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Provocative Idea:

On Borges' Amnesia and Talmudic Understanding: Reviving Ancient Traditions in Re-search

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Abstract

The paradigmatic bases, which sustain traditional western psychological interpretative efforts, need not be just a footnote to Plato. In this paper we introduce the Talmudic interpretative perspective, which we use to point at some weaknesses we identify in contemporary research imaginings. While the empiricist approach may be traced to Plato and the interpretative and the critical approaches may be traced to Heraclitus, we argue that the Talmudic approach is a differentiated and unique perspective that, because of its non-epistemic nature, its dialogical character, and its recognition of two intermingled levels of interpretation, can make an important contribution to new ways of thinking about understanding and meaning in research.

Keywords: psychology; paradigmatic perspectives; Talmud; epistemology; self

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1. Bacon's Amnesia: A Prologue

J. L. Borges opens one of his fictions with an insight he attributes to Francis Bacon:

> Solomon saith: *There is no new thing upon the earth*. So that as Plato had an imagination, *that all knowledge was but remembrance*; so Solomon giveth his sentence, that all novelty is but oblivion (Borges, 2000, p. 183).

We find this piece particularly illuminating because it presents us with several commonsensical statements that, taken as a whole, direct us to a surprising conclusion--like a paradox. Let us try to reconstruct the above statement in order to make it clear. First, we have the notion that there is nothing new under the sun, an idea that has the unpopular fundamentalist flavor of the denial of real progression and an orientation toward the past. Second, the above excerpt points in the direction of the famous Platonic suggestion that knowledge is remembrance. That is, to know something is actually to recall it, either from the soul's previous travels in the heavenly realm (as suggested in the Platonic dialogues) or from our past intellectual history (for a full discussion on these issues, see Neuman, 2003).

Given those two arguments, we may reach the surprising conclusion: what we consider as new is in fact the result of a process of oblivion, a result of our amnesia. We are both what we remember and what we forget. Indeed, in his seminal work *Arguing and Thinking*, Michael Billig (1987) critically exposes this kind of amnesia among mainstream social psychologists and, as a devoted antiquarian, urges them to turn their head and to look back into earlier times in order to recognize the wisdom of past generations and the relevance of their ideas to our current psychological studies. This is the aim of our paper: to suggest that sometimes when we look backwards, when we *re-search* (search again), we may find interesting ideas that may revitalize the way we understand the meaning of understanding and the nature of research.

In this paper, we adopt Billig's advice and, consequently, we design it like a cinematic event that brings forth images from the past (of Talmudic sages), in order to integrate them with our more current knowledge. While so doing, we take issue with the present conceptions of understanding and meaning, as these have evolved in research in the social sciences in general, and in social psychology in particular; we try to enrich them with traditions which, though not totally new seem still in need of support so as to revitalize a rather modern Eurocentric field. We wish to help overcome Bacon's amnesia: to reflect critically on our past just to make it open to novel ways of understanding in the present.

The first section aims to take us back to the past, before Dilthey, Marx, or Habermas had established their theories, and to review the two grand western narratives of interpretation which serve as the basis for present positivist-empiricist and critical conceptualizations: the *Platonic* and the *Heraclitic*. We then introduce the Talmudic interpretative perspective (the Talmud is the body of Jewish civil and ceremonial traditionary law, collected, codified, and redacted from about 200 to 500 AD), which we use to point at some weaknesses we identify in contemporary social psychological research imaginings on understanding and meaning. While the positivist-empiricist approach may be traced to Plato's conviction on the immaculate and truthful nature of the unobservable form, the

love and study of which are at the center of any life worth living, and the interpretative and the critical approaches may be traced to Heraclitus' law of process and opposition and his principles on nature's fluidity and subsequent lack of Truth, we argue that the Talmudic approach is a differentiated and unique perspective that, because of its non-epistemic nature, its dialogical character, and its recognition of two intermingled levels of interpretation, can be of vast significance to new ways of thinking about understanding and meaning in research.

2. Out of the Platonic Cave and Inside the Heraclitian Text

For Plato, the only way in which we may understand the meaning of a phenomenon is through *in-sight* into our soul--an insight that aims to uncover the abstract, firm and genuine nature of reality. To recall Plato's famous cave allegory, all of us are prisoners held captive by our senses. The only way to get out of the cave is by overcoming the misleading factors of appearance and by observing the pure forms that underlie them. Although modern science is far removed from some of Plato's wilder epistemological speculations, Plato's vision dominates the popular image of science as the removal of the curtain, which obscures the "nature of our nature." This Platonic ideal of interpretation is also the ideal of mainstream experimental psychology that seeks for the general and abstract "rules of the mind." While the Platonic perspective is the most familiar to the general audience, it is definitely not the only player in the game.

Heraclitus (500 BCE) holds the keys to a different approach. This tradition of inquiry emphasizes the *dynamics* of reality and our ability to reveal its existence not by removing the "screen of appearances" but by rearranging the riddle of appearances in a way that corresponds to the latent structure of reality (Kahn, 1981). Due to the fact that Heraclitus left only short puzzling fragments, it is quite difficult to argue with complete confidence that he had a coherent theory of interpretation. However, some scholars contend that this is possible, and it is worth inquiring into their speculations.

The name Heraclitus is usually associated with the famous fragment--*panta rhei*--everything flows. This fragment portrays Heraclitus as the theorist of a universal flux. Hussey (1999) suggests that for Heraclitus, *process* is "the basic form of existence in the observable world, although something, not directly observable, persists throughout" (p. 99). Like many other philosophers, Heraclitus is aware that the senses cannot provide us with clear insight into reality since they are already shaped by our preconceptions: "Eyes and ears are poor witnesses for men if their souls do not understand the language." Therefore, "the possibility of understanding is correlated with the existence of a *meaning*. It implies the need for interpretation of what is given in experience, as though it were a riddle or an oracle" (Hussey, 1999, pp. 90-91, our emphasis). According to this interpretation, there is a reality; there is a truth waiting for us to reveal it. However, this truth is hidden, and there is no algorithmic way to uncover it. In this sense, Heraclitus precedes some "modern" philosophers of science (e.g., Paul Feyerabend) who question the existence of "the" scientific method. Another surprising aspect of Heraclitus' theory is his elaboration of a social theory of epistemology. Not that he denies there is a true

structure underlying the appearances. However, he suggests that since there is no algorithm that may lead us beyond the screen of appearances, we should rely only on indirect ways of encountering the truth and confirm our findings through some kind of social agreement. While this sounds most peculiar, the argument is not that any statement about the structure of the universe should be based on some kind of social fashion, but rather that the heart of any scientific activity is *interpretation*, which is a *social activity*; the result of this activity is so clear that it is evident to the public and cannot escape social recognition. In this sense, Kuhn's conception of a socially grounded scientific paradigm and "postmodern" perspectives, which emphasize the interpretative nature of the scientific enterprise, clearly correspond to Heraclitus' ancient theory of interpretation.

Concerning the above arguments, one can immediately see the theoretical affinity between the Heraclitian ideas of interpretation, Dilthey's notion of hermeneutic and understanding, modern thinkers (e.g., Wittgenstein) who place language as a central key for understanding our psychological realm, and critical thinkers who believe that our discourse reflects and constitutes the macro-structure of our society.

Both Plato and Heraclitus are immersed in an epistemological quest. Both of them accept the qualitative gap between the world of appearances (text) and the world of ideas (truth/meaning). Both of them would like us to look beyond the text, discourse, phenomenon, or appearance and to uncover the *logos* that governs our mind/nature. The difference between them is that Plato believes that in order to uncover the meaning of a text we should transcend it through a specific scientific methodology, while Heraclitus suggests that the text should be reconstructed in a way that spontaneously reveals its meaning. That is, Heraclitus suggests that we should *understand* the text through reconstruction, which is legitimized *post hoc* by a scholarly consensus.

The western mind, with its Platonic and Heraclitian perspectives, is immersed in epistemological doubts, and as such it has found it difficult to overcome idealist/universalist or individualist perspectives. Therefore, it must be extremely difficult for it to consider the possibility that there are *non-epistemic* perspectives of interpretation, social and local products of a recursive process of constitution and reconstitution. Our suggestion is that a non-epistemic, dialogical/local/social perspective of interpretation exists and is expressed in the Talmud, the canonized corpus of Jewish commentary on the Jewish law. This perspective is non-epistemic in the sense that it does not adopt as its base line the difference between text and meaning, truth and appearances. We would like to argue that the Talmudic perspective, which is not exactly positivist-empiricist, interpretative, or critical/emancipatory, is a constitutive perspective, and that it is the most appropriate perspective for studying social psychological issues related to understanding and meaning.

