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Identity, Self-Reflection, and Inner Speech;
or, What Can an “I” Ask about and
Learn from Its Self-Talk?©

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“The ‘technique,’ or treatment, of a problem begins with its first expression as a question.

The way a question is asked limits and disposes the ways in which any answer to it—right or wrong—may be given.”

—Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 15.

Question and such kindred words as quest and inquire (along with a few other terms, like require and conquer) derive from a common Latin stem, the verb quaerere and its noun form questum. However, just where the Latin comes from is not known, which means that the earliest etymological root of question is itself in question.

—Adapted from *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, 53.

“The one story that the ‘I’ cannot tell is the story of its own emergence as an ‘I’ who not only speaks but comes to give an account of itself.”

—Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 66.

THE ARGUMENT AND ITINERARY OF THIS ESSAY

What could be more familiar than one’s own thoughts? And yet we do not really know how to characterize the manner in which we produce our thoughts,

especially our awareness of ourselves being aware, and our inner speech, our private self-addresses. [1] We receive no formal training in how to examine our self-talk and pay little attention to what questions we might ask about a mental activity that is at the heart of our experience of our own minds. We seldom recognize where our self-talk comes from. We tend not to ask about what emotional conditioning we were subject to as infants and children long before we had a memory of being an "I" and thus long before we had a fully operational self-remembering sense of ourselves. We rarely, if ever, ask whether our childhood conditioning might be influencing our present self-talk without our being able to tell. In addition, although we know that others can have false beliefs, we never believe that we do—at least not at the moment that we believe what we do. We always think that what we believe—at least, again, at the moment that we believe it—is true. When we talk to ourselves about what is wrong with the world, we do not tend to think: "I myself have false beliefs (even though I do not know what they are), and my false beliefs are a problem for others." Not many of us know precisely how to use our self-talk to take greater responsibility for our minds.

Self-help psychologists are among the few who have explored the subject of self-talk in a non-academic discourse that is readily available to the public. [2] Those academicians who conduct research into the nature of self-talk seldom invoke this phrase. Rather, they refer to "mentalese," "symbolic representation," "cognitive mapping," "the distribution of discourse," and other such abstractions that lead away from the phenomenological experience humans have of . . . talking to themselves. [3] Moreover, those who study the way in which humans experience their mental representations of themselves and the world seldom investigate the content of people's self-talk, how the self-talk of one person is different from that of another, and more generally how self-talk might be related to the formation and transformation of identity over the course of a lifetime. Rather, they tend to investigate the neuroanatomy involved in how the brain produces thinking as inner speech, [4] or how the ability to think abstractly evolved or co-evolved with the advent and acquisition of language, which intensified the production of complex self-representational feedback loops and levels of intentionality, [5] or how humans unconsciously internalize ideological norms. [6] In the pages that follow, I want to demonstrate why educators might want to consider "self-talk"—the ordinary experience humans have of their own minds in action—especially in any course that asks students to engage in "critical thinking": doing so is a signal opportunity to interest students (perhaps teachers as well) in reallocating some of the psychological energy that they use for maintaining their identities into the work of critical self-reflection or into new avenues of self-review.

In the first section, I offer a thought experiment in order to indicate the simple fact that we tend to take our self-talk for granted rather than to reflect critically on it. In section II, I raise a number of possible questions we might ask ourselves in order to determine the nature and quality of our self-talk and its possible role in our lives. In section III, I focus on questions the point of

which is to demonstrate the possibility that our self-talk emerges from out of an affective conditioning in childhood and infancy, a conditioning that we cannot and will never be able to access directly and that affects our present self-talk in ways we must infer, surmise, or interpret. In section IV, I raise questions the point of which is to underline a limit to first-person consciousness. Finally, in the concluding section I ask how we can use our knowledge of the limit to first-person consciousness to take control of our self-talk, if we so desire, to shape our minds and become who we are not (yet) but want to be.

I: A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Imagine being someone else—someone with different beliefs, a different body type, or a different gender, perhaps someone older or younger. Perhaps the person is unusual or exceptional in some way—a world record holder in some sporting event, like Lance Armstrong in cycling, or like the teenager who recently sailed around the world (nearly 25,000 miles) . . . alone. Perhaps the person is someone who knows that he or she is going to die soon, a bridge painter, a coal miner, or someone who is autistic. Perhaps the person is an artist of some sort. Perhaps the person has a great, even world-wide, following. Whoever the person might be, what do you imagine the person is thinking? What is the self-talk like that this person is engaging in? Is it the same self-talk that goes through your mind? Is it different? Do you, in fact, know how to characterize your own self-talk? If someone were to imagine being you, what would their experience of your self-talk be like? Are you hard on yourself, perhaps even punitive in the way you talk to yourself? How do you talk to yourself when confronted with difficult social situations? Do you know whether or not your self-talk has contributed to your successes and failures, whether or not it is a strength or a shortcoming, whether or not it is leading you closer to fulfilling your aspirations or getting in the way?

