The Dialogical Self

Beyond Individualism and Rationalism

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There is growing awareness among psychologists that the individualistic and rationalistic character of contemporary psychological theories of the self reflect an ethnocentric Western view of personhood. In opposition to this view, it is argued from a constructionist perspective that the self can be conceived of as dialogical, a view that transcends both individualism and rationalism. A comparison of three constructionist forerunners (Vico, Vaihinger, and Kelly) suggests that to transcend individualism and rationalism, the embodied nature of the self must be taken into consideration. Moving through space and time, the self can imaginatively occupy a number of positions that permit mutual dialogical relations. The classic Jamesian distinction between the I and the Me is translated in a narrative framework. The implications for three areas of psychological research—attrition theory, moral development, and the individual differences paradigm—are briefly discussed.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the role of culture and history in shaping the content of basic psychological processes. In particular, the concept of the self has been of growing importance in the discipline over the past decade. The dominant conception of the self in Western thought has been characterized as “self-contained” (Sampson, 1988), “self-reliant and independent” (J. Spence, 1985), “standing out of the group” (Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn, 1984), “egocentric” (Shweder & Bourne, 1982), a “centralized equilibrium structure” (Sampson, 1985), “selfish” (Schwartz, 1986), a “distinctive whole set contrastively against other such wholes” (Geertz, 1979), and “rationalistic” (F. Johnson, 1985). Recently, Cushman (1990) highlighted the problematic character of the Western self by describing it both in terms of “self-contained individualism” and “emptiness.”

Vico: To Know is to Make

Giambratista Vico, born in 1668 as the son of a bookseller in Naples, is generally recognized as one of the founders of the philosophy of history (cf. Hora, 1966). His main work, Scienza Nuova (New Science), which he wrote and rewrote until his death in 1744, was posthumously pub-

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1 For other significant influences on contemporary constructionist thought, see Berger and Luckmann (1971, pp. 13–30), K. J. Gergen (1985), and Valsiner and Van der Veer (1988).
lished in the same year. The main thesis is that this historical world is certainly created by human beings, "and therefore the structure of history must be sought in the human mind" (Vico, 1744/1966, pp. 51–52, translated from German; see also Hora, 1966, p. 233). According to Vico, the relation between history and the workings of the human mind cannot be properly understood when history is conceived of as purely objective facts. In Vico's view the relation between mind and reality can only be understood in terms of creative behavior—people make their own history.

Much in Vico's thinking was in opposition to Descartes' famous thesis, cogito, ergo sum (I think, therefore I am). Vico rejected Descartes' method of systematic doubt because it ignored the role of historical knowledge, reported by witnesses and written down in documents, in human awareness. Vico argued that cogito as the final certainty is a serious reduction of the human condition and results in an ahistorical and disembodied conception of the human mind. Instead, Vico elaborated on the view that mind and body are inseparable: Buried in a body, the human mind is in history and makes history at the same time. "Because I consist of body and mind, therefore I think" (Hora, 1966, p. 236). Along these lines Vico arrived at the conclusion "verare et facere idem esse" (knowing and doing are the same; Hora, 1966, p. 237).

Following the conviction that Cartesian reason cannot become a productive force in history independent of the body, Vico wondered which human capacity was capable of shaping or influencing the environment. In his attempt to answer this question, he realized that progress with regard to the environment has, since ancient times, been the result of inventions. Vico therefore assumed the existence of a creative force in human nature, which he called ingenium. With this force humans can alter the physical world and make history. Endowed with ingenium, people are able to move things into "new relationships" (Hora, 1966, p. 241).

**Vaihinger: As If**

Although Vaihinger (1852–1933) is sometimes regarded as a pragmatist, he himself stroked an important difference between pragmatism and fictionalism. According to pragmatism, "an idea which is found to be useful in practice proves thereby that it is also true in theory" (Vaihinger, 1935, p. viii). According to Vaihinger's philosophy of as if, or fictionalism, "an idea whose theoretical untruth or incorrectness, and therewith its falsity, is admitted, is not for that reason practically valueless and useless; for such an idea, in spite of its theoretical nullity may have great practical importance" (p. viii). That is, a fiction may have a clear function.

As Vaihinger (1935) explained, his concept of fiction is rooted in the Latin word fictio, which means the activity of fingering (fingere): constructing, forming, giving shape, elaborating, presenting, or artistically fashioning. The word also refers to the product of these activities—the fiction, counterfactual assumption, fabrication, creation, or imagined case. Mythology, insofar as it is the common source of religion, poetry, art, and science, is probably the prototypical fiction. Myth and fiction do not correspond to reality, but they nevertheless contain "constructs which are freely fashioned out of empirical elements" (pp. 81–82). Vaihinger's favorite examples were Pegasus, the sphinx, the centaur, and the griffin, all of which are products of a reordering of elements of the real world.

Vaihinger (1935) did not focus on the presence of fiction in only mythological, religious, or aesthetic products. He also considered the existence of fiction in science. Many physicists regarded the atom as a provisional tool for the concrete expression of certain phenomena. That is, physical phenomena can be reduced to forces and relative effects of forces represented in terms of minimal particles. The only reason the concept of the atom was maintained was because no better means for connecting numerous phenomena existed (p. 221).

Interested as Vaihinger was in science, he devoted a separate chapter in his book (Vaihinger, 1935) to the difference between fiction and hypothesis. A hypothesis is based on reality: It claims or hopes to coincide with some perception. A hypothesis is submitted to empirical tests and demands verification. If, for example, a hypothesis is put forward that humans are descended from lower mammals, it requires the actual existence of direct and indirect ancestors. A hypothesis needs verification, but fiction demands justification. The former must be confirmed by experience, whereas the latter must be justified by its service to experience. Actual existence in reality is not required in the case of fiction. In Vaihinger's view fiction is a conscious, practical, and thus fruitful error. Vaihinger argued that fictions are scientific instruments without which the higher development of thought would be impossible.

**Kelly: Personal Constructs**

Kelly (1905–1967), the founder of the psychology of personal constructs, was certainly within what is by now named constructionism. Much of Kelly's thinking is based on constructivist alternativism. To make sense of the world, one must interpret it, and alternative interpretations are always available (p. 15). However, absolute construction of the universe is impossible, and therefore one must settle for a series of successive approximations to it.

Kelly's work has a special affinity to Vaihinger's philosophy in that both authors acknowledged the subjective nature of human perception. In fact, Kelly cited Vaihinger approvingly in later publications (Kelly, 1964). Therefore, we will concentrate on what Kelly meant by the term personal construct and how this is related to Vaihinger's philosophy of as if.

According to Kelly (1955), "A construct is a way in which some things are construed as being alike and yet different from others" (p. 105). He founded his theory on the metaphor of person as scientist, and it is in the light of this metaphor that the notion of a personal construct should be interpreted.

We consider a construct to be a representation of the universe, a representation erected by a living creature and then tested.
against the reality of that universe. Since the universe is essentially a course of events, the testing of a construct is a testing against subsequent events. In other words, a construct is tested in terms of its predictive efficiency. (p. 12)

In terms of Vaihinger's philosophical system, Kelly's personal construct is a hypothesis and not a fiction. That is, constructs are used for predictions of things to come, and the world keeps rolling along and revealing these predictions to be either correct or misleading. This fact provides the basis for revision of constructs and, eventually, of whole construction systems. (Kelly, 1955, p. 14)

It should not come as a surprise, therefore, to see Kelly's construct described in some textbooks (e.g., Pervin, 1989, p. 237) as a hypothesis that allows the scientist to pursue its implications as if it were true. Investigators working within personal construct theory make use of the as if notion at times. Mair (1977), for example, discussed the case of a stutterer encouraged to consider his stutter as if it were a person to be dealt with. Indeed, Kelly himself may have been ambiguous on this issue. In his fixed-role therapy (Kelly, 1955), for example, the client is invited to do as if he or she were another person. Nevertheless, Kelly emphasized that the fixed-role sketch—written for the client to practice a new role—must entail formulations that “can be immediately and widely checked against reality... akin to saying that a new scientific theory should provide testable hypotheses” (p. 372).

Independent of whether Kelly (1955) mistakenly blurred the distinction between fiction and hypothesis, it cannot be denied that the theoretical nature of his construct is a hypothesis and not a fiction. Vaihinger (1935) explicitly connected the words as if with fiction and the word if with hypotheses (p. 126). Because the hypothesis in the Kellian sense takes the form of an if-then statement (e.g., if my neighbor shouts at me, then I see him as aggressive), it should be considered an if concept rather than an as-if concept.

In sum, Kelly's constructive alternativism was groundbreaking work that challenged the pervasive assumption of an objective reality by recognizing the alternative interpretations of the world or hypotheses created by people. It represents a milestone in constructionist theory and is exemplary of the complementary use of psychological and philosophical thinking.

Comparison of Vico, Vaihinger, and Kelly

A clear similarity among Vico, Vaihinger, and Kelly is their emphasis on the human capacity for imagination. Vico did this with his term ingenium, Vaihinger with the function of fiction, and Kelly with his constructive alternativism. Another striking similarity is that all three of these men saw the human mind as basically active and organizing: Vico argued that humans make their own history; Vaihinger showed that people create fictions for practical reasons and showed the as if construction to be a cross-categorization of different domains; and Kelly argued that people are continually organizing and reorganizing their construct system (see Mahoney, 1988, for additional discussion of essential characteristics of constructionism).