3. A Lesson from Stubborn Talmudic Sages

While current Jewish scholarship has undertaken to introduce contemporary theories of interpretation into the study of Jewish culture and history (for a recent review, see

Kepnes, 1996), our effort moves in the opposite direction. We will be looking at the Talmudic text and its interpretation so as to reflect on its potential to affect present western social theorizing. The Talmudic case we would like to present (*Babylonian Talmud*, 1990-1994, pp. 286-287) in order to illustrate our argument, concerns a dispute among several Talmudic sages regarding the question of whether a specific kind of oven can or cannot be restored to its ritually pure state; that is, whether a specific kind of oven is subject to the Jewish laws of defilement or whether it is an oven that cannot be rendered impure and therefore the laws of defilement do not apply.

This question seems a little bit bizarre to the modern secular mind, but to those scholars engrossed in issues of impurity, in the theological rather than the hygienic sense, this issue was an integral part of their world. Though the question at hand is of importance in that it is particular and local and not in search of universal rules, what we want to emphasize first is rather the drama that evolves out of this specific dispute.

At the beginning of this story, we are told that a leading sage, Rabbi Eliezer, declares that the oven may be broken down (because it is made up of discrete units) and therefore is not susceptible to becoming ritually impure. This is his position in the debate. The other sages do not agree with Rabbi Eliezer and declare that the oven is indeed susceptible to becoming ritually impure. Then our story begins:

> On that day Rabbi Eliezer produced all the arguments in the world, but they did not accept them from him. So he said to them, "If the law accords with my position, this carob tree will prove it." The carob was uprooted and moved from its place by a hundred cubits [an ancient measure of length derived from the forearm]--and some say, four hundred cubits.

What we see is that after trying to convince the other sages in a rational way by providing arguments in favor of his position, Rabbi Eliezer gives up all attempts at rational persuasion and tries to change the other sages' minds through the use of supernatural validation. Surprisingly (or not), the carob tree that was located near the sages is uprooted and moves from its place in support of the Rabbi's argument. (Most rhetoricians would very much like to have such a persuasive tool at hand.) Does this supernatural proof convince the Talmudic sages? No. And they respond to this miracle by saying:

> "There is no proof from a carob tree."

Rabbi Eliezer was a leading sage and a descendent of Moses himself, a sage not to be easily dismissed. Therefore, the response he received from the other sages to his miracle must have been quite shocking. So he tried another miracle and said:

> "If the law accords with my position, let the stream of water prove it." The stream of water reversed its flow.

At this point in the story, the reader feels assured that the sages must be convinced by Rabbi Eliezer's position. One miracle, such as a migrant carob tree, may be dismissed as a magician's trick, but a stream of water that reverses its flow? This is something contrary to the basic laws of physics and should have been considered a clear endorsement of the Rabbi's argument. The stubborn sages seem to acknowledge this but they refuse to accept *empirical facts* as a legitimate source of evidence by saying:

> "There is no proof from a stream of water."

Now it seems that the Rabbi becomes very angry and frustrated and takes a dangerous turn:

> "If the law accords with my position, let the walls of the study hall prove it", whereupon the wall of the study hall leaned to fall.

At this risky juncture, the sages seem to lose their patience: empirical facts even if constructed in the narrative could be consequential. They indeed feel threatened by the walls of the study hall leaning upon them, and Rabbi Yehoshua rebuked the walls, shouting at them (the walls):

> "If Torah (the Mosaic or Jewish law; hence, a name for the five books of the Pentateuch and its commentaries) scholars vie with one another in legal issues what business is it of yours?"

The Talmud redactor adds at this point:

> The walls did not fall, out of respect for Rabbi Yehoshua but neither did they right themselves out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer--and they still continue to lean to this day.

Rabbi Eliezer, somewhat unhappy with the results of his last attempt, gives it one more try, appealing this time directly to the Almighty:

> "If the law accords with my position, let the Heaven prove it!" An echo came forth, saying, "What business have you with Rabbi Eliezer, for the law accords with his position under all circumstances!"

Aha! This time the old Rabbi Eliezer seems to provide the stubborn Talmudic sages with the most powerful and convincing proof that his interpretation in the dispute over the oven is the correct interpretation of the Jewish law. Receiving support for your position from God himself is a support no one can argue with, unless... one is a Talmudic sage. One of the sages, Rabbi Joshua, stands up on his feet and says:

> "It is not in heaven."

As interpreted by Rabbi Jeremiah, the meaning of Rabbi Joshua's interjection is that:

> Since the Torah [the law] has already been given from Mount Sinai, so we do not pay attention to echoes, since you [God] have already written in the Torah at Mount Sinai [traditionally Mount Sinai is considered the place where Moses received the five books of the Law] "After the majority you are to incline."

