

The Victory Of Nominalism: Nobody Is Anything Else? An Approach To Borges's "Tlön,
Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"

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I. The Debate Realism-Nominalism

Protests have always been raised against the realist belief that there is a hidden reality *behind* the phenomena waiting to be discovered and represented. In antiquity, sceptics denied that humans, with their limited capabilities of perception and reasoning, could ever achieve knowledge of underlying essences, necessities, causes and laws. In the late Middle Ages, the Nominalists argued that we can observe what actually happens, but we cannot ascertain which are the mechanisms behind what we observe. In the eighteenth century, David Hume concluded that knowledge about underlying causes is impossible, while Kant held that we can never have access to things in themselves but only to things as perceived, filtered, and interpreted by us. In the turn of the century, empiricists like Ernst Mach rejected the idea that our descriptions of reality could be something more than probable *hypotheses*, always subject to test and likely to be rejected. In the sixties, philosophers of science such as Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend emphasized the role played in our theories by conceptual schemes ("paradigms") or ways of looking at the world.¹ Borges has not remained indifferent to the realism-nominalism debate. In 1949 he presents it as follows:

Coleridge observes that all men are born Aristotelian or Platonist. The latter know by intuition that ideas are realities; the former, that they are generalizations; for the latter, language is nothing but a system of arbitrary symbols; for the former, it is the map of the universe. The Platonist knows

that the universe is somehow a cosmos, an order, which, for the Aristotelian, may be an error or a figment of our partial knowledge. Across the latitudes and the ages, the two immortal antagonists change their name and language: one is Parmenides, Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Francis Bradley; the other is Heraclitus, Aristotle, Locke, Hume, William James. In the arduous schools of the Middle Ages they all invoke Aristotle, the master of human reason (*Convivio*, IV, 2), but the nominalists are Aristotle; the realists, Plato (Other Inquisitions 156).

In Borges's view, the realism-nominalism debate is over: "Nominalism, which was formerly the novelty of a few, encompasses everyone today; its victory is so vast and fundamental that its name is unnecessary. No one says that he is a nominalist, because nobody is anything else" (Other Inquisitions 157). Certainly, Borges would be surprised to learn that the debate between realists and nominalists is still alive today, particularly among philosophers of science and theoretical physicists. According to Bas van Fraassen, the battle against realism is fought again in every century ("The World of Empiricism" 122). Van Fraassen himself has argued against most of the tenets of scientific realism and proposed an alternative conception of science called "constructive empiricism." Yet, in clear contradiction to Borges's statement that today "nobody is anything else" but a nominalist, a book was published in 1985 containing a vigorous set of papers in defense of realism and in response to Van Fraassen's constructive empiricism.² Moreover, Borges's belief in the prevalence of nominalism seems to prove wrong also for the 1990s. In a 1992 symposium on physics, along with the discussion about "theories of everything," the old realism-antirealism debate was renewed.³ While nominalists like Van Fraassen deny the possibility of ever knowing what is "really going on" behind the phenomena and argue for a plurality of theories which may equally well describe our world, realists believe that the theories they defend are not only empirically adequate but true.

Borges's story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" illustrates diverse issues related to the realism-nominalism debate. If, according to Borges, "the English nominalism of the fourteenth century reappears in the scrupulous English idealism of the eighteenth century" (Other Inquisitions 123), it follows that Tlön's idealism may be regarded as a manifestation of nominalism. Accordingly, within a nominalistic framework, I shall explore here the notions of monism, language, articulation, order, and representation present in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and trace these notions back to Fritz Mauthner's work.⁴

II. "A Cold Wind Blows From The Bank Of The River"

The inhabitants of Tlön deny the belief that the entities they deal with "really" exist in a mind-independent external world; for them, the world exists only in their minds. The narrator calls this philosophical view "monism" (Obras completas 436). Traditionally, the concept of monism is associated to the idea of substance. A traditional monistic conception of the world claims that in the final analysis our world consists of only one kind of "stuff." Yet the meaning of Tlön's monism cannot be revealed through this traditional conception. Interestingly, Mauthner too uses the word "monism" but associates it to a different notion. He denies the traditional notion of monism for the same reason that he denies the idea of substance: it encourages us to think that there is something *beneath* our descriptions or conceptualizations of reality, as if we could have access to something which is what it is independently of how we conceptualize it. By contrast, Mauthner associates the word "monism" to the view that holds that the world in which we live occurs only once, not *outside of* but rather *under* our representations or conceptualizations of reality. He claims:

