

“LE DIEU TROMPEUR”  
NOTES ON “PRIVATE KNOWLEDGE”  
IN DESCARTES, WITTGENSTEIN AND BORGES



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1 - INTRODUCTION

Parting from a reading of Descartes, Wittgenstein and Borges, we attempt to discuss, in the present paper, the possibility of “private knowledge”. We understand such notion inevitably accompanies that of representation. Our hypothesis is that, depending on our own position towards the issue of representation – its acceptance, rejection or criticism – we will assume a certain attitude toward the possibility of private knowledge. We think that there is a reciprocal implication in the admission of both notions, namely, representation and private knowledge.

The discussion of the theme in Descartes will be carried out on the basis of the example he himself gives over the knowledge of wax, in his *Second Meditation*.

In the case of Wittgenstein, our discussion takes as a starting-point his statement regarding the “argument of private language”, in his *Philosophical Investigations*.

Jorge Luis Borges will serve us as material for reflection, through the description the author offers of a character, named Funes, and this latter's endeavor to create a completely private language, a project Funes carries on to the last consequences.

We have reserved our closing remarks for the relevancy and permanence of the topic at issue, as it appears in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis, which often faces the question of shaping and constructing a meaningful world capable of encompassing emotions, feelings, thoughts as well as conflicts between principles either of pleasure or reality.

## 2 - DESCARTES' WAX

At the end of the First Meditation, there emerges the idea of a "Deceiving God"<sup>1</sup> in the process of radicalization of doubt as a method, and the author is urged to search the most solid foundation for his convictions. It must be remembered that, in his summary to the referred to meditation, Descartes already betrays his ultimate purpose: to render impossible any doubt concerning that which will be taken as true<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> "I will suppose, then, not that Deity, who is sovereignly good and the fountain of truth, but that some malignant demon, who is at once exceedingly potent and deceitful, has employed all his artifice to deceive me." [*Supponam igitur non optimum Deum, fontem veritatis, sed genium aliquem malignum, eundemque summe potentem & callidum, omnem suam industriam in eo posuisse, ut me falleret*] (Med. 1 § 12)

<sup>2</sup> "In the First Meditation I expound the grounds on which we may doubt in general of all things, and especially of material objects, so long at least, as we have no other foundations for the sciences than those we have hitherto possessed. Now, although the utility of a doubt so general may not be manifest at first sight, it is nevertheless of the greatest, since it delivers us from all prejudice, and affords the easiest pathway by which the mind may withdraw itself from the senses; and finally makes it impossible for us to doubt wherever we afterward discover truth". [*In primâ, causae exponuntur propter quas de rebus omnibus, praesertim materialibus, possumus dubitare; quandiu scilicet non habemus alia scientiarum fundamenta, quàm ea quae antehac habuimus. Etsi autem istius tantae dubitationis utilitas primâ fronte non appareat, est tamen in eo maxima quòd ab omnibus praedjudiciis nos liberet, viamque facillimam sternat ad mentem a sensibus abducen-*

In this line of thought, relying upon divine omnipotent goodness is not enough to give substance to one’s capacity of having access to the real. We must sustain such access against malignant doubts that might assail us. He quotes, as an instance, doubt about one’s frame of mind: Is one dreaming or wide awake when she or he makes so many statements over things? That would be the well-known argument of dream. Just before presenting the argument of dream, Descartes wards off another possibility that, incidentally, is the one that concerns us most: the error in the wake that he attributes to mad individuals<sup>3</sup>. As we will see in the last section of the present paper, it doesn’t seem so easy at all warding off error in the wake, delimiting the frontiers between the “mad” and the “sane” individual, chiefly if they both share one and the same mind.

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*dam; ac denique efficiat, ut de iis, quae postea vera esse comperiemus, non amplius dubitare possimus*] (Synopsis § 1)

<sup>3</sup> “But it may be said, perhaps, that, although the senses occasionally mislead us respecting minute objects, and such as are so far removed from us as to be beyond the reach of close observation, there are yet many other of their informations (presentations), of the truth of which it is manifestly impossible to doubt; as for example, that I am in this place, seated by the fire, clothed in a winter dressing gown, that I hold in my hands this piece of paper, with other intimations of the same nature. But how could I deny that I possess these hands and this body, and withal escape being classed with persons in a state of insanity, whose brains are so disordered and clouded by dark bilious vapors as to cause them pertinaciously to assert that they are monarchs when they are in the greatest poverty; or clothed [in gold] and purple when destitute of any covering; or that their head is made of clay, their body of glass, or that they are gourds? I should certainly be not less insane than they, were I to regulate my procedure according to examples so extravagant.” [*Sed forte, quamvis interdum sensus circa minuta quaedam & remotiora nos fallant, pleraque tamen alia sunt de quibus dubitari plane non potest, quamvis ab iisdem hauriantur: ut jam me hinc esse, fovo assidere, hyemali togâ esse indutum, chartam istam manibus contrahere, & similia. Manus verò has ipsas, totumque hoc corpus meum esse, quâ ratione posset negari? nisi me forte comparem nescio quibus insanis, quorum cerebella tam contumax vapor ex atrâ bile labefactat, ut constanter asseverent vel se esse reges, cum sunt pauperrimi, vel purpurâ indutos, cum sunt nudi, vel caput habere fictile, vel se totos esse cucurbitas, vel ex vitro conflatos; sed amentes sunt isti, nec minùs ipse demens viderer, si quod ab iis exemplum ad me transferrem*]. (Med 1 § 4)

In order to delimit our field of discussion, we will take the example of wax, in the *Second Meditation*, as a starting point for investigating Descartes' difficulties in achieving his ultimate purpose, namely, an undisputable true knowledge.

The argument of wax begins in paragraph 11 of the *Second Meditation* and then takes the following steps: firstly, the piece of wax is presented as a good model of knowledge of a body through the senses. For this end, from odor to consistence, everything characterizes it as a "piece of wax". Nevertheless, later on, — see paragraph 12 — due to an approximation to fire, everything the senses had identified as a "piece of wax", from consistence to odor, ends up by vanishing. In paragraph 12, he attributes the permanence of the wax recognition, despite all the sensorial transformations it has sustained, to a scrutiny by the mind, that

which may be imperfect and confused, as it formerly was, or very clear and distinct, as it is at present, according as the attention is more or less directed to the elements which it contains, and of which it is composed.<sup>4</sup>

Thenceforth, he takes a more generalizing step, in paragraph 13, to say that the same as senses tell one too little about the wax, they also tell one too little about the men passing by the street, even though what he sees is

and yet what do I see from the window beyond hats and cloaks that might cover artificial machines, whose motions might be determined by springs ? But I judge that there are human beings from these appearances, and thus I comprehend, by the faculty of judgment alone which is in the mind, what I believed I saw with my eyes.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "...mentis inspectio, quae vel imperfecta esse potest & confusa, ut prius erat, vel clara & distincta, ut nunc est, prout minus vel magis ad illa ex quibus constat attendo"(§ 12).

<sup>5</sup> "Quid autem video praeter pileos & vestes, sub quibus latere possent automata? Sed judico homines esse. Atque ita id quod putabam me videre oculis, solâ judicandi facultate, quae in mente meâ est, comprehendo"(Med 2: § 13).

By taking such a step, Descartes wards off the discussion of language in so far as, for him, this latter is so untrue and misleading as the senses:

But, meanwhile, I feel greatly astonished when I observe [the weakness of my mind, and] its proneness to error. For although, without at all giving expression to what I think, I consider all this in my own mind, words yet occasionally impede my progress, and I am almost led into error by the terms of ordinary language. We say, for example, that we see the same wax when it is before us, and not that we judge it to be the same from its retaining the same color and figure.<sup>6</sup>

It is implied in the quotation above that, in his view, meaning (in this case, the word wax) is derived from a perception of the real, as the whole former argument tried to show, that is so misleading as any other perception. This way, access to the real is attained by means of thought. This comes to occupy a privileged place in the process of knowledge, even being the only object which we are able to know<sup>7</sup>. The private nature of knowledge is the immediate sequel

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<sup>6</sup> *“Miror verò interim quàm prona sit mea mens in errores; nam quamvis haec apud me tacitus & sine voce considerem, haereo tamen in verbis ipsis, & fere decipior ab ipso usu loquendi. Dicimus enim nos videre ceram ipsammet, si adsit, non ex colore vel figurâ eam adesse judicare”* (Med 2: § 13).

<sup>7</sup> This position is restated in “Author’s responses to the Second Objections”: “You may say that you derive this knowledge from the senses, since you can see, or touch etc., the one thing when the other is not present. But the evidence of the senses is less reliable than that of the intellect: it can variously happen that one and the same thing appears under different forms or in several places or in several different ways, and so be taken for two things. And, after all, if you remember the remarks about the wax at the end of the Second Meditation you will realize that bodies are not strictly speaking perceived by the senses at all, but only by the intellect; so having a sensory perception of one thing apart from another simply amounts to our having an idea of one thing and understanding that this idea is not the same as an idea of something else. The sole possible source of such understanding is that we perceive one thing apart from another, and such understanding cannot be certain unless the idea of each thing is clear and distinct.” [*“Fortè dicetis hoc haberi à sensibus, quia unam rem absente alia videtis, aut tangitis, &c. sed sensuum fides incertior est quàm intellectus; & multis modis fieri potest ut una & eadem res sub variis formis, aut pluribus in locis, aut modis appareat,*

to Descartes' critical argument in relation to several modes of empiricism. The notion of thought itself, as he defines it (85)<sup>8</sup>, has both the character of knowledge and the character of being private:

*Thought.* I use this term to include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it. Thus all the operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination and the senses are thoughts.<sup>9</sup>

As our main concern is to focus the difficulties the notion of private knowledge brings forth, we think Descartes' position over it is already adequately established. We can thus pass on to the wittgensteinian criticism of private knowledge, before studying Funes' unusual attempt at creating a clear and distinct language, on the basis of an accurate correlation with the real.

### 3 – WITTGENSTEIN'S "BOX OF THE BEETLE"

In so far as any form of knowledge is accompanied by a language, we have picked up an aspect of the "argument of private language" – the box of the beetle – as a counterpart to the understanding of

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*atque ita pro duabus fumatur. Et denique si recordemini eorum quæ in fine secundæ meditationis de certa dicta sunt, advertetis nequidem ipsa corpora propriè sensu percipi, sed solo intellectu, adèo ut non aliud sit unam rem absque alias entire, quàm habere ideam unius rei, & intelligere istam ideam non eandem esse cum idea alterius. Non autem hoc aliunde potest intelligi quàm ex eo quòd una absque altera percipiatur, nec potest certè intelligi nisi utriusque re idea sit clara & distincta: atque istud signum realis distinctionis ad meum debet reduci, ut sit certum"](70).*

<sup>8</sup> In the same text he defines *idea*: "*Idea.* I understand this term to mean the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me aware of the thought. Hence, whenever I express something in words, and understand what I am saying, this verify fact makes it certain that there is within me an idea of what is signified by the words in question" [*"Idea nomine intelligo cujuslibet cogitationis formam illam, per cujus immediatam perceptionem ipsius ejusdem cogitationis conscius sum, adèo ut nihil possim verbis exprimere intelligendo id quod dico, qui ex hoc ipso certum sit in me esse ideam ejus quod verbis illis significatur"]*].

<sup>9</sup> "*Cogitationis nomine complector illud omne quod sic in nobis est ut ejus immediatè conscii simus. Ita omnes voluntatis, intellectus, imaginationis & sensuum operationes sunt cogitationes"*(85).

language role in Descartes. As we have said above, in Descartes knowledge attained by the mind is composed of representations that are crudely conveyed by language. The latter thus has a secondary role, as a mere tool in the service of thought, and the relationship “word – idea – thing” would hardly become a topic for discussion. In this set – idea (representation), word and thing (real) – the representation has a primordial role, not only in a chronological sense, but also because it can be an immediate object of one’s knowledge. For Descartes, knowledge is fundamentally private.

Wittgenstein will develop, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, a new trend in a different direction other than the alternative: representation → real, or real → representation. With his pragmatic notion of meaning, that were to emerge from a certain language-game, knowledge would take part in the game as well. We will restrict our discussion to paragraph 293, reproduced below:

If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word ‘pain’ means – must not I say the same of other people too? And how can I generalize the one case so irresponsibly?

