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A bundle of 41 essays

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Unintended collisions

when inner dialogues turn into data.

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Category: Aspects of philosophical and societal impact

In an era featuring an unprecedented range of options to express one's inner thoughts, the notorious trial of Dutch nurse Lucia de Berk – receiving broad media coverage during the early 2000s – still has scientific relevance. This essay focuses on its particular significance for the phenomenon of privacy, or more specifically: the protection of inner dialogue as private matter.

In four consecutive cases Lucia de Berk was convicted for multiple murder and attempted murder of patients in hospitals where she had worked, initially receiving both a life sentence and compulsory

the omission of words that would have rendered them less enigmatic – turned out to be very unfortunate, as the prosecution interpreted them as evidence confirming their multiple murder narrative.

“Arguably the most intimate of conversations.”

Lucia's personal writings suddenly became suspect: her inner thoughts – whether fact or fiction – that had materialized into texts, were now considered to be valuable data. When Lucia's daughter was asked to explain why her mother had written these cryptic manuscripts, her answer was deceptively simple: Lucia's diary was never meant to be read by anyone but herself.

psychiatric treatment. After spending more than six years in prison, her case was reopened, and due to newly discovered exculpatory evidence De Berk was released from jail. Two years later the former nurse was exonerated of all charges, making her trial one of the most severe miscarriages of justice in recent Dutch history.

De Berk apparently kept her diary for a reason that many others do: to correspond with the self. In this distinctively private type of correspondence – in which sender and addressee are one and the same – communications can be quite indirect and still transfer 'clear' meaning. Moreover, in this particular type of correspondence, 'storing' inner dialogue in written text can serve many purposes: the exploration of fantasies being one of them.

Lucia de Berk's case had been controversial from the outset because of the prosecution's fragile construction of indirect evidence: an amalgam of debatable interpretations of medical data, conclusions derived from statistics (!), and personal writings such as excerpts from Lucia's diary, which will be our main concern here. As it turned out, police investigations into her personal life had 'revealed' that De Berk was a productive diarist, who allegedly liked reading Tarot cards and Stephen King novels.

When expressed inner dialogues are viewed upon as data, something crucial happens: they instantly gain in credibility and turn into raw material for interpretation. The conversation with the self is pulled towards a force that renders both its content and participants defenseless: the assumption that all expressed considerations are possibly connected to the author's behavior in the physical world. Through privacy, the inner dialogue – arguably the most intimate of conversations – is protected from that, against which it cannot defend itself: an unintended collision with reality.

Amongst the many words and sentences that Lucia confided to her diary were a certain amount of ambiguous phrases such as: 'a great secret' and 'admitted to my compulsion'. These phrases' particular choice of words – and more importantly: