
PHILOSOPHY AS LITERATURE:
THE CASE OF BORGES

I. Borges the Artist and Borges the Thinker

A LEADING historian confessed to me once that while he had been acting editor of the journal devoted to his sub-specialism he had one constant nightmare: he feared he might accept for publication a fabricated paper with fabricated documentation, so vast even a historical sub-specialism is. The nightmare represents not merely an expression of anxiety due to ignorance of certain areas—it expresses the terrible idea that the Cartesian demon can fake any symptom of reality and pass for real by any touchstone.

Jorge Luis Borges is working for decades now on the execution of the nightmare. Perhaps his most celebrated instance is “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”. It would take much work to sift the fabricated references in Borges’ works from the ones deliberately misread from the over-emphasis on an author’s casual remark, etc.

This, of course, is part of the game, for Borges wishes to shake in his reader the commonsensical confidence that one knows the difference between dream and reality—be this confidence based on any intuition or on any criterion to demarcate the two. Consequently, it is very hard to demarcate Borges' stories from Borges' essays. If we read the story 'Funes the Memorious' we may view it as a short story or as a thought experiment about a Lockian mind with total recall. Now that A. R. Luria has published an empirical study of such a mind, one need not vindicate Borges, but may draw attention to additional treasures buried in his stories and essays.

Normally one separates stories and essays functionally. The artist's task is to explore the emotional-experiential dimension. When a writer explores a new vision of the world in order to open up a new feeling, a new attitude, he is writing as an artist. As an artist he can also take a platitude and enhance it so as to make you feel its full significance. As an essayist he would rather draw from the platitude conclusions unexpected and unplatitudinous, or he would take an unnoticed fact or an outlandish thesis and show its merit and significance.

This demarcation is not clear-cut. In particular, there is the area of overlap. Butler's *Erewhon* and *Erewhon Revisited* include essays thoughtful in their defence or mock-defence of outlandish theses, but also pregnant with a quaint atmosphere peculiar to these novels. So are most of Borges' writings. Like Butler, Shaw, and others, he uses a literary medium to advocate an unpopular philosophy. Like them he is in danger of being valued as a writer of note but as an advocate of a shallow philosophy. The philosophy he advocates is a variant of Schopenhauer's, and much akin to that of Erwin Schrödinger, well-known as a physicist but hardly as the accomplished writer and the intriguing philosopher that he was.

It is the Schopenhauerian principle in Borges which makes him wonder what is real and what is illusory in our common experience. And it is this which makes him deliberately blur the borderline between his fiction and his essays: as if in order to imitate nature he blurs the boundary between reality and dream. The result may easily be that his essays be deemed a new form of fiction: besides the reportage novel we may see the non-fiction novel. The English translation of Borges' essays, *Other Inquisitions*, includes a prefatory essay of over seven pages, by James E. Irby of Princeton. His thesis is that all Borges' essays are works of fiction, in the sense in which Borges' beliefs are 'clearly not' the ones seemingly advocated in the essays. This, I am tempted to say, is 'clearly' an indication of Irby's reluctance to accept Borges' challenge. In particular he apparently comforts himself by reference to the fact that Borges himself is dominated by skepticism. This would not be the first time that the challenger's skepticism is used as an excuse to maintain one's dogmatism. But, frankly, I do not think Irby's dismissal of Borges the thinker is rooted in dogmatism; more likely it is rooted in

fear of having one's ontological security put to test: whatever one thinks of R. D. Laing and his *The Divided Self*, most psychologists do accept his idea that ontological security, *i.e.* a sense of a more or less fixed identity, is important for most people as means of retaining their sanity. Now, it is not very rational to dismiss Irby's idea on psychological ground—except that his idea is a dismissal of Borges' ideas on psychological cum literary grounds. And all I wish is to present Borges as an interesting thinker.

So let me take up only one of Borges' challenging ideas and show that they can be put in a more sober, *i.e.* literarily inferior, manner so that it may be harder to dismiss them as merely artistic exercises.