Now someone tells that he knows what pain is only from his own case! – Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a ‘beetle’. No one can look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle. – Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. – But suppose the word ‘beetle’ had a use in these people’s language? – If so, it would be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a something: for the box might be empty. – No, one can ‘divide through’ by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.

That is to say: if we construe the grammar of the sensation on the model of ‘object and designation’, the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant.” (Wittgenstein 100)

This paradoxical argument seems to us to point to the private character of knowledge that Descartes suggests. For the “men” he sees through the window can rightfully be *seen* by Descartes himself as “automatons, puppets on strings”, or simply “empty hats and

coats". In this conception of private knowledge and language as a mere intermediate between representation and the thing, both the object and the meaning of "men" become irrelevant.

Although such doubt was not framed, in his "Meditations, in the very linguistic formulation with which we conveyed it here, it is present so as to ward off the *certainty* of senses. Transposing the same *certainty* to a safer ground – the representations – Descartes ventures toward new tricks of the "Deceiving God". For even with clear and distinct ideas his private knowledge distances him from his fellow-beings, silencing him, inasmuch as significant language is lost.

We think that "Funes el memorioso" – a Borges' character – was alert to such hazards and, in a dramatic way, attempts to avoid them. Let's see his adventure.

#### 4 - BORGES' "FUNES EL MEMORIOSO"

Jorge Luis Borges tell us, in less than ten pages, the extraordinary life of Ireneo Funes (1868-89), a young man endowed with a prodigious memory who, after a fall from a horse, began to have a most peculiar apprehension of present time, which led him to develop a language of his own much in accordance with such a register. On the other hand, the narrator's geniality prevent us from discussing the episode lest we surely impoverish it. Therefore, we will solely pick up those aspects of immediate interest for us, the reader is encouraged to read the whole text.

Since the first meeting, Borges had already noticed Funes' privileged memory. Nevertheless, in the second meeting, after the fall from the horse and the skull trauma, Funes disdained his prodigious past:

... He told me that, before that afternoon in which the horse had thrown him down, he had been what all Christians are: a blind, a deaf, a dull, a forgetful man. (I tried to remind him of his accurate perception of time, his memory for proper names, but he wouldn't listen to me.) He has been living for nineteen years now as someone who is dreaming: looking without seeing, hearing without ever listening, he would forget everything, almost everything. As he fell, he



lost consciousness; when he came to life, present time was almost intolerable because so rich and clear, the same applied to his earliest, as well as most trivial, memories. Before long, he found out he was crippled. Actually, this hardly affected him. He discussed (felt) that his immobility was a minimum price to be paid. His perception and memory are infallible now.<sup>10</sup>

...He knew the shapes of the southern clouds at the dawn of April the thirtieth, eighteen eighty-two, and was able to compare them with the stripes of a leather-bound Spanish book he had only seen once and with the lines of suds that an oar plowed into Negro river on the battle of Quebracho eve. Those recollections were simple; each visual image was linked to muscular, thermal sensations, etc. He was able to re-ensemble all his dreams, all his in between dreams. For two or three times had he reconstructed a whole day; he has never doubted, but each reconstruction had required a day's work... A circumference traced on a chalkboard, a triangle, a lozenge they are all forms that one is quite able to intuit; the same applied to Ireneo in so far as a tumultuous colt's mane, a horn of cattle on a small hill, a shining fire, the numberless ashes, the endless faces of a dead man in a prolonged funeral are concerned. I don't know how many stars he saw in the sky. <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “Me dijo que antes de esa tarde lluviosa en que lo volteó el azulejo, él había sido lo que son todos los cristianos: un ciego, un sordo, un abombado, un desmemoriado. (Traté de recordarle su percepción exacta del tiempo, su memoria de nombres propios; no me hizo caso.) Diez y nueve años había vivido como quien sueña: miraba sin ver, oía sin oír, se olvidaba de todo, de casi todo. Al caer, perdió el conocimiento; cuando lo recobró, el presente era casi intolerable de tan rico y tan nítido, y también las memorias más antiguas y más triviales. Poco después averiguó que estaba tullido. El hecho apenas le interesó. Razonó (sintió) que la inmovilidad era un precio mínimo. Ahora su percepción y su memoria eran infalibles” (OC 1: 488).

