Imaginary Companions
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The Philoctetes Center

Taylor: *Imaginary Companions* is our topic, and this is a topic that's endlessly fascinating to me. It refers to the characters that children invent and talk about or interact with on a regular basis. I think that this activity raises a lot of questions. Some of them are about just the children themselves who have these companions. If you've ever interviewed a child or talked to them about their imaginary friend, you can't help but be impressed by the act of creativity that you see. There's so much detail and idiosyncratic characteristics about the imaginary friends and their extended family and where they live and all the rest of it that you wonder what does this say about this child? Is this a precursor of creative activity to come?

On the other hand, I think that in many topics in imagination, there's the bright side and then there's the dark side, and this is certainly the case with imaginary companions. There's a long history of parents and teachers and therapists wondering if it's a red flag. Why does the child need to create a friend? Do they not have real friends? Is there a confusion about the fantasy/reality distinction? Is it a precursor of mental illness to come or some kind of dissociative disorder, an emotional disturbance? And then there's the cognitive questions, the fact that actually many children create imaginary companions and do so from a very early age— from two or three years of age—just when they're learning about the real world, the people in it and the things that they do. And now they're thinking about things and people that don't exist and things that couldn't happen. It's strange that it happens so early in development. It seems there must be something fundamental about the human mind that allows it to happen so early. And I think that there are questions about consciousness that are raised by imaginary companions, because when we look at the experience that children have, they often describe their imaginary companions as if they have a mind of their own, as if they're independent of the self. How is that possible, and what does it say about conscious and unconscious processes? So I think there are lots of questions, and I know the panelists will come up with many more because we have a group of people coming from different perspectives to talk about imaginary companions, and I just want to say a brief word about each person that's here.

First, I want to introduce Dorothy Singer, who has done really pioneering work on imaginary companions with Jerome Singer, who is also in the audience. I'm glad that you're here today, too. Their work showed that actually having an imaginary companion is a good sign. It's healthy. It's related to positive affect and to getting along well with others, and this is something that people didn't understand before their work. It really was quite groundbreaking. The Singers have also done a lot of work looking at the effect of television on children's imagination, and most recently other electronic media, publishing in 2005 their book *Imagination and Play in the Electronic Age.*

Then, Edith Ackermannn, who is right here, who is a developmental psychologist from the University of Aix-Marseille in France and is now a visitor at MIT. And what she is interested in is imaginary companions as just one of a range of different alter-ego constructs that are used by

children to negotiate the boundary between self and other. And that's the kind of things she'll be talking about.

Then, Marcel Kinsbourne, who I believe is well known to this group and has participated in other roundtables. He is a behavioral neurologist and professor of psychology at The New School, and an internationally renowned expert on consciousness. He's studied so many different problems on consciousness and made so many contributions working with many different populations— people with autism, with Tourette's syndrome, attention deficit disorder, epilepsy and many different kinds of neurological damage. So that's the perspective he'll be bringing.

And then Paul Bloom, who is Professor of Psychology at Yale, is well known for his work on language acquisition. Most recently his book *Descartes' Baby* talks about our natural tendency to think in terms of dualism—thinking of people as having a material brain and an immaterial mind. His book has a very wide-ranging discussion of the implications of this natural tendency, and he even talks about imaginary companions in the book at one point.

And then Ruth Fisher, a clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, who for many years has had a practice as a child psychoanalyst and will bring her experience with her practice to this discussion. So I want to thank everybody for being here, and I thought we could just start by going around the room with some opening thoughts.

Singer: Well, I'm pleased that you mentioned our early work on imaginary companions, and actually I should mention a young assistant that we have, John Calderia, who was really an important part of that research. We were curious about children who were watching a lot of television, and that's how we got interested in that. Who were these children who were really deeply immersed in electronic media, and were they really losing some of their capacity for imagination? So that led to the study. Since we had a large sample, over a hundred children in that sample, we were quite surprised to see that—I think if I remember, and Jerry will correct me if I forget it—about 65% of the children told us they had imaginary companions, while the parents really didn't know this. There were far less parents who knew about that, maybe only 50% or so. We simply asked questions like who did you play with, what is your favorite game? We developed a questionnaire, and that's when we got the information coming back that they had these friends.

The other thing that interested us in this study was the clear gender difference. The girls would have boys, male figures as imaginary companions. Very few of the boys had a female imaginary companion, so that was one of the striking differences.

Ackermann: Maybe because it's the beginning, I just want to put questions on the table. A first question that I have is relative to the types of alter ego, as you said the children build. And there are certain kinds of imaginary others that are not imagined only. There are certain imaginary others that are actually embodied, that the children embody in some character that they carry along. And I think there are big differences between imaginary companions and, for example, throwing an avatar in an environment, in a virtual environment, or just having a privileged rapport with some action figure. So maybe this is one of the things that we can try to disentangle a little bit.

I was trained in Geneva at the Piaget Institute, so I am a person who spent 20 years in the Piaget Institute. And I am somebody who learned to appreciate the uses of the clinical method as a way of actually establishing a dialogue with the children to try to understand how they think about things. There is a very strong theoretical framework that drives the research. On the other hand, coming from the Piaget Institute, I have also in a way endured the fact that Piaget was very useful to the study of this topic when he was actually trying to understand the way young children, at the beginning of the symbolic function, develop language, how they develop pretend play, how they start to take their own action as an object to think with. But then, because he's a rationalist, he sort of stopped studying more evolved forms of those very early abilities that children have, and this is the second set of questions that you have addressed a lot in your book and I think Dorothy and Jerome have addressed, too. The whole question of if we take as an end point of development the very evolved form of actually being imaginative, would we be able to actually study in that the genesis of those capabilities next to more cognitive capabilities. So that's another set of questions.

Kinsbourne: Since we're raising issues to come back to, I'd like to raise two more. Marjorie's kind introduction stressed my interest in consciousness, and I do agree that we can define our thoughts about consciousness with respect to the question of whether a child is pretending, or does a child really believe. I'd like to suggest that that dichotomy doesn't do justice at all to the states of mind that are involved. I think the child is both pretending and really believes. And I think that this is the case not just for children with imaginary companions, but for people. And just to give you one illustration of this, soon after I came to this country and before I sort of had much idea of who these people are, there was a poll which asked who is the greatest American hero. I don't know if any of you remember this. And the vote, by a large majority, was John Wayne. And I thought to myself, "What's up with that? Who are these people?" And the fact is, they're people. In other words, one can entertain contradictory positions, and that's only surprising if one believes in unity of the mind. Once one abandons that mistake, then one can begin to understand these thought processes. So I'm hoping that there will be some exploration of that, among other things.

The second point I'd like to just try out—what I'm about to say may be totally obvious—this is a center for the study of the imagination. This is a center for the study of fantasy. Are those the same or are they different? I would suggest that they are importantly different and actually opposite, that the imagination expands our reality. It entertains a potentially real set of circumstances, so in a sense we live not just in our moment, in our surroundings, but we live in our minds in other situations which are feasible under circumstances. And I think our enormous cerebral cortex enables us to do that, and it's really rather a good thing. Fantasy I think is the opposite. I think it distances us from reality. It escapes reality; it's like a wish fulfillment away from a reality that may not be the best one would like into imaginary worlds and curious characters, and it's more like a security blanket. It's a comfort for people who are not totally comfortable. Anyway, that's an attempt at a distinction and that may or may not suit people.

Bloom: Normally I'm comfortable talking about imaginary companions because I think I know a lot about them. I know more than most people in the room typically. But that's because I memorized Marjorie Taylor's book. So I'm feeling a little bit superfluous here. But I'll just

focus on a general question which came up earlier when we were talking, and it's something which has long engaged me. The fact that kids' imaginary worlds contain people is not very surprising. It's commonly known and theoretically appreciated that part of what goes on when you deal in social situations and you practice social skills is you imagine a world and then you act within the imagined world. So, you know, if I have a job interview coming up, I might imagine myself with the job interviewer and anticipate questions, respond, and that's not so surprising. But there's a phenomenon that to me is just striking, and that is the occasional unruly behavior of imaginary companions. Whereas Marjorie points out, in normally developing kids, often these imaginary people surprise them, disobey them, taunt them, it's hard to see this in a normal sort of simulation theory of mind approach that I'm working within. And so one question I'm interested in pursuing would be what analogies or homologies can we find with this sort of unruly imaginary friend, with adults or in other domains.