II: INITIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT SELF-TALK

One of the most characteristic mental activities humans perform is talking to themselves. Why and with what consequences? And why do we do so automatically, typically without thinking about the matter—that is, without thinking about why we are thinking in just the particular way that we are? What would we learn if we were to inspect our self-talk? We cannot do so, of course, without producing more self-talk. What happens to our self-talk when it becomes the object of our self-talk? What happens, in other words, when we reflect on our acts of consciousness, our acts of self-reflection, and what can we learn?

To answer such questions, we might proceed by asking yet another—a definitional question: What is "self-talk"? I propose to define the term as a provisional name for the way humans engage in "inner speech" or "interior monologue." Although we sometimes mutter to ourselves under our breaths, we

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typically communicate with ourselves without actually talking. We just turn our attention onto our own thoughts—we just think a thought, and, voilà, we (think we) know what we are thinking. We do not literally hear ourselves speaking, however; rather, when we are conscious of our thoughts, it is *as if* we are talking inside our minds. “Self-talk,” then, is a metaphor for thinking where thinking seems to be so much like having a conversation with ourselves that we think we actually are having a self-conversation.

Why is self-talk important, [7] and why is it valuable to recognize that we designate the idea and the phenomenon by means of a metaphor? In order to answer these further questions, we need to ask still others, especially the following meta-level question: What questions can be asked of the concept and experience of self-talk? The following are some of the many possibilities.

We might ask about when and why we talk to ourselves and what difficulties we sometimes encounter:

- Why do we talk to ourselves? That is, for what different purposes do we engage in an interior monologue?
- Under what different circumstances do we talk to ourselves, how do these circumstances affect our reasons for talking to ourselves, and how do they affect the way we run words through our heads?
- Why is it sometimes the case that, in our mind’s eye, we know what we want to say but that, when we try to put our thoughts down on paper, we have trouble doing so and experience our spoken or typed words as not expressing what was so clear to us before we tried to translate them into oral or written form?

We might also ask about how people come to talk to themselves:

- When do children begin to talk to themselves? Do they learn to do so and, if so, how?
- When do children recognize that others talk to themselves?
- How do medical conditions—like certain kinds of brain damage from stroke or from Alzheimer’s—affect a person’s self-talk?

We might pose questions about the forces and circumstances that shape self-talk:

- What influences our self-talk? For example, is our present-day self-talk affected by the way we were raised in infancy and childhood, and, if so, how would we know what effect our parents and others had on our self-talk?
- Do people in different cultures and different historical eras talk to themselves differently? [8]
- Is self-talk affected by technology? Do new technologies change the way people talk to themselves? Do people talk to themselves differently

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when writing a letter in long-hand from the way they do when typing an email or when text-messaging on a cell phone? Did the advent of writing change how the first literate humans talked to themselves? [9] When did humans learn to read silently rather than out loud? It appears that most people subvocalize when they read. Is it possible to learn to read without doing this?

We might raise evolutionary questions, such as:

- When in the course of evolution did humans begin to talk to themselves, and what survival, reproductive, or other “adaptive” purpose or purposes did it serve? [10]
- What parts of the brain are involved in the various kinds of self-talk? Do different parts participate depending on what one is thinking to oneself or depending on the occasion for talking to oneself?

Closer to our daily experiences of our own minds and what we infer of the minds of others, we might inquire about the relation between self-talk and a person’s success in life:

- How do those with good judgment, those who make wise decisions, or those who realize their dreams talk to themselves?
- Are there general guidelines for disciplining one’s self-talk that will enable a person to live well and better still?

Clearly, we could expand this list of questions indefinitely. Rather than doing so, I will turn to two sets of questions—the first concerns the childhood roots of identity (section III), the second concerns the difference between first- and third-person consciousness (section IV)—that I believe are especially important, for they point to a basic problem associated with the experience of self-talk in particular and of being an “I” that is self-conscious in general.