Because of a lack of a better word, one might link the concept "monism" to an idea completely different from the idea of monism at which human thinking has arrived in its search of a resting place. [This new idea] is something totally different from a final and only cause as well as from a highest and only Being. In the torment of life and experience, aware that our thinking has created what seems good and bad to us, it might have a redeeming power to think that the world in which we live and suffer occurs only once--not twice, not out and in--and that therefore we must make up our minds and be content with the only [existing] world. (Wörterbuch 2: 349)⁵

According to Mauthner, the world for us consists of sensations, and our sensations, articulated in a certain way, constitute our representations of things (Vorstellungen) or "things of thought" (Gedankendinge). Because we cannot transcend our representations of the world and arrive at what our representations are representations of, Mauthner refuses to talk about a world of things (Wörterbuch 2: 125). In his view, there was only one philosopher, Berkeley, who contented himself with the doctrine that claims that the world occurs only once. Yet, according to Mauthner, Berkeley deceived himself when he claimed that the world was also something else, namely, God. In Mauthner's view, all those who attempted to give a name to what is hidden behind our description or representation (Vorstellung) deceived themselves: "Kant, extremely carefully, called it thing-in-itself; Schopenhauer, with an apparently irrefutable sense of introspection, called it 'Will.'" It was always a divinity" (Der Atheismus 4: 445). Mauthner claims that his critique of language is the only philosophical undertaking that does not pose the question about a "hidden reality" that stands "behind the representation" (Vorstellung) (Der Atheismus 4: 445).⁶ Because, in his view, it does not make any sense to oppose an external object to our internal representation of it, Mauthner concludes that "the object is nothing if it is not in me." (Wörterbuch 1: 552).

Yet the belief in having access to things as they really are still persists in humans' minds. For this reason, Mauthner compares humans with a child to whom a trip was promised and whose reaction after visiting new woods, mountains, and lakes is only to ask where the trip is (Wörterbuch 1: 296). However, Mauthner suggests a way of getting rid of the belief in things beyond our representation and instead accepting a "monistic" view of the world, the view that things for us consist only of "things of thought."

Mauthner believes:

One can get used to the idea that all things are nothing but 'things of thought' (Gedankendinge) by thinking about concepts such as "shadow," "wind," or "thunder." Thus, a thunder does not occur, apart from the sensations of which it is a cause, a second time in the world of the noun. Nor does a flame occur a second time, apart from its effects; we are the ones who project the flame as the cause of its effects, we are the ones who hypostasize it. (Wörterbuch 1: 297)

Just as the inhabitants of Tlön share Mauthner's monism, they also share his view of nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Nouns are, according to Mauthner, the most misleading parts of speech. He illustrates his point thusly: because an apple "does not occur a second time, apart from the sensations" we have of it (round, red, sweet), it follows that "an apple does not occur once in the world of the adjective and a second time in the world of the noun" (Wörterbuch 1: 296). In other words, Mauthner rejects nouns because they encourage us to think that there are *things* out there, and, in his view, there is nothing in our senses identifiable as a "sensation of a thing." Admittedly, nouns are useful linguistic means of referring to clusters of sensations. However, Mauthner emphasizes that there is nothing in our senses that can be identified with a cluster of sensations; only qualities are real, but clusters of qualities are not (Beiträge 1: 634).

Significantly, Borges too regards nouns as constructs out of our sensations:

The world of appearances is a rush of jumbled perceptions.... Language is an effective arrangement of the world's enigmatic abundance. In other words, *we invent nouns and we add them to reality*. We touch a round form, we see a small, rounded mass of dawn-colored light, a tickle delights our mouth, and we lie and say that these three heterogeneous things are one, and it is called orange. (El tamaño de mi esperanza 45. Italics mine)⁷

This notion of nouns as short-hand means of referring to clusters of qualities is also present in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." Precisely because a noun suggests the existence of a thing in the world "out there," no one believes in nouns in the idealistic world of Tlön. In the northern hemisphere nouns are replaced by accumulations of adjectives, while in the southern hemisphere they are replaced by verbs. In the languages of the northern hemisphere of Tlön, the noun "moon," for example, is replaced by different accumulations of adjectives such as "airy-clear over dark-round" or "orange-faint-of-sky," while in the southern hemisphere it is usually replaced by the verbs "to moon" or "to moonle."