Certainly in pathology there are cases where a schizophrenic will hear voices telling it to do things that he doesn't want to hear or doesn't want to do. But it's not obvious for me how that happens in non-pathological behavior. Even religious belief systems, which can in some sense be analogized to dealing with imaginary companions, where you imagine yourself talking to God or to Jesus, still God and Jesus usually don't tell you something you would have never expected to hear, and they don't usually command you to do something you wouldn't have otherwise wanted to do. Or maybe they do. But I'm interested in exploring where we find the unruly behavior of imaginary companions in other domains.

Fisher: I guess I'm the psychoanalytic clinician here today, and one of the things that struck me is how unusual in my experience it is to hear about the imaginary companion. I hear about it socially from friends telling me about their children or grandchildren, but clinically I hear it very little. But one of the things I hear about, and I'm not sure what you mean by surprises or unruly behavior, but I do hear about the imaginary companion who does all sorts of bad things, which seems very much to be a projection of the child's impulses. They don't feel comfortable expressing themselves, so they have the imaginary companion doing it. And I've recently read a story by Shirley Jackson—I think it's called *Charles*—and it's this little boy who goes to preschool or kindergarten and he comes home and he tells his mother that everything was fine, but there's this kid Charles who does all these terrible things and he gets punished. And after a period of time, the parents go to the parent-teacher meeting and the mother says something to the teacher about, you know, how's this kid Charles? And she says, what kid Charles? There is no Charles in the class. Which was clearly her son's way of dealing with his unruly behavior. And whether or not that was an imaginary companion, it was certainly a convenient excuse. And I think that's more of what I hear in therapy. It's about someone else, some other child who is used to express what the child himself is not comfortable expressing. So it's as if it's, you know, this isn't me, it's Charles who is doing whatever he happens to be doing. You certainly hear that clinically with older children, with adolescents, who come in and tell you, I have this friend who does all kinds of things, takes drugs, has sex, all these terrible things. And of course, they're not talking about their friends, they're talking either about themselves or their impulses to do it.

So this isn't exactly imaginary companion, but it is a derivative of that, and of course that's what child therapy is so much about. We play with puppets or whatever, and the puppet is the issue that the child's dealing with.

Singer: In my practice, which I stopped about three years ago, I had a little boy who was an only child of a mother who worked in a local supermarket, and he was referred because he was having very negative behavior in school. He was referred by a pediatrician, and after about four weeks of working with him he began talking about Ghost. And I asked him who Ghost was and he said Ghost was his friend. And Ghost really told me how unhappy he was, and Ghost would talk to me, his friend. When the mother then was going to move to a different part of Connecticut—and this was very upsetting for him because now this little boy had made friends and adjusted to the school—Ghost talked much more to me than the little boy. And finally he was beginning to resolve this. He said, "You know, I guess I could take my friend with me." And I said, "Yes, you can." He said, "He doesn't have to go in the moving truck because, you know, he's really not real." And that's the point I wanted to make, that he understood that this was not a real person. Ghost really was very important to him in handling all of the unresolved feelings and anxieties that this little boy carried around with him, especially since the father was—they were divorced. The father really did not offer this boy very much love or support and Ghost did. And then, finally, when it was time to move, he said to me, "I think I could leave Ghost here. Is that all right?" I said, "Of course you can leave Ghost here." And I think what happened in the course of therapy, he was really finished with this need for Ghost. He didn't need to take him with him anymore. But Ghost did a lot of mischief, too, that this little boy did not do. I mean, because he was so afraid of antagonizing his mother and he already had no father, he would report to me the things that Ghost did and these are the things he wanted to do to really express his anger. But it was very striking that he knew this was not a real person, that it was someone who was an alter ego—they call it splitting in psychoanalysis. But it was a very important, key character and he was all ready to abandon it, just the way sometimes a child will throw away his bow-wow or stuffed rabbit when he's outgrown it. He was ready to say, "I don't need Ghost anymore."

And just to follow this up, the mother kept in touch with me and told me that he was doing very well in the new school, and I asked her, "Did he ever refer to Ghost?" She said no. Ghost was gone, which made me feel good that he was able to integrate all the aspects of his personality and was able to do it through this little imaginary character.

Taylor: There's a content/process thing that I think we need to be careful about here. Children are using pretend play in lots of different ways to process—to think about content, to think about who's fair, who's mean, who's misbehaving. And being bad is very interesting to a young child, and so, of course, having an imaginary friend who's bad or has these characteristics is something that might come up. On the other hand, I think sometimes what happens when you interview children is that it's not that they're thinking and working through and controlling bad behavior in the imaginary friend. They're actually surprised by the behavior and they want to stop it. That's what they experience. I take this seriously that sometimes this happens. That's different, I think, than sort of trying to work through ideas you have about badness or fairness or misbehavior.

Bloom: I mean, one extreme version of this would go back to Marcel's point about the unity of the mind and rejecting that notion, which is on one extreme, that when you create an imaginary companion you do create an autonomous mental agent that actually in some sense does its work

Transcript prepared by
Richard Alwyn Fisher
718-797-0939 1-800-842-0692
richardalwynfisher@gmail.com

separate from you. Now I think that's too extreme. Because it doesn't capture the extent to which it is under control and does your bidding. But it's hard to know how to think about it.

Kinsbourne: I think, just to pick that up in the context of your question about surprise, in dreams it happens all the time. I have these adventure story dreams, like detectives, you know, a whodunit. I have no idea who did it and suddenly I find out who did it. And who told me? Me. And, undoubtedly, psychoanalytically that wouldn't be a surprise in terms of conscious and unconscious. So this is just to compliment what's been said already, that if the companion is surprising, it still arises from the same brain and affects another aspect of that brain. Indeed, that's possible because not all parts of the brain check what they say out with everybody else. They're not really very good at committee work. But various subsets take over at different times and express perspectives, which may not be at all alike. When we meet people we try to organize them into traits to get stable notions of whom they are and what they're like, how they're likely to behave. We exaggerate that for our own purposes, to simplify the problems that face us. In fact, the diversity is very striking. Even to the point of one surprising oneself.

Singer: I was fascinated by you making a distinction between imagination and fantasy. I always think of imagination as someone asking, "What if?" The possibilities that exist for me, for others, and it's been verified in some of the research we've done where we've found that children who are highly imaginative use more of the subjunctive in their language. We analyzed the language and we found that those children who were really our most imaginative children used future tense and the subjunctive. And we tried to understand that, and we thought, yes, of course they use future tense because when children play there's a certain amount of planning that takes place. First we do this, then we do that, and then we'll sit down and have our tea party. There's an ordering, and the subjunctives is, "what if it's possible," "it could be"—this constant kind of thinking. There's the realm of possibility, and I like that notion of thinking. To me, the notion of "what if" tells me that that's the imagination. All of the possibilities open. But I think of it more as a continuum rather than as a distinction between imagination and fantasy. I think it can go on and on till the imagination can become so fantastic that you can fill it with all sorts of things that are not related to the real world. The images that you can have can be conjured up and they have no realistic basis. And I think that's more of an extreme. So I don't see it as a dichotomy, and you intrigue me by saying you saw a difference.

Kinsbourne: Any time I either utter or hear a dichotomy, I know it's really a continuum, which we categorize for our simplification purposes. Absolutely, I would agree. And I think that when we're discussing what the children of interest do, there are elements of both and it's a matter of degree and context and time. I absolutely agree with that.

