, problems of integrity, and with anxiety and fear of non-recognition by Others.

The next example of inner dialogue comes from Czechoslovakia. In her research on inner dialogue, Tania Zittoun explored an inner dialogue of a young woman imprisoned in the communist Czechoslovakia for political ‘crimes’. Hana Truncová tried to survive an extremely routinised daily life in prison. She was arrested when she was twenty-seven and condemned to thirteen years of imprisonment. She was released after nine years. In interview with two historians, she stated:

I was thinking about my future life, I planned a family and was also thinking about things that happened. In my imagination I walked on trips, travelled and remembered my life. *I would say that a prisoner lives again the life he has already lived.* You remember everything from childhood, you remember people who were important to you. It is not that you would judge your life because you cannot change anything but in prison you appreciate the fact that you were able to live and that you enjoyed it.

To conclude, we have seen that in these examples inner dialogical voices are in a constant tension, but they always remain autonomous and unfinished. Their tension is orientated towards new events and new interpretations of the Other’s words. Inner dialogues clash, conflict with external dialogues with the others, all leading to new discursive possibilities. In this sense inner dialogue is fundamental for the development of the Self.

It may

* take place without verbal speech
* concern commitments and loyalties to a social group to which the Self belongs
* take place together with external dialogue
* express distrust while externally attempt to communicate trust
* involve a conflict between the Self’s own norms and those of the group
* take specific linguistic forms and speech styles.

1. *Some reasons for having inner dialogues*

[4] Social scientific literature provides many examples of inner dialogues in which the Selves are concerned with their contradicting ideas, questioning, arguing, and assuring themselves about their correctness and falsity. Often, one’s scientific beliefs may contradict other beliefs that one holds simultaneously. We may remind ourselves of the seventeenth century astronomer Johannes Kepler’s inner dialogues in which he attempted to unite his discoveries in astronomy with his deep faith in God. He commenced his book on *The Harmonies of the World* with ‘a secret discourse, a most true hymn to God the Founder’. For God, the creator of geometrical celestial harmonies, the circle was the symbol of perfection. Kepler’s own discovery that planets move in ellipses around the Sun was shattering because his scientific pursuits and mystic religious beliefs conflicted with his belief that planets should move in circles symbolising the perfection of God.

Literature shows many instructive examples of scientists’ struggles with their ideas as well as with misunderstandings of terminology they were using (for example, the French anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl was using the term ‘pre-logical thinking’ with respect to thinking of non-western people. He was accused of racist prejudices for allegedly claiming that the thinking of primitive people is inferior and irrational, although for him, ‘pre-logical thinking’ referred to a cultural form of thought that was rational on its premises). However, because of critiques, Lévy-Bruhl later changed his terminology.

The Austrian/British social psychologist Marie Jahoda showed the importance of self-critical inner dialogues in her own work, which led her to reformulate her thoughts and questions, and to find new questions.

In addition to self-critical inner dialogues leading to new questions, humans may retrospectively reinterpret their original motives, reasons for, and aims of their views or theories. They may reconstruct their initial theory in terms of new motives and new convictions, and then forcefully present them as true motives. Such retrospective reinterpretations may happen for multiple personal and non-scientific reasons including memory problems, self-justifications, or beliefs about oneself.

[5] Among various examples, let us remind the autobiography of Albert Einstein who retrospectively reconstructed the development of his special theory of relativity. While earlier in his life he referred to influences of previous physicists on his ideas when he was developing the theory of special relativity, later in his autobiography he discarded such influences. In analysing Einstein’s retrospective rewriting of his work and his personal history, van Dongen concludes that ‘Einstein rewrote his own history and crafted his own version of his persona to justify and promote his unification attempts: theoretical and personal virtues here mirrored one another.’

We need to add that the two kinds of reinterpretation of the author’s theory, i.e., one resulting from a genuine development of ideas, and one based on a retrospective reinterpretation of motives and goals, may be intermeshed, partly consciously and partly unconsciously, both by the author of the theory and by his/her interpreters. Nevertheless, the authors’ inner dialogues determine the fate of the theory, its ‘official’ version, and its acceptance, rejection, or interpretation.