III: THE CHILDHOOD ROOTS OF IDENTITY

Where does our sense of being an “I” come from? Although we do not begot ourselves, when it comes to our sense of first-person consciousness, it seems as if each individual’s mind arises from out of itself. This is the starting point for the first modern philosopher, René Descartes, who famously declared that “I think, therefore I am” (in French: *je pense, donc je suis*; in Latin: *cogito ergo sum*). The “I” thinks, and when it does, it seems to produce itself; its thoughts seem to come from itself, spontaneously so, not from elsewhere. [11]

And yet the truth is clearly otherwise, for human newborns come into the world radically immature—helpless, astonishingly vulnerable, and in need of extremely close attention and care. Indeed, human infants and children are dependent for years on the care-giving of parents or parental substitutes. During

this time, children receive innumerable non-verbal and verbal communications [12] of which they have no memory. Infants are cooed at, comforted with hums and songs, and touched over and over as they are held, fed, rocked, their diapers changed, and so on. Who can remember these interactions and what they were like, what sensations they evoked, and how they made one feel? Who can remember the hands that held them? Who can recollect how quickly their parents were able to relieve them of whatever distress was making them cry? Who can remember what it was like to be talked to, to learn the names of things and to talk in turn? Children have either no recollection or only the most occasional, disconnected, and incomplete of memories of their infancy and early childhood, and yet during this time they are subject to countless interactions by which they are emotionally conditioned in ways to which they have no access. They are subject to an endless variety of commands, directions, instructions, acknowledgments, greetings and welcomes, "or else's," "no's," exclamations, permissions, questions, interrogations, cautions, "please's" prayers, requests, refusals, denials, curses, blessings, and many other "interpellations." [13]

This condition of *being subject to* affects our development in ways that we can never know. We might suspect that our anxieties, for example, or certain characteristic ways of responding to others trace back to patterns that were established in childhood and perhaps even in infancy. However, even if we are motivated to try to find out about how this might be so, we will not be able to go back and retrieve a memory of all the interactions that might have had a shaping influence on our nervous system. Why not? Until a child learns language and acquires the mental ability to represent others as having a point of view that is not necessarily the same as its own—that is, until the child has a Theory of Mind, which develops somewhere around the age of four-plus years—the child has very few coherent memories of itself by which it can access its personal, developmental history. In consequence, our earliest development in infancy and early childhood occurs such that we have no retrievable record, no self-memory, of what has happened to us.

Thus, it is not the case that, "I think, therefore I am," as if one's thoughts emerged from out of oneself, but that, "I was given sufficient care as an infant to survive and develop to the point where, having been emotionally conditioned by countless interactions with my parents or other care-givers, I now have the experience that my thoughts seem to come from myself, therefore I am." [14]

Unless we suffer from some exceptional condition that makes the normal course of human development not possible, we learn to speak before the age of two and eventually to talk silently to ourselves. We are genetically programmed to do so. However, we are not genetically programmed to talk to ourselves in the particular ways that we do so. That we can talk to ourselves is part of our biological endowment. *What* we say and think to ourselves is part of our acculturation, which we acquire or pass through under the influence of others early on; later, we begin to discover or invent new things to think or say to ourselves as we acquire greater and greater linguistic experience and skill and as

our brains and minds develop to the point where we experience ourselves as individual "I's." Before that point, we learn how to talk and use words without being able to decide about the matter and without being able to be in charge of our learning. More fundamentally, we learn how to talk in conjunction with a more general emotional conditioning that happens without us being able to choose, direct, or otherwise control this conditioning.

Does this early childhood learning affect our feelings about ourselves and others, and do these feelings affect our self-talk in some way? To the extent that (some of) our thoughts, feelings, and attitudes are shaped in infancy and childhood, might this shaping also have influenced and still be influencing our self-talk? How would we know? How would we be able to recognize when our self-talk is us speaking our own minds and when it is us channeling our parents, us being ventriloquized by them, us repeating (perhaps in disguised, displaced, or symbolic form) our early childhood conditioning?

Consider the following scenario in which a toddler stumbles forward, stops, turns, and sees that it is being watched (its parent is paying very close attention), and turns back, hurrying away giggling and otherwise happy, its legs moving unsteadily, its arms aflutter, its eyes sparkling. Flash forward thirty years and the person is stepping off an airplane in France or Italy, eyes sparkling. . . . Is it possible that a person's love of traveling is an evocative "memory" of a repeated childhood experience—and the thrill of that experience—of stepping forward, away from one's parent, somehow "knowing" that it is safe to do so because behind one is the good and loving and protective parent whose goodness one has internalized to such an extent that it is a model for what one expects to encounter "up ahead"—in the world that opens up before one, hence is a model for one's sense of the future?

Alternatively, consider having been raised by parents who did not provide such protection, encouragement, playfulness, or support, who were not particularly attuned to one's needs, who may not have known how to be a good parent, who may have been neglectful at critical moments in one's life, or who may have been abusive. . . . Consider having been raised in another historical era, in utterly different economic and social circumstances. . . .

Clearly, imagining (and trying to feel the difference) a different past might have made is a speculative exercise. The value of such a speculation is in making it possible to consider that the way we talk to ourselves in the present might follow not only a cognitive but an emotional pattern that was established long before we were self-aware, long before we could talk to ourselves. ☆☆

We cannot choose our past. We cannot choose to have undergone a different emotional conditioning from what we did undergo. Indeed, we cannot know what that conditioning was, only what it might have been. We cannot choose how we learned to talk to ourselves the way we did and perhaps still do. How, then, might we respond to this peculiar condition of having a consciousness, of being aware that we are aware but not being aware of how we have been emotionally conditioned? Starting with our present self-talk, can we choose to talk to ourselves differently, to talk to ourselves in one way rather than another? Can

we choose to greet the day, the world, the future as if we had a different past, a different emotional conditioning in childhood and infancy, a different attitude toward ourselves? Can we deliberately choose our future selves? (Isn't that what we do, in effect, though mostly without paying much attention to the fact that we are doing so—whenever we take one class rather than another, read one text rather than another, listen to one song rather than another, and, in general, choose x rather than y? If so, how often do we remind ourselves that we are, in fact, choosing or at least shaping our future? How often do we remind ourselves that we are shaping or even choosing our future every time we attend classes and complete assignments?)

There is a problem, however, that interferes with our ability to change the way we talk to ourselves. The problem arises when the "I" takes for granted its own point of view, as it does whenever it (thinks it) knows something. This problem—the problem of first-person self-certainty—is especially difficult because, at the moment of self-certainty, we are most vulnerable to the error of false belief. When we (think we) know something concerning a matter of importance to us—above all a matter on which we feel compelled to reject, repudiate, contest, or go to war over someone else's contrary view—we tend to experience the cause of the conflict as being the other person's consciousness, not our own. Thus, we treat the problem of (our) first-person consciousness as the solution to this problem. Why is this so?

IV: FIRST- AND THIRD-PERSON CONSCIOUSNESS

First-person consciousness is the consciousness that each "I" has of itself, a consciousness that the "I" is usually able to access, more or less directly and seemingly immediately, simply by turning its attention toward itself. If an "I" does so, it is not only aware of the world but aware of itself being aware of the world. Third-person consciousness, in contrast, is the awareness that each "I" has of someone else's first-person consciousness. Unlike the awareness it has of itself, an "I" can access what is in the mind of others only indirectly, only by way of inference, which means only by turning its attentions toward and interpreting the indications or signs of what they are thinking (the words, the gestures, the tone of voice, the posture, the look in their eyes, their energy, and so on)—that is, only by surmising what their self-talk might be. When we do not know or are not sure what another is thinking, we become quite self-conscious of the fact that we do not have direct access to another's mind.

The difference between first- and third-person consciousness means that there is a sharp difference between what we know (or think we know) of ourselves as well as how we know it and what we know of another's mind and how we know it. This difference between knowing our own minds seemingly directly and knowing another's mind only indirectly produces an *epistemological asymmetry* between first- and third-person consciousness. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that investigates what we can know; asymmetry refers to an unevenness or a lack of a parallel, an incommensurability, a divide. Because

we cannot know another's mind in the same way that we can know our own minds, because we are denied the kind of access to the other's mind that we have to our own, we must live in a condition of epistemological asymmetry, a condition of being at a distance from the inner most experience another has of himself or herself. With what consequences must we bear this asymmetry between our relation to ourselves and our relations to others?

We can begin to understand the implications of this epistemological asymmetry by asking whether or not we would choose to give up our own minds, if we could, in favor of having someone else's mind, when the matter at hand is our first-person consciousness of ourselves—and especially of our wants and motivations. Have you ever said something to someone and have this person interpret you as meaning something that you did not intend at all? Under this circumstance, whose consciousness would you rather have—your consciousness of yourself, your awareness of your intent, or the other person's consciousness, a consciousness that has led this person to attribute to you a meaning that was the furthest thing from your mind? More generally, which consciousness of your own mind would you rather have—your own first-person consciousness or another person's third-person consciousness? What does this imaginary choice entail?

Consider the following. Suppose you are convinced that something is the case while someone else is convinced that you are in error. (For example, suppose that you are a medieval scholar or cleric and you know that the earth is the center of the universe and that the sun literally rises on the horizon as it circles our planet. Suppose that a Copernicus comes along and says, no, the sun is the center. . . .) One of you is right, the other is wrong.

- For your part, you are not in doubt: you do not *just* think you know, you *know* you know that something is the case. You are certain, and you know it.
- Therefore, at the moment that you (think you) are convinced that you know you are right, you cannot simultaneously know you are wrong (if, contrary to your conviction, it is the case that you are in fact wrong). You may learn very quickly that you are wrong, but at the moment that you think you are right, you cannot also know that you are not right.
- The other person is, of course, in the same boat.
- And yet the other person may, in fact, have superior knowledge. It is possible that this person right and knows it, in which case the person knows (i) that you are wrong, (ii) that you do not believe you are wrong, and (iii) that you do not recognize that it would be better for you to have his or her consciousness of the matter at hand than your own present consciousness, which is mistaken.

In general, when a person holds a belief that is false but thinks that the belief is true, whose consciousness would you choose, if you had a choice and if the truth or falsity of the belief mattered—the consciousness of the person who be-

One right,
one wrong

believes that the (false) belief is true or the consciousness of the person who recognizes that the (false) belief is false?

Suppose that the belief in question concerns what you consider to be a terrible injustice. Suppose you believe that you have been treated unfairly, inequitably, or without regard to the truth, and that you are in consequence having

to suffer some loss or punishment that you should not have to suffer. Suppose that you are furious about having been the victim of what you are convinced is an injustice. Suppose further, however, that you are mistaken—that your belief is based on assumptions that are false or on incomplete or even erroneous information—but that you do not know that you are mistaken or that you refuse to be told otherwise. How likely is it that you will give up your (false) belief?

If you agree that when people are impassioned about their beliefs they are less, not more, open to learning that they are in error, the next question would be to ask: When are we most impassioned about what we believe—that is, about what we (think we) know to be the case? Is it not the case that we are most impassioned when the belief concerns issues of ultimate concern—matters of faith, for example, or of right and wrong, or of the way the world ought to be, or of politics? In other words, do we not tend to be most committed to a belief precisely when the stakes are highest, when we have the most to gain or lose by being right or wrong? Do we not tend to resist other people's beliefs when they oppose, contradict, or threaten our own? When two or more groups of people are at war, is it not the case that peace is difficult to achieve precisely because each group or side thinks it is in the right and its opponents in the wrong?

One anguishing test-case for Americans was the destruction of the World Trade Center on 9/11. When terrorists flew into the towers and the Pentagon (and aimed to destroy the White House), when they did so in the name of a sacred cause, when they killed thousands of civilians, including children, and when they claimed to do so in the name of Allah, was it possible for Americans to accept the belief of the terrorists that their violence was God's Own Word? Clearly, no. Americans—indeed, the world—repudiated as false the terrorists' belief that their cause was not only true but divinely sanctioned. At the moment they believed, the terrorists could not grasp that they believed falsely.

If you have seen *Caprica*, the prequel to *Battlestar Galactica*, you will recall the suicide bombing by Ben Stark (Avan Jogia), a teenager who blows up a commuter train in the name of his belief in the One True God. Ben, along with Zoe Graystone (Allessandra Torresani), is a convert from the polytheism of most humans to the monotheism that will become the basis of the soon-to-be invented Cylons. When Lacy Rand (Magda Apanowicz), who attends the same religious school that Ben and Zoe do, confesses to Sister Clarice Willow (Polly Walker) her involvement with her friends, she realizes what Ben has done: "So . . . he was the terrorist." The sister responds: "Labels like 'terrorist' are what this corrupt and decadent culture calls people who are trying to fight the real evil in this world." [15]

Of course, such an argument is clearly self-contradictory. How so? Imagine asking, in response: "Are you not engaging in the very act of labeling, which you say that you abhor, when you refer to 'this corrupt and decadent culture?'"

Do you see the problem? Earlier, we saw that no one can believe he or she has a false belief. By definition, an "I" can only believe that it believes truly. Can an "I" ever have a false belief about what it truly believes? Can you—not just an "I," not just someone else, but you, you yourself? If not, if you and I necessarily believe that we believe truly, then our self-talk, our experience of being certain, our self-awareness is not the solution but part of the problem, which we typically locate in the other's false belief.

What can people learn about how they talk to themselves that would increase the chances that they could avoid the conflicts, the wars, the destruction that they unleash on one another in the name of what one side believes to be true (is convinced is true, knows is true) and the other side believes to be false (is convinced is false, knows is false)? This is a consequential question because it opens up the general issue of personal responsibility. If we are responsible for our self-talk, what does that responsibility entail? If we are responsible to ourselves for ourselves, how might we use our self-talk to meet this double responsibility?

V: SHAPING YOUR BRAIN— TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR SELF-TALK

Genes determine the general form of the brain, its circumvolutions, its structures and the organization of its areas—in short, "the general architecture of cerebral tissue. . . ." Nevertheless, "considerable variability . . . remains despite the genes' power." [16] Indeed, there is accumulating evidence that the human brain is remarkably plastic—that is, capable of changing itself, including repairing and reconfiguring itself when damaged in certain ways—and that it modifies itself synaptically such that it sculpts itself, as it were. Moreover, the brain evidently does so in an effort to represent and interpret its own processes on the way to making new (unprogrammed and unpredictable) connections and patterns of connections, hence on the way to enabling us to become the person we are not yet. According to Marc Jeannerod:

If a synapse belongs to a circuit in frequent use, it tends to grow in volume, its permeability increases, and its efficacy increases. Inversely, a little-used synapse tends to become less efficacious. The theory of synaptic efficacy thus allows us to explain the gradual molding of a brain under the influence of individual experience, to the point of making it possible for us, in principle, to account for the individual characteristics and particularities of each brain. We are dealing here with a mechanism of individuation that makes each brain a unique object despite its adherence to a common model. [17]

Thus, the brain each of us has today is not the brain each of us is stuck with. We can learn, and we can learn how to learn. We can also unlearn, and we can even

learn how to unlearn. And we are able to do so according to a process of individuation that changes us, that makes us different from who we have been as well as from others, who likewise are capable of undergoing similar individuation.

For this reason the brain each of us has and can have is not exactly the same as the brain someone else has: “the brain of a pianist is not strictly identical to that of a mathematician, a mechanic, or a graphic artist,” notes Catherine Malabou. [18] She goes on to point out that our brains are not different merely in terms of having formed different habits, having learned different skills, having memorized different facts, or having immersed oneself in different areas of knowledge:

it is obviously not just a person’s “trade” or “specialty” that matters here. The entire identity of the individual is in play: her past, her surroundings, her encounters, her activities; in a word, the ability that our brain—that every brain—has to adapt itself, to include modifications, to receive shocks, and to create anew on the basis of this very reception. It is precisely because—contrary to what we normally think—the brain is not already made that we must ask what we should do with it, what we should do with this plasticity that makes us, precisely in the sense of a work: sculpture, modeling, architecture. [19]

This quotation suggests that each of us has the opportunity to shape our own brain and the responsibility for doing so in order to work toward becoming whatever person we might yet become. Again, the words of Malabou:

It is already known that “synaptic plasticity, continuing throughout learning, throughout development as well as adulthood, sculpts each of our brains. Education, experience, and training make each brain a unique work.” What should we do with all this potential within us? [20]

What can we do to shape our brains? What can we (try to) learn? What might we need to (try to) unlearn? What can we choose to become? What will we choose for, which means what will we choose against? (What we choose at any one point in time can be measured in terms of what we do not choose, which henceforth are, in the term used by economists, “lost opportunities.” In this regard, we must be beware, be aware, that existence costs, the future costs, consciousness costs, choice costs. That is why choices are consequential and a matter of politics and ethics—that is, of responsibility.)

Will we choose (and accept the costs of our choices) to cultivate our brains in a certain way? Can we make choices that take us in a direction that significantly modifies (what we may not be aware is) our childhood emotional conditioning, that goes counter to our upbringing, that puts us in the position of deliberately unlearning what we have learned? The brain, Malabou notes, is “a self-cultivating organ.” If so, in what direction, with what aims, do we want to cultivate this self-cultivating part of our being? What kind of world, what kind of future, what kind of culture, do we want to live in? “Which cul-

ture is the culture of neuronal liberation? Which world? Which society?” [21] Which future?

If it is the case that “humans make their own brains, and they do not know that they do so,” that “Our brain is a work, and we do not know it,” part of the reason why is the seemingly self-evident nature of our present moment of first-person consciousness coupled with the difficulty of recognizing the childhood emotional patterning of this consciousness. These two situations are fundamental barriers to “neuronal liberation.” Thus, to take the responsibility by which one could answer Malabou’s questions, we would have to interrupt our self-talk, begin to recognize how we are ventriloquized—that is, conditioned to talk to ourselves in ways we would never choose if the matter had been up to us at the outset—and carefully examine the way we represent ourselves to ourselves and the world. We would have to learn how to consciously inspect the emotional needs that we unconsciously seek to satisfy by the particular ways in which we have learned to talk to ourselves. We would have to learn how to talk ourselves through the limits of first-person point of view, which means we would have to learn how to talk to ourselves about talking to ourselves—and in the process unlearn much of what we (thought we) knew. In short, each of us would have to accept responsibility for becoming the person each of us is not but might yet become. We would need to scrutinize our self-talk in order to (try to) learn what we do not already know—or think we already know but may not—about who we are, who we have been, and who, perhaps, we will be.

NOTES

1. In *A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness* (New York: PI Press, 1004), V. S. Ramachandran observes that “A crucial yet elusive aspect of self is its self-referential quality, the fact that it is aware of itself.” This second-order awareness depends on “a metarepresentation—an awareness of awareness and a concomitant sense of self” (111). It depends, that is, on being a self that represents itself to itself, the experience of which often takes the form of inner speech.

2. The number of self-help books that offer advice on how to talk to oneself are legion. Three that I find exemplary are Al Siebert’s *The Survivor Personality: Why Some People Are Stronger, Smarter, and More Skillful at Handling Life’s Difficulties . . . and How You Can Be, Too*, rev. ed. (New York: Perigee Books, 1996), Siebert’s *The Resiliency Advantage: Master Change, Thrive under Pressure, and Bounce Back from Setbacks* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005), and Bernie Siegel’s *Love, Medicine, and Miracles: Lessons Learned about Self-Healing from a Surgeon’s Experience with Exceptional Patients* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986).

Sigmund Freud sometimes referred to Psychoanalysis as providing a “talking cure” (see John Launer, “Anno O and the ‘Talking Cure,’” *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine* 98.6 [2005]: 465-66). In the contemporary field of clinical psychology, much counseling aims at changing the patient’s self-talk. In the cognitive approach known as Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), for example, one must learn to recognize one’s irrational beliefs and how they af-

fect one's feelings and actions; one must then learn how to talk to oneself in order to change one's thoughts, feelings, and actions. (Among the many books by and about REBT, see Albert Ellis and Windy Dryden, *The Practice of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Springer Publishing, 2007). See also the Mayo Clinic's online article on cognitive therapy, "Self-esteem: Boost your self-image with these 5 steps," at <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/self-esteem/MH00129>; accessed 21 July 2009).

Concerning the general neglect of self-talk by psychologists, Alain Morin reports on two studies he conducted. In one, he found that only 7 of 32 introductory psychology textbooks mentioned "inner speech, self-talk, private speech, or self-statements in their subject indexes." In the other study, he found that "the average citation frequency" in peer-reviewed journal articles for "103 key psychological concepts and phenomena" was 1,719 whereas "inner speech was cited 52 times." Morin concludes that "inner speech does tend to be overlooked . . . probably because it is taken for granted" ("Inner Speech: A Neglected Phenomenon," http://www.psychoscience.ntt/inner_speech.htm; accessed 20 July 2009).

3. According to Steven Pinker, "People do not think in English or Chinese or Apache; they think in a language of thought," what he calls "mentalese" (*The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* [New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1994], 72). In *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: Norton, 1997), Terrence W. Deacon locates the origin of "mentalese" in the evolutionary advent of symbolic representation. In turn, such representation, he surmises, accounts for the emergence of human self-consciousness: "The self that is the source of one's experience of intentionality, the self that is judged by itself as well as by others for its moral choices, the self that worries about its impending departure from the world, this self is a symbolic self" (452). And this symbolic self is able to represent itself to itself—to talk to itself—in all sorts of ways. See also the collection of papers in *Self-Representational Approaches to Consciousness*, ed. Uriah Kriegel and Kenneth Williford (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

4. For a bibliography, see the references in Alain Morin's article, "Possible Links between Self-Awareness and Inner Speech: Theoretical Background, Underlying Mechanisms, and Empirical Evidence," <http://cogprints.org/3784/> (accessed 20 July 2009).

5. See, for example, Daniel C. Dennett, *Kinds of Minds: Toward an Understanding of Consciousness* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), especially 148-50, and Douglas Hofstadter, *I am a Strange Loop* (New York: BasicBooks, 2007).

6. See, among other research endeavors, the immense scholarship that goes under the headings of New Historicism, Culture Studies, and allied areas of literary studies.

7. Lev Vygotsky undertook pioneering research into the nature and functioning of self-talk. See, for example, *Language and Thought*, trans. and newly rev and ed. Alex Kozulin (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1986), and the analysis of Vygotsky's work by James V. Wertsch in *Voices of the Mind:*

Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993).

8. In one of the early efforts to address this question, George Steiner suggests that "there is a history, a morphology, a rhetoric of inner speech as there is of outer. The relationships of internal language to the environment are dialectical, precisely as are those of voice utterance; they help to create the world of experience and, at the same time, reflect it" ("The Distribution of Discourse," *On Difficulty and Other Essays* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1978], 91). Steiner hypothesizes that "internalized speech-forms in the literate segments of Western society" underwent a "radical shift . . . between the seventeenth century and the present" (70) and that the evidence of this shift is available in way that "The generation and emission of language"—both public and inner speech—"by the individual both enacts and mirrors the power relations, the conventional and contingent hierarchies in the social unit" (71).