Ackermannn: One aspect that I would like to bring in, in relation to the question of the fantasy versus the imagination, is this notion that—it's actually Paul Keegan who expressed it well—that both in cognitive and affective development what people do is constantly try to solve this irresolvable tension between getting embedded in a situation and emerging from embeddedness. In a way what I find so difficult—and this is where I am so intrigued by these projections and introjections—is that to a certain extent, the fact of projecting something outwards by, for example, creating an imaginary companion or even embodying aspects of oneself in avatars or characters or puppets, allows one to take distance. It allows one to separate. But then there is

Transcript prepared by
Richard Alwyn Fisher
718-797-0939   1-800-842-0692
richardalwynfisher@gmail.com

always this other part. Because once you have actually created this avatar and you put it in the world, what it also does is that it allows you to look at this world through its eyes. And this is something very strange, because that's where, again, you separate, but in a way it allows you to enter into a more intimate conversation once you separate. And maybe there is something similar with your distinction between imagination and fantasy. To me, imagination has to do with this ability to establish a dialogue between what is and what could be. In order to do that, you have to make displacements of your mind. You have to put yourself in this situation that is the "could be" situation. But in order to do that, you have to delve into this virtual or possible world so that you can actually be in touch with it and continue to establish this dialogue. So what I am suggesting is that there is always this shifting back and forth between almost getting lost in a situation, being embedded or letting something in—being more accommodative, in Piaget's vocabulary—and then sort of pulling back and, in a way, extracting yourself and then literally erasing the other, because then you impose your own order, so to speak, on things. I think that children, when they are involved in play, like we are when we are watching a movie, know that—when I see *Bambi* I cry, I mean, I know it's not for real. But I do cry for real, because it actually evokes, it brings up feelings that are very real and maybe it's a good idea to take our own rapport with, let's say, theater or cinema, to try to look differently at children's pretend play, because I think they shift constantly between knowing that it's not real but then playing it as if it were real. They come together.

Kinsbourne: That's a beautiful statement in the spirit of Geneva. No, I wasn't joking; I'm complimenting. I would like to pick up on the getting lost. I think there is a key part of it. A person may indeed know it's pretend but get lost in the intensity of the activity, and at that point he or she doesn't know it's pretend. And the fact that the rest of the brain has latent knowledge of that is perhaps secondary. You see examples of people in the street insulting and assaulting characters from sitcoms. Like J.R. "How could you have been so mean to so and so?" And these are not insane people who are doing this, but they are so lost in the intensity of the imagined situation. I like the idea of a discussion of the subjective phenomenology of imaginary companions in terms of this interplay and tension. But if you ask in cold blood—"Is this pretend?"—the kid will usually, apparently, say yes. But that doesn't mean everything. Those of you old enough may remember what Attorney General Mitchell said, "Watch what we do, not what we say." What they say is not a guarantee of their point of view at all times, or the perspective they take.

Taylor: But when we are emotionally involved in fantasy, we don't act in ways that we would if it was real. I think we always know—or at least frequently; there may be some exceptions—but the default is that we're actually pretty good at keeping track of things. Take the case of the movie. We're absolutely involved in the fantasy and emotionally involved, but we're not calling 911 when people are being murdered; we're not running from the theater. We're not doing the things we would do if it was real. We're sitting there and getting anxious and our heart is beating and all that, but our behavior in some ways shows that we know it's fantasy.

Ackermannn: I just have to tell this little anecdote of a Brazilian novella, where when the hero does something nasty to his fiancée, the public goes and actually relates directly to the actor by giving their opinion about what they did in the play. And this is very interesting; it's one of the slippages, where this disassociation between—

Singer: This is not just particular to that group, because if you ever pick up *Soap Magazine,* which keeps you informed about the soaps, people write in about the characters as if they're very real and "how could the writer change that behavior when I expected so and so to do this?"

With the children who have imaginary companions, what's fascinating to me is that the child can have several of them and can keep their personalities very different, give them very different names and really be very much in control of this process, which is why I think children who have imaginary companions are highly imaginative and very much in control and very integrated. We've known children who've had three, four or five imaginary companions and given them distinct personalities, and yet are really in control.

I wanted to ask you all about if you've experienced this: if you tried to play with a child's imaginary companion, the child cuts you out of it, or will create a new one once you intrude. For some children this is very private, and unless you're dealing with it in therapy, as I do, this little boy does not want you to play with that imaginary companion. He'll introduce you to him, as we know, or want their mother to set a place at the table and have a special chair, but if you start to play a game with the imaginary companion—we know of a child who immediately conjured up a new one, got rid of the other one, because it's a very private, personal thing. So there are really two things I'm raising: the child who has a number of them and keeps their personalities very distinct and the child who doesn't want you to intrude on this imaginary world. I think it's fascinating when we see this phenomenon. Unfortunately, it hasn't been studied enough and I wish some of the people who are doing more of the research on this would pick up on this, because there are some children who only keep one and some children who keep several of them.

Fisher: And yet, in therapy I find that a child may create three or four characters and that will go on for months, for weeks, for years. The same characters come back session after session and evolve, but these are imaginings that are developed in the session, so they're developed with the two of us together, rather than something that's brought in from the outside. But shared nowhere else, and it becomes a creation of the therapy. I think what you were describing—this coming together and separating out—is exactly what happens in therapy, and we try to promote this because it gives the child an opportunity to distance from something that he's been very much engaged in or that's been on his mind that he hasn't been able to think about. Once he's engaged in it and then is able to distance from it, then he's able to get some understanding of it. So this idea of engagement and distance is very important and is a way for the child to understand himself and to get some control of his feelings.

Kinsbourne: There's an anecdote which maybe I read in your book, which speaks to the point of not letting the other person into the matter. A lady takes her daughter to a party. When they arrive, the daughter says, "Oh, we didn't bring X with us." Mother desperately says, "Let's pretend she's here." "No way!" We're going to have to go back to get the pretend person.

Bloom: Well, let me go back to this thing between imagination and reality and try to insert some disagreement into this pleasant panel. I certainly agree that we often respond to the imagination as if it were real. This is why we get pleasure from certain things like movies and books and so on. Our hearts race as if it were really happening. We become aroused or amused as if these

Transcript prepared by
Richard Alwyn Fisher
718-797-0939 1-800-842-0692
richardalwynfisher@gmail.com

were real people. We bleed over, we attribute to the actors properties of their characters and so on. But first, as Marjorie pointed out, we very rarely act towards the imagined as if it were real. Only a nut would run. If you're watching a horror movie, nobody runs out to call 911 to say there's a homicidal maniac on the loose. But more than that, often we respond in polar opposite ways. This is what philosophers call the paradox of tragedy or the paradox of horror, which is: In a real world, having somebody run around with a chainsaw dismembering people is very, very bad and it would be unpleasant and it would be frightening and it would be upsetting. But in a movie, it's delightful—now I'm getting into autobiography. Statistically, such movies are often very popular—not among people with more base pleasures than my own. So we're often drawn towards things in imagination that would repel us in the real world. But we have to be very cautious about viewing the imagination as if it were just sort of a paler version of reality. Often the rules are entirely different.

Kinsbourne: If you go into psychopathology, then that really does apply.

Bloom: The paler version?

Kinsbourne: Yes. And of course there is a continuum again between the boundaries of normality and psychopathology, so that when you come into delusional thinking, the person who's Jesus is so very much into it that even if the apostles are nowhere in sight and he's wearing this lousy robe and the slippers, nonetheless, in his mind he is Jesus. I totally agree that in the general population there is some inhibitory function which saves us from this behavior. Not in dreams, however.

Bloom: No.

Kinsbourne: In dreams you actually do act out, act at times in this manner.

Taylor: And they're unpleasant, so if you have a violent dream it's really an unpleasant experience. But you may seek out a violent movie if you like that sort of thing, because you understand fantasy/reality. It allows you to explore the emotional space associated with that particular experience. If you didn't have that firm grasp of what's real and what isn't, you wouldn't, I don't think, enjoy it. I don't think it would be possible to enjoy it.

Kinsbourne: Which is why depressed people like comedies.

Taylor: Do they?

Kinsbourne: I hope that's right.