However, there are two differences among Vico, Vaihinger, and Kelly that have implications for the remainder of this article. One difference is between Vaihinger and Kelly—Vaihinger considered fiction to be central to his philosophy and Kelly took hypothesis testing to underlie the creation of personal constructs. Another difference is between Vico, on the one hand, and Vaihinger and Kelly, on the other: Vico, particularly in his vehement criticism of Descartes’s cogito, emphasized the bodily nature of thought and imagination. This emphasis on the intrinsic unity of mind and body was not systematically elaborated in either Vaihinger’s notion of fiction (which is primarily a mental invention) or Kelly’s personal construct (which is mental categorization).

The Body in the Mind

In his challenging book, The Body in the Mind, M. Johnson (1987) argued for the centrality of human embodiment in human cognition. Just what and how things can be meaningful for us is shaped by our patterns of bodily movement, our spatial and temporal orientation to the world, and our interaction with the objects in the world. Human cognition is never merely a matter of abstract conceptualizations and propositional judgments.

Johnson clearly opposed objectivism, which he saw as the dominant approach to meaning in today’s philosophy, linguistics, psychology, and computer science. Objectivism is not merely an abstruse philosopher’s project; it also has significant ramifications for everyday life. In its unsophisticated manifestation it tends to take the following form: The world consists of objects, which have properties and stand in various relationships independent of human understanding. The world is as it is, no matter what any person happens to believe about it. In addition, there is a rational structure to reality, independent of the beliefs of any particular people, and correct reasoning mirrors this structure. In order to describe an objective reality of this sort, moreover, language is needed to express concepts mapped onto objects, properties, and relations in a literal, unequivocal, context-independent fashion. Reasoning is seen as the joining of basic concepts into propositions that describe different aspects of reality. Reason is thus a purely formal capacity to draw inferences from literal concepts using the rules of logic. Words are arbitrary symbols that, although meaningless in themselves, get their meaning by virtue of their direct connection to things in the world (for a discussion of the rationalistic character of contemporary European–American social science, see Ornstein, 1981).

A vast network of empirical studies in combination with a wealth of arguments led M. Johnson (1987) to his central thesis that “any adequate account of meaning and rationality must give a central place to embodied and imaginative structures of understanding by which we grasp our world” (p. xiii).

To illustrate this important and undervalued notion
of embodied, imaginative understanding, let us consider the notion that is most central to Johnson’s thesis—the concept of metaphor (see also Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The essence of metaphor is that interpretive patterns from one domain of experience are projected onto another domain of experience. Conceived in such a way, metaphor is not merely a linguistic mode of expression; it is one of the chief cognitive structures producing coherent and ordered experiences. Through metaphor, we make use of patterns obtaining in our physical experience to organize our more abstract understanding. Consider, for example, the very simple but pervasive metaphor of more is up. Examples such as “Prices are going up,” “The number of books published each year keeps rising,” “His gross earnings fell,” and many others, suggest that we understand quantitative more in terms of quantified verticality in space, up. More and up are correlated in our experience in a way that provides a physical basis for our abstract understanding. Whole systems of concepts are organized spatially: happy is up, sad is down, good is up, bad is down, important is up, unimportant is down, and so on. Although there are no compelling logical arguments to do so, we use a verticality schema that corresponds with the shape of our body in structuring the world (see also Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, who took “le corps-sujet,” the body subject, as central to his conception of intentionality).

The Self as a Mind Space

Jaynes (1976), in his treatment of consciousness, also considered metaphor essential to thought and not simply a figure of speech. The most prominent group of words used to describe mental events, Jaynes observed, are visual. We “see” solutions to problems, the best of which may be “brilliant” and the person “bright” or “clear-headed,” as opposed to “dull,” “fuzzy-minded,” or “obscure” solutions. Similarly, in our reasoning we speak of the “heart,” “kernel,” “core,” or “marrow” of an argument.

According to Jaynes (1976), the self is also spatially organized. In his description of the self as mind space he drew on James’s (1890) distinction between the I and the Me, or the self as subject and the self as object, a classic distinction in the self literature (Rosenberg, 1979). The I constructs an analog space and metaphorically moves in this space (e.g., following a “train of thought”). The I can move about in our imagination, doing things that we are not actually doing. Besides the I, Jaynes distinguished the metaphor Me that refers to the person observed to move in space and time. For example, when one plans to take a walk, one can imagine the view and step a little further back to see oneself resting along the way in a restaurant. In consciousness the I is always seeing the Me as the main figure in the story of one’s life. Narration is not only evident in the example of walking along a path, but is the main characteristic of all human activities. Seated where I am, Jaynes explains, I am writing a book and this fact is imbedded in the story of my life: “time being spatialized into a journey of my days and years” (p. 63). The kernel of Jaynes’s thinking is that the conscious mind, and the self in particular, is a spatial analogue of the world, and mental acts are analogs of bodily acts. The self functions as a space in which the I observes the Me and relates the movements of the Me in a storylike fashion.