The story is close to its climax. The Talmudic sage is arguing with God himself by reminding her that the majority [of sages] has the authority to decide on matters of law, and therefore the interpretation is in the hands of the sages, rather than the hands of God. Is this Talmudic sage rebelling against God herself? We assume that the readers are curious to see how God responds. The same curiosity pushed Rabbi Nathan to ask Elijah [the famous biblical prophet who was suppose to be dead at that time but suddenly turns up in the story!]:

> "What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do at that moment?" and he [Elijah] replied to him: "*He laughed and said 'My children have overcome me, my children have overcome me*!'" [our emphasis]

This is an amazing story. A group of sages is arguing about a specific, even technical, matter. One of them seems to be in the right, at least within a hierarchical theological system of interpretation. He is trying to convince his fellows to accept his position but fails to convince them through the use of the ordinary tools of rhetoric. Even though he is supported by astonishing miracles and also by God, the sages refuse to accept his position and argue against God who has commanded them to adhere to rules of interpretation and scholarly consensus and not to rely on miracles or empirical facts. This position sounds paradoxical, because the same God who created the law is evident in this specific dispute, and clearly supports one of the sages.

Therefore, what is the point of reminding God that he commanded them to do something else in the past ("After the majority you are to incline.")? Does he not remember it by himself? Is the will of God subordinate to the interpretative rules he determined? And why does God laugh and say, "My children have overcome me"? Does God laugh? Can he be overcome through social consensus and rhetoric? Is he a relativist who changes his laws according to social norms? Or in other words, is God postmodernist?

We must admit that this story is very strange. It is even stranger than we tend to instinctively think because those sages do not present a good model of an argumentative activity, and if one wishes to use the above case as an example for the argumentative nature of the human mind (Billig, 1987), then one is in trouble. Although the Talmudic sages are involved in argumentative activity, they are not British barristers; that is, approaching them as argumentative beings *per se* in not our way. Let us explain why.

Our reading of the Talmudic story takes us back to Plato and Heraclitus. Although both Heraclitus and Plato present the idea of a reality as differentiated from appearance, their positions nevertheless differ widely. To recall our previous argument, for Plato, the world of appearance is a mask that covers a hidden truth. In order to uncover the truth, one has to tear off this mask by overcoming sense data (i.e., text) and introspect into the secrets of reality (i.e., meaning). In modern hermeneutic terms, we can say that the text covers the truth and one should *transcend* it in order to grasp its meaning. In contrast, our reading of Heraclitus suggests that the text [human behavior?] should not be neglected in order to reveal the latent structure of reality [computational rules of the mind?]. If the text is like a riddle, it should be carefully interpreted in order to organize its internal structure and thereby to uncover the *logos* which is reflected in it. This conception is highly similar to discursive psychology and the critical approaches to discourse analysis, and suggests that there is no difference between *reality* (meaning) and *appearance* (text) as there is no difference between *nomos* (convention) and *physis* (nature). Meaning is evident in the text. However, the Talmudic story takes us in another direction, far away from the epistemic story as told by Plato and Heraclitus.

In general, Talmudic inquiry, as evident in the Talmudic writings, is not interested in *epistemology* and *aesthetics*; those domains are deeply connected, since both are nurtured from the tension between appearance and reality or from the tensions between contradicting appearances. In contrast with the Platonic (or the Heraclitian) expositions, which are obsessed with questions such as 'What is beauty?' or 'How can we transcend our senses and know reality?' the Talmud is totally indifferent to such questions. As suggested by Eco (1997) in a minor comment, in the Greek (and European) tradition, knowledge is associated with vision, while the Jewish tradition is a tradition of sound and voices. This comment encapsulates a profound difference between the Jewish Talmudic culture and the Greek culture. The Talmudic inquiry is indifferent to epistemology but attentive to dialogue. Talmudic inquiry is about *praxis* and *ethics*, about the way the divine will should be realized in man's practice in the world or, more importantly, about the way people constitute God in their world by *dialoging* (to use a popular but overused term) with her. The difference between the Platonic/Heraclitian perspective and the Talmudic perspective is therefore a qualitative one. The Talmudic inquiry does not accept as its starting point a gap between *logos* and its representation, between reality and appearance (unlike the Platonic psychologist), between text and meaning, but adheres to a totally different position in which people practice in this world, their unique way of *being-in-the-world*. Their unique way of *speaking the world* is the *logos*.