<sup>11</sup> “Sabía las formas de las nubes australes del amanecer del treinta de abril de mil ochocientos ochenta y dos y podía compararlas en el recuerdo con las vetas de un libro en pasta española que sólo había mirado una vez y con las líneas de la espuma que un remo levantó en el Río Negro la víspera de la acción del Quebracho. Esos recuerdos no eran simples; cada imagen visual estaba ligada a sensaciones musculares, térmicas, etc. Podía reconstruir todos los sueños, todos los entresueños. Dos o tres veces había reconstruido un día entero, no había duda-

In as much as Funes developed such a capacity, he also developed a corresponding notation. He would then live all alone laying down in a cot. Borges tells us over this peculiar language:

...he had developed an original system of numbering and that in a few days such system had surpassed the amount of twenty-four thousand. He had not written it down because, if he thought of it only one time, he would no longer be able to delete it. His first stimulus, I guess, had been the displeasure at the verification that thirty-three Orientals required two signs and three words instead of one word and one sign only. It didn't take too long for him to apply this nonsensical principle to the other numbers. Instead of seven thousand and thirteen, he would say, for instance, Máximo Perez; instead of seven thousand and fourteen, The Railroad; other numbers were Luis Melián Lafinur, Olimar, sulfur, thick, the whale, the gas, the cauldron, Napoleon, Agustín de Vedia. He said nine for five hundred. ...I tried to explain to him that this rhapsody of inconsistent voices was exactly the opposite of a numbering system. I told him that saying 365 was tantamount to saying three hundred, six by ten, five unities; an analysis that hardly existed in the "numbers" Negro Timoteo or flesh mantle.

In the eighteenth century, Locke postulated (and rejected) an impossible tongue in which every individual thing, every stone, every bird and every branch had a name of its own. Once Funes envisaged a similar tongue but had repudiated it for it seemed to him to be too general, too ambiguous. Indeed, Funes used to remember not only each leaf of each tree on each hill, but also each time he had sensed or imagined it.

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do nunca, pero cada reconstrucción había requerido un día entero. Me dijo: *Más recuerdos tengo yo solo que los que habrán todos los hombres desde que el mundo es mundo. Y también: Mis sueños son como la vigilia de ustedes. Y también, hacia el alba: Mi memoria, señor, es como vaciadero de basuras.* Una circunferencia en un pizarrón, un triángulo rectángulo, un rombo, son formas que podemos intuir plenamente; lo mismo le pasaba a Ireneo con las aborascadas crines de un potro, con una punta de ganado en una cuchilla, con el fuego cambiante y con la innumerable ceniza, con las muchas caras de un muerto en un largo velorio. No sé cuántas estrellas veía en el cielo" (OC 1: 488-489)

The two projects I referred to (an infinite vocabulary for the natural series of numbers, a useless mental directory of all images in the memory) are unreasonable, but have a certain prattling greatness. They allow us to have a glimpse or infer Funes’ vertiginous world. Funes, it must be remembered, was almost incapable of having general platonic ideas. It was not only hard for him to understand that the generic symbol ‘dog’ embraced so many disparate individuals of various sizes and various shapes; it upset him that the dog of three fourteen o’ clock (in a profile view) had the same name as the dog of three four (in a front view). His own face in the mirror, his own hands amazed him more and more. Swift refers that Lilliput’s emperor could discern the movement of the clock’s small hand; Funes unceasingly discerned the mild advances of corruption, of tooth decay, of fatigue. He was able to notice the advance of death, of humidity. He was a lonely and lucid spectator of a many-sided, instantaneous and almost unbearably accurate world.

He had easily learned English, French, Portuguese, Latin. Nevertheless, I suspect he was not very keen at thinking. Thinking is forgetting differences, is generalizing, abstracting. In Funes’ overloaded world there were but almost immediate details.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “...había discurrido un sistema original de numeración y que en muy pocos días había rebasado el veinticuatro mil. No lo había escrito, porque lo pensado una sola vez ya no podía borrarle. Su primer estímulo, creo, fue el desagrado de que los treinta y tres orientales requirieran dos signos y tres palabras, en lugar de una sola palabra y un solo signo. Aplicó luego ese disparatado principio a los otros números. En lugar de siete mil trece, decía (por ejemplo) *Máximo Pérez*; en lugar de siete mil catorce, *El Ferrocarril*; otros números eran *Luis Melián Lafinur*, *Olimar*, *azufre*, *los bastos*, *la ballena*, *el gas*, *la caldera*, *Napoleón*, *Agustín de Vedia*. En lugar de quinientos, decía *nueve*. Cada palabra tenía un signo particular, una especie de marca; las últimas eran muy complicadas... Yo traté de explicarle que esa rapsodia de voces inconexas era precisamente lo contrario de un sistema de numeración. Le dije que decir 365 era decir tres centenas, seis decenas, cinco unidades; análisis que no existe en los “números” *El Negro Timoteo o manta de carne*. Funes no me entendió o no quiso entenderme.

Locke, en el siglo XVII, postuló (y reprobó) un idioma imposible en el que cada cosa individual, cada piedra, cada pájaro y cada rama tuviera un nombre propio; Funes proyectó alguna vez un idioma análogo, pero lo desechó por parecerle demasiado general, demasiado ambiguo. En efecto, Funes no sólo recor-

Borges' concise report raises a series of questions of which we will only select those concerning the creation of a clear and distinct language in accordance with correspondingly exact representations. For, apparently, there must have been Ireneo Funes' design to evolve a "good memory" in order to register a representational

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daba cada hoja de cada árbol, de cada monte, sino cada una de las veces que la había percibido o imaginado. Resolvió reducir cada una de sus jornadas pretéritas, a unos setenta mil recuerdos, que definiría luego por cifras. Lo disuadieron dos consideraciones: la conciencia de que la tarea era interminable, la conciencia de que era inútil. Pensó que en la hora de la muerte no habría acabado aún de clasificar todos los recuerdos de la niñez.

Los dos proyectos que he indicado (un vocabulario infinito para la serie natural de los números un inútil catálogo mental de todas las imágenes del recuerdo) son insensatos, pero revelan cierto balbuciente grandeza. Nos dejan vislumbrar o inferir el vertiginoso mundo de Funes. Éste, no lo olvidemos, era casi incapaz de ideas generales, platónicas. No sólo le costaba comprender que símbolo genérico *perro* abarcara tantos individuos dispares de diversos tamaños y diversa forma; le molestaba que el perro de las tres y catorce (visto de perfil) tuviera el mismo nombre que el perro de las tres y cuarto (visto de frente). Su propia cara en el espejo, sus propias manos, lo sorprendían cada vez. Refiere Swift que el emperador de Lilliput discernía el movimiento del minuterio; Funes discernía continuamente los tranquilos avances de la corrupción, de las caries, de la fatiga. Notaba los progresos de la muerte, de la humedad. Era el solitario y lúcido espectador de un mundo multiforme, instantáneo y casi intolerablemente preciso. Babilonia, Londres y Nueva York han abrumado con feroz esplendor la imaginación de los hombres; nadie, en sus torres populosas o en sus avenidas urgentes, ha sentido el calor y la presión de una realidad tan infatigable como la que día y noche convergía sobre el infeliz Ireneo, en su pobre arrabal sudamericano. Le era muy difícil dormir. Dormir es distraerse del mundo; Funes, de espaldas en el catre, en la sombra, se figuraba cada grieta y cada moldura de las casas precisas que lo rodeaban. (Repito que el menos importante de sus recuerdos era más minucioso y más vivo que nuestra percepción de un goce físico o de un tormento físico.) Hacia el Este, en un trecho no amanzanado, había casas nuevas, desconocidas. Funes las imaginaba negras, compactas, hechas de tiniebla homogénea; en esa dirección volvía la cara para dormir. También solía imaginarse en el fondo del río, mecido y anulado por la corriente.

Había aprendido sin esfuerzo el inglés, el francés, el portugués, el latín. Sosepecho, sin embargo, que no era muy capaz de pensar. Pensar es olvidar diferencias, es generalizar, abstraer. En el abarrotado mundo de Funes no había sino detalles, casi inmediatos" (OC 1: 489-490).

world, exempt from doubts and uncertainties, capable of being entitled to the role of the most faithful representative sample of reality. Funes’ bizarre language, in spite of having absorbed him to the point of leading him to complete isolation, thus rendering exhausting, and in fact impossible, the task of communication, is nevertheless only a secondary aspect. We understand that language is dealt with as a mere vehicle for representations, these are enriched by the pedantry of a divine perfection. Here, there comes to stage the “Deceiving God. The promise of an absolute knowledge, exempt from doubts and uncertainties, prior to language, in an unceasing conflict with its imperfections. Trickier than the malignant Cartesian genie, it doesn’t engender any confusion, any error, nor stimulates doubt, rendering it hyperbolic; on the contrary, it promises certainty.