After an insightful comparison of the works of Jaynes (1976) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Smith (1985) concluded that the meaning of basic concepts in a particular culture (e.g., mind, time, or love) “inheres primarily in the network of its metaphorical affinities, which characteristically can be described as connotationally coherent rather than logically consistent” (p. 73). Smith also concluded that the spatialized and narrated construction of experience demands respect for the as if, not debunking of it. According to Smith, the value-laden world is richly metaphorical and in this condition lies its tragedy, comedy, and glory (p. 75).

Two Modes of Thought

Drawing on a distinction originally made by William James, Bruner (1986) has argued that there are basically two modes of thought: storytelling (narrative thinking) and argumentation (propositional thinking). Each provides a distinct means for ordering experience and construing reality. Each mode of thought also has its own operating principles and criteria for well-formedness. A good story and a well-formulated argument are different natural kinds. Arguments are intended to convince someone of their truth; stories are intended to convince someone of their lifeliness. Argumentation appeals to formal and empirical proof procedures; storytelling appeals to verisimilitude (Vaihinger, 1935, would distinguish between verification and justification, respectively).

Storytelling and argumentation, according to Bruner (1986), also imply different kinds of inference. The term then functions differently in the logical proposition “If x, then y” than in the narrative “The king died, and then the queen.” One leads to a search for universal truth conditions, the other for particular connections between events. The story must conform to the canons of logical consistency to achieve verisimilitude, but violations of expected consistency also provide the basis for drama.

Bruner (1986) contrasted the imaginative quality of the narrative mode with the deductive quality of the logical-scientific mode. The former leads to good stories, gripping drama, and believable historical accounts, whereas the latter refers to the ability to see possible formal connections before one is able to prove them empirically. The narrative mode deals in human intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark its course, whereas the logical-scientific mode seeks to transcend the particular by reaching for higher and higher levels of abstraction. The narrative mode strives to put the general human condition into the particulars of experience, and attempts to locate experience in time and space (p. 13).

Sarbin (1986) also viewed the narrative as a way of organizing episodes, actions, and accounts of actions in
time and space, and as an achievement that brings together mundane facts and fantastic creations. Not only are fantasies and daydreams unvoiced stories, but also planning, remembering, and even loving and hating are guided by narrative plots.

Both Sarbin (1986) and Bruner (1986) referred in their accounts of the narrative nature of the human psyche to the work of the Belgian psychologist Michotte (1946/1963), who performed experiments on the human perception of causality. Michotte constructed an apparatus that allowed an observer to see two or more small colored rectangles in motion. The experimenter controlled the speed, direction, and distance travelled by the figures. With particular configurations, the observers were found to attribute causality to the movements of the rectangles. For example, if rectangle A stopped after moving toward B, and rectangle B then began to move, the observers would say that B "got out of the way" of A. In such cases, subjects typically reported their perceptions in as if terms. For example, "It is as if A's approach frightened B and B ran away"; "It is as if A, in touching B induced an electric current which set B going"; "It is as if A touched off a mechanism inside B and thus set it going." Sarbin (1986) concluded from these and other observations that the meaningless movements of the rectangles were assigned meaning and described in the idiom of the narrative. Similarly, Bruner (1986) concluded from Michotte's and other studies that it is possible to arrange the space-time relationship in such a way that intention or animacy are implied. Searching, goal seeking, and persistence in overcoming obstacles are plainly seen as intention-driven behaviors (Bruner, 1986, p. 18).

As Sarbin (1986) and others (e.g., Crites, 1986; K. J. Gergen & M. M. Gergen, 1988; Hermans, 1987a; Hermans & Van Gilst, 1991; Kempen, 1986; McAdams, 1985, 1988; Thomae, 1988) have argued, the self can also be studied fruitfully from the perspective of the narrative. Of special relevance for the present article is Sarbin's thesis that James, Mead (1934), Freud and others emphasized the distinction between the I and the Me and their equivalents in other European languages precisely because of the narrative nature of the self. The uttering pronoun I stands for the author, the Me for the actor or narrative figure. In this configuration, moreover, the I can imaginatively construct a story with the Me as the protagonist. Such narrative construction is possible because the self as author can imagine the future and reconstruct the past.

James's original distinction between the I and the Me can be reformulated in narrative terms by seeing the I as author and the Me as actor. The self can be reformulated as the narrative self, which reflects the embodied and imaginative nature of the human mind, and the deeds, thoughts, and feelings of the self-actor understood as movements across space and time.

The Self as a Dialogical Narrator

The conceptualization of the self in narrative terms can be further expanded by referring to the work of the Russian literary scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin, especially his book Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (1929/1973). The importance of this work for psychology has been discussed by Vasil'eva (1988) and Florenskaya (1989). We will first show that Bakhtin's ideas were a significant contribution to understanding the dialogue nature of the self and then elaborate on his ideas with more recent psychological and anthropological work.

