

THINKING TIME BEYOND PHILOSOPHY: ON WIDDER'S NONSENSE OF TIME

John Mullarkey

Richard Rorty once described Henri Bergson's process philosophy as little more than just 'whooshing about a bit'.¹ In one respect, he might have had a point, in as much as this 'whooshing' could be seen as an embodied, affective understanding of a process that thwarts representation. Indeed, process may well make more sense when it is enacted as an immanent movement rather than when it is seen as a representation of an object. Yet the problem of time for philosophy has, nonetheless, primarily been precisely in terms of a *representation of time* (rather than its embodiment). According to Parmenides, for example, only an immutable, immobile Being could explain the *illusion* (or false representation) of becoming. This need to find the condition for time, often understood as unsupported change (or 'substance'), can also be seen, however, as a problem more for philosophy than for time itself. It may be that the anathema of *unconditioned* becoming says more about philosophers' knowledge, about the conditions of epistemic respectability, than anything else. In Book XI of his *Confessions*, St Augustine famously wrote: 'What then is time? If no one asks me, I know, if I want to explain it to someone who asks, I do not know'.² From this one might ask whether the problem of time really is only a problem of knowledge, specifically, the philosopher's model of knowledge as *eternal sense*. In Nathan Widder's work, by contrast, I believe that one can see an instance of a non-sense of time that actually subverts such a need for philosophical rationality (though it may not be an instance that Widder himself would recognise in these terms).

Certainly, a whole line of modern philosophers have argued that the only way to understand time is through some timeless element. In particular, there are those philosophers of time called 'detensers' in virtue of the fact that they deny that the processual tenses of pastness, presentness and futurity are real aspects of time.³ Despite appearances to the contrary (for many take him to be a process philosopher in the mould of Bergson), parts of Gilles Deleuze's writings reveal him to be one such detenser. In his book *Difference and Repetition*, for example, Deleuze talks of the paradox of the present as the need for a time in which to constitute or synthesise time (as the succession of past, present, and future): '*there must be another time in which the first synthesis of time can occur*'.⁴ This time, moreover, cannot be time understood as succession, as change or tensed, for this would just bring us back to the question of how and where such a time was constituted, how did it flow. Rather, it is empty, the time of

eternity—what Deleuze calls the Virtual or *Aion*.

And here we come back to knowledge and the needs of philosophy again. For Deleuze, it is a *principle of sufficient reason* that demands that there be an ‘implicit’ or virtual domain to make the present pass: for there to be change, there must be a *principle of change*.⁵ But what if the whole question of ‘support’ was wrong? What if the ‘support’ for time was always *itself*, always its own *immanent enactment*? So, faced by the paradox of representing time as change (which we might call ‘Augustine’s problem’), philosophers can either posit some timeless ground that will facilitate its comprehension, its sense, or they can forward a new idea of what it means to comprehend time, a new logic of time. It is the latter that I can see at work (implicitly if not explicitly) in Nathan Widder’s recent book, *Reflections on Time and Politics*. Yet this counter-reading will involve a certain revision of what we mean by philosophical knowledge, one that approximates a logic of non-understanding, of not knowing, of not making *sense* of time. Moreover, in Widder’s case, it will be a *Deleuzian* logic that, ironically, counters even Deleuze’s own enterprise of founding time on *Aion*. Indeed, Widder uses Deleuze’s logic of non-sense in such a way that it goes against his need for a sufficient rationality of time. Widder proposes a Deleuzian ‘ontology of sense’ that involves nonsense. This idea of nonsense, he argues, should not be seen as dialectical contradiction, for that would be too abstract, and not *ontological* enough. Something beyond Hegelian contradiction is required: a ‘Sense’ of non-sense that is understood through a *differential* logic.⁶ Such ‘Sense’ goes beyond subject and predicate logic, being a sense that is ‘also nonsense’, for its identity is one of self-differentiation (the becoming that comes with paradoxes of self-reference, as in Russell’s famous Barber paradox). In this respect, a paradox brings *too much sense*, being a nonsense that keeps *making sense* only by creating new types of sense (just as Russell’s paradox was solved through a theory of types of meaning). As such, the Sense and nonsense of time are not opposites, but rather both ‘oppose the absence of sense’.

So far, so Deleuzian, one might say. Yet Widder’s Deleuzian non-sense can actually be seen to run counter to Deleuze’s principle of sufficient reason as regards time, for what is *Aion* or the Virtual if not an attempt to make time rational, intelligible (albeit not through substance or structure, but through philosophical reason itself)? A non-sense of time leads to time being self-sufficient *in its temporality* (rather than atemporality): we understand it not by thinking it, but by enacting it, by *actually* ‘whooshing about a bit’ (and everything else that this condescending phrase might indicate). The question that remains for Widder, however, is whether he remains too much of a Deleuzian (and so a philosopher) to see how his Deleuzian logic of nonsense thwarts the Deleuzian logic of a need for a (Virtual) support of time.

John Mullarkey is Lecturer at the University of Dundee, and the author of, most recently, *Post-Continental Philosophy*. He has published widely on Bergson, and is a collaborating editor of *Annales bergsoniennes*.

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NOTES

1. Rorty, Richard, 'Comments on Dennett', in *Synthese*, Vol. LIII (1982), 182.
2. Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford Paperbacks, 2008, book XI.
3. Smith, Quentin 'The Infinite Regress of Temporal Attributions', in L. Nathan Oaklander and Quentin Smith, eds., *The New Theory of Time*, Yale University Press, 1994, p.180.
4. Deleuze, Gilles, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, Athlone Press, 1994, p.79.
5. See Deleuze, Gilles, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley, Athlone Press, 1993, 41-3.
6. See *Reflections on Time and Politics*, p.34, p.36. Later in the same work, we read: contra Hegel's abstractionism ('the real is the rational, and the rational the real'): 'sense must present itself in the movement from the empirical to the conceptual and back'. (p.37)