9. In *Becoming Beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Human Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), Brian Rotman argues that first speech, then alphabetic writing, and now digital writing have transformed the nature, character, rhythms, thought processes, and emotionality—in sum, the very experience—of first-person consciousness. In cultures that have writing (alphabet writing, for example), the experience of oneself associated with the representation of oneself as an "I" is profoundly different from the experience of oneself in cultures without writing. In a world-wide globalization based on "digital writing," the experience of being an "I" is undergoing another profound transformation; a new pattern of self-representation, and with it new habits of self-reference are emerging. Rotman characterizes this development as the advent of "a self becoming beside itself, plural, trans-alphabetic, derived from and spread over multiple sites of agency, a self going parallel: a para-self" (8-9).

Maryanne Wolf begins her study, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York: Harper, 2007), with the declaration: "We were never born to read. Human beings invented reading only a few thousand years ago. And with this invention, we rearranged the very organization of our brain, which in turn expended the ways we were able to think"—hence to talk to ourselves—"which altered the intellectual evolution of our species" (3). She goes on to note that "Knowing what reading demands of our brain and knowing how it contributes to our capacity to think, to feel, to infer, and to understand other humans beings"—and, again, knowing how it affects our self-talk—"is especially important today as we make the transition from a reading brain to an increasingly digital one" (4).

10. Thus does Steiner imagine that "It is entirely possible to envisage an evolutionary scenario in which the dynamics of survival would entail the early development of inner-directed and intra-personal address" ("The Distribution of Discourse," *On Difficulty*, 63).

Among the rapidly expanding number of works in evolutionary linguistics, see, in addition to the books by Deacon and Pinker mentioned in note 1, Rob-

in Dunbar's *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (Harvard University Press, 1996).

11. The twentieth-century philosopher Jacques Derrida calls this the experience of "auto-affectation." See *Of Grammatology*, corrected ed., trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 20.

12. How many—thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, more? Steiner wonders: "How would one define, for purposes of quantification, the sum of speech, of linguistic communication, of enunciatory action by verbal means, in a given society and at a given moment? What is the word-count of articulate exchange or discourse during a twenty-four hour period for any 'speech-unit' or 'social-semantic clustre' of two or more humans beings?" ("The Distribution of Discourse," *On Difficulty*, 61).

13. An "interpellation" is a formal address or call to someone (for example, an official) to give an accounting of himself or herself. The Latin source of this word, "interpellare," means to interrupt (from "inter" and "pellare," to speak). "Interpellation" is cognate with "appellation," which means name or designation. The Indo-European root of both words, "pel," means to thrust, strike, drive (see *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, rev. and ed. Calvert Watkins [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985], 48). In his article, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," the philosopher Louis Althusser uses "interpellation" as a synonym for all the ways in which humans are hailed or addressed, including even before they are born. One way humans are "interpellated" is by being given names—by having names thrust on them, as it were. Our names, then, are instances of the way in which we come into the world subject to the expectations of others. Thus, when parents want to have a baby, their own, they do not just want to bring a person, a consciousness, into existence; they have hopes and dreams as well as fears about their child and ideas about the best way to raise him or her. The point is that parents begin shaping the identity of their child-to-be even before the child is born, and in this way identity, like a name, is (interpellatively) thrust upon the child. (See *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* [New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971], 127-86, especially pp. 170-77). Not surprisingly, those who practice taking on alternative identities—actors—often change their names.

14. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) and in other works, Judith Butler analyzes at length how the condition of being subject to the voice control of others and of not knowing it or being able to recall what it felt like affects the formation of individual identity: "the subject is opaque to itself, not fully translucent and knowable to itself" (18), for example. In an article on the film *Crash*, I analyze how the characters act out the problem of being "opaque" or blind to themselves—indeed, blind to their blindness—at the very moment they think they see clearly. (See "At the [Infanticidal] Limits of First-Person Consciousness: Anger, Shame, and the Sacred in Paul Haggis's *Crash*," *Soundings* 91.1-2 [Spring/Summer, 2008]: 133-66.

15. Dir. by Jeffrey Reiner, written Donald D. Moore, et al. (Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2009). The original television pilot aired on 12

April 2009; the DVD, which includes an extended version of the pilot, was released on 21 April 2009.

16. Jean-Pierre Changeux, *Neuronal Man: The Biology of the Mind*, trans. Laurence Garey (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 247; cited in Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 8.

17. Marc Jeannerod, *Le cerveau et la pensée: La révolution des sciences cognitives*, ed. Jean-François Dortier (Paris: Sciences Humaines Editions, 1999), 63; cited in Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 7.

18. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 7

19. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 7.

20. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 15; she is evidently citing Jeannerod, *Le cerveau*.

21. Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* 30

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