The Notion of the Polyphonic Novel

Bakhtin (1929/1973) observed that Fedor Dostoevsky, one of the most brilliant innovators of literary form, created a peculiar form of artistic thought—the polyphonic novel. In Dostoevsky's novels there is not one single author, Dostoevsky himself, but several authors or thinkers (e.g., the characters Raskolnikov, Myshkin, Stavrogin, Ivan Karamazov, and the Grand Inquisitor). Each of these heroes has his own voice ventilating his own view, and each hero is authoritative and independent. A hero is not simply the object of Dostoevsky's finalizing artistic vision, but comes across as the author of his own ideology. According to Bakhtin, there is not a multitude of characters within a unified objective world, illuminated by Dostoevsky's individual vision, but a plurality of perspectives and worlds: a polyphony of voices. As in a polyphonic composition, the several voices or instruments have different spatial positions and accompany and oppose each other in a dialogical relation.

The notion of the polyphonic novel requires an explanation of the difference between logical and dialogical relations. Bakhtin (1929/1973) gave the following examples (see also Vasil'eva, 1988). Consider two phrases that are completely identical: "life is good" and again "life is good." In terms of Aristotelian logic these two phrases are connected by a relationship of identity; they are, in fact, one and the same statement. From a dialogical perspective, however, they may be seen as two sequential remarks following each other in time and coming from two spatially separated people in communication, who in this case entertain a relationship of agreement. The two phrases are identical from a logical point of view, but different as utterances or speech acts: the first is a statement, the second a confirmation. In a similar way the statements "life is good" and "life is not good" can be compared. In a logical sense one is a negation of the other. However, when the two phrases are taken as utterances from two different speakers, a dialogical relation of disagreement can be seen to exist. In Bakhtin's worldview, the relationship of agreement and disagreement is, like question and answer, a basic dialogical form.

For Bakhtin (1929/1973) the notion of dialogue referred to the essential nature of the character's psyche. By transforming an inner thought of a particular character into an utterance, dialogical relations spontaneously occur between this utterance and the utterance of imaginary others. Dostoevsky's novel The Double may function as an example. In this work the second hero (the double) was introduced as a personification of the interior voice of the first hero (Golyadkin). By externalizing the interior voice of the first hero in a spatially separated opponent,
a full-fledged dialogue between two independent parties can develop. In this dialogue each character can tell, as an independent author, a story about himself. In Bakhtin’s terms:

This persistent urge to see all things as being coexistent and to perceive and depict all things side by side and simultaneously, as if in space rather than time, leads him to dramatize in space even the inner contradictions and stages of development of a single person. (p. 23)

In this narrative construction Dostoevsky presupposed a plurality of consciousnesses and, correspondingly, a plurality of worlds that are neither identical nor unified, but rather heterogeneous and even opposed. According to this device Dostoevsky portrayed characters conversing with the devil (Ivan and the Devil), with their alter egos (Ivan and Smerdyakov), and even with caricatures of themselves (Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov). In his analysis of Dostoevsky’s works, Bakhtin argued that the notion of dialogue not only represents a literary genre and a possible conceptualization of personality, but also the very essence of personality (Florenskaya, 1989; for the transformation of temporal positions into spatial positions see also Goodman, 1976, 1981).

The metaphor of the polyphonic novel expands on the narrative conception of the I as an author and the Me as an observed actor. Whereas in Sarbin’s (1986) version of the self-narrative, a single author is assumed to tell a story about himself or herself as an actor, and the conception of the self as a polyphonic novel goes one step further. It permits one individual to live in a multiplicity of worlds, with each world having its own author telling a story relatively independent of the authors of the other worlds. Moreover, the several authors may enter into dialogue with each other at times. That is, the self conceptualized as a polyphonic novel integrates the notions of imaginative narrative and dialogue.

Pervasiveness of Imaginal Dialogues

In her book Invisible Guests, Watkins (1986) argued that in most psychological theories imaginal phenomena are most often approached from the perspective of the real. The real and the existence of actual and real others, in particular, are given clear ontological priority, with imaginal others seen as derivative from and subordinate to them. Nevertheless, imaginal dialogues play a central role in our daily lives: They exist alongside actual dialogues with real others and, interwoven with actual interactions, they constitute an essential part of our narrative construction of the world. Even when we are outwardly silent, for example, we find ourselves communicating with our critics, our parents, our consciences, our gods, our reflection in the mirror, the photograph of someone we miss, a figure from a movie or a dream, our babies, or our pets.

Imaginal others, despite their invisible quality, are typically perceived as having a spatially separated position. This applies not only in Western culture (e.g., imaginal contact with a deceased parent or friend, an ideal lover, or a wise advisor), but also to non-Western communities. Watkins, basing her work on that of Warneck (1909), gave the example of the Bataks of Sumatra, who believe that the spirit, which determines the character and fortune of a person, is like a person within a person; this entity does not coincide with the person’s personality and can often be in conflict with his or her I. It is experienced as a special being within the person, with its own will and desires. As Cassirer (1955) emphasized, in mythical consciousness a tutelary spirit is not conceived as the subject of someone’s inner life but as something objective, “which dwells in man, which is spatially connected with him and hence can also be spatially separated from him” (Cassirer, 1955, p. 168, cited by Watkins, 1986).

Caughey (1984), a social anthropologist, considered the role of imaginary social worlds, both in Western and non-Western cultures. Caughey did fieldwork on Fânakker, a pacific island in Micronesia, and in the Margalla Hills of Pakistan. In comparing these cultures to North American culture, Caughey observed that imaginal interactions are in no way restricted to non-Western cultures. He estimated that the “real” social world of most North Americans includes between 200 and 300 people (e.g., family, friends, acquaintances, and colleagues). Moreover, a number of individuals may exist in imaginary social worlds and invite a person into this world. Caughey divided imaginal or semi-imaginary figures into three groups: (a) media figures with whom the individual engages in imaginal interactions; (b) purely imaginal figures produced in dreams and fantasies; and (c) imaginal replicas of parents, friends, or lovers who are treated as if they were really present. Caughey demonstrated with this classification, as Watkins (1986) did, that imaginal dialogues and interactions exist side by side to real interactions (e.g., “If my mother could see me now . . . “) and may or may not have a direct link with reality.

Caughey (1984), like Watkins (1986), criticized the identification of social relationships with only actual social relationships. He saw this conception as incomplete and actually representing “an ethnocentric projection of certain narrow assumptions in Western science” (p. 17). For the same reason, he preferred to speak of an imaginal social world rather than a purely inner world in order to emphasize the interaction with somebody who is felt to be there.

The Dialogical Self as a Multiplicity of Positions

On the basis of the foregoing considerations, we conceptualize the self in terms of a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I positions in an imaginal landscape. In its most concise form this conception can be formulated as follows. The I has the possibility to move, as in a space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time. The I fluctuates among different and even opposed positions. The I has the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. The voices function like interacting characters in a story. Once a character is set in motion in a
story, the character takes on a life of its own and thus assumes a certain narrative necessity. Each character has a story to tell about experiences from its own stance. As different voices these characters exchange information about their respective Mes and their worlds, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self.

The proposed conception is a step beyond individualism and rationalism and differs in two essential ways from the Cartesian cogito. Before we can articulate these differences, at least two points should be recalled. First, the Cartesian expression “I think” assumes that there is one I responsible for the steps in reasoning. Second, the Cartesian “I think” is based on a disembodied mental process assumed to be essentially different from the body and other material extended in space.

The dialogical self, in contrast with the individualistic self, is based on the assumption that there are many I positions that can be occupied by the same person. The I in one position can agree, disagree, understand, misunderstand, oppose, contradict, question, and even ridicule the I in another position. The embodied self, in contrast with the rationalistic self, is always tied to a particular position in time and space (either physically or mentally). In the terms of Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962), there is no “regard survolant”: that is, being embodied the person is not able to freely “fly above” his or her position in space and time, and the embodied nature of existence is defined as the basis of human life. Even the most advanced arithmetic problem, for example, involves a system of numbers originally based on the counting of 10 fingers, which is in turn indispensable for the child to understand the activity of counting at all.

The dialogical self is conceived as social—not in the sense that a self-contained individual enters into social interactions with other outside people, but in the sense that other people occupy positions in the multivoiced self. The self is not only “here” but also “there,” and because of the power of imagination the person can act as if he or she were the other. This is not to be equated with taking the role of the other (Mead, 1934), as this expression implies that the self takes the actual perspective of the other outside the self. Rather, I construe another person or being as a position that I can occupy and a position that creates an alternative perspective on the world and myself. This perspective may or may not be congruent with the actual perspective of the actual other, which can be checked by entering into conversation with the other. In addition, however, the other may be largely the product of imagination and can even be completely imaginary.

The proposed conception is also a reaction to the Western ideal of the self as a centralized equilibrium structure, critically discussed by Sampson (1985). The dialogical self contrasts with the notion of the self as the center of control. The different I positions are seen as different anchor points that may organize the other I positions at a given point in time. Watkins (1986) acknowledged this when she argued that an imaginal other may have as much autonomy as do real others. If one insists that an individual creates an imaginal other, it can equally be maintained that an individual experiences the imaginal other as creating himself or herself. Goethe, for example, once said “The songs made me, not I them” (cited in Watkins, 1986). Jung (1961) had an imaginal companion, Philemon, with whom he had frequent dialogues. “Philemon and other figures of my fantasies brought home to me the crucial insight that there are things in the psyche which I do not produce, but which produce themselves and have their own life” (Jung, 1961, p. 183, cited in Watkins, 1986).