Singer: I think it's very interesting to look at some of the characteristics of people who have had imaginary companions and then grown up, and the only research I know is the work by the Root-Bernsteins, Michelle and Robert Root-Bernstein. He's a physiologist, she's a psychologist, and they have access to Nobel Prize winners and Macarthur Genius awardees, and they questioned them and found that the majority of them had imaginary companions when they were younger. Their work is very interesting because the group they compare them to has people of the same

Transcript prepared by
Richard Alwyn Fisher
718-797-0939 1-800-842-0692
richardalwynfisher@gmail.com

intelligence, but the difference is that these people did not have the imaginary companions. I think there's only one other person I know who's looked at adults and questioned them, and that's Charles Schaeffer, who questioned a number of creative young high school people. Embedded in the questions was one dealing with imaginary companions, and again the majority of these children who were highly creative had imaginary companions. So I'm focusing, as you said early on, on the positive aspects of this. Early on it was Loretta Bender, who worked in Bellevue Hospital here in New York and had a number of patients who were young adolescents who had imaginary companions, and she associated this with pathology. She thought the imaginary companion for these disturbed young people was an outlet, was really maybe another aspect of themselves. For a long time the literature expressed that if you had a child with an imaginary companion, this was a negative. We find mothers still are hesitant to tell you about it. There's still this kind of feeling in the air that maybe this is not such a good thing. Yet the children who have imaginary companions tend to be more creative than normal. And I wish that society at large did not have this very pathological, negative view of it. I view it as a fantastic creation of the mind, the ability to conjure up this person, to make another person, to endow them with all kinds of characteristics. And if there are three or four, it's quite exciting. It's the same way I feel about paricosms, children who have imaginary worlds. We do know that very famous people such as Tolstoy, Goethe—all of these people who were great writers who became creative, even though they were somewhat disturbed as adults, the creativity they had as emerged from some of the imaginary companionship. Characters that they created or the puppet theaters they played with, or the parent who gave them this ability to play and sanctioned play, allowed them to really spread their imagination. I remember Tolstoy, for example, there's a very interesting story about him. His grandmother was very wealthy and hired a storyteller who was blind to come in every night and sit on the windowsill and tell stories. And the grandmother only allowed one child at a time in the bed with her to listen to the stories. And this remained with Tolstoy all of his life, the fact that you can tell stories, that you can make things up. It gave him tremendous satisfaction. So I think what happens when you're very young, if you have this capacity for imagination or someone who helps you and fosters it, it stays with you, enriches you. Certainly we know that from the Root-Bernstein's work, that very well known people who received all these credits and awards had this little imaginary companion when they were little. So it did some good.

I guess in the long run I'm saying I don't want us to really think of this as pathology or focus on that aspect of it, but to think of it as one more marvelous aspect of the human being. To be able to do this, to picture it, to see it, to clothe it, to name it, to give it all of these deeds to do, and still you know this is not real. I don't know any imaginary companion child who ever thought that it was real, unless there are some very disturbed kids who have, and then it really is not quite as integrated or as controlled as it is with a so-called normal child who has it.

Bloom: Can I ask a question about multiple imaginary companions? I've done some work with Dena Skolnick, who's a graduate student at Yale, on children's understanding of fictional worlds, and what we find is even four-year-olds understand that Batman and Robin are fictional, and Harry Potter and Hermione are fictional. But they also understand that they're different fictional worlds and they don't interact. And I'm wondering for children in cases that you describe, where they have multiple imaginary companions, do they inevitably treat them as if

Transcript prepared by
Richard Alwyn Fisher
718-797-0939 1-800-842-0692
richardalwynfisher@gmail.com

they would know one another? Or do they treat them as sort of separate and that they wouldn't connect with one another?

Singer: I think the person who creates them is this powerful figure. Either it'll be the mother or the father of these figures, and sometimes they know each other, sometimes they don't. And that's why I say this is an area where we really still need to do more hard research. We know Dena, since she was our assistant as well, and we've talked about this with her at Yale, and I don't think we've seen enough of the research to really find out—does your imaginary friend Jimmy know your imaginary friend Johnny?

Bloom: One question we asked was does Batman believe Robin is real or not?

Singer: Yeah, I remember that question.

Bloom: And this is Dena's idea. No one had thought to ask children that. Well, Batman thinks Robin's real. Why else would he fly around? But does Batman think Spongebob is real? Batman thinks Spongebob is make-believe.

Singer: That's right.

Bloom: So what I'm asking is, if you have a child with multiple imaginary friends, do their imaginary friends believe their counterparts are imaginary?

Singer: See, the problem with that one, though, is Spongebob is animation. We've talked to Dena about that, that you really had to have another control group in that. But I don't want to get into her dissertation. A question that I think needs to be pursued is to really ask the children who have three or four companions, "Do they know each other?" Do they play with each other? My feeling is that they are very separate, at least from the children that we've met. They are really very separate, and they all serve different aspects of the personality. Now there may be some children out there—I don't know because we haven't polled them—who do have them interact. I don't know. But that's a question that's really up for grabs.

Fisher: It's children in therapy who create characters that they keep with them through the therapy sessions. They interact.

Singer: Yes, but I think the therapy's different because I know that in working with this kid who had Ghost, I was interacting and we shared it. If I were not the therapist, he would not have shared Ghost.

Fisher: Right.

Singer: So we're doing something different. We're really getting them to cope and to talk and to find out what this person is in terms of their own skills and their ability to integrate. So that's different. I'm really talking about the children who are out there and who we haven't really questioned on this.

Taylor: Well, we've interviewed children a lot about groups of imaginary friends, and actually it's quite common to have more than one. And often they are closely related. They might even have the same name, like Nutsy and Nutsy, one of my favorite examples—two brightly colored birds that lived in a tree outside the child's bedroom. One of the things she would talk about with Nutsy and Nutsy is that they were always fighting with each other and chattering and that sort of thing. There's Timpy and Tompy, and there's Digger and Doogie. In fact, one thing is if you have an imaginary friend who won't show up when you want the imaginary friend to come, you often will invent another one to keep you company while you're waiting for number one to show up. So there's that sort of thing that happens. And also if you have an imaginary friend and you're enjoying it, why not have another and another? Sometimes children have circle time with their imaginary friends. It kind of goes on and on like this, and then your imaginary friend might, if you get a dog, well your imaginary friend might get a dog. One parent told us that every time something happened to the little boy, it was bigger and better in the life of the imaginary friend. So the little boy gets a pet fish and the imaginary friend gets a tank of sharks, that kind of thing. So what I've experienced is that they tend to be integrated. If they're talking about different friends that aren't, it's because they're serial. So they'll trade in one and then invent another. And then they don't even want to tell you anything about number one. In fact, one child said, "He's defective." We were trying to find out if we could get the same story from children using different interviewers over a period of seven months, and what we found is that in many cases the imaginary friend might be gone and sometimes replaced. And if they're gone and replaced, the child really didn't want to talk about it anymore. That was finished. So they can have lots of them in their lives that don't interact, but those tend to be the serial ones. The ones that they have at the same time, I've often found that they're brother and sister or that sort of thing.

Fisher: Are they different parts of the child's personality? I've seen in therapy where kids are very involved with twins, and it's like there's a split, there's a good twin and a bad twin. So I'm wondering if this is what you're saying with these kids, that one of their imaginary companions has a certain constellation of personality characteristics and another would have a different constellation?

Taylor: It varies so much that you can't make general statements. The phenomenon is so diverse. Occasionally we've come across someone who has an imaginary friend that's a twin, just one twin, and they'll say, "She's just like me, only she is good." I'm thinking of a little child who had a ghost sister named Olivia. "She's good. She cleans the floor, she does all the housework. She's very good." And the child didn't say, "And I'm bad." Sometimes when there are two it varies. Sometimes it would be the good one and the bad one, or often they're both bad, like Darnit, a little girl named Darnit. And the brother who also was—I'm forgetting his name, but his name was something like Darnit—only it was also something bad.

People have been sitting here for an hour or so and I know that there probably are questions that people would like to bring up.

Audience: I'd just like to ask, as an extension of your discussion currently, Marcel and you both talked about the genesis of imagination and fantasy and the question that I was going to ask

Transcript prepared by
Richard Alwyn Fisher
718-797-0939 1-800-842-0692
richardalwynfisher@gmail.com

related to the fact that the imaginary companion comes at the age, you say, between two and three years old.

Taylor: It can. I mean, I think the peak age would be around four, but you can get them as young as two-and-a-half.

Audience: Well, it's a question relating to separation with the child and the mother. It would be a notion of a mental representation of a parent, so it enables you to separate from a parent to some extent. The experience of creation of something apart from the self is that memory of the parent.

One thing that I wanted to throw back into the panel is the presence of the imaginary companion in the recovery movement. For instance, you have the higher power, and not necessarily God. It is something apart from the self.

