

The cogito and the Subject of the Unconscious. What certainty can be gained in an analysis?

y la experiencia me enseña que el hombre que vive

sueña lo que es hasta que despierta.

Calderon de la Barca

Let's start this work by recounting a famous Borges' fiction: A foreigner, a wizard perhaps, lands alone in a desolated landscape, and encounters the ruins of a circular dwelling. He soon learns that this place had been, long ago a temple consecrated to the cult of the God of Fire, but it was later on abandoned after being consumed by a fire. The purpose of this character — of whom we know nothing, neither his name, nor his place of origin, or personal story, as it is characteristic in the Borgean universe — is to create a man by dreaming him “in painstaking detail, and to impose him upon reality”(Borges, 1998, P. 136). The man he wants to create is to be trained as his disciple, should possess all the attributes of a real man, and all the knowledge that his teacher would impart; however, he should never know the he is just an appearance, a mere shadow projected by the dream of other man.

Thus, day by day and night by night, our foreigner devotes himself completely to his task, striving in his dreams to give his creature sense-organs, fingers, hair, heart and profound intelligence. At the beginning, his dreams are chaotic and its forms undistinguishable, composed of images of the dreamer imparting lessons to some disciples, among whom his creation should emerge. None of these creatures, however, are deemed by him worthy of inhabiting the world. “He was seeking a soul worthy of

taking its place in the universe.” (p. 96) Discouraged, and on the brink of capitulating, he dreams of the God of Fire, who promises him to “magically bring to life the phantasm the man had dreamed — so fully bring him to life that every creature, save Fire itself and the man who dreamed him, would take him for a man of flesh and blood.” (p. 99) With renewed enthusiasm, the dreamer goes back to his task, and after some time he knows his dream-creature is ready to be born. He then reluctantly relinquishes his son into the world “. . .but first (so that the son would never know that he was a phantasm, so that he would believe himself to be a man like other men) the man infused in him a total lack of memory of his years of training.” (p. 100) Time passes by, and one day the wizard perceives the signs of a repetition and realizes that a new fire threatens to devour the remainders of the ruins of the temple. As our wizard tries to take refuge from the fire, he soon realizes that is not necessary, that the flames do not bit his flesh: “. . .with relief, with humiliation, with terror, he realized that he, too, was but appearance, that another man was dreaming him.” (p. 101)

I have found in this fantastic tale certain resonances, though treated ironically, with the metaphysical effort made by Descartes to found his own certainty as a subject, there were the hypothesis of the dream threatens it. Conversely, in the Borges’ tale the subject departs with the certitude of his powers and ends up discovering he is only a dream. It occurred to me that we can conceive this Borgean fantasy as a reflection on the cogito, but presenting its reverse, the other side of the Cartesian rationalism. Their points of departure and arrival get twisted like in a Moebius Strip where the right meets the left, with such a surprising turn in the case of the tale that we are momentarily snatched away from our privilege position from which we believe we master our world of

representations. Indeed, the wizard of the tale embarks on his goal with the certainty of being a man, and with the certainty that his representations could have material reality. He is almost like God at the time of Creation. Unlike Descartes, he does not interrogate himself about the possibility of being deceived. Although he is aware of the difference between appearances and the real, he does not doubt that his oneiric representations have the power to be projected into reality. In the end, at the height of his omnipotent belief, he discovers that he is no more than just dream, that his will was mere illusion. The dethroned wizard reminds us of the moment of the discovery of the unconscious, when the ego discovers that he is not “the master in his own house”. Rather, he is “spoken” by an Other that inhabits him but that nonetheless, he experiences as not a part of himself.

Descartes, instead, departs from doubt, a doubt that questions all previous knowledge, all the content of our representations, of the information gathered by our senses. Descartes doubt leads to the point of interrogating what distinguishes our dream from our real perceptions, fantasy and imagination from reality, mere appearances from true external reality. In that sense, Descartes’ doubt echoes the same existential questions that spans across the baroque, so wonderfully illustrated by great literary masterpieces such as ‘Hamlet,’ ‘El Quixote,’ and in particular “Life is a Dream” by Calderon de la Barca, which expresses so poetically that men’s life is after all a staging made with the same dream-like material.

Indeed, the historical context of Descartes’ philosophical system was dominated among other things by the progressive erosion of what had been, up to then, the traditional sources of knowledge, namely, the authority of the Church and of scholastic thought, particularly Aristotle. This erosion was brought about by the rapid changes

introduced by intellectual developments and scientific discoveries during Renaissance times. This resulted in a crisis of confidence about the sources of men's beliefs and ideas, and about the ability of human reason to deliver true knowledge. (Descartes, 1971. Introduction) The progressive fading of the authority of these traditional institutions implied an abandonment of old metaphysical assurances, such as the place of mankind in the universe and the purpose of human knowledge.

The Cartesian method implies the suspension of the value of true of all the ideas unless these are "clear and distinct" putting into question even the most evident ones, the mathematical truths, initiating a movement that, similarly as in the Borgean fiction, leaves all the edifice of knowledge in ruins. However, Descartes' doubt is above all methodical, not existential. Through the path of doubt he finds certainty, the certainty of his own existence, of God's existence, and of the effectiveness of reason to advance in the search for scientific knowledge.

We know that Lacan established a parallel between the subject of the unconscious and the subject of the cogito, stating that "the Freudian field was only possible . . . after the emergence of the Cartesian subject, in so far as modern science began only after Descartes made his inaugural step." (Lacan, 1978 p. 47). Indeed Descartes initially founded the certainty of the cogito, the certainty of its existence in the act of thinking, of which doubting is a part. Because of thinking, dreaming or even being deceived, there is no doubt that I exist. In that regard, Freud also encountered, in the doubts of the dreamer about certain contents of the dream, the certainty of that those doubts are an indication of unconscious thoughts. Freud's procedure was Cartesian, according to Lacan. If the

subject of the unconscious could only be asserted after the founding of the subject of the cogito, it was in the sense that the latter had been stripped off of all its attributes, emptied out of all its psychological characteristics and of all its representational contents to such a degree that it was completely a vacuum, a non-substantialized subject, reduced to a letter, that is the subject of modern science par excellence.

In the end, Descartes founded the certainty of the cogito in the very act of thinking, beyond the contents of any particular thought. This is true even when I dream. The evil god can deceive me as much as he wants, and all the thoughts can be false, but nonetheless the act of thinking is safe from doubt. “Then there is no doubt that I exist, if he is deceiving me. And let him do his best at deception, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I shall think that I am something. Thus, after everything has been carefully weighted it must finally be established that this pronouncement ‘I am, I exist’ is necessary true every time I utter it.” (Descartes, 1971 p. 67) However, the presence of the cogito suffered the fragility of the instant, where nothing guaranteed its permanency, its identity of ‘being’ underneath each act of thinking. In other words, it was not yet the subject conceived as the synthesis of the activity of understanding. That is why the cogito, in spite of being the first certainty, was not enough to guarantee the effectiveness of reason in grounding true and scientific knowledge. Indeed, the hypothesis of the evil God continued to lurk and with it the possibility of being deceived, of fooling oneself into believing that even those truths that appears to the mind with the greatest evidence and clarity, such as mathematical truths, could be erroneous. Thus, Descartes had to prove the existence of God as a perfect creature that as such could not deceive me, since deception is a defect that could not pertain to God’s nature –a nature upon whom the cogito

depended. This perfect God was the one who ultimately guaranteed the functioning of the cogito, which meant that every time the mind understood in a clear and distinctive manner, the ideas that were thus generated were certain and truthful, and not a fabrication. “And thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of every science depend exclusively upon the knowledge of the true God, to the extent that, prior to my becoming aware of him, I was incapable of achieving perfect knowledge about anything else.”

(Descartes, 1971. p. 107)

The arguments used by Decartes to prove God’s existence as a perfect being gave rise to a fundamental objection during his time that is known today as the “circular logic” creating an impasse in the heart of his reasoning. It can be summarized as follows:

Descartes, to validate God’s existence as a perfect and undecieving being, used axioms and arguments — the clear and distinct ideas — that emanated from a Cogito that was still liable to be deceived, that was not yet validated in its functioning until...God’s existence was proven! That is, I need to trust my intellect to prove God’s existence, yet until I am certain about God’s veracity I don’t have reasons to trust my intellect.

(Cottingham, 1986) Incidentally, the circular configuration of this logical impasse may suggest another resonance with our tale ‘The circular Ruins’ and its idea of repetition, of events and times destiny to recur over and over again.

So now, what about the relations of the subject of the unconscious with the subject of the cogito? Initially, the cogito in its first assertion as Descartes was aware was just an assertion of existence. It was only later that the cogito will acquire signification by becoming a thought, where being is identical with thinking and where the subject of the cogito is granted its ontological status. But the assertion of the cogito in its initial

emergence as an utterance, is equivalent to what Lacan called the emergence of a signifier in the real, which is the condition *sine qua non* for the constitution of the subject.

However the subject that thus emerges is not a unified being, but actually divided there where the emergence of the signifier provokes at the same time its evanescence. The problem of Descartes, according to Lacan, is that the philosopher made the cogito something more than a mere punctual moment, something more than the mere instant of the evanescence of the subject. Indeed, Descartes wound up conceiving the cogito as an object of thought, giving it a meaning and a signification, in other words, making of it an object of knowledge.