It is not only in the work of artists or scientists that evidence for the notion of decentralization can be found. In the application of the self-confrontation method, in which clients are invited to investigate the content and organization of their selves in cooperation with a psychologist (Hermans, 1987b, 1989), many clients refer to statements made by their parents or teachers in the past. Actual contact with these significant others may not have occurred for many years, but their statements nevertheless play a central role in the present life of the clients. Many clients also explain that they often have imaginal discussions with their psychotherapist when confronted with a problem in their daily lives (e.g., “What would my therapist say about this?”) and take the result of the following imaginal discussion as a guide for their actual behavior. The frequency of imaginal contacts with a significant other is probably very high. This is suggested by M. M. Gergen (1987), who asked a group of college students to describe people they remembered from their past and carried with them into their present activities. It was found that 75 of the 76 respondents were able to mention such a figure in their own life (the major portion being friends of the respondents with whom they no longer interacted on a regular basis).

The dialogical self can only be fully understood when its cultural constraints are acknowledged. The self is embedded in a historical context with deep implications for both the form and content of narratives and dialogical processes. In his book Acts of Meaning, Bruner (1990) concluded that selves are not isolated nuclei of consciousness locked in the head, nor do selves arise rootlessly from the present. On the contrary, selves are distributed interpersonally and take meaning from the historical circumstances that gave shape to cultural values. Referring to the work of Taylor (1989), Bruner argued that we “neither shoot values from the hip” (p. 29) nor are they the product of isolated individuals. Rather, values locate one in a culture (e.g., as a man, woman, young, old, White, Black, etc.) and not only order but also constrain the content and organization of the self.

What kind of constraints do we mean in the case of the dialogical self more specifically? A most fundamental cultural constraint is precisely the strong centralization that is so typical of the Western individualistic and rationalistic ideal of selfhood. This centralization puts serious limitations on the relations among the different characters of the self-narrative as a field of possibilities. If it is true that Western education fosters an ideal of a bounded, highly centralized self (Sampson, 1985), then
this ideal may have far-reaching implications for the characters that are admitted as integral parts of a developing self. If a certain divergence of characters is admitted to the self, then a strong tendency to centralization will organize the self in such a way that there is one I position that may dominate the others, thereby reducing the possibility of dialogue that for its full development requires a high degree of openness for the exchange and modification of perspectives. This culturally based shrinking and centralization of the self also has direct practical consequences. Many psychotherapists are quite familiar with the problems of clients who suppress particular "subpersonalities" (Rowan, 1990), thereby denying them a voice. Psychotherapists are also often confronted with the problem of intellectualization, whereby clients seem to be unable to "let their feelings speak" or use their imagination in a productive way. Although these problems may be attributed in part to a person's personal history (for a full discussion, see D. Spence, 1982), there are basic cultural factors that clearly limit the full development of dialogical relations. In other words, the dialogical self can be conceived of as a fundamental human possibility, albeit culturally and psychologically constrained. (In addition to constraints on the content of narrative and dialogue, constraints of a formal nature are also operating; for further discussion of this issue, see Clark & Clark, 1977; Labov & Waletsky, 1967; Mitchell, 1981; Propp, 1968; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973.)

The dialogical self can be seen as a multiplicity of I positions or as possible selves (see Markus & Nurius, 1986). The difference, however, is that possible selves (e.g., what one would like to be or may be afraid of becoming) are assumed to constitute part of a multifaceted self-concept with one centralized I position, whereas the dialogical self has the character of a decentralized, polyphonic narrative with a multiplicity of I positions. This scene of dialogical relations, moreover, is intended to oppose the sharp self–nonself boundaries drawn by Western rationalistic thinking about the self (Holdstock, 1990; Hsu, 1985).

Some Related Developments in Psychology

To place the proposed view of the self in a broader context, we will briefly review some related developments in the domain of psychology in which the notion of dialogue may be of direct importance: causal attribution, moral development, and the individual differences paradigm.

From Causal Attribution to Causal Explanation

Hilton (1990) recently emphasized that most theories of causal attribution, being based on the person-as-scientist analogy, have overlooked the interpersonal nature of causal explanation. The person-as-scientist model, intrapsychic in nature, does not concern itself with the interpersonal factors that might constrain attributions. Just who is doing the explaining, to whom the explanation is being given, or why an explanation is needed are typically not considered. Hilton argued that the verb to explain implies that someone explains something to someone and that it is, in essence, of a conversational nature. A conversation is ordinarily a cooperative activity between two persons and, therefore, has to follow certain organizing principles in order to be understandable and meaningful. For example, the principle of quantity requires that the speaker not be more informative than required, the principle of quality requires that the speaker not say things that he or she knows to be false, and the principle of relevance requires that the speaker not say irrelevant things. On the basis of these principles (originally formulated by Grice, 1975), Hilton demonstrated that the same question, posed by different persons who are differently informed about a certain matter, can lead to different explanations.

Explainers may not only give different answers to the same why question, but people in different positions may also pose different questions. Drawing on the work of Hart and Honoré (1985), Hilton (1990) argued that the questions posed in scientific research are often not relevant to the pragmatic, localized concerns of a layperson. For example, scientists are interested in the question "Why do people die?" whereas a layperson is more interested in "Why did this man die at this point and how?" In explaining a murder, a speaker is expected to convey the individuating features of the case (e.g., "his exlover shot him") and not the necessary conditions (e.g., "he stopped breathing, thus preventing oxygen flow to his brain").