II. *Borges' New Refutation of Time*

The idea which Jorge Luis Borges explores in the last of his *Other Inquisitions* is, he says, a mere anachronism. Supposing it to be so, it would be, at the very least, a new and enlightening *reductio* of an old system. Beyond that it may raise problems concerning current philosophy. Let us take the historical point first, and conclude with brief remarks on the contemporary scene.

Borges explains that in the tradition of the idealism of Berkeley and Hume—and I should add perhaps, Ernest Mach and Russell of the *Analyses* and even Carnap of the *Aufbau*—the attempts to deprive the world of its substance are intended to leave the world as a system of experiences very much like the familiar ones. We do not, along these lines, deny material things their being there, but of their substance, says Berkeley; and so with minds, says Hume; and so with space, say Berkeley and Hume; and so with time, concludes Borges. With what consequences?

Berkeley and Hume consider fragments of space which are experienced by individuals. They map these experienced fragments into a logical space, in a manner such that overlaps of these fragments are faithful to experienced overlaps (*e.g.* you and he now observe the same table, or desire the same woman). The whole lattice of experienced space, they hoped, will turn out to be a subspace of the geometer's space; what of the geometer's space is left out, is the unexperienced portions of geometrical space sliced out by Occam's razor. Whatever Occam's razor can cut, the idealists may put as their dictum, it should very well cut.

Borges observes that the operation of mapping experienced space into the geometer's space presupposes simultaneity, that simultaneity presupposes objective or substantial time, and that hence the idealist's program is not completed. Rather, let us replace simultaneity with experienced simultaneity. Similarly, let us replace the past with experienced past, which is present memory. Let us see what this further application of Occam's razor amounts to.

One immediate corollary is that not all simultaneously experienced portions of space are necessarily mapped into the geometer's space of the same real moment: all overlapping experienced portions of

the geometer's space which are experienced simultaneously as overlapping, will have to merge; the overlaps will be used to secure proper mapping, much as we usually do it in aerial photography. When in aerial photography we have no overlaps we use other means of linkage; including conjecture, if need be. What will the idealist do under such conditions? Suppose that mankind is split at one time into various groups with no experienced communications, we shall not know how to correlate the various subspaces they form and to project them into the geometer's space without first establishing simultaneity. Of course, the various communities will later establish contact and then will have, quite possibly, at least various groups of memories, records, clocks, etc. This will provide the necessary overlap to help them overcome the difficulty and re-establish the total experienced space-time manifold into the geometer's space-time manifold. But this is quite an involved piece of undertaking, and there is no guarantee that while executing it nothing will be upset. So many things can go wrong!

In particular, what can go wrong is that time need not be a progression or a simple line; it can be a loop. If the whole world of experience is a loop (The Great Cycle), things might still be tolerable. If it is a loop for one memory sequence, then of necessity (for topological reasons alone) the venture of mapping experienced space-time into the geometer's space-time will fail. A loop may occur if one remembers a future event. A loop may occur if an extraordinary experience, say a dream, recurs. A loop occurs when Don Quixote reads the *Quixote*, when Scheherezade tells the tale of Scheherezade. But say this is impossible (why?). What about any ordinary recurrence? If we have a time-axis proper we shall have to speak of the recurrence of a dream as well as of a sunrise as an event separate from its previous occurrence, of Rip Van Winkle as different from his son. But for this we need to assume the time-axis first, namely, time regardless of and prior to experience—perhaps even time as a substance. And if so, we may just as well take space in the same manner. To house real space-time with mere experiences makes no sense to any philosopher. Therefore, after assuming real space-time we may well give up idealism altogether.

III. *The Force of Borges' Criticism*

Borges says that he assumes the principle of the identity of indiscernibles. This is true, strictly speaking. Is it, perhaps, a principle that the British idealists would reject? Will this, perhaps, invalidate Borges' criticism? I think not. I think the British idealists assume, and have to assume, the principle of identity of indiscernibles though, admittedly, they need not stress it overmuch. What they speak of is experience, and the identity they assume is the identity of experiences, not of things. Once you allow the multiplication of one experience at will, the Occam's razor is blunted and the strongest case for British idealism is given up.