Taylor: Talking about the separation from the parent, I think that's really important, especially from a psychoanalytic perspective. When I think of the youngest ones, I don't know the answer from the approach that I've taken.

Singer: Well, I think you'd have to really be at the stage of symbolic thinking to envision the imaginary companion. Before that you may be holding a little stuffed animal or a cuddly blanket, but I think to envision the imaginary companion you'd really have to have that ability to see things in your mind's eye, and that usually comes after three or four, the period of symbolic thought. With two year olds, they're not that verbal. It's very hard to really know if it's a true imaginary companion. But certainly by the time you're three or four, you're capable of symbolic thought, and that's when I think we see more of the peak of it—four, five, six. Although some children hold on to them, as long as six, seven, eight, nine, eleven, beyond that. But most of it takes place during that symbolic thought period.

Fisher: I think it's a very important point you're making that first of all you have to have the relationship, the child with the parent. That has to be established enough so that if the parent is not there, the child feels the need for the connection, desires the connection. Then there has to be some kind of mental representation that has been established so that the child can evoke that mental representation, and then there has to be a memory that can be evoked. Then you get to a point—all of this allows for greater separation, and with greater separation, the child can imagine a companion or whatever it happens to be. So connection and separation are very important in terms of developing an imaginary companion, as well as cognitive development, which has to have reached a certain point. The child has to have moved from some sort of psychic equivalence to a pretend mode. So there are a lot of different aspects of development that have to occur before the child can resort to this.

Kinsbourne: What age does this separation typically happen?

Fisher: For all of this to occur, I would imagine two to three. Somewhere in there, depending on the child. I mean, you need object permanence and you need object constancy, which usually begins to occur by three.

Kinsbourne: Just as a tangential comment, sort of partly responding to you, I've been impressed in my own children how naturally they find it to have several different names. I have a two year old who is Charlotte and Chiat and she is Lola, and Lolita, and she's Shasha. But she's five things and she doesn't find that at all out of order. There seems to be some comfort in these differences, and the taking on a character. You're reading a book and there's a rabbit and a hare and "I'm the rabbit and, Daddy, you're the hare." I mean, it comes so naturally so early. That's why I asked what age we're talking about.

Fisher: Now this is like trying on different identities, and I guess you have to have reached a certain point in development before you can then try on these different identities.

Kinsbourne: But you reach it real fast.

Fisher: Yes.

Kinsbourne: In other words, given that these kids have rather small heads and are quite slow to be able to do certain things, it's amazing how quickly they do have such inventions.

Audience: There have been various hints around that suggest continuities into adult life of forms of imaginary companions. One is the obvious relationship to religious characters. Thousands, millions of people believe they have guardian angels, they have patron saints with whom they converse. Some of you may remember Tevye in the musical comedy where he talks directly to God at various points, and he's kind of an imaginary companion. I think Tevye might acknowledge that. That's really a widespread phenomenon and it takes different forms in different religious groups, but then there's another side to it that's coming into adult life and that has to do with the fact that we now have an electronic world around us and people are using the computer to form—the word avatar was introduced by Dr. Ackermann, I think that's the term that is used in some of the research on the use of alternate egos. You take a different name or a different character and send it out into cyberspace and then see what happens, and sometimes this becomes an issue. So I'd be interested in hearing thoughts or comments about these two movements from the early childhood into our own adult thinking.

Audience: The children who have imaginary companions, are they usually with or without siblings?

Taylor: They can come from any size family, but there's some tendency to be a firstborn or an only child.

Audience: I kept thinking of two things. Do you make any distinction in the research with regard to creating imaginary companions as a response to an under-stimulated personal universe—I'm thinking of the Brontes. I recently wrote an introduction to *Wuthering Heights* and, if anyone has ever gone to the Bronte's house, they had two toys. They invented. In terms of the distinction between fantasy and imagination, this is one of the few cases I know where it gets collapsed, because they had this very invented world. They drew on it for all of their writing, but they were responding to complete under stimulation. Most of the kids you're

Transcript prepared by
Richard Alwyn Fisher
718-797-0939 1-800-842-0692
richardalwynfisher@gmail.com

looking at today in this contemporary world, they're creating imaginary friends as a response to over stimulus. The whole genesis of the creation is different. I mean, it is a response, in some ways, to stimulus or not stimulus. I kept thinking of the Brontes as an example of another kind of world.

Singer: Yeah, they created paracosms, meaning an artificial world, and they played with it continuously. But they had each other, including their brother. They were all very involved in this make-believe world and it went on for a very long period of time. But it also led to the creative writing of the individual ones, so it wasn't their entire experience. I think it added to it. I think what you're asking is did they do this because they didn't have electronic media.

Audience: I wasn't asking, I was suggesting.

Singer: Yes, I think you're right.

Audience: One of the distinctions you might look at: I think the British classically have not mythologized imaginary friends so much. The only excellent book I know on it is a British book for children called *Aldo*. Here there's more an alarm. Is this a symptom of insufficient integration? So I was really not asking, I was making a suggestion that the notion of stimulus and under stimulus could be taken into account.

Singer: When we were doing the study, we pulled out the children who were heavy TV viewers and lighter TV viewers, and in this respect you're probably right. Our lighter TV viewers, those who were spending less time with TV, were the children who had imaginary companions.

Audience: Imagination classically flourished. It brings up the whole issue of isolation.

Audience: Imagination has to do with play and expanding the sense of reality, and I wonder why adults in general don't continue what these children do. And I was thinking of politically. For example, somebody has had imagination that they could see ahead and develop something that really turned into a reality, which was absolutely unbelievable. Then you see, for example, currently our president. His imagination became fantasy with what happened in Iraq. You know, it was not imagination there; it was just fantasy and look what happened.

Kinsbourne: I like the politics, but I won't pursue them. Let me just throw in, when Martin Luther King said, "I have a dream," it wasn't a dream. It was imagination. He had a dream of a potential physical reality.

Audience: I was thinking of somebody else who said that too: Lenin. He had a dream about a newspaper that had to be developed to bring about what he wanted. He said it was a dream at first and they laughed at him and said, "Oh, how can you have a dream," and it became a reality, what he was doing. Remember, he started with a dream.

Kinsbourne: And it was definitely a reality.

Audience: And it became a reality.

Audience: I just wanted to ask about two things, because I don't think we ever really answered the question about adults—if they continue to maintain some kind of imaginary relationship, not just in a religious sense. And then the other one is about the antagonistic imaginary friends. I feel like you brought that up but we never really got into the imaginary friend who's doing something that's counter to what the child is projecting.

Ackermann: For the question of adult versions of entertaining imaginary companions, I was thinking at some point that there is an interesting connection between the idea of imaginary companions and fictional audiences as adults. It's Paul Valery who said that you always address your work and your thinking, and you always borrow from the people that inspire you. So it's the idea that even if a creator or a designer is alone, the person is always in a dialogue or a multilogue with people to whom they address whatever they think about the work they do, because they are important to them and they inspire them, and in a way they borrow and recompose and re-massage their ideas. So one can think of this idea of these fictional audiences—Bakhtin talks about this.

Taylor: We don't have a unity of thought; we have multiple voices. That's what you're talking about. There also are some people who just continue to have imaginary friends. For example, Agatha Christie, if you read her autobiography, she talks with great affection about the imaginary friends she invented when she was a child. She thought much more highly of them than the characters in her novels, actually. She felt the characters in her novels were too old. She didn't know why she had created them to be so old, and then they'd be really old by the time she finished. They would have been over 100 by the time she finished writing about them.
So there are people who do have actual imaginary friends, but then there's also just the creation of characters in novels, and that's something I've been really interested in. It's not the same as having an imaginary friend. There are some differences, but it's surprising how often people who write about a character become connected to that character in a personal way, not just in the world of the novel but interacting to them and talking to them about a reality outside the novel.

Kinsbourne: And the novelist may say, "I actually didn't know what my character was going to do."

Taylor: Right. We call that the illusion of independent agency. We've studied this with 50 fiction writers in one study and we're now trying to do a bigger study with well-known writers about their creative process.