Mauthner too prefers adjectives and verbs rather than nouns. Because our senses inform us of qualities, and adjectives refer to qualities, adjectives, in his view, are closer than nouns to our experience of reality (Wörterbuch 3: 366). Going back to his example of the apple, Mauthner argues that what an apple is, beyond the adjectives that express its qualities, is "a metaphysical question." He claims that "everything we know of it [the apple] qua chemists or botanists can equally well be expressed in adjectives" (Beiträge 3: 99). Consequently, while philosophy has traditionally regarded nouns as the main parts of speech and adjectives as secondary (for, traditionally, nouns refer to substances and adjectives to qualities), Mauthner undermines this hierarchy. For him, adjectives represent the principal term, since they refer to qualities, while nouns only serve to systematize the information provided by our sense-impressions. Furthermore, for Mauthner, qualities can be expressed equally well by verbs. He does not see any

reason for verbs to mislead us, since verbs are not likely to suggest the existence of things; verbs usually signal some change in the cluster of qualities.⁸

Because we have access only to sensations and, as we have already pointed out, there is nothing that can be identified with a "sensation of a thing," we must conclude that there must be more than one way of articulating sensations and thus configuring objects. Borges, going a step further than Mauthner, postulates other possible articulations that might also very well fit our sensations:

The world of appearance is most complex, and our language has carried out only a very small number of the combinations which it allows. Why not create a word, one single word, for our simultaneous perception of ^(crr) cattle bells ringing in the afternoon and the sunset in the distance? (El tamaño de mi esperanza 48).

In the imaginary planet of Tlön, sensations are articulated in ways that clearly differ from those in Western languages. Accordingly, in the literature of the northern hemisphere of Tlön, one can find unfamiliar "objects" resulting from the combination of different sensations:

There are objects made up of two sense elements, one visual, the other auditory--the color of a sunrise and the distant call of a bird. Other objects are made up of many elements--the sun, the water against the swimmer's chest, the vague quivering pink ^{Do not} which one sees when the eyes are closed, the feeling of being swept away by a river or by sleep. These second-degree objects can be combined with others; using certain abbreviations the process is practically an infinite one. (Borges. A Reader: 115-6).⁹

Mauthner's longlasting stimulus on Borges can be traced as late as 1977. In a lecture held in that year, based on the assumption that we have no access to reality apart from our sense-impressions and that there is no "sense-impression of a thing," Borges claims that there is no difference between prose and poetry; neither of them is

closer to reality than the other; both of them are only different ways of mapping our sensations. He states:

It is said that prose is closer to reality than poetry. I think this is wrong.

There is an idea that has been attributed to the short story writer Horacio Quiroga: if a cold wind blows from the bank of the river, one must write simply "*a cold wind blows from the bank of the river.*" Quiroga--if it was he who said this--seems to have forgotten that that construction is as far from reality as it is from the cold wind that blows from the bank of the river.

What is our perception of it? We feel the air moving, we call it wind; we feel that that wind comes from a certain direction, from the bank of the river.

And with this we form something as complex as a poem by Góngora or a sentence by Joyce. (Seven Nights 78)

III. Classification As Falsification: Tlön's Metaphysical And Scientific Systems

Since for the inhabitants of Tlön the world occurs only in their minds, it is not surprising that their main science is psychology, while all other sciences are subordinated to it. Because Mauthner's primary concern rested on language as a means of conveying knowledge, he was also particularly interested in psychology. Mauthner claims: "We do not have immediate knowledge about bodies; all our knowledge is psychic; all our sciences can be regarded as parts of an applied psychology" (Wörterbuch 2: 458). Mauthner used to believe that epistemology had to have psychological foundations. However, he came to the conclusion that psychology offers very shaky foundations; because psychology deals with our inner world, and our language is based on "observations of the outside world," no reliable account of our inner world can be articulated through our language, "an instrument for the

understanding of the outside world" (Beiträge 1: 235). In Mauthner's view, our individual acts of thought lose their original uniqueness once named or reported, for they can be named or reported *only* through a public language, which automatically imposes its form on them (Beiträge 1: 226). Since no articulated account of a mental act can be identified with the mental act itself, Mauthner concludes that a "scientific psychology" is altogether impossible (Beiträge 1: 544). Significantly, the inhabitants of Tlön hold a similar position. In their view, once mental acts are reported, they are automatically falsified: "Each state of mind is irreducible. The mere act of giving it name, that is of classifying it, implies a falsification of it" (Obras completas 436).

