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The Aleph, Language, Truth, and the Self

In "The Aleph", Jorge Luis Borges highlights the limitations of language when it comes to expressing truth. The universe is infinite and can be accounted for, but one would need to live forever to count it and would never reach the end. In the short story, "The Aleph," Borges, the character, experiences the mystical Aleph, a point in space that contains and displays the entire universe at once. But what Borges experienced was simultaneous, and if he were to try to describe it to someone or imagine it, he would need to use our language, which is chronological, or two-dimensional. This limitation of language applies not only to describing the Aleph but trying to describe anything with certain truth. The Aleph, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet, hints at the possibility of a divine language, where signified and signifier are one. But as mentioned, our language is far from divine and is incapable of expressing the Aleph.

Before touching on the story, some explanations regarding the issue of language are needed in the forethought. The idea that there is truth out there in the universe comes from Plato, who believed in the existence of a god, thus a divine language capable of explaining truth. In his mind, the only one capable of approaching truth was the philosopher, who appealed to reason, and thus, divinized the philosopher and put down the poet, who appeals to the emotions. (Plato 8284) Richard Rorty refutes Plato in his book, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. The chapter entitled, "The Contingency of Language," highlights the fallacy of a divine language:

[t]he suggestion that truth, as well as the world, is out there is a legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own. If we cease to attempt to make sense of the idea of such a nonhuman language, we shall not be tempted to confuse the platitude that the world may cause us to be justified in believing a sentence true with the claim that the world splits itself up, on its own initiative, into sentence-shaped chunks called "facts. (Rorty 5)

Rorty continues to explain that:

“[t]ruth cannot be out there - cannot exist independently of the human mind, because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own - unaided by the describing activities of human beings - cannot.” (Rorty 5)

Language is of human creation; reality does not speak a language, we do. This being so, the languages used to express truth, no matter how creative and intricate, will fail to express reality fully. Rorty suggests that language is not a signifier of truth, but a signifier of a signifier. To explain something to someone else using language, one creates a string of words, each signifying something, and each word, or signifier, has a definition which explains what the signified is. But because our language is diachronic, a definition is nothing else than a collection of signifiers of other signifiers, but none of them is the signified.

Having established this theoretical framework, we can shed light on the topic that is the focus of the present study. In “The Aleph,” Borges, the character, describes the different interpretations of the Aleph:

[i]n the Kabbala, that letter signifies the En Soph, the pure and unlimited godhead; it has also been said that its shape is that of a man pointing to the sky and the earth, to indicate that the lower world is the map and mirror of the higher. For the *Mengenlehre*, the Aleph is the symbol of the transfinite numbers, in which the whole is not greater than any of its parts. (Borges 285)

The universe is infinite and, according to Georg Cantor, though infinite, it is numerable, as mentioned earlier, it can be counted or accounted for, but we would need to live forever, be immortal, to count it, and yet we would never reach the end. Borges, the character, depicts this paradox stating, “[p]erhaps the gods would not deny me the discovery of an equivalent image, but then this report would be polluted with literature, with falseness. And besides, the central problem—the enumeration, even partial enumeration, of infinity—is irresolvable.” (Borges 282)

This paradox, the Zeno’s paradox of the rabbit and the tortoise, is the point of departure for Cantor to come up with the transfinite numbers (Sagastume 350). Sagastume further explains that Cantor deduced that “there are an infinite number of sets, some larger than the others and some of them so large that they have no place in the real world as perceived by the human being and that they can only begin to be considered in vector space.” (350) Not even a linguistic system that is considered exact, such as mathematics, can explain reality. However, Cantor’s set theory, establishes that if one considers the universe as sets of particular numbers, or elements, there is a set that contains all other sets and it becomes the first level of infinity; Cantor calls it Aleph-0. But, one may ask, what set contains this set, and Cantor’s answer would be Aleph-1, pointing to an absolute godhead. But, this god, then, becomes a metaphysical issue.

In the story, Borges introduces the mythical Aleph, a point in space from where the viewer can see ‘the whole of the universe’, at once. What he sees, however, cannot be easily expressed:

I come now to the ineffable center of my tale; it is here that a writer's hopelessness begins. Every language is an alphabet of symbols-the employment of which assumes a past shared by its interlocutors. How can one transmit to others the infinite Aleph, which my timorous memory can scarcely contain? (Borges 282)

Borges explains that the tools of language are insufficient in expressing the Aleph to someone else, or even looking back on the memory of the Aleph in one's mind. Sagastume further suggests that "Cantor spent the rest of his life trying to prove his hypothesis mathematically, reaching the conclusion that the language and the epistemic systems that the mortal being has (including the mathematical), being finite, are insufficient to represent the infinite and inconceivable Aleph." (Sagastume 350) Both language and mathematics are insufficient in expressing or recalling the Aleph in full.

After seeing the Aleph, Borges, the fictional character, struggled to find words and statements in our language to capture any of what he saw, but the same problem occurs when attempting to describe any truth using language. He says, "what my eyes saw was simultaneous; what I shall write is successive, because language is successive. Something of it, though, I will capture." (Borges 283). Our language cannot express ideas synchronically, nor can it explain them accurately.

In Mary McBride's journal, "Jorge Luis Borges, Existentialist: 'The Aleph' and The Relativity of Human Perception" the notion that the short story, "The Aleph" suggests that humans cannot reach truth using language is further proved. McBride depicts "The Aleph" as a projection of "the relativity of human perception" and "the inadequacy of man's reason to explain the enigma of the universe" (McBride 401). McBride continues to mention the ways in which language was ineffective for the narrator to explain the Aleph, quoting the "Ineffable

center” of Borges’s story. Like previously explained, The Aleph is unexplainable in human language and highlights the insufficiencies for language to express truth.

Shlomey Mualem looks at the biblical depictions of The Aleph and the implications it has for the relationship between the divine and human language. Mualem notes the “internal split” within language: the human dimension, and the transcendental one, which cannot be expressed. Mualem notes the commentary made by Hasidic rabbi, Menahem Mendel Merimanov about God giving Moses the Ten Commandments. Merimanov believed that “all the divine voice pronounced was the first letter of the first word of the first command (in Hebrew: ‘anochi’) – the infinite Aleph. The rest was Moses’ human interpretation” (Mualem 41). Mualem explains that this view suggests that The Aleph is the original language, one that captures all truth and a “spiritual resource of all the letters.” Mualem continues to explain that “The cabalistic Aleph does not convey any concrete meaning since it comprises infinity. Thus it cannot be pronounced by humans and its utterance was the real divine revelation on Mount Sinai” (Mualem 41). The Aleph can be mentioned, but not expressed. Through a biblical lens, Mualem analyzes how the disconnect between a divine language, and a language humans can produce and perceive limit the ability for language to express truth in full.

It has been suggested here that language is insufficient in expressing truth. As Rorty, rephrasing the German Romantics, said that truth is not discovered, it is created (Rorty 1); reality is out there, we don’t discover it, but our descriptions of it are nothing but creations of our language. What to do then? Rorty suggests that to be able to define oneself, one must “walk the length” of one’s mind. By this, he means, play through each memory, from birth to the present day. (Rorty 23) In doing so, one spends the amount of time already doubled, as half of it is spent walking the length of the mind. If one tries to explain one’s *self*, supposing one has access to an

Aleph in which they could see the entire length of their mind, at once, if we wish to tell someone else, or, again, think about it, the language they would use would be chronologic. Yet, chances are, as suggested in another story by Borges, "The Circular Ruins," that "[w]ith relief, with humiliation, with terror [we] realized that [we] too, was but appearance, that another man was dreaming him." (Borges 100) Rorty proposes: "[w]e shall see the conscious need of the strong poet to *demonstrate* that [we are] not a copy or replica as merely a special form of an unconscious need everyone has: the need to come to terms with the blind impress which chance has given him, to make a self for himself by redescribing that impress in terms which are, if only marginally, his own." (Rorty 43) Rorty means that through different language games, creatively, we should continue to provide descriptions and redescriptions, which all together will help us get a better understanding of the universe and the self. According to Rorty, though we will not be able to come up with a final vocabulary, the more creative we are in such redescriptions, the better the ideas conveyed.

Borges's short story, "The Aleph," called to mind the mysticism and wonder of the Aleph, while recalling the limitations of language. After experiencing the Aleph in all its wonder, Borges's character was left feeling unfulfilled and without purpose because he now knows everything; he has lost the pleasure of the capacity to be surprised and thus attempts to forget the Aleph and what he saw in it. The idea of a perfect language to describe the Aleph may be mystifying, but as Rorty suggests, one will never reach it, yet, describing and redescribing the self and the universe can help bring one closer to that understanding. Defining the self, because of language, is nothing but a fictional work, but the multiple descriptions of the self brings us closer to understanding ourselves.

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