Assume, however, the identity of indiscernibles. Assume also, with Berkeley and Hume (*pace* Chesterton and Borges), that our stock of possible experiences in all their combinations is finite. (Berkeley and Hume clearly declare all experienceable space, geometrical, colour, sound, etc., to consist of a finite set of discrete segments. And so, it seems, did even Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus*.) It follows that quite possibly (and in the long run certainly) simultaneous with my present experience here, there is an identical experience elsewhere. We need not fear, however, that these two have to be considered identical; they belong not only to different parts of the geometer's space (which the idealist denies the existence of) but even to different parts of experienced space which, we remember, is mapped into the geometer's space. And so the idealist and the geometer will come up in this case with the same result—to the idealist's delight.

But in order to ground this commonsense in idealism, for all cases, idealists must assume certain suppositions. They must assume, first, that each experienced segment of space is Euclidean or some such—is topologically decent. This they do, and on the authority of common experience, they say. They must likewise assume that the lattice of all overlapping experienced segments is Euclidean or some such—is also topologically decent. The second assumption cannot, *eo ipso*, rest on experience. It can therefore be questioned. It turns out to be highly questionable: the topology of the lattice need not coincide with the topology of its elements. (Einstein's space is Euclidean locally but not globally.) Given the principle of identity of indiscernibles or Occam's razor, we must reject the idealist's assumption that the sum of Euclidean subspaces is Euclidean.

And so idealism ends up with loops, both in space and in time; space-time becomes a lattice with a topology of a most curious and unexpected nature. Subsequently one must reject one's sense of identity as illusory. And so the British idealist's programme of leaving the world of experience as it is fails and the world all of a sudden is experienced as an eerie place. End of argument.

What has gone wrong here? Borges himself is an idealist of the same school as Schopenhauer and Schrödinger. What he finds otiose in the British empiricist's idealism is not its being idealistic but its being so reassuring, commonsense, flat. (This incidentally is what he, following Shaw, views as the most eerie and unreal thing—hell indeed.) But what he rejects in British empiricism most strongly is not so much that it flattens the universe, but, and more deeply, that it denies the existence of a limitation on reason; not so much that it identifies the knowable with the observable, but, and more deeply, that it identifies the knowable with what there is. Borges himself is all too aware of his own message: the world is not, in principle, fully knowable. He is no less aware of lacunae and difficulties in his own philosophy. Destroy all sense of identity, and the sense of self-identity, perhaps even of responsibility, is

gone as well. And that will not do. 'The world, alas, is real; I, alas, am Borges.' So concludes the essay.

Now it is not as if we have the choice between realism and Schopenhauerian idealism without a clear sense of identity. The *a priori* space-time necessitated to avoid loops need not be objective—it can very well be a Kantian form of intuition, assumed independently of the question, does objective space-time exist. Borges, like Schrödinger, finds here a great mystery: how is it that different intuitions agree with each other. This, incidentally, is also of historical interest: Kant's challenge in the direction of non-Euclidean geometry is better known than his challenge in the direction taken up later by Schopenhauer—partly at least because the latter was not taken seriously in his lifetime or soon after.

It is therefore hardly surprising that both followers of Schopenhauer, Schrödinger and Borges, come up with two similar views on matters of space-time in relation to identity. Let me quote only three extracts from striking passages in one of Schrödinger's striking books (*My View of the World*): 'Shared thoughts, with several people really thinking . . . are *single* occurrences . . .' (p. 17). 'Are you dreaming me and everything else, and am I dreaming you and everything else, so cleverly that our dreams match? But this is mere foolish playing with words' (p. 105). 'The hypothesis of the real world does at least explain some of these various degrees of sharedness in a natural way, because it includes the reality of space and time. . . . The doctrine of identity requires some very penetrating thinking in order to make these distinctions [between seemingly different selves, such as I and you] plausible, thinking which has never yet, perhaps, been properly done.'

A similar plea for rethinking has been made by Charles Hartshorne in the first issue of *The Philosophical Forum*, 1968-69, where idealism is advocated without the eighteenth century sensationalism which traditionally goes with it.

IV. *The Problem of Individuation*

The aim of Borges is to impart to his reader the sense of the mystery of the world, a sense of skeptical reverence, akin to Einstein's "cosmic religious feelings". For this, as a man of letters, he may use any means at his disposal, including magic and mysticism, and including logic, valid or somewhat faulty. It is amazing how sharp and forceful both his magic and his logic happen to be. Philosophers seldom expect a magically minded man of letters ('I always try to accept naturalistic explanations', he says wryly) to use valid logic; much less in a revealing fashion. I have therefore undertaken to translate his literary gem into the cruder language of a mere philosopher. There is, I think, a strong philosophic reason in Borges' dual theme of the mystery of time and of blurred identity: like Schrödinger he feels that we need a theory which will account for our sense of multiplicity of things, even will ground them in reality,

yet will deny, in the last resort, the existence of more than one final entity. Borges, thus, is more intent on raising a problem, albeit from a given philosophical (Schopenhauerian) viewpoint, rather than advocate his philosophy.

This, it seems, is of universal value in our own days. The problem of individuation does these days engage an increasing number of philosophers. We can say, briefly, that extremely few solutions to it are known, all unsatisfactory. First, and foremost, Parmenides' solution: there is only one thing. This leaves room for no explanation of the phenomena. Second, Spinoza's variant of the same idea of Parmenides. This simply sidesteps the problem of individuation completely: we know what is an attribute, but what determines a mode? There is the class of solutions—of Democritus and Plato and Mach and Haldane: individuals are atoms of reality, be they indivisible particles, or qualities, or *sensa*, or genes; so-called individuals are conglomerates of atoms. A corollary to this is that any so-called individual, whether a person or a world, is repeatable. This conclusion Democritus accepted, Plato found (in his *Parmenides*) unacceptable, Mach found tantalizing since verging on the mystical (and so perhaps did Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.014, though not 2.0233), and Haldane found disturbing. For my part I see little need to argue that neither the Parmenidean nor the Democritean solution will do. Clearly the only promising suggestion, thus far, is that there are levels of identity. This solution, Schrödinger claims, is Schopenhauerian.

Identity is deeply linked with space-time, as a brief deliberation on Leibniz's two proofs of the identity of the indiscernibles will indicate (now that we have Borges' new refutation of time). Leibniz proves the principle first from God's omnipotence and second from fact that the different space-time coordinates of two things makes them non-identical. Now Leibniz denied that space-time is a substance, even that it is strictly Euclidian; but he went no further. Assume the two proofs valid, and two identical things of different coordinates must belong to a loop in space-time! There is little doubt that such considerations must enter Einsteinian cosmology, since Einstein was, on this issue, a Leibnizian proper. Identifying an entity and deciding the topology of the cosmos must be deeply linked procedures. This, as Schrödinger observes (p. 76), opens a new link between relativity and quanta—via the Pauli-Dirac exclusion principle which is a principle of individuation of sorts.

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The Revolution in Ethical Theory. By GEORGE C. KERNER. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966. 40s. Pp. 251.

PROFESSOR KERNER is of that incorruptible line of moral philosophers who have set about confronting Hume's conclusion that moral judgments derive from passion and are never in accord with or contrary to reason. To this endeavour he brings a conception of our moral utterances as linguistic acts, a conception which will allow us to see, he believes, that they can have certain "proofs". (The inverted commas, commendably, are his own.) Proofs of this kind are said to be conjoined, when necessary, with a defence of the competence of the provers, who must, it appears, claim for themselves some of those excellences sometimes attributed to the Ideal Observer. Professor Kerner's eventual presentation of this doctrine is inventive, schematic and cautious, more cautious than the announcements of it in the early parts of the book.

The revolution mentioned in the book's title is the concern of recent philosophers with the analysis of moral language and their abandonment of moral metaphysics and a good deal else. The revolutionaries are Moore, whose somewhat dubious inclusion depends partly