Let us try to be more explicit concerning the ethics and practice of the Talmudic method of inquiry. According to the above interpretation of the Talmudic method, *logos* is not masked by appearance, and it is not a riddle that needs solving by rearranging its components on the surface. Nothing is to be found behind *logos*. *Logos* as an activity (pragmatics) carries no meaning all in or by itself. Meaning exists neither in the text (appearance) nor in some kind of Platonic realm, but at the dynamic event of *interpretation*, which is social through and through. The activity, the practice (in this case the activity of interpretation), is what constitutes *logos*, which in turn constitutes the

meaning of the interpretative. Meaning is co-constituted in the active dialogue of interpretation ultimately allowing for no final significance other than the one negotiated and renegotiated in the next moments of its history/evolution. In this sense, our inquiry should focus on the way our meaning-making practices, our ways of interpreting various texts (throughout a historical process), *materializes our own selves*.

The above becomes evident when reading the Talmudic story. Clearly the story could have been rendered otherwise, but the choice of the Talmudic editors point at their preference to emphasize two intermingled levels of interpretation. The first level is the interpretation of the Jewish law concerning a specific case. The second level is an *interpretation of the interpretation process*. These are the communicative and the meta-communicative levels Bateson saw as necessary and complementary aspects of any communication process (Bateson, 1973). The relation between the levels is recursive. Not the empirical, nor the ideal, nor the interpretative will do. The sages' decision is based on a scholarly consensus that receives its authority from the interpretative framework God instructed the sages to use. The validity of the interpretation is derived from a given interpretative framework (the whole). At the same time, the interpretative framework receives its power from the community (the sages) who adopt it as their interpretative framework! This is the point at which the notion of the Hermeneutic circle, the *ourobouros* (the legendary snake that bites its own tail), and many other forms of circularity and recursion come to mind.

Why, however, should we bother ourselves with those ancient conceptions of interpretation or with strange Talmudic stories? The answer is very simple. If we would like to understand re-search in the humanities and the social sciences in general and in psychology in particular, we cannot consider people as objects that can be easily manipulated by human or other external factors as traditionally implied by modern western perspectives.

However, and this is our main argument, if we adopt the Talmudic perspective then we may reach both theoretically surprising and practically relevant conclusions. The Talmudic perspective suggests that people are not independent variables or passive objects but active individuals who constitute their identity and are being constituted by their identity through *interpretation* and *meta-interpretation*, these being *constitutive of each other*. In other words, they are all co-participants in processes in which they become constitutive of, and at the same time are constituted by, the identities at play in the socio-historical trajectory within which the actual drama evolves.

If we adopt the Talmudic perspective for studying people in social psychological research, we conceive a unit of analysis we designate *processual-plurality*: its operationalization implies questioning how individuals within a process move between the two complementary levels of interpretation, and how this movement constitutes their unique form of being-in-the-world. We posit that adopting this notion implies that the dynamic and the struggle of interpretation and meta-interpretation should guide our quest.

4. Conclusions

Earlier social psychological theorizing, by reconnecting with the old rhetorical tradition (Billig, 1987) has already helped move social psychological speculations on thinking and cognition into a wider socio-historical context (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), in which discursive activity, in the form of opinion-giving and argumentation, takes center stage. These developments have been central to liberating traditional psychological approaches from their mechanical understanding of human thinking as information processing and the following of cognitive rules (Harré, 2001). However present conceptualizations still fall short of overcoming the hegemony of experimental psychology strongly based in Eurocentric philosophical perspectives traditionally considered nothing but footnotes to Plato and, as such, strongly based on the mind-body dichotomy--the enlightened mind against the deceiving body.

Posturing that the world structured by humans is linguistic rather than cognitive does not liberate our thinking from the "knowing mind" (Newman & Holzman, 1997). Seeing people as argumentative creatures, whether Talmudic sages or British barristers, in itself does not make the difference (Neuman & Levi, 2003). Our work has tried to dispel the implicit Eurocentric assumptions that tend to constrain the ways in which we think about the relationships between the research and meaning-making. We have tried to overcome the conceptualization of these categories as independent and related through causality. We offer in exchange an emphasis on the dynamic process of meaning-making which constitutes, in its becoming, both the selves involved in its construction and itself as a non-replicable event. Indeed, there is nothing behind a text; its meaning is codependent with, and constrained by, the available resources and the historical boundaries of the stage on which it is enacted. We all share *response-ability* in concert. Re-searchers and their public audit each other in a playful interpretative game.

Diving into the past forgotten traditions and trying to bring them in dialogue with the contemporary ones, we have tried to offer new imaginings to current re-search in the social sciences in general and psychology in particular. We encourage others to plunge into their own local traditions and help revitalize re-search paradigms so as to overcome their present Eurocentrism. Needless to say, we do not mean to suggest that from now on, open inquiry needs to become nothing but a footnote to Talmudic arguments.

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