In conclusion, in inner dialogues the Selves are concerned with their contradicting ideas, questioning, arguing, and assuring themselves about their correctness and falsity, and retrospectively reconstructing their reasons for activities to justify themselves or to present themselves in desirable lights. Often, one’s beliefs may contradict other beliefs that one holds simultaneously.

1. *Rationalization and intuition*

If inner dialogue represents the whole of psychic life, it means that it is concerned with the multitude of heterogeneous mental faculties, for example, thinking, memories, emotions, imagining, responsibility, ethical and aesthetic concerns, and otherwise. Manifold effects of these faculties underlie different kinds of inner dialogues that serve diverse purposes and goals upon which the individual reflects and about which he/she reasons. However, this reflective rationalization seeking the way forward is only one feature of inner dialogue. The individual lives in society that has history and culture, in which phenomena are not only in a continuous movement, but which also become relatively stabilized, and these, too, influence reflective faculties of the individual. Such stabilized phenomena represent what is often known as common sense, intuition, unquestioned truths, and otherwise. In other words, both the reflective rationalization seeking the way forward, and the relatively stabilized mental states have a direct effect on the Self’s decision-making and risk-taking.

In following Peter Rober’s ideas on inner dialogue in relation to family therapy, we shall focus on struggles and tensions between relatively stabilized intuitive dialogical thinking on the one hand and on reflexive rationalizing of thinking on the other.

*3.1 Rationalization and intuition: history*

[6] Although rationalization and intuition, as different modes of thinking and knowing have been known since ancient Greece, it was the seventeenth century philosopher Blaise Pascal who coined the distinction between rationalisation, or the ‘Spirit of Geometry’, and intuition, or the ‘Spirit of Finesse’. This differentiation has led to two kinds of scholarship. The ‘Spirit of Geometry’ inspired the development of scientific knowledge, and required a rational, systematic, and rigorous thought. The Age of Reason or Enlightenment of the eighteenth century pursued the belief in the growth of universal rationality, and the logical capacities of humans. The rapidly developing science, ruled by Blaise Pascal’s ‘Spirit of Geometry’, and based on the mechanistic principles of Newtonian physics, became the leading power of rational thought and technological innovations. It enabled advancements in astronomy, chemistry, and biology; these ‘rational’ disciplines aimed to discover the truth about the world and universe. In contrast, the ‘Spirit of Finesse’ referred to intuitive and creative features of the mind. Enlightenment considered the ‘Spirit of Finesse’ as a non-scientific perspective and associated it with irrationality. The beginnings of social sciences in the eighteenth century, rather than incorporating the scientific ‘Spirit of Geometry’, were much closer to Pascal’s notion of intuition, or to the ‘Spirit of Finesse’. They studied social phenomena like nationalism, religion, myths, beliefs, and communities.

Among the followers of Pascal, the nineteenth century French philosopher Henri Bergson took up the dichotomy between the ‘Spirit of Geometry’ and the ‘Spirit of Finesse’, and developed it further as the distinction between intellect and intuition. Bergson was a critic of mechanistic philosophy and of materialism; his philosophy was based on the concept of creative evolution and the uniqueness of human experience. While he characterized intelligence as the individual’s capacity to think or act with a goal, he referred to intuition as the direct experience of something or of oneself. It was based on imagination, memory, emotions, and the creative impulse.

Intuition has been important in human and social sciences in various ways. Psychological studies into the very early life of infants on face recognition, imitation, communication, interactional rhythm, and recognition of voices provided evidence that infants intuitively relate to a human face immediately after birth. Their response to human face differs from that towards objects: the human face obliges the Self and Other to get involved in a dialogical action.