Mauthner believes that just as our everyday world and our reported mental acts are shaped by language, so the world behind the appearance that science claims to reveal is structured by scientific theories. Indeed, he would oppose the distinction introduced by logical positivists between "observation terms" and "theoretical terms." According to logical positivists, "observation terms" refer to directly observable things and do not involve theory, while "theoretical terms" (such as atom, molecule, quark) acquire their meaning via relations determined by theory (Dieks 67). For Mauthner, by contrast, any observation depends for its meaning on a theoretical background. Since all observation necessarily implies theoretical terms, there is, in his view, no "pure" observation. Certainly, Mauthner does not deny that we are able to make new observations; what he actually claims is that when articulating those observations within a theory, the phenomena observed are automatically shaped by that theory (Beiträge 1: 680). Undoubtedly, Mauthner would agree with many philosophers who for the last few decades have been arguing that even everyday terms referring to clearly observable things are "theory-laden" (Dieks 67). He illustrates his point by suggesting that when science "explains" phenomena such as lightning or thunder in terms of electricity, these phenomena are not explained at all (Beiträge 1: 680-681). Clearly, Mauthner does not deny that scientific theories allow us to manipulate nature. Yet he claims that electricity

or any scientific theory whatsoever does not increase our knowledge of the world. Because we cannot grasp anything without the inevitable mediation of concepts, and concepts necessarily imply a theoretical background, Mauthner concludes that we do not know what electricity really is (Beiträge 1: 681), and thus will never know what things "out there" really are.¹⁰

In the essay "The Metaphor" (1921), Borges displays a similar argument. For him, scientific explanations only classify new phenomena according to preexisting conventions, but they are not able to tell us what things actually are. Borges writes:

To explain pain in terms of histology, of nervous tremor, of cavities is equivalent to avoiding precisely what we are intending to explain. Obviously, scientific definitions may fulfill a pragmatic goal, namely, they may provide an intellectual relief, similar to the one produced when naming the terms of an algebraic operation with the variables X, Y, and Z. Yet it is absurd to believe that these variables could possibly change or clarify to some extent the things to which they are applied. The light--the sensation of light--is something completely different from the vibrations into which the optic translates it. These vibrations do not constitute the reality of light. Moreover, how could one believe that one thing could constitute the reality of another thing? (275):

Like Mauthner, Borges does not deny that we can manipulate nature through scientific theories such as electricity. However, for Borges as well as for Mauthner manipulation and understanding are two different things.¹¹

Returning to Tlön, from the assumption that articulating an individual act of thought implies its falsification, we might actually expect to find no science there. Paradoxically, there are countless scientific and metaphysical systems in this imaginary planet. The inhabitants of Tlön reject the idea of a single correct theory and instead accept the existence of a multiplicity of theories that can equally well describe the same

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phenomena. For example, there are two geometries in Tlön, a visual and a tactile one: "The latter geometry corresponds to our geometry, and they consider it subordinated to the former. The foundation of visual geometry is the surface, not the point. This geometry rejects parallelism, and states that, as man moves about, he alters the forms which surround him" (Obras completas 438). And if there is no "true" geometry in Tlön, even less is there a "true" system of measurement. Accordingly, we learn in the course of the story that Herbert Ashe, a friend of the narrator's father and one of the "demiurges" of Tlön, transcribed some duodecimal tables (in which 12 is written 10) into sexagesimals (in which 60 is written 10) (Obras completas 441).

Mauthner too accepts non-Euclidean geometries and rejects Kant's view that Euclidean geometry alone fits the conditions of space. He claims that "the question about the truth of Euclidean geometry has no sense. One could ask just as well whether the metrical system is true and the old measures false. One geometry can be no truer than another; it can only be more convenient" (Wörterbuch 1: 117). Indeed, Mauthner and Borges's Tlön seem to be very close to recent antifoundationalist philosophers who endorse the view that there are no fundamental truths but different possible descriptions of the world. Their position is also reminiscent of van Fraassen's insistence that the right scientific attitude is to point out to alternative theories rather than to subscribe to any particular scientific view (Dieks 77).