Audience: I'm sort of like Tevye myself: I speak to someone who I'm not sure is listening. But that's not my question. In this over stimulated society we're talking about—cyberspace and all these different things—do these children ever create a character to use it as a teaching device? Are they teaching this character what they've learned during the day? Meaning, for example, I've learned all this and I have it jumbled in my head, now I'm going to teach this other imaginary character?

Taylor: Yes. Some children come home and just teach what they learned in school to their imaginary friends at home. That's actually what they do. That can happen.

Audience: Is it like a reinforcing mechanism, meaning they're repeating what they've learned so it helps them?

Taylor: One would think so.

Fisher: Maybe it's an idea of turning passive into active, which kids do all the time. There's an experience that they've had passively and then they act it out.

Audience: You said before that it has something to do with separation, and I'm wondering whether the creation of an imaginary companion and a belief in one is a way of asserting the child's own power to determine who's there, when and where, and who is not. In other words, to take control over the terrible feeling of being separated from whomever the kid doesn't want to be separate from. Is that borne out at all in your work?

Taylor: I think that's true. The power and control can be one of the best parts—

Audience: I'm remembering something about a specific imaginary companion who came about at a specific time when something was very bad. I do believe that it gave this child the strength to master that.

Taylor: There are different kinds of imaginary companions, and some are like that. For example, Shadow Shark—he's always there; he's always right with me. And he does anything I say. In fact, the compliance is what's really exciting, and the control. And then about 28% of them have a lot of unruliness, and that's a whole other subset and those kids look different on inhibitory control and other kinds of measures. So I think that you can't say one blanket statement.

M: What do the perverse imaginary friends do?

Singer: There's a child who had two, Maddy and Baddy. He also had two friends who were very good. So he had these four imaginary companions and the two bad ones who do all of these naughty things and the two good ones did all the good things, so the child himself was projecting these things on the two unruly imaginary playmates.

Fisher: That's a matter of control, too, though. Because there's control of the bad behavior—allowing it to happen, allowing it to be expressed, and yet it's contained.

Taylor: Sometimes the bad behavior, you're controlling it. But sometimes they're just bad. You have to vacuum them up because they're being so bad. They mess things up, they spill things, they boss you around, they say bad words.

Fisher: But you're controlling it.

Taylor: Yes, sometimes. But the children also express frustration. "She always bosses me. She never leaves me alone." Stuff like that. Now, it sounds a little odd. Sometimes it goes too far.

Transcript prepared by
Richard Alwyn Fisher
718-797-0939   1-800-842-0692
richardalwynfisher@gmail.com

If you look at Joy Silberg's work, it talks about what distinguishes children with dissociative disorders from children who are not in trouble in that way. Some children have imaginary companions that they absolutely can't control; they have a confusion about whether they're real or not. They're always being told to do things that they don't want to do, and there's also some memory issues around it. So it's more extreme. But there are all these ones where it doesn't come across as just controlling bad behavior. Although I think that happens, too. Sometimes it really is this sense of not being able to get the imaginary companion to do what you want the imaginary companion to do. And you see the same thing with fiction writers who cannot get their characters to do what they want them to do. The characters have a mind of their own. Sue Grafton, who we interviewed for this study, said that sometimes Kinsey would want her to do something and she just had to type it in, and then she'd come back later when Kinsey wasn't around and change it. She said, "I know it sounds crazy, but that's what I have to do."

Ackermann: In respect to this, I work a lot on the way in which children relate to animated toys, toys that are sort of the opposite of how we think of transitional objects because they have autonomy. They have a sort of will of their own. Sometimes they're even scary because you cannot control them. But there is a sense in which those kinds of objects are transitional objects for different sets of issues than your typical malleable blanket that conforms exactly to what you want. It's the dream of everybody. What if my friend were really, really doing always what I wanted. If our spaces would constantly respond to what we need at that moment. In a way it would be hell, and we would get utterly bored after a while because what we like also is to have something in front of us or somebody in front of us that has an integrity, that has a will of their own, that has a logic of their own. The type of control is different. It's partial control. It's finding pleasure in poking something, in the case of these animated toys, to see what they do with whatever you bring to them, and to be surprised by it. So I think there is a sense in which the children, at least in other forms of play, enjoy interacting and controlling playthings or props in to sort of explore these issues that have a degree of autonomy. And this somehow relates also to adults who create these characters, and when they're really connected to these characters they take on a life of their own. What the children, or the adults for that matter, allow—I have this image that they let this *other*, with different degrees of autonomy, inhabit a part of their mind. And this can be dangerous. It's like when you fall in love with somebody. I mean, you let in a little bit too much, maybe, of these characters or these playthings, and you play with these boundaries of how autonomous they are or how malleable they are.

Kinsbourne: Charlie Ravioli is a good case in point.

Taylor: Yes, Adam Gopnik's child had Charlie Ravioli, who actually lived in New York City and was always too busy to play. Which is really bad and Adam Gopnik really worried. Your child has an imaginary friend that's too busy to play and you have to make an appointment— after a while Charlie Ravioli had a secretary or somebody making the appointments for the imaginary friend—and Gopnik thought, well, only in New York. But we've actually seen that in other places.

Audience: In relationship to the question about how this may appear in adults, I was thinking about how it may appear clinically. Maybe this is related to transference. For those of us who are not novelists or poets, in analysis there is this idea that there is less stimulation, less reality

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Richard Alwyn Fisher
718-797-0939 1-800-842-0692
richardalwynfisher@gmail.com

type things, so that this fosters the projection and the imagination. I just wondered, has this been connected to a concept of transference in adults, which they may have also to teachers or bosses or whoever else? A thought I had about the distinction between the imagination and fantasy was that the examples that come up about imagination seem to be ones where the children are using it to solve a problem they're having emotionally in reality, whether it is in school or with friends or whatever, and working out different versions through the imaginary friend. Maybe the distinction with fantasy would be more that they've withdrawn from the reality and are just making up a wishful one, and they're not in the process of trying to solve the conflicts in some way that allows them to return to reality.

Kinsbourne: Like they're denying it rather than coping with it?

Audience: Yes.

Audience: There actually is some research on the outcomes of psychoanalytic therapy that has shown that those people who have developed a kind of very personalized attachment to a therapist—either the therapist seems all powerful, like just an absolutely wonderful person, or they develop a very negative relationship and are ultimately disgusted with the therapist—it turns out that those people tend to have bad outcomes of therapy when it's evaluated subsequently. And people who have had successful outcomes have an image not so much of the therapist as a super figure but as simply a process figure, someone who's there and says, "Well, why don't you think about it some more?" or "Let's examine the situation," or just gets them started on thinking through a difficulty of some kind. Those people are the ones who have reported or shown in other ways a successful outcome. So some of this can be used, and in other clinical studies— more behaviorally oriented ones—people actually use the figure of the therapist to help in something like continuing a cognitive behavioral process. This is some kind of exercise for reducing anxiety that they started in the therapy but then are told to continue, like if they have a fear of driving. This was actually a case that I had in my own practice. If they have a fear of driving you tell them to imagine that the therapist is alongside talking with them or suggesting different possibilities or something like that. And so the therapist becomes a temporary imaginary friend.

Audience: Yes, I was fascinated by the possible connection to the adult use of religious figures, guardian angels. It seems like there's a little evidence that people actually believe in guardian angels, maybe more than kids believe in their imaginary friends. What would you think when someone dies and a person feels that they're still around and they talk to them? Is there any connection there, with someone who's not here physically any more, but you still believe in their presence in some way? Does that serve some person? Is there a brain mechanism in people that allows us to do that sometimes?

Taylor: I think what you said first about the distinction between talking to someone that you believe is there, like a guardian angel who is there listening, versus creating someone and having interactions with them—even if you get to a place where you're listening to this thing that you've created, rather than having the sense of putting words into their mouth—I think that's really crucial. In terms of speaking to someone who has died, that happens a lot. If you interviewed elderly people who have lost a spouse, what would the role of their conversations

Transcript prepared by
Richard Alwyn Fisher
718-797-0939   1-800-842-0692
richardalwynfisher@gmail.com

with their departed spouse be like? I bet sometimes there's a sense of real communication. And sometimes it's just a comforting, thinking about and keeping that person alive in your mind.