The human face is a speaking face relating the participants in and through speech and communication. The dialogical philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas argued that the human face has the force of immediacy; such an immediate relation is not reflective, but it is an unreflective sensibility. Unreflective sensibility is prior to any rational reflection: ‘it is not a blind reason and folly. It is prior to reason’. The face is not something to observe but it is something that commands the individual to engage with it. The biological world is ruled by a struggle for life and the struggle for life is without ethics. Ethics arrives only with the emergence of humans and ‘the beginning of language is the face’. Lévinas insists that language does not start with signs or with words. Language is the fact of being addressed, of being spoken to. With the appearance of humans, the struggle for one’s own life totally transforms: the emergence of ethics makes the life of the Other(s) more important than one’s own life. For example, humans may act on impulsive intuition to save someone’s life (e.g., jumping into water to save someone from drowning) and even sacrificing one’s own life to save others.

But equally, humans may use physical and verbal violence to destroy the other.

In conclusion, reflexive rationalisation and intuition are two features of inner speech and they raise questions about their roles, functions, and mutual integration.

*3.2 Daniel Kahneman*

[7] With these ideas in mind, in his analysis of inner dialogue in family therapy, Peter Rober refers to Daniel Kahneman’s distinction between two cognitive systems: to intuition on the one hand, and to the deliberate and analytic cognition on the other. In contrast to many of his predecessors who acknowledged the existence of these two mental systems, Kahneman does not denigrate intuition as irrational thought, but he poses the question how the two systems work together. He characterises intuition as the first cognitive system which is fast and automatic, is attuned to context and is timplicit. Kahneman assumes that humans acquire intuition in and through experience. In contrast, the second cognitive system is deliberate, analytical, and reflective in attempting to solve problems. It proceeds sequentially, step-by-step, analysing the situation in question in an explicit and orderly way. Kahneman’s interest is human risk-taking, and acting in uncertainty, and much of his discussion is concerned with biases of intuition. While intuition can rapidly and correctly solve problems, it can also provide misleading solutions. Kahneman views the two systems as complementary, and he poses questions as to how they should interact together in risk-taking situations. While some situations require quick and implicit action, others need an evaluative and calm approach.

However, while Kahneman is concerned with cognition and risk-taking of the individual, Peter Rober’s concerns are clearly dialogical. He poses questions about the extent to which the two systems, in and through inner dialogue of the therapist, are relevant and mutually involved in difficult situations of family therapy. In such dialogical situations humans are ethically engaged, they have aesthetic feelings, and they take, or reject responsibility for each other. As Peter Rober observes, the balance between these two systems is fundamental in the work of clinical psychotherapy, in which there is a dynamic tension between the two complementary cognitive systems.

However, before we turn to the challenging question of how to balance the two cognitive systems, i.e., cognitive rationalization and intuition, let us briefly summarize different ways we referred, today, to intuition.

*3.3 Intuition: summary*

[8] Intuition, we have seen, can be viewed on different planes. On one level, taking the Lévinas’ perspective, intuitive, or unreflective sensibility to human face which has the force of immediacy and is prior to any rational reflection, is a feature of humanity. A response to the human face and to suffering is immediate and prior to any reflection. At another level, psychologists explored the neonates’ relation to a human face immediately after birth, and they found that their intuitive responses to human face differ from those towards physical objects. Studies on neonates’ face recognition, imitation, communication, interactional rhythm, and recognition of voices by neonates have provided ample evidence of intuitive responses, and they mark intuition as an ontological feature of recognizing humanity. Third, intuition, just like common sense, can be learned in and through culture. Repetitions in physical, biological, and social domains become stabilised – a become socially accepted and taken for granted.

[9] Among these, political and ideological repetitions of propaganda turn into authoritative inner speech that demands to be acknowledged and accepted without questions (e.g., a religious dogma, ideological conviction, scientific truth, a moral position, common sense, unquestioned beliefs.). Bakhtin insisted that authoritative discourse precludes interpretations. It demands to be accepted in inner dialogue and obtains monological qualities. It does not allow openness and dialogical relations. One can disobey authoritative discourse but cannot argue with it. It is closed to development and unfinalizability. Finally, Kahneman argued, that the individual develops intuition through repeated experience.

