Language, Infinity, and the Search for Meaning in "The Library of Babel"

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The oldest cave paintings, located at El Castillo, are estimated to be roughly forty thousand years old. Compare this to modern agriculture which, at the earliest, is eleven thousand years old, and one will find that humans felt a need to express themselves through language before the need to feed themselves. This extraordinary, base desire to express oneself through writing is inherently coupled with an equal or exceeding desire to find meaning in language. The minute, yet all-important differences between the physical act of writing and the meaning of language are by no means easy to comprehend. Jorge Luis Borges says it best in his work “The Library of Babel”: “You who read me, are You sure of understanding my language?” (Borges 5). Through “The Library of Babel”, Borges creates a world where there is no human purpose outside of writing and language. On the surface, this makes for a tremendously fascinating story because of aspects such as the contemplation of the near-infinity of the library and, in turn, the near-infinity of unique books. However, as one digs deeper, one will find that by depriving his characters of all other purpose, Borges amplifies their need to find meaning in the “meaningless” writing contained in the books of the library. This amplification provides a basis for an undeniably engaging dialogue about the untapped potential of language. While it is true that humans have put together a copious number of credible languages, we have not even scratched the surface of what language has to offer. However, rather than tarry over the volume of their language, it is paramount that humans instead prioritize the substance within.

Before diving into the extensive number of complex implications concerning language in “The Library of Babel”, it is important for one to first garner a certain level of appreciation for the sheer volume of unique books in the library. In his book titled “The Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges’s Library of Babel”, William Goldbloom Bloch sets out to calculate just how extensive this library really is: “we conclude each book consists of 410 * 40 *
80 = 1,312,000 orthographic symbols; that is, we may consider a book as consisting of 1,312,000 slots to be filled with orthographic symbols ... 25 ways to fill one slot, 25 * 25 = \(25^2\) ways to fill two slots ... and so on for 1,312,000 slots. It follows immediately that there are \(25^{1,312,000}\) distinct books in the Library. That’s it” (Bloch 17). “That’s it” may seem sarcastic or slightly humorous if it is understood as a representation of the enormous number of books in the library. However, as Bloch communicates in the next paragraph, it is actually meant to refer to the simplicity of the calculation for, what seems like to most, an impossibly complex problem. So there, thanks to Bloch we now have an exact knowledge of how big the library is; or do we? Of course, a number as big as this one is simply impossible to fathom. While this is certainly true, it is possible to obtain a more physical representation that, although is still not simple by any means, will provide a reader with a broader understanding of the immensity of the library. Thankfully, Bloch completes this calculation as well:

Using a ruler shows that an average grain of sand is approximately one millimeter across. If we assume a cubical shape combined with a perfect packing, then we could fit approximately

\[10^3 \times 10^3 \times 10^3 = 10^9 = 1,000,000,000 = \text{one billion}\]

grain-of-sand books in a cubic meter. Multiplying by the size of the universe, we find that the universe holds only \(10^{81} \times 10^9 = 10^{90}\) such books. (Bloch 19).

By comparing each book to an individual grain of sand, one can begin to paint a picture of just how unfathomable this library is to humans. By doing a simple calculation based on Bloch’s math, one can see that our universe would need to be \(10^{1,834,007}\) times larger in order to contain every book (keep in mind that this calculation is done assuming that each book is the size of a single grain of sand). Finally, thanks to an imperfect physical representation of size, one can begin to grasp the impossible situation in which the librarians have been placed. However, the practically infinite space required to contain every book is accompanied by yet another practical infinity; namely, language.

There are a near-infinite number of ways to put together twenty-five characters into a book. This, in turn, means that there must be a near-infinite number of books contained in the library that are entirely full of gibberish. But does it really? If we focus solely on the English language, then the books that are considered gibberish simply mean nothing in English because the creators of English did not give meaning to those combinations of letters. Borges writes:

I cannot combine some characters

\[d\text{h}\text{e}\text{m}\text{r}\text{l}\text{c}\text{h}\text{d}\text{j}\]

which the divine Library has not foreseen and which in one of its secret tongues do not contain a terrible meaning. No one can articulate a syllable which is not filled with tenderness and fear, which
is not, in one of these languages, the powerful name of a god. To speak is to fall into tautology. (Borges 5).

It is essential to reiterate the narrator’s critical argument: “To speak is to fall into tautology.” By agreeing that there are an infinite number of possible languages, one must also agree that, for each possible combination of the twenty-five characters, there are an infinite number of languages in which that combination has an entirely different meaning. For example, in English we have the combination “sad”, however there is certainly potential for a language where the combination “sad” has the same meaning as the English combination “happy.” However, the majority of first-time readers, myself included, jump straight to the conclusion that the library is mostly full of nonsense.

Even Marcelo Gleiser, the Appleton Professor of Natural Philosophy and a professor of physics and astronomy at Dartmouth College, argues that the library is full of nonsense in his article titled “Borges, The Universe And The Infinite Library”: “[There are books] that make sense and completely absurd ones, works that group meaningless sequences of letters compiled into random arrangements with no purpose whatsoever” (Gleiser). To most readers, this may seem like a completely agreeable statement. However, somewhat comically, Gleiser himself contradicts his own statement just a few paragraphs later: “Can we ever fully understand something when we are not able to examine it as a whole? … the librarians try in vain to decipher the mysteries of their world, unaware that all they can acquire is a partial knowledge of reality” (Gleiser). How can Gleiser claim that he understands the library to be nonsensical when he cannot examine language as a whole? When, as an English speaker, he can only acquire a partial knowledge of language? This, essentially, is the basis for the argument that humans have not scratched the surface of language. Furthermore, this brings into question the creation of the library. Mainly, who could have possibly created such a library, full of an incomprehensible number of books, and for what purpose?