Lacan, instead, granted to the 'I think' the same status as the 'I lie' an apparent paradox that is resolved by positing the division between the subject of the statement and the subject of the enunciation, a division that is proper to any act of speech. The subject of the enunciation implies the position of the "I" who utters the speech, that is, the position the speaker assumes within his own utterance, including the sayings in which he says more than what he intends to say. Whereas the subject of the statement is the one referred to in the contents of what is being said. The cogito is marked by the enunciation, is an enunciative act, and as such carries the trait of the subject of desire. Descartes himself emphasized it when he enunciated the cogito for the first time as an act of speech: "I am, I exist is necessarily true every time I utter it". However, the truth that pertains to the subject of the enunciation that has no guarantee other than the act of saying it, is shortly after ejected to the exterior, ejected to the place that God occupies as a guarantor, who is from now on responsible for the question of truth. After Descartes had given God

the task of guaranteeing the place of true, the subject was free to embark in the development of scientific knowledge. According to Lacan, what took place in this manner is a separation between truth and knowledge. This signifies that in spite of the initial incidence of the subject and its 'truth' in the formulation of the cogito, this subjective incidence is immediately foreclosed, rejected. Indeed, science presents itself as a discourse without subject.

But that which was foreclosed in the symbolic will return in the real through the various formations of the unconscious such as symptoms, slips of tongues, dreams and forgetfulness, where something of that truth returns. It is this return that allows for the emergence of the discourse of psychoanalysis: "the subject upon which we operate in analysis can only be the subject of science". (Lacan, 2006. p. 729)

The subject in analysis is also someone who doubts, who searches for a certainty about his/her desire, and about who she is. We want to obtain assurances and guaranties about our choices, but we don't want to pay the price it entails: our subjective division. Analysis teaches us that what we believe to be the organizing center of our thoughts, the master of our intentional speech is not where we can obtain some certainties regarding the desire that inhabits us. Though psychoanalysis could not have emerged but in the scientific era, the notion of subject in psychoanalytic discourse suffers a radical subversion. In our field, the subject is represented by a signifier for another signifier, which provokes at the same time its division; its representation is inevitably correlative to its disappearance, to its fading. The subject is at the same time sucked up by the signifying chain and rejected outside, foreclosed. This is a fact of the structure which

results in the subject's displacement throughout the signifying chain, forcing us to believe that there is always one more missing term necessary to exhaust its signification. For this reason, Lacan identifies the subject alternatively with the function of plus one or minus one, the term that is always lacking to designate the subject. The strategy of an analysis is not to pursue the second term indefinitely to feed meaning, but rather the reduction of meaning to the original non-meaning of the signifier, where the signifier becomes a letter that borders the real, the real of the symptom.

The subject of the unconscious supposed by analytic discourse is not the product of certain ideas that have been censored or repressed due to their content, but rather actual presence that is manifested in speech as an interruption, as a discontinuity in the intentional chain of the subject's sayings, gaps in memory, a slip of a tongue, a stumbling in speech. In other words, it is a subject that is instituted at the moment where it disappears, where no one can utter "I". However, this manifestation of the unconscious as an actual production becomes only possible if there is also a partner willing to listen, determined to welcome its effects, and attentive to its beating-like functioning, to its opening and closure, a closure that, nonetheless, does not imply any "inside". The analyst partakes of the concept of the unconscious, says Lacan (Lacan, 2006, p.703-722) in so far as it constitutes the (Other) term that is addressed by the subject (of the unconscious), which implies that the analyst is included in the functioning of the unconscious, and in the analytic operation. Lacan will articulate the position of the analyst with the position of the Subject Supposed to Know, through which the function of the analyst takes part in the symptom: "What is meant by the fact that there are men who call themselves psychoanalysts and are interested in this operation?"

“It is quite obvious that in this register the psychoanalyst is first introduced, by introducing himself as a subject who is supposed to know, is himself, himself receives, himself supports the status of the symptom.” (Lacan, 1964-65, p.233)

Under this title, the analyst finds his place as a formation of the unconscious, very much like a dream, a joke or a symptom. In my view, it is from this angle that one can read Lacan’s pun when he said that he never talked about the formation of the analysts, but rather about the formation of the unconscious. The analyst participates in the functioning of the unconscious, and is responsible for its appeal in so far as it elicits its aperture from an interior place that is also the place of the Other. This relationship can only be conceived in a topological space, where there is contiguity between the interior and the exterior, and where only one edge connects the subject and the Other.

The journey of an analysis implies a trajectory where a subject reaches its certainty as a desiring subject not in the order of the significations, but rather asserting itself in an act of speech that implies the level of the enunciation, a level that is correlative to the existence of the unconscious. Analysis is an experience that cannot be measured in a progressive or linear temporality, since its progression implies also scansion, punctuation. This punctuation, by introducing a retroactive time, makes possible a new re-ordering of the analytic material, permitting the subject to read otherwise, and therefore, to experience a change in her subjective position. The times that dominates the analytic experience is a time that belongs to the register of the signifier, characterized by anticipation and retroaction. For this reason, both the duration of an analysis as well as the duration of each of its sessions cannot be standardized, or decided in advance.

This temporal logic that dominates the journey of an analysis, similarly to the temporal logic of the formations of the unconscious implies that is only in the aftermath that we can qualify its trajectory as “having been didactic”. It is only at the end of an analysis, if there emerges the desire of the analysis, a desire that in my view is marked by the certainty of the existence of the unconscious that we can say that, indeed, that analysis was an analysis in formation.

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