We think Ireneo Funes’ is an illustrative case. However, we don’t bring it too close to Cartesian thought since its epistemology is more suggestive of an empirical attitude. Nevertheless, the point we would like to stress is the privilege conferred to representation. This latter, be it innate or derived from the senses, once it is sovereign, the more it is precise the more self-sufficient, the more conducive to solipsism it becomes.

## 5 – PRIVATE KNOWLEDGE, MADNESS AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

When we regarded as rather precipitate Descartes’ attitude of warding off madness as an object of his concern<sup>13</sup>, in favor of a search for clear and distinct ideas, we were thinking of the daily challenge we meet in psychoanalytic practice and reflection. For it is in the phenomenon of madness, delusion or psychosis that the “Deceiving God” appears in his most cruel guise<sup>14</sup>. In so far as Descartes puts the evidence of *cogito* in the domain of ideas<sup>15</sup> and these in effect

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<sup>13</sup> See §. 4 of the *First Meditation*.

<sup>14</sup> We will take the three phrases (delusion, madness and psychosis) as interchangeable, thus following the same Leme Lopes’ reading of Karl Jaspers.

<sup>15</sup> See Marcondes: “Descartes adopts the criterion of the **evidence** of *cogito* in his discussion of the ideas he finds in his mind. A given idea will be valid or suitable in so far as it is evident, that is, clear and distinct” (170).

don't differ from representations, being valid while they are clear and distinct, he makes way for the blurring of the distinction between rational and irrational, since the latter cannot be simply ignored. In our view, it is not so much a fruitful approximation as an undifferentiation, derived from a privilege of the representation which, we will attempt to show, has no competence to bear such responsibility.

The nature of this paper won't allow us an all-embracing scrutiny of delusion. As to the point we want to explore, however, it becomes necessary a brief survey of the question at issue – one of the most discussed questions in psychiatry and psychoanalysis – for which end we will have recourse to Leme Lopes' above-mentioned paper:

Jasper begins by situating delusion as a 'primary phenomenon' (*Urphaenomen*) which in itself characterizes madness; delusional and mad are synonymous

Delusion, while being in itself a pathology of thought and, to be precise, of judgment, is characterized by a lack of awareness of being and existing, that is caused by a global change in the awareness of reality. Jasper proposes a first definition of delusion: 'Delusional ideas are pathologically falsified judgments'

Sometimes these judgments are not assuredly stated, but are felt as presentiments, as pure awareness of what is called 'feeling', that is, an obscure knowledge. Jaspers doesn't expand on this gradation of evidence, but goes on to characterize delusional ideas – falsified judgments – by three external signs, according to his categorization:

- 1 - extraordinary conviction which is tantamount to an incomparable **subjective certainty**;
- 2 - **impossibility of their modification** by **experience** or **closed arguments** and
- 3 - **impossibility of their content.**

Jaspers then proposes to look at these aspects from behind and distinguishes manifestations that derive from affective states, from feelings of guilt, passionate alterations or making the external world turbid due to clouding of consciousness; he then call those states '*wahnhaften ideen*' – *deliriform* ideas, that he separates from **true delusional ideas**, for which he is unable to find any psychological antecedents and that phenomenologically show themselves as the **ultimate thing**. (4-5)

We have expanded on our quotation because we find it a trustworthy survey of Jasper’s fundamental contribution to the topic. On the other hand, an exhaustive psychopathological study on Jasper also serves as a framework for the discussions concerning the theme. The characteristics 1 and 2 were practically a consensual matter in the debate that followed, the third one is a bit hard to sustain and, in our view, less significant<sup>16</sup>. What calls one’s attention, in clinical experience, is exactly the strength of subjective certainty and its irreducibility either by argumentation or experience.