This might seem like an unanswerable question, but to those inhabiting the library, it is one that holds the answers to all their questions. Imagine for a moment that one being created the library in “The Library of Babel.” First, it created the infinite hexagonal-staircase structure. Next, it created every single book contained by the library and, finally, placed the humans inside. Why create such a definitively structured space that follows such concrete and unbreakable laws of organization, only to break the logical nature of the space by filling it with nonsense? The narrator of “The Library of Babel” writes of a group of librarians who agree that the language of the books is unknown to humans: “They admit that the inventors of this writing imitated the twenty-five natural symbols, but maintain that this application is accidental and that the books signify nothing in themselves. This dictum, we shall see, is not entirely fallacious” (Borges 2). The narrator indicates that this
way of thinking “is not entirely fallacious” because it is obvious that the librarians’ initial concession is true. That is, every book in the library is made up of the twenty-five natural symbols. However, the narrator seems to disagree with the latter part of their statement. This, of course, is because the narrator believes that the library was the product of some God: “the universe, with its elegant endowment of shelves, of enigmatical volumes, of inexhaustible stairways for the traveler and latrines for the seated librarian, can only be the work of a god” (Borges 2). By believing that the books are the product of a God, the narrator calls into question the original statement of the librarians. Namely, that “the books signify nothing in themselves.” Surely, the narrator believes, a God worth believing in would not torture men with an entire collection of seemingly infinite knowledge when, in actuality, the books have no significance. This too, is not an entirely flawed way of thinking. It seems only logical that a God would not create a trivial and nonsensical library.

The word “logical”, if read by someone who does not have any knowledge of the English language, would of course be judged as nonsense. This situation is no different from the phrase “dhemrlchtjd” when read by any human. In this sense, then, is not all language nonsensical? Every possible combination of letters is meaningless to someone. This is certainly true of the books contained in the library in relation to humans. Humans cannot comprehend a substantial percentage of the books, and any meaning that they claim to find has been fabricated by their own language, making it purely coincidental. This proves the librarians’ earlier statement about the “accidental” meaning found in the books. Many may find this to be the most bothersome characteristic of “The Library of Babel.” It seems a rather simple deduction that the library, to humans, is full of nonsense. Why then, do many humans insist on searching for meaning in those books when they have their own language to explore? The narrator has found solace by looking toward his understanding of his own language, rather than enslaving himself to a pointless search for meaning in the library. However, it is the belief of Jonathon Basile, creator of the Library of Babel website, that the so-called “nonsense” contained in the library is not actually meaningless after all. A true appreciation of Basile’s argument can only be achieved after reading the argument in its entirety:

There is no such thing as meaninglessness, in other words, and not a single volume or even a single line of text worthy of condemnation in the near-infinite library. According to the theory of language with which we began, a speaker’s intentions can never secure a univocal meaning for his utterance: the possibility for those same signs to appear in new contexts, animated by different intentions or none at all, is as limitless as the library itself. The result is not that language loses all meaning but that it constantly gains more, as even the
unprecedented combinations of its atoms, the letters, wait patiently for the discovery or invention of the language in which they will be the names of new gods. (Basile).

Basile asserts that the hopeless depth of infinite language does not strip human language of its meaning. Rather, the languages we have created, specifically the letters, are waiting to be used in new ways, not yet imagined by humans. Perhaps then, the focus should not rest solely on the works contained in the library, rather the question should be: How does our writing compare to the writing in the books of the library? In relation to “The Library of Babel”, how does the writing held in the preexisting books of the library compare to the writing done by the librarians?

It is apparent by now that human language does not even come close to its full potential. If our language is so miniscule, so insignificant, why do we write? The narrator has this to say about his own writing: “The methodical task of writing distracts me from the present state of men. The certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms. I know of districts in which the young men prostrate themselves before books and kiss their pages in a barbarous manner, but they do not know how to decipher a single letter” (Borges 5). In an indirect way, these few lines perfectly encapsulate the reason we write. The narrator explicitly states that, for him, writing is a way of distracting himself from the state of men. For him, writing is an escape from reality, no matter how temporary. While it is true that we cannot relate to the universe the narrator finds himself a part of, everyone can relate to needing an escape from reality. Whether this escape comes as a result of sports, video games, or hanging out with friends, everyone needs an escape at some point. For many, this escape comes from writing and, for humans, that is all the reason we need.

Up to a point, the volume of our language is of little significance. It is what we gain from the essence of our language that makes all the difference. At the end of “The Library of Babel” the task of writing comforts the narrator, whereas he observes others constantly losing sanity over the search for meaning in the library. The narrator even notes: “I believe I have mentioned suicides, more and more frequent with the years” (Borges 5). Trying to find meaning in the meaningless is a plague that literally kills many of the librarians in the story. Perhaps if they had looked toward their own understanding, rather than searching for more, they could have found the meaning they so desired. “The Library of Babel” begins with the epigraph: “By this art you may contemplate the variations of the 23 letters...” (Borges 1). A fitting beginning to the story, this epigraph propels the reader into an expansive exploration of the marvel that is language.
Works Cited


