



Victor **Rosenthal**, victor.rosenthal[at]ehess.fr  
Institut Marcel Mauss – EHESS, France

### **Semiotic institution of inner life**

The very idea of inner life arises from our being on speaking terms with ourselves, from having an inner voice. I shall argue that far from being merely an anonymous vehicle of thought, inner voice represents an embodied modality of our *selfhood*, of our being in the *social world*, and as such is an essential vector of our humanity. Although inner voice may (rightfully) be viewed as instrumental to the exercise of thought (a familiar theme from Plato to Vygotsky to Merleau-Ponty), its significance far exceeds this purely cognitive instrumental dimension: it is an essential vector of semiotization of human life and it institutes full-fledged forms of inner life that differentiate us from non-humans. Moreover, even in its outwardly silent form, it incarnates the public character of expression, when the addressee is an invisible, fictitious partner.

In this sense, and in contradistinction to Vygotsky's theory of inner speech, self-talk is not utterly simplified, mostly reduced to a predicative form but encompasses all of forms of discourse. Neither is it merely dialogical (as hold the proponents of the bakhtinian tradition) for it also comprises narratives, self-comments and other conversational forms. Actually, *epilegein* as we shall call the phenomenon of inner voice (but isn't it also outer, since we hear it) is also the voice of the *subject* as a *person* and as a *moral instance*. For, because I talk to myself, somehow I am two-in-one, and I have to live up to the constraints of this coexistence (to the pressure of the other voice), to become accountable to myself (if I disagree with other people, I can walk away; but I cannot walk away from myself; if I do wrong, I have to live along with a wrongdoer). And I live in a social world even when alone; even in my solitude I recap normative, prescriptive, imaginary repertoires of my society. Inner speech is thus instrumental to acquisition and stabilization of social, cultural and linguistic repertoires of norms and instituted forms, by way of repeating, rehearsing, transforming, and fictionalizing (of which it is an essential medium). There is a functional duality of inner speech inasmuch as it acts both as an *agent of the social world* (by the use of shared language and of its cultural repertory) and is a *vector of individuality* (autonomy of attention, intimate spokesperson). Indeed, by speaking to myself I free attention from purely immersive and participatory form of life and become able to fix my own agenda. The range of phenomena encompassing inner voice thus goes far beyond a simple modality of speech, and it will be argued that it is an essential *institution of human life*, and as such, is the main (though note the sole) *vehicle* of inner and social life.