IV. Avatars Of The Nine Copper Coins

Because Tlön's monism implies that reality is a construct out of experience rather than something existing independently of it, the greatest paradox of Tlön is certainly materialism. One of the versions of this paradox cites that:

On Tuesday, X ventures along a deserted road and loses nine copper coins. On Thursday, Y finds on the road four coins, somewhat rusted by Wednesday's rain. On Friday, Z comes across three coins on the road. On Friday morning, X finds two coins in the corridor of his house. [The heresiarch is trying to deduce from this story the reality, that is, the continuity, of the nine recovered coins.] It is absurd, he states, to suppose that four of the coins have not existed between Tuesday and Thursday, three between Tuesday and Friday afternoon, and two between Tuesday and Friday morning. It is logical to assume that they *have* existed, albeit in some secret way, in a manner whose understanding is concealed from men, in every moment, in all three places. (Borges. A Reader 117)¹²

The narrator argues that in Tlön the so-called paradox of nine copper coins plays a role equivalent to the role played in our world by the Eleatic paradoxes of Zeno, which Borges discusses in two essays, "The Perpetual Race between Achilles and the Tortoise" and "Avatars of the Tortoise," both in Discusión (1932). In "The Perpetual Race between Achilles and the Tortoise," Borges summarizes Achilles' paradox as follows: "Achilles runs ten times faster than the tortoise and gives him a start of ten meters. Achilles runs those ten meters, the tortoise runs one; Achilles runs that meter, the tortoise runs a decimeter; Achilles runs that decimeter, the tortoise runs a centimeter; Achilles runs that centimeter, the tortoise runs a millimeter; Achilles, the millimeter, the tortoise a tenth of a millimeter, and so on ad infinitum, so that Achilles can run for ever without overtaking the tortoise" (Obras completas 244). Subsequently, Borges discusses several attempts (Stuart Mill's, Henri Bergson's, and Bertrand Russell's) to solve Zeno's paradox. Ultimately, he argues that this paradox emerges from the word (and concept) of infinity, which, Borges adds, we have created "with temerity" (Obras completas 248). As is well known, the essential feature of infinity is that a part of infinity is as big as the whole, and that is the reason why Achilles can never overtake the tortoise. Achilles cannot reach the

tortoise because to do so, he must first reach the point just departed by the tortoise, and if space is infinitely divisible, then Achilles will have to run through an infinity of points before he arrives at the point just departed by the tortoise. Borges continues: "Let us accept idealism, let us accept the concrete increase of what is perceived, and we will elude the overwhelming abysses of the paradox" (Obras completas 248). In other words, Borges urges us to stop thinking of our theories as being literally descriptive of the world and accept the view that reality is for us only our construct, our representation (*Vorstellung*). For, in his view, if we accept that the reality we have access to is our own construct, we will be no longer concerned with paradoxes that actually emerge out of human constructs. In "Avatars of the Tortoise," the second essay that deals with Zeno's paradox, Borges encourages us to do "what no idealist has done" and "search for the unrealities" which confirm "the hallucinatory nature of the world" (Obras completas 258). Thus, Zeno's paradox is, in Borges's view, one of those "unrealities" or "interstices" in the architecture of our systems that allow us to know that they are not faithful representations of the world but mere constructions we impose on the world.

Mauthner discusses Zeno's second paradox within the framework of his theory of the three pictures of the world. We have already discussed his notions of adjective, noun, and verb. These three notions constitute the fundamental concepts of what he calls "the three pictures of the world." According to Mauthner, there is only one world, but our knowledge of it can be articulated from three different points of view, namely, the substantival, the adjectival and the verbal points of view. The adjectival world is the world we experience immediately through our senses (Wörterbuch 3: 362). The verbal world, in turn, is "the world of becoming, the condition of which it is time.... It sees in everything only change, relations, relations of the so-called things to us and relations of these things to one another" (Wörterbuch 3: 366). Finally, "the substantival world is approximately the same as the world of Being, the condition of which is space" (Wörterbuch 3: 366). Although Mauthner claims that all three worlds complement each

other, the adjectival world is, in his view, the closest one to our experience of the world, for it implies the lowest form of articulation. The substantival world, by contrast, is, in his view, the most misleading of these three worlds, for it encourages the illusion that there are things out there apart from our sensations of them. Mauthner regards Zeno's paradox within the framework of these three pictures of the world and claims that "Achilles the Nimble-Footed can never really overtake the tortoise--if, removed from time, the judge holds firmly to a timeless world of Being" (Wörterbuch 3: 363). According to Mauthner, Zeno's paradox emerges from considering exclusively an infinitely divisible space, while disregarding the world of time. Since space is, in Mauthner's view, the condition of possibility of the world of things or substantival world, he concludes that this paradox is a result of our misleading substantival world, a mere construction we introduce in order to systematize our talk about sense-impressions (Wörterbuch 1: 296). In other words, Zeno's paradox proves to be also for Mauthner one of those "interstices" Borges talks about, which allows us to know that our access to the world is *through* our constructions.