Bloom: That raises a question about kids. Most people around the world believe that dead people continue to exist as spirits or in heaven or in the spirit world and they communicate to them in some different ways. But typically there's not the phenomenological reporting of literally talking to them, literally hearing their voices. I'm wondering with kids and their imaginary friends, do they pretend actually? I guess I'm trying to ask about the phenomenology of it. They don't literally hear them?

Taylor: They'll say they do sometimes.

Bloom: Because if they did, it wouldn't be pretense. So they pretend that they're speaking?

Taylor: It varies. Sometimes they make a voice for them. But other times, if you say, "Do you hear her the way you hear me?" some of them will say yes. And I think it's like if you think about listening to your mother's voice or somebody like that—your wife's voice—you can hear her voice, right? You can have a sense of actually hearing it. And I think that's more vivid for some children than for others. We've been looking at the development of auditory and visual imagery and how it relates to this phenomenon and it's complicated.

Bloom: Can I just hijack this for a second based on what you said, which struck me as very wise, about your perfect friend and that somebody who mirrors you is actually a very boring and uninteresting person? In kids' individual development with their imaginary companions, do they start off obedient and mirroring and then, as kids realize this isn't working for them, do they sort of make them deviate? Is unruliness part of evolution of a companion?

Taylor: It can go any way you want. It can be the monster in the closet you're afraid of, and you're really scared, but then when the monster comes out of the closet it turns out he's okay and he's pretty nice. So it can go the other way altogether. Or Throat—in your throat there's kind of a nasty person, but mom opens your mouth and has a little talk with Throat and Throat starts to behave again. It varies.

Audience: It seems to me it's a very multi-determined creation. One of the areas I was interested in was loneliness—the relationship with loneliness to the creation of imaginary companions. And the other was, along the idea of separation, whether you found that part of the meaning of this had to do with the identification with mother and birth. You know, the child is giving birth to all these people. Does that help the child to separate?

Singer: The loneliness one is the easy one.

Taylor: Children who have imaginary companions tend to be more sociable, have more real friends and be more extroverted than children who do not, which is exactly the opposite of the stereotype. They do have to have some free time. So children who are always with others may not create an imaginary friend as often as someone who at least has some free time and remembers, you know, "Rachel at daycare who was so much fun, so why not invent fake Rachel

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Richard Alwyn Fisher
718-797-0939 1-800-842-0692
richardalwynfisher@gmail.com

to play with at home," to name a real example. So it's not the shy, lonely child who is having these friends, it's the outgoing, sociable one. But they may feel the need for companionship and that's why they invent something.

Kinsbourne: Well, being outgoing means you have a need for companionship.

Taylor: Yes, that's right.

Kinsbourne: Are they more hypnotizable?

Taylor: Good question. Hypnotizable?

Singer: I don't know if anyone's tried that.

Taylor: Yes, that would be an interesting question.

Audience: Taking a lead from Marcel Kinsbourne, I wonder whether or not we could talk about his comment that when he hears dichotomy, he thinks continuum. Instead of dividing the population into those who have imaginary companions and those who don't, I would hazard a guess that it's a universal phenomenon, that it's in fact repressed by many, in fact maybe more repressed by the non-creative, but that it's present, at least in a transient form, for all. That it is in fact a subset of what we call play, that eventually becomes playfulness, that it's an aid to development, that it's in fact an essential part of development, and that perhaps in some children, especially because of the natural secrecy that occurs as they evolve into latency, or perhaps because of what they sense society approves of and doesn't approve of, we don't hear about it very much, but it's there. It's there in all kids. I would agree with Dr. Fisher that it's very rare to hear about it in a clinical setting. The one patient who told me about an imaginary companion told me about it in a very unusual way. A boy who was the first of four sons and the only adopted child in a very loving family, who saw me for a few years between the ages of seven and nine, mentioned nothing about an imaginary companion until he voluntarily returned at age 15 and told me for the first time about not just one imaginary companion, but five or six of them, all of whom were part of the imaginary family that he had, and that had in fact sustained him throughout a good part of his childhood.

Fisher: That's an interesting thing that you hear a decent amount about, and that is the imaginary family in the adopted child.

Bloom: Schizophrenics hear voices, too. And if we're going to say where we see dichotomy and look for continuity, would that argument apply for that as well?

Audience: You could say that in the very, very young child for whom the clarity of distinction between real and unreal is not there, then you would hear about it. In other words, is the hallucination necessarily a pathological phenomenon or does it become more clearly pathological when it surfaces in a context that one doesn't expect, namely adulthood?

Kinsbourne: In the context of a thought disorder it's pathological, but normal people have hallucinations. At least, I hope they do. If you are expecting something intensely enough, you will actually hear the voice or see the face, fleetingly, that you expect. So there's continuity.

Audience: How about shared imaginary friends? Between siblings or at school or daycare, are there instances of a lot of shared companions and are there then conflicts over authorship?

Bloom: Copyright.

Audience: Or more just who controls the imaginary things that imaginary companions do?

Taylor: The answer is yes, there are shared ones, and exactly how they negotiate what happens, I don't know what that process looks like, but we definitely have seen ones where a little boy created Margarine to help him make his transition to preschool and then when his little sister started preschool, Margarine showed up to help her as well, and they both drew pictures of Margarine and in both cases she's got very long braids almost down to the floor.

Kinsbourne: Could I point out something else that's obvious? Every time somebody asks—is there a kind of child who has this?—the answer is always yes. Which is indeed fitting with the notion that this is universal, so that every kind of person, every kind of thing that could happen happens. But I'm exaggerating just a little.

Taylor: And part of what could happen is not having an imaginary friend. I bet there's some kids who don't have imaginary friends. But the universe of imaginary friends is as diverse as the universe of real people, I think. Wouldn't you say so?

Singer: You had asked something about adults and I was thinking of adults who play the war games and have little soldiers and the Society for Creative Anachronism. There are grown ups who continue, not with imaginary companions, but they do take on roles, especially in the Medieval clubs. They become princes and knights and there are regular jousting meetings and events. They're really very exciting. We had visited one, and flags go up and they roast a pig, they drink ale, and everyone takes on the name of a character and it's a way of perpetuating your playfulness into adulthood that's legitimate and fun. I think this is true with amateur theater and things that we do as a way of keeping that playfulness going on forever. So where Piaget may have said it ends and we play our board games and we become very realistic, I don't think that happens. I think that we all keep this all throughout life. Even sensory motor play continues, which is supposed to end when you're two or three. We go to the beach, we like to touch the sand, we like the water. So I think these childhood stages continue and they don't stop. Play just goes on.

Fisher: For some of us.

Singer: I would hope for all. It's a pity when it isn't for all.

Fisher: But I think there are many people who can't allow it to continue, who need to close it down.

Singer: Yes. I think what I'm saying is that we all have the potential for that. And some people are afraid of it and close down their imagination. There are some people who tell us they have no visual imagery at all. They cannot see anything in their mind's eye. One of the little tests we usually do is to ask someone how many windows are in their house and then they begin to turn their eyes away from you and picture, and then you find out they do have imagery but they haven't used it.

Kinsbourne: One of the very few things I didn't find in the index to your book was animism. Religion has been mentioned, but there's the much broader category of animism, which of course characterized all of the ancient beliefs about trees and rivers, spirits of this and that. It seems like a developmental stage both in the individual and in the growth of knowledge in the species. So to begin by having what my friend Dan Dennett called the intentional stance—viewing any activity or event out of one's own control as being controlled by some entity—would seem to be a first way of rationalizing what is going on, which then is replaced by better understanding of cause and effect, but may have a resurgence in psychopathology.

Ackermann: Wherever imagination reigns, personification is there. I'll just give you the name of somebody who has written a paper that I really like which is called *Toward an Anthropomorphic Epistemology*. The name of the person is Sayeki, and he's a researcher in cognitive psychology and he comes from Japan, which is an important detail. And what he has written about is the fact that it remains the case when we try to solve a very complex problem of a cognitive type that we actually literally project the parts of ourselves in the situation we are trying to understand and we sort of understand the situation through that. So he gives an example in relative motion. He takes cases that are very cognitive and what he shows is that if we don't do this act of imagination, of projecting ourselves into the situation to animate entities that we are trying to understand the behaviors of, it becomes hard to understand them.

So, in the children it's very clear. When you ask them questions about, for example, the little wagon that goes up the hill and how much force it takes, you literally see the kids in sensory mode where they're going into the situation to try to answer the question. And the point that Sayeki makes is that we do that all the time. So, for example, if you ask somebody a question that looks very rational like "Here is a lake, here is a pilot, here is a co-pilot. Once the car is on the other side, will the co-pilot actually face the lake or the mountain?" you have those people that go like this … and then you have the other ones that solve it in a very abstract way. But in a way to do that is very clever, because what you do is you think of your own body as the car. This is the environment, here is your pilot, here is your co-pilot, and then you can go around with this and solve any kind of problem that has to do with the space. Instead of taking on a God's eye view and then doing the computations.

These are just examples to show that there are very effective ways in which older people use their intuitions about navigation in space, their sensory motor knowledge, to actually solve problems that are very complex. My mentor, Jean Piaget, would consider these kinds of solutions less noble than the types of solutions that are very separated and where you adopt this God's eye view and do the computations.

There has been a lot of work done in this field. Seymour Pepart, with whom I work, developed a whole way of engaging children, for example, using their intuitions about navigation and space as an entry point into mathematics—geometry in particular. So there is a different evolution than the one that was suggested by people like Piaget.

Kinsbourne: So this is embodiment.

Fisher: Piaget might not have approved, but Freud would've approved. That's the idea that the ego is primarily a body ego. So it's evolved out of sensations within the body.

Kinsbourne: And Freud would have said that what Piaget was doing was actually also embodiment, except he didn't know it.

Audience: Dr. Singer mentioned that the particularly creative have multiple imaginary friends, and I was wondering if those imaginary relationships were more intense than other children's or if they had a longer duration in childhood? Was there anything special about their relationships?

Singer: I think the children who we found had imaginary friends also had other friends. They were really very well adjusted children. But they also had the capacity to create. When they weren't with their friends and wanted to continue playing, they could create other playmates to have. So it wasn't as if they were deprived or weren't social.

Audience: Yes, but the adults who are creative later in life, were their relationships in their childhood more intense than other children's who didn't become particularly creative, or did they go on for longer periods of time?

Singer: It probably went on for a longer period of time and was more creative.

M: Were they distinguished in some way from the other imaginary friends?

Singer: Yes, I think so. Or they wouldn't have won all of those fantastic prizes.

Kinsbourne: Assuming that everyone here is very creative, who here has actually had an imaginary companion? Could you raise your hands?

Taylor: It's okay, the rest of you have just forgotten it.

Kinsbourne: Just checking.

Audience: I have a question relating to the idea of an imaginary friend surprising you. When you were talking about Nutsy and Shadow Shark, I was wondering, are these all anthropomorphic, or is there a kid who sometimes has an imaginary friend that has something other than human consciousness?

Taylor: Well, there are gods and Martians and that kind of thing, but they act like humans. There are some that are like presences, where they don't talk: "She's just with me." There's a sense that it's different, but it's still pretty human.

Bloom: You have imaginary pets that are animals.

Taylor: They are, but they can talk and they act like people.

Bloom: So you never have an imaginary dog that's just a dog, like who barks and runs around.

Taylor: Right.

Fisher: I have an example of that.

Taylor: You do?

Fisher: Yes.

Taylor: So maybe that can happen, too. Yes. The answer is yes.

Audience: I knew a boy who had an animal that would show up. It wasn't a friend particularly, but he could describe it and he had a whole elaborate sense of it, but it didn't talk or anything.

Taylor: Actually now I'm remembering a child who said that she had a paper route and she didn't like to be alone in the early morning so she had an imaginary dog running with her. I don't remember her saying the dog was talking. But I would say the typical case is that the dog not only talks but stands up and is dressed in clothes and all that. That's what most of them do.

Audience: It sounds like a number of you that are clinicians rarely see this phenomenon. Dr. Fisher and this gentleman and myself rarely hear this, either in adults or in children. And yet some researchers seem to hear it a lot. I don't understand why that happens. What's the hypothesis about why some people see it often and some people see it very, very rarely?

Taylor: My hypothesis is: I wonder how many clinicians ask, "Do you have a pretend friend?" What we do is we get a random sample of kids and we say, "Some friends are real—the kids who live on your street, the ones you play with; and some friends are pretend friends—ones that are make-believe that you pretend are real. Do you have a pretend friend?" And I wonder if you ask that question?

Fisher: No.

Kinsbourne: Actually, this is a phenomenon. People who have hallucinations, which are unusual experiences, on the whole are reticent about talking about that—I'm talking about people who are not completely psychotic but just have hallucinations—because they know they might be thought worse of. I had the experience of finding that certain people with cervical spondylosis, if they turn their head in one or the other direction might see flashing lights and

spirals. But they wouldn't tell anybody. You have to ask directly before they will tell you. I suspect that, as you say, these kids don't volunteer it, and also the mothers are worried about it, not just because they're worried about the child's mental health, but they're worried about what the neighbors will think.

Singer: Yes. I think this is what I was trying to say in the very beginning when I first spoke, that the children, when we asked them, told us. Many of the mothers didn't know. I think if you ask children, you find out this information. I think this notion that it's not a good, healthy thing still stays with the general public. That it's strange, that it's not good—I think that still exists.

Fisher: It seems to me there's got to be more to it than that, because if you have a child in intensive treatment over an extended period of time and you don't hear about it—I mean, you shouldn't have to ask. It should appear in some form that would be enough to make you at least think to ask. And I think this is a general experience that it rarely comes up.

Taylor: Well, I also think it's a healthy thing, and I remember in your *Playing for their Lives* book that you were saying that if they had an imaginary friend in therapy that was a great thing. It showed that they had a coping response.

Fisher: Right. It may be that we are finding that the children who have these friends aren't in therapy as much, or it may be something that was beneficial and resolved and it's no longer present and therefore doesn't come up.

Audience: There was a famous case with a child therapist—Tommy was the name of the boy. Tommy had a very successful outcome, even though his story, his fantasy, was very elaborate and very bizarre. But it may well have been the fact that he couldn't immediately tell the therapist about this that may have actually had something to do with the positive outcome in the case.

Ackermann: I think imaginary companions are a construct of the researchers to a certain extent. Because we think about transitional objects, and those you meet all the time in therapy. You probably also meet the children when they are playing out some scene. When they are replaying, recasting some scene they engage dolls and other things as props. So the difference has to do with persistence over time with certain kinds of transitional objects that you play with. And maybe that's what imaginary companions are about.

Singer: Well, I think the transitional object comes earlier, doesn't it—before you have this capacity for internal representation? After they can suck their thumb and rub a blanket and they hold a little teddy bear or a little doggie when they're below the age of two—

Ackermann: I'm thinking about transitional objects more generally. I think of these kids I know who are eight, nine, that still have their favorite penguin.

Singer: Well college kids come with their stuffed animals, but I'm talking about the real transitional object, in terms of developmental psychology, which is that first little bear or doggie or whatever they have—that soft character that you can rub. I see that as different than an

imaginary companion which really forces you to have an image. The transitional object is there, but I think this comes before the stage of symbolic thought.

Kinsbourne: But it's something more than just that it's fuzzy and warm, because so are the other bears and so are the other blankets.

Singer: It's something you get attached to, yes.

Bloom: Bruce and I did a study. It was one of the weirdest studies and it's under review. We created a duplicating machine, which is a machine that's a 3D copier. It was a magic trick. You put an apple in there, you press a button, then there's two apples. And then we got the kids to bring in their transitional objects, along with other things like their shoes and a toy. We got them to put it into the duplicating machine and copy it.

Fisher: That's so cool.

Bloom: And then we saw which one they preferred to take. We were doing it because we were interested in individuation and concepts—different agenda. But what we found is kind of what you'd expect, which is that if you photocopied their shoe they'd be very happy to get the duplicate. They'd prefer the duplicate. It's kind of cooler. But about a quarter of them refused to let us put the transitional object into the machine, and of those who let us, almost all of them demanded to take back their original.

Fisher: Oh, sure. That's such a cool experiment.

Transcript prepared by
Richard Alwyn Fisher
718-797-0939 1-800-842-0692
richardalwynfisher@gmail.com