1. *Inner dialogue in family therapy, and inner dialogues of the therapist*

[10] As I understand it, Peter Rober’s dialogical concerns refer to the extent to which the two systems, i.e., rationalization and intuition, in and through inner dialogue of the therapist are relevant and mutually involved in difficult situations of family therapy. He draws attention to two kinds of biases in the therapist’s inner dialogue as projected in interaction with clients. At one extreme, the therapist may be guided by rationalisation. He/she observes, evaluates available choices, makes logical judgements based on normative generalised models. Contemporary emphasis of scientific models pays attention to cognition and attempts to solve problems by evidence-based facts, which rarely considers concrete situational problems. This approach tends to underestimate intuitive and tacit knowledge, arguing that it can be wrong and does not give credit to ‘scientific’ evidence.

At another extreme, the therapist may be guided by intuition. But as we have seen, intuition raises questions about its different planes, such as historical, cultural, ontogenetic, and individual. Some kinds of intuition present themselves as unquestioned authoritative inner discourse that is obeyed without questions. Other intuitions adopt the interpretative discourse in which, in Bakhtin’s terms, a word is always ‘half-ours and half-someone else’. The creative and productive interpretative semantic structure in never finished, and each new context dialogise the structure in new ways. These two kinds of emphasis in family therapy raise challenging question about training therapists.

[11] Moreover, there is skilled intuition, intuition developed through proper training, experience, and repetition. Skilled intuition, Rober maintains, is different from impulsive intuition which is no more than gratifying one’s own needs or desires (e.g., one’s need to be needed, one’s need to feel useful) or as the acting out of overwhelming emotions (e.g., fear, anger).

As Rober shows, explicit cognitive activities of rationalisation are in a constant dynamic tension with tacit and implicit intuition. Imbalance between the two mental system is likely to be insufficient therapeutic responses and the problem is, he emphasises, to integrate these two approaches, and make their integration the main feature of training therapists.

1. *Conclusion*

[12] In this presentation I focused on some features of inner dialogue, that is, on interaction of voices between the Self and various absent ‘Others’. Such absent ‘Others’ may include individuals, groups, the public, socio-political and cultural environments, and their institutions. These absent ‘Others’ contribute to simultaneous and heterogeneous viewpoints expressed in inner dialogues within the Self. These diverse dialogues may be in mutual contradiction, may interfere, or corroborate one another.

I presented some evidence that inner dialogue is a universal human phenomenon, that is, just as human beings develop thinking or imagination, they acquire the capacity of talking to oneself. Selfhood can develop and exist only in and through interaction with Others. Inner dialogical voices are in a constant tension, but they always remain autonomous and unfinished. They clash, conflict with external dialogues, all leading to new discursive possibilities. In this sense inner dialogue is fundamental for the development of the Self.

I discussed some reasons for having inner dialogue. Among these, the Self may hold simultaneously contradicting beliefs and attempts to resolve these; the Self may struggle with his/her ideas and with misunderstandings of terminology. In addition to self-critical inner dialogues, humans may retrospectively reinterpret their original motives, reasons for, and aims of their views. They may reconstruct their initial theory in terms of new motives and new convictions, and then forcefully present them as true motives.

Inner dialogues represent the whole of psychic life and involve direct and indirect influences of the multitude of heterogeneous mental faculties, for example, thinking, memories, emotions, imagining, responsibility, and ethical and aesthetic concerns. The manifold effects of these faculties underlie different kinds of inner dialogues that serve diverse purposes and goals.

Inner dialogues in family therapy refer to intuitive dialogical thinking on the one hand, and to rationalizing of thinking on the other. Peter Rober poses questions about the extent to which the two systems in and through inner dialogue of the therapist are relevant and mutually involved in difficult situations of family therapy. He observes that the fundamental challenge for training therapists is to establish the balance between these two systems, which are in a continuous dynamic tension.

Finally, inner dialogue emerges from a multitude of sources showing that it is a wellspring of consciousness, of dialogical thought and of therapeutic resources.