V. Encyclopaedias And The True Order Of The World

The discovery of Uqbar, we read in the opening sentence of this story, is owed to "the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia" (Borges. A Reader 111). Indeed, encyclopedias play an important role in "Tiön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." The series starts with an invented encyclopedia, The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia, published in New York in 1917, which is a reprint of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. We soon learn that there are only two copies of The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia, one belonging to the narrator, the other to his friend Bioy Casares. Surprisingly, the two copies are not identical: Bioy's copy contains four extra pages at the end of Volume 26 which consist of an entry for the

land of Uqbar. The second encyclopedia in the series is A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön, entitled Orbis Tertius, a set of forty volumes of which only Volume 11 is known to exist. And just as there are two copies of Volume 26 of The Anglo-American Cyclopedia, so too there are two copies of Volume 11 of Orbis Tertius. One copy of Volume 11 has been discovered in the bar of a hotel, where it had been left by Herbert Ashe, a friend of the narrator's father who will turn out to be one of the demiurges of Tlön. The second copy turns up later in a library in Memphis, Tennessee, where a complete set of Orbis Tertius has been "exhumed." In addition to The Anglo-American Cyclopedia and Orbis Tertius, a third encyclopedia is also announced, one written not in English but in one of the languages of Tlön.

Mauthner dedicates an article to the encyclopaedia (Encyklopädie). After devoting two sections of his entry primarily to the purpose and history of the French Encyclopedia, he opens the third section with a brief description of his own attempt to create "a new system of knowledge" (Wörterbuch 1: 395). In his system, Mauthner divides all knowledge into two classes. The first class contains "events linked through laws, regularities, and causalities capable of being known" (Wörterbuch 1: 395). The second class contains those events that cannot be linked to each other by laws or regularities and thus "remain isolated events" (Wörterbuch 1: 395). Mauthner states that his own new system of knowledge made him "suspicious" toward all kinds of systems. Certainly, he admits that his classification of knowledge is very similar to the traditional division into "natural sciences" (Gesetzeswissenschaft) and "human sciences" (historische Wissenschaft), although he would rather enhance the traditional concept of "human sciences" while restricting that of "natural sciences." Thus, in his view, the science that deals with the three kingdoms of nature (the vegetable, animal, and mineral kingdoms) belongs to the "human sciences," that is to say, to the class or set of events that are not linked by laws or regularities (Wörterbuch 1: 395). By questioning the traditional assumption that the so-called kingdoms of nature present enough regularities to be

treated as belonging to natural sciences, Mauthner is actually calling into question the human proclivity to assume order and uniformity in things. People are inclined to find laws and regularities without realizing that those laws and regularities are not *in* things but imposed on things by our own minds.

Furthermore, to undermine the credibility of any system of knowledge, Mauthner argues that our systems are both historically contingent and interest-bound. He emphasizes the fact that science cannot achieve knowledge independently of historically contingent categories and practices. In his view, our systems, "always obeying only the instantaneous state of the art, replace one another, from science to science, and from generation to generation" (Wörterbuch 1: 396). Subsequently, Mauthner makes his second point in order to demonstrate that "there cannot be an objective system of knowledge" (Wörterbuch 1: 396): he stresses the role played by human interest in the constitution of our systems. Mauthner argues that our interest determines which phenomena we are going to pay attention to as well as the way in which we are going to connect those phenomena. He states: "We have obtained our knowledge of nature by connecting thoughts, and human interest--whatever people may claim--is at the base of these connections" (Wörterbuch 1: 396). Hilary Putnam has recently given us a good example of the role interest plays in the way we select and connect phenomena. Putnam presents the case of a man who has high blood pressure, eats food high in cholesterol and refuses to exercise against the advice of his doctor, and eventually suffers a heart attack. Putnam points out that if we are *interested* in what would have happened to him if he had obeyed the doctor's orders, then we are likely to say that his eating habits and lack of exercise caused his heart attack. However, if we are *interested* in what would have happened to him if he had not had high blood pressure, then we are likely to say that his high blood pressure caused the heart attack (Renewing Philosophy 50). In the same vein, Mauthner argues that "we have come closer and closer to nature by means of our knowledge or our language because dominion over nature was in our

own interest" (Wörterbuch 1: 396). If knowledge is historically contingent and human interest determines those aspects of a phenomenon to which attention is paid, then, it is necessary to conclude that we will never know what the universe really is.