Moral Development: From Reasoning to Narrative

Vitz (1990) recently criticized contemporary approaches to moral development as overly emphasizing the role of what Bruner (1986) called propositional thinking. As a case in point, Vitz mentioned the verbal discussion of abstract moral dilemmas based on Kohlberg's familiar model of developmental stages in moral reasoning. Vitz discussed the importance of narrative for moral development and emphasized that the story mode requires imagination, an understanding of human intention, and an appreciation of the particulars of time and space. Drawing on the work of Robinson and Hawpe (1986), Vitz argued that stories are better guides to behavior than are rules, maxims, and pure reason. The oldest form of moral literature is the parable and the most common form of instruction is the anecdote. Both forms exemplify social order in a contextualized form. Rules and maxims state significant generalizations about experiences, but stories illustrate these maxims in a concrete, understandable fashion and locate them in space and time. In other words, stories appear to be natural mediators between the particular and the general.

After a discussion of the connection between narrative and empathy (Hoffman, 1987) and the relationship between moral deliberation and self-interpretation (Sloan & Hogan, 1986), Vitz (1990) concluded that "moral deliberation is usually a social not a solitary process. Even when one deliberates alone, moral reflection is often an internalized conversation among the various voices of one's conscience, for example, father, mother, church,
and peer group" (p. 715). This personification of conscience suggests that in the moral narrative the individual is confronted with particular people and circumstances that represent alternative I positions.

**Individual Differences Versus Possible Positions**

The narrative-dialogical approach emphasizes the particular position of the protagonists in space and time. Since Windelband's (1894) original distinction between an *idiographic* approach, which results in statements referring to "that which once was," and a *nomothetic* approach, which results in statements referring to "that which always is," controversy has surrounded the relation between the particular and the general. Through Allport's (1937, 1962) seminal publications on the subject, the idiographic-nomothetic distinction has given rise to numerous publications on the problem of individual assessment (for reviews, see Hermans, 1988, and Runyan, 1983).

A significant contribution to the controversy about the relation between idiography and nomothesis was provided by Lamiell (1981, 1987), who formulated a fundamental attack on the individual differences paradigm. According to Lamiell, this paradigm is based on the general assumption that valid statements about an individual can be formulated by comparing the individual with other individuals. Lamiell persuasively argued that empirical evidence generated by individual differences research has no legitimate interpretation at the level of the individual.

As an alternative to the individual differences paradigm, Lamiell (1987) presented a dialectical model based on an epistemological analysis of human judgment. People do not judge another person on the basis of a comparison of this person with preceding others; rather, they judge the other on the spot through the mental negation of alternative possibilities. For example, when one person, Smith, is presented with information concerning the behavior of another person, Jones, and asked how introverted or extraverted Jones is, Smith is inclined to consider how introverted or extraverted Jones might be. In other words, in order to judge Jones's personality, Smith does not proceed to compare Jones with other people, but with Jones himself, that is, with Jones as he is not but might be.

Although Lamiell (1987) phrased his view in terms of dialectical reasoning and not in terms of narrative, he was aware of the importance of imagination in the judgmental process. Referring to the example above, he wrote, "Smith intuitively generates 'images' of what Jones' behavior pattern would have had to look like in order to warrant a judgment of extreme introversion on the one hand, and a judgment of extreme extraversion on the other hand" (p. 167). That is, the judging person is assumed to construct an imaginatively contrasting position for the person to be judged by. Similarly, a person who judges himself or herself is also engaged in a constructive process in which several positions are compared (for a similar view of human judgment, see Rychlak, 1976).

In a slightly different domain, Hermans and Bonarius (1991) reviewed the research methods used in personality research since Mischel's (1968) influential treatise on the consistency of personality traits. They concluded that personality psychology is well on its way to allowing the individual to play a more active role in psychological research and to recognizing the subject as an expert on his or her own self and situation. On the assumption that the person has a specific expertise, Hermans and Bonarius discussed the promises and limitations of involving the subject as coinvestigator in psychological research. In such a cooperative model the position of the psychologist functions as another I position for the person, who then has the opportunity to compare his or her knowledge with that generated from the perspective of the psychologist.

In a discussion of the evolution and impasses in theories of the self, K. J. Gergen (1984) drew two conclusions for future research: (a) Researchers should move beyond the presumption that theories can only precede their evidential grounds except by a small margin, and (b) the range of criteria for evaluating theories of the self should be expanded. Attention should be paid, in particular, to the ideological influence of contemporary theories on the culture as a whole. Similarly, Sampson (1989) argued that development toward a globally linked world system calls for a dramatic revision of the way in which the self has been conceptualized in Western psychology. We propose that conceiving the self as a dialogical is imperative for a psychology that is broadening its cultural and historical horizon.

**REFERENCES**