In a rather simplifying fashion, we would venture to say that the traditional debate, that absorbed the greatest names of classical psychiatry, has always bumped against the limits proposed by Jasper: delusion as the *ultimate thing*. It would be the point where understanding ceases and there begins the explanatory processes, in the famous jasperian distinction between understanding and explaining<sup>17</sup>.

Freud’s important contribution to the topic appears exactly in the attempt to overcome this impasse: *the most important psychopathological picture is necessarily inaccessible to understanding*<sup>18</sup>. The well-known “Schreber case” and other minor papers describe his attempt, by using the notion of unconscious conflict, to make for what, till then, had eluded — at least in its most precise form (delusion in the jasperian sense) — any access to psychological interpretation. However, it is specially with Melanie Klein’s contributions and, in particular, with Bion’s contributions — both being analysts of the British school — that the analysis of psychotics would evolve and offer new elements so that such phenomenon might be rethought. There has emerged now a whole new series of questions in the very field

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<sup>16</sup> Kurt Schneider (1948) reports an episode of a schizophrenic woman who, at a genetic counseling clinic, — in Nazi Germany — claimed that her child was the fruit of an union with a prince. This piece of information had been labeled as delusional, although it has been confirmed later on. This doesn’t exclude that the patient were indeed deluded. (Quoted by Leme Lopes 22).

<sup>17</sup> We have extended on this point in: “*Notas sobre o Compreender e Explicar*”.

<sup>18</sup> Kurt Schneider (1952) is final about this issue: “... where there is understanding there is no delusion.” (in Leme Lopes 38).

of psychoanalysis. Having in mind our present paper, we are going to choose as a central point the issue of meaning construction. Thus in so doing, we think we have articulated what was said in this section with the rest of our paper.

Taking this vertex as a starting-point (namely, posing, as central, the question of meaning) we understand that error and the malignancy of delusion occur in the attempt at creating a private significant world. Delusion is, first of all, a “private knowledge”. In this sense, Ireneo Funes’ endeavor to engender a precise language, exempt from ambiguities is, like its result, consistent: a “language” that doesn’t communicate anything, that excludes the other fellow-being, that immobilizes him in his cot, by condemning him to solipsism. As Borges points out:

He had easily learned English, French, Portuguese, Latin. Nevertheless, I suspect he was not very keen at thinking. Thinking is forgetting differences, is generalizing, abstracting...

The close relationship between thought and language, regarding the origin of thinking, is discussed by Diva Deiss de Farias<sup>19</sup> (whom we dedicate this paper) in the light of W. R. Bion’s theory of thinking.

In that psychoanalytic conception (see Bion), meaning can only emerge from a relationship. The model is mother / baby relationship. The baby’s experiences (either emotional or sensorial), once they are contained and named by the mother, gradually construct a meaningful world. Failure in that containment yields a situation of “nameless dread”, renders impossible that the anxieties might be dealt with by a rudimentary psyche, thus evolving primitive forms of communication that don’t allow the development of thinking, and learning from experience. Thoughts would be the fruit of the development of “idea”, this latter having a tentative categorization ranging from primitive forms to the most sophisticated ones. So, what one usually call “thought” would only emerge from pre-conceptions (empty expectancies) which would evolve from an in-

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<sup>19</sup> We are grateful to Diva Deiss for introducing us to this text of Borges’.



tersubjective relation to forms that can be communicated and stored (memory), and are suitable to knowledge. This way, the existence of experiences prior to language is not ruled out, but it is admitted that they would not be available, neither to the observer nor to the subject. In other words, in the case of delusion, which is the point that concerns us most, there would be nothing hidden to be uncovered but the remains of a meaningful relation that either had been destroyed or has never come true. The reconstruction that delusion incarnates – Freud referred to delusion as an “attempt at cure” – is seen as a desperate mode of organization of a meaningful world that fails in so far as it doesn’t derive from a relationship but from a solitary activity, as Borges, in our view, so well described. It is in this sense that the psychoanalytical conception referred to denies the possibility of “private knowledge”.

We could summarize our comments on delusion in this paper by stating that, in our standpoint, delusion is a bizarre way of life. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, understanding a delusion is the same as participating in a way of life that dramatically endeavors to organize a meaningful private world, maybe under the spell of a “Dieu trompeur” who offers self-sufficiency, certainty, arrogant solitude.

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