Precisely because our systems of knowledge do not reflect the order of the world but the order inscribed in our language, Mauthner does not think much of encyclopedias (Wörterbuch 1: 398). He relates the goal of any encyclopaedia to catalogue human knowledge with "the longing of the dreamer Lull and of the science organizer Leibniz" (Wörterbuch 1: 398). Mauthner says that "our encyclopaedias are definitely in their brutal systemlessness just the *ars magna*, the art of Lull, or the *ars combinatoria* [of Leibniz] " (Wörterbuch 1: 398). As is well known, Leibniz believed that statements about complex things could be derived from statements about their simpler constituents by a process of combination. His goal was to create a lingua characteristica universalis or universal language where each sign corresponded to one of those simple constituents. This project of a universal language, which, as Mauthner points out, occurred to Leibniz almost before he was in his teens and haunted him throughout his whole life (Wörterbuch 3: 321-22), rests on the assumption (denied by Mauthner) that there are things out there in the world waiting for us to label them. Like Leibniz, Raymond Lull with his logic machine assumed that he could create a system that could provide us with reliable information about the world. In Mauthner's view, Lull, Leibniz, and the creators of the encyclopaedia share the belief in the power of language to catalogue things as they are, ignoring that language is able only to catalogue things as they are (constructed) in language. That "the superficially oriented catalogue of the world" we learn in our mother-tongue from childhood is "linguistically and logically necessary" is, according to Mauthner, a feeling we acquire through usage (Beiträge 2: 68-69). Because the true catalogue of the world and our diverse human catalogues never coincide, Mauthner concludes in his article on the encyclopaedia: "Human disposition,

even when it is able to focus on real science, is something completely different from the order of nature" (Wörterbuch 1: 396).

Like Leibniz's *characteristica universalis* and Lull's *ars magna*, the imaginary planet Tlön's encyclopaedia, called Orbis Tertius, also symbolizes the impossibility of systems to reflect the true order of the world. However, humanity embraces Tlön's sciences and systems without questioning their credibility. According to the narrator, the language of Tlön and its history are already taught at our schools, while our sciences are also reformed as a consequence of the contact with the world of Tlön. "Manuals, anthologies, summaries, literal versions, authorized reprints, and pirated editions of the Master Work of Man poured and continue to pour out into the world" (Borges. A Reader: 121). The narrator claims further that the people are fascinated by this orderly world, just as some years ago they were fascinated by "any symmetrical system whatsoever which gave the appearance of order--dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism" (Borges. A Reader: 121). Therefore, because of their desperately need for order, people are actually embracing the arbitrary order of an immense catalogue of forty volumes as if it were a faithful mirror of the order of the world. In Borges's view, reality is orderly, however, "in accordance with divine laws" or "inhuman laws" "which we will never completely perceive" (Borges. A Reader: 122). Clearly, Borges shares Mauthner's belief that "never does our language coincide with nature.... Relationships in nature are not connections of thought, at least not human connections of thought" (Wörterbuch 1: 396). Mauthner's image of the world-catalogue seems to be at the base of Borges's story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," where humanity forgets once again that languages and systems do not reflect the catalogue of the world and that instead the catalogues of our languages and systems shape our understanding of the world.

Borges comments on "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius":

I wrote this story in Adrogué, in Las Delicias. Perhaps it is the most ambitious of my stories. It presents the idea of humanity transformed by a

book. Once I wrote this story, I felt very vain.  A book transforms reality and transforms the past! However, I realized that it has always happened. For, ultimately, we are the creation of the Bible and the Platonic dialogues (Carrizo 222).

¹ For an historical account of the debate realism-antirealism see Dennis Dieks, "The Scientific View of the World: Introduction," Physics and our View of the World, ed. Jan Hilgevoord, New York: Cambridge UP, 1995; 61-78.

² I refer to Images of Science. Essays on Realism and Empiricism with a Reply from Bas C. van Fraassen, ed. Paul M. Churchland and Clifford A. Hooker, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985.

³ Based on this symposium held in The Netherlands in 1992 a book appeared entitled Physics and our View of the World, ed. Jan Hilgevoord, New York: Cambridge UP, 1995. This book contains contributions from well known theoretical physicists and philosophers of science such as John Barrow, Paul Davies, Dennis Dieks, William Drees, Paul Feyerabend, Bas van Fraassen, Mary Hesse, Gerard't Hooft and Ernan Mc Mullin.

⁴ Fritz Mauthner (1849-1923) was probably the first modern philosopher who argued that philosophical problems are ultimately linguistic problems. His chief merit consists in discovering and developing a hidden tradition of using critique of language as an instrument of philosophical analysis. Posterity, however, has, for the most part, relegated him to obscurity. Yet Borges acknowledged Mauthner's philosophy and often referred with admiration to Mauthner's work. Thus, in 1940, Borges asserted that Mauthner's Wörterbuch der Philosophie (Dictionary of Philosophy) was one of the five books which he had fully "processed" and commented on extensively (Obras completas 276).

⁵ All translations from German into English are mine unless otherwise indicated.

⁶ Although Mauthner explicitly rejected the dualism representation/thing-in-itself, implicitly, however, through the use of certain metaphors and terms, he seems to be still working within the Kantian framework he seeks to escape from. Thus, for example, his use of the terms "Vorstellung" (representation) and "Erinnerungsbilder" (memory-images) suggests the persistence of the notion of intrinsic reality he intends to

undermine. Moreover, metaphors such as the cave analogy that he borrows from Plato presuppose a distinction between appearance and hidden reality clearly at odds with his notion of monism. For a study of such images and metaphors see Bredeck, Elisabeth, Metaphors of Knowledge. Language and Thought in Mauthner's Critique, Detroit: Wayne State University, 1992.

⁷ See also Jorge Luis Borges, Inquisiciones 66.

⁸ Mauthner's criticism of nouns is not so much against concrete nouns, such as "water" or "orange," which articulate impressions linked to the senses, but against abstract nouns such as "God," "law" or "cause" (Wörterbuch 2: 119), which encourage us to think that they refer to things "out there" when, in fact, they do not correspond to any external reality whatsoever.

⁹ The narrator correctly compares this "objects" resulting from the combination of different sensations with Meinong's objects, for Meinong's objects, although they do not exist, are as real as existent objects. For a discussion of Meinong's theory and its role in Borges's story see Floyd Merrell, Unthinking Thinking. Jorge Luis Borges, Mathematics, and the New Physics, West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1991; 23-27.

¹⁰ Mauthner seems to be still holding on here to the phenomenon-noumenon dualism he intended to escape from. Cf. Footnote 5.

¹¹ Indeed both Mauthner and Borges would have certainly smiled at the following anecdote from an Oxford exam of about a century ago:

Examiner: What is Electricity?

Candidate: Oh, Sir, I'm sure I have learn't what it is--I'm sure I did know--but I've forgotten.

Examiner: How very unfortunate. Only two persons have ever known what electricity is, the Author of Nature and yourself. Now one of them has forgotten (Drees 202).

12 An orthodox thinker intends to solve the paradox by postulating a "pantheistic idealism": "This felicitous supposition declared that there is only one Individual, and that this indivisible Individual is every one of the separate beings in the universe, and that those beings are the instruments and masks of divinity itself. X is Y and is Z. Z finds three coins because he remembers that X lost them. X finds only two in the corridor because he remembers that the others have been recovered" (Borges. A Reader 118). The narrator claims that "Schopenhauer, the passionate and clear-headed Schopenhauer, advanced a very similar theory in the first volume of his Parerga and Paralipomena" (Borges. A Reader 118). Schopenhauer's influence on Borges can be traced in many of his essays and stories. Also in Mauthner's work, an echo of Schopenhauer's thought can be found. Mauthner was deeply impressed by Schopenhauer's revision of Kant's first critique carried out in his dissertation On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, where Schopenhauer sees nature as a product of reason (Janik 123-24). And just as Borges claims that only in Schopenhauer's philosophy he has seen "some trace of the universe" (Obras completas 258), so Mauthner admits that Schopenhauer's influence on him was so great that he had difficulty in extricating himself from Schopenhauer's system (Janik 123-24). Yet Schopenhauer's position was not beyond Mauthner's criticism. Mauthner argues that Schopenhauer, in his notion of will, was victim of the temptation to reify abstract words (Janik 124).

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