

## THE FORKING PATHWAYS BORGES (ET CETERI) ON TIME (ET CETERA)

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(revised 2022.12)

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### *TIME*

*is the substance  
of which I am made.*

*Time is a river,  
which bears me  
- but I myself am the river.*

*It is a tiger,  
which rips me apart  
- but I myself am the tiger.*

*It is a fire,  
burning me up.*

*- but I myself am the fire.  
The world, unfortunately, is real, and,  
unfortunately, I am BORGES.*

*J.L. Borges, 1946.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Borges was not only a respected poet, he was also a profound thinker. His literary production shows a veritable cornucopia of subtle refinery and intellectual sophistication. He was not a philosopher in the academic sense, but he was well informed of the entire philosophical tradition, a fact witnessed by his works that are often inspired by funny metaphysical and theological ideas. His thinking often veers in unexpected directions: old caprices are elucidated in new and interesting ways, or trite conceptions are given a surprising twist. His artistry manifests itself in a unique ability to wrench the reader out of commonplaces and lead him upwards to soaring heights so dizzying that an eagle's eye is needed to recognize the familiar traits of existence (NB: Borges was blind!).

In what follows, I will direct my attention to Borges' ideas about time. Speculations about the notion of time, and about its (un-)reality and characteristics, figure prominently in his numerous short stories and essays. The philosophizing poet ascribes to the temporal dimension of reality a fundamental importance for human existence. At the same time, he is fascinated by the ephemeral nature of time that hides it from our senses.

Man Time World

## 2. BORGES, AND THE (UN-)REALITY OF TIME

Borges' anthology: *The Jackal*, published in 1983, includes two texts treating time. These texts antithetically shed light on each other; the first apparently refutes that which the second apparently accepts: the reality of time. A common denominator is found in the recognition of the problem of time as the foremost philosophical question, the point being that, basically, the question of time is identical to the question of the human mind. Understood thus, the problem of time constitutes the true point of contact between two central philosophical disciplines: metaphysics and psychology.

*Gnothi seauthón*: "Know thyself!", admonished the Delphic oracle, an exhortation which Socrates, the great existential thinker of antiquity, made a mission of for himself. *In te, anime meus, tempora metior*: "In thee, my soul, I measure time", was the answer given by St. Augustine, *Confessiones, liber xi*, who ended up by endorsing the Socratic *docta ignorantia*, confessing himself to the ultimate mystery. The best man can hope for is to come to know his own ignorance. Only God can solve the Sphinx's riddle.

Like Socrates and Augustine, Borges too was consumed by the desire to behold the truth about his own existence, but somehow his excitement is less ardent than theirs. Having abandoned his belief in truth, he always knows the answer in advance. His reader admittedly feels the whirring of spiritual wings, but it is difficult to determine in which direction his wings are carrying him: where is his starting point, where is his destination? It is as if his poetic light is more like darkness. Borges, the poet, is indefatigable in his efforts to lead us towards the loftiest heights, but before we arrive, he disappears from the scene, his voice leaving only a frustrating echo. Most of all, he seems reminiscent of "a god who creates first cosmos and then chaos" in the manner of Homer, his main figure in the tale of "The Immortal" from the collection of stories named *Aleph*.

In other words: one should not expect Borges to provide final solutions or, rather, one should be aware of the fact that the solutions he does provide are *legio*, but that none of them are final in any sense other than *ficciones*. Let us consider, e.g., his lecture "El tiempo" from 1980 in which it is provisionally maintained that time, unlike space, cannot be thought away. The justification for this is a double one: human consciousness unfolds itself in time, not in space; and, according to the *cogito* principle of Descartes: as a thinking consciousness it is unable to think oneself away.

As pointed out by Descartes, cogitation and extension are so altogether different that they can have only one feature in common, viz., pure existence, temporal continuity, or duration, in one word: *time*. As an illustration of the possibility of a purely temporal, i.e., non-spatial, world, Borges emphasized music. In this context it is natural to recall the work of the deaf Beethoven: what inner life, what world of silent tones! Considered thus, time is an aspect of mind, co-existing with the self, and superior to space.

Although Borges did not believe that an answer to the problem of time will ever be found, he regarded it as worthwhile to ponder the philosophical attempts that are made in the quest of its solution. Plato's proposal, the oldest one of its kind, which was later taken up and further developed by Plotin and Augustine, is also the most beautiful.

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According to Plato, time should be comprehended as "a moving image of eternity". Eternity, "this wondrous invention" (Borges), wished to see itself mirrored in an infinite multitude of things; this could not occur all at once, but only from one instant to the next, i.e., in time. Hence time and world were created together. Time is "a gift of eternity" (Blake), because it enables us to live one day after another. Piece by piece, we can take part in everything; but eternity in its entirety is too much, an unbearable burden to man. One who beholds God himself, face to face, is crushed, overpowered, and annihilated. Borges, the mystic, however, declines to be interpreted religiously.

What, then, is eternity? Being time-bound creatures, we are compelled to imagine time as being pieced together of all of the past, all of the present, and all of the future. But, in fact: these three conjugations are all present as manifestations of the immediate, Borges insists. The future being the impending present, and the past being the retiring present, only the now is actually present. However, as duration, the present is never totally present, since every duration has both a beginning and an end; while the end is already impending, the beginning is already receding. But if the present is thought of as non-durational suddenness, it naturally does not participate in time at all.

These arguments have been adapted from antiquity's sceptic, Sextus Empiricus. In this way, the reality of time is transformed to illusion, as Borges insists in his story "Nueva refutacion del tiempo" from 1952. However, he held his ultimate victory to be an argument invented by himself, based on a consistent rethinking of the idealism of the empiricist philosophers Berkeley and Hume. To the idealist, reality consists of a flow of sensory impressions, connected only by their temporal order. Why, and with what right, after all, do we maintain that time constitutes a linear continuum?

Borges, maybe unwittingly, reached the same conclusion, and the same outcome, as did Russell. Russell referred to his thinking as "neutral monism", or "logical atomism". According to this philosophy, the world is a mess of sensed data, of neutral experiences, which, being neither subjective, nor objective, possess no real substantiality whatsoever, and which are wholly devoid of immanent structure, spatial or temporal. The most crucial difference between Russell and Borges is that Russell seemed to be committed to modern physics (more precisely, Minkowski's dogma of a 4-dimensional spacetime amalgam), whereas Borges was far less impressed by science's presumed conquests, and therefore felt himself free to follow his own poetic imagination and fancies.

Thus Borges "transcended" both the Newtonian and the Einsteinian idea of time. With idealistic arguments, he felt able to refute idealism's infinite temporal succession. If time is a mental process, how is it shared by thousands of human beings, or just two? Every perceived moment is real, existing on its own. The totality of time is a phantasm. Does not the repetition of a single moment suffice to destroy time as a linear series? Every now in which something occurs is in itself an entire temporal succession.

Time simply does not exist beyond the present moment. The very moment when Chuang Tzu is dreaming that he is a butterfly flying freely in the air, knowing nothing of Chuang Tzu, that very moment is his whole reality. "I have heard that the present,

i.e., the 'specious present' of the psychologists, lasts between some few seconds and some tiny fraction of a second. So long does also the entire history of the universe last"! To Bishop Berkeley God was the omnipresent spectator whose work it was to make the universe cohere as a unified totality. Borges seems to prefer Buddhism which allows the world to be annihilated and restored 6.500.000.000 times a day!

*Panta rhei*, everything flows. This statement could easily be ascribed to Borges who, just like Heraclitus, held that to bathe twice in the same river is an impossibility. Not only the river, but also the bather, has changed. To put it otherwise, not only time, but also the human soul, can be likened to an incessant flux. Borges was extremely fond of referring to the metaphor of the flowing river, and he relished immersing himself in the paradoxes of its interpretation. But, applied to time, the metaphor is ambiguous, as the flow seems to have two possible directions, because we are free to choose whether we prefer to say that what happens is passing from the future *via* the present towards the past, or whether we prefer to say that our consciousness is passing from the past *via* the present towards the future: both choices are equally possible as interpretations.

We may recall Huckleberry Finn, who in an evanescent dreamlike moment rocks on his raft in the hazy dusk embracing Mississippi, every directional indication seeming to disappear. His disorientation is total, and his resignation correspondingly phlegmatic. But one does not dare to trust the transitory, never-to-be-repeated quality of the event for the reason that "a single bath in the river of immortality" will suffice to refute Heraclitus. Disposing of endless aions of time, a human being might experience everything more than once, even an infinity of times, and time would be transformed to a mill whose grinding would destroy every difference between good and bad: all values would lose their significance in "infinity's hall of mirrors". Only the troglodytes would survive!

Borges eagerly cultivated the strange humour of horror, as evidenced, e.g., in the phantastic account of "Tlön, Ukbar and Orbis Tertius" from the collection *Ficciones*, where he describes the history of an unknown planet. Its population are born idealists, and this tale can be comprehended as a parody on that very interpretation of reality which so fascinated Borges and which, apparently, it was so hard for him to renounce. The idealism of the planet's natives extends so far as to express itself in their language, which is formally devoid of nouns, admitting only verbs and their modifications.

Since material objects in this universe are not inherent and primitive, but derived, Borges can pretend that they multiply themselves as so-called "hrönir". As the identity of these objects is so very precarious, it is possible for particularly inventive individuals to revise the past which, therefore, assumes the same flexible character as the future. The reader's patience is rewarded by a sinister creepy sensation when it is revealed that the laborious midgets of conspiracy continue their work, that reality is about to collapse, and that the present world is slowly, but inevitably, being transformed to Tlön ...

Borges' secret society for the dissemination of fictions about strange alien worlds count as its members both the alchemist Johann Valentin Andreae and the metaphysician George Berkeley - but, surprisingly, not the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg ...

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### 3. THE GARDEN WITH THE FORKED PATHS

The tale of Ts'ui Pen's labyrinth, "The garden with the forked paths", which like the previous story appeared in the *Ficciones*, appears at first glance to be even more sinister: "I envisage that for each passing day humanity will embark upon ever more frightening endeavors until at last only soldiers and bandits will remain".

The crux of the story is the tale of a wise man, Ts'ui Pen, who wished to construe a labyrinth, but who instead chose to compose a demented novel, rampant with bizarre contradictions manifesting themselves in the fact, that the novel feigns a world wherein literally everything is happening, because all possibilities are being realized concurrently. Hence, the labyrinth emerges as an imaginary "multiverse", and the paths of this strange garden depict a network of mutually antagonistic courses of events, whereby the garden becomes an image of a world-course which branches out at every instant.

Some acquaintance with Leibniz's ideas about possible worlds is advantageous in understanding Borges' message in this incredible fiction. Leibniz, as we know, defended himself against the nightmare of determinism by introducing a modal distinction based on the idea of entire world-courses, universes, defined as maximum sets of mutually consistent statements (statements about the monads participating in the world process). From the infinity of possible worlds, which constitute the contents of divine *omniscience*, he distinguished the one and only actual world, understood as the manifestation of divine *omnipotence*. The compatibility of providence and freedom he then attempted to explain by the invocation of divine *benevolence* as its primary and original impulse.

What makes the tale of "the garden with the forked paths" so riveting is its image of the ensemble of all possibilities, as represented by the set of all possible garden paths, and this even at a time when "possible worlds" semantics had not yet ripened historically. The concept of possible worlds, described as maximally consistent sets of propositions, has today gained a firm stand within logic, first in modal, since in temporal, logic.

The final theme which I want to discuss in this review of Borges' notion of time is the problem of history itself, as it is raised in the strange tale of "The Other Death", from the collection *Aleph*. Inspired by Dante's *Divina Commedia*, *canto xxi*, one of his most humorous canti, Borges had studied a theological treatise: *De Divina Omnipotentia*, by Pier Damiani (whom Dante locates on Uranus, the place reserved for holy hermits), and, in all probability, Borges must have amused himself very much by this reading: Pier, by defending that, if only a fallen woman repents, God in His mercy, by exerting his omnipotence, is able to restore her lost virginity, regardless of how often she has sinned, shows himself to be a true devotee of the holy simplicity, *sancta simplicitas*.

The basic principle in this story involves omnipotence's ability to modify the past. Borges, in his tale of "The Other Death", portrays a mestiz named Pedro Damian who, on his deathbed, after having repented his cowardly behavior during a certain battle, is granted the possibility of reliving the battle so vividly that he, after having performed heroically, is shot in the chest and dies. Thus Pedro Damian died in 1946 during a battle that took place in 1904, every trace of his previous shame being now obliterated!

We are accustomed to warrant that: "What is done is done, and cannot be altered". But maybe this is not worthy of credence? Is it conceivable that God is able to tamper with the irrevocable character of the past? Is it after all possible to revise the work of creation so fundamentally that that which has happened can be undone, not only "as if", or pretendedly, undone, but truly, in fact? This question has many ramifications.

Kierkegaard, in fact, discussed the same problem in his *Philosophical Fragments*: "Is the past more necessary than that which is impending?", and: "In its becoming real, does the possible become more necessary than it was?". His answer was a definite: 'No!' The immediate incentive to these considerations was provided by Hegel who, in his philosophy of history, had proposed the controversial idea of an inherent necessity that, due to a "cunning of reason", intervenes as determining factor in the course of history. Kierkegaard, in his criticism of Hegel, appears to agree with Damianus, and so seems to disagree with the Diodorian-Leibnizian principle of the irrevocability of the past.

As regards Damianus, who seems to be just as naive as he is humble, the question is ultimately revealed to pertain to history, his example being the establishment of Rome. The Romans, as we know, calculated their calendar *ab urbe condita*, and thus the entire historical chronology is at stake. Concerning God, Damianus claims that he is co-eternal with his own omnipotence, and that his infinite wisdom incorporates all times: he can neither experience anything new, nor can he lose his knowledge by forgetfulness.

From the acknowledged fact that God created a world wherein he realized the establishment of Rome, we conclude (presupposing his free will) that he could just as easily have created a world without Rome. But Damianus, referring to the fact that his omnipotence is eternal, claims further that "could", when interpreted in omnipotence's own language, as manifested in the divine word of creation, is synonymous with "can". Hence, according to Damianus, this proposition is true: God can effectuate that Rome - established in antiquity, as we know - was not established in antiquity after all!

In order to debunk this "hocus pocus" (at first a vulgar imitation of the eucharistic: *Hoc est corpus*) it is mandatory to realize that every contrafactual assumption, i.e., every conceivable change of the actual course of events, implies antecedents and consequences that extend towards infinity. Thus the assumption supposes an alternative world time, i.e., another possible universe; and the assertion that God can create a new world which is different from this one is, logically, not quite as sensational as the assertion that he can undo what has happened. So I think there are valid reasons for accepting the Diodorian-Leibnizian principle of an irrevocable past as a constituent of any possible world.

If my assumption holds good, it makes no sense to use a possible-world semantics to interpret a logical system, unless this system is capable of legitimizing a thesis which is semantically equivalent to the principle in question - for example, the following thesis: "The past is unpreventable" or, more precise, "Everything that is true about the past is inevitably true, i.e., true for all future". This thesis is reasonable since, if the notion of world lacks it, it is incoherent, more like a notion of chaos than one of cosmos.

The only circumstance that might possibly invalidate the thesis would be an event which could make the past future and the future past, an event which, in other words, could reverse the direction of time, causing time to move "backwards", as compared to the "earlier" direction of time. But the idea of a world-time suddenly going backwards is, to put it mildly, fanciful and might best be diagnosed as a "psychic anomaly".

In any case, Borges' hypothesis in the novel just discussed seems to be deficient, because its status seems neither ontological nor chronological but, rather, psychological. I am well aware of the fact that the notion of "backwards time" has been put forward by such illustrious thinkers as Plato and the mathematician Gödel. But, firstly, I believe that Plato meant this myth to be taken *cum grano salis*, and, secondly, I regard Gödel's world to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of an uncritical use of general-relativistic methods.

To this can be added that Gödel, clearly, could not predict the developments which have taken place within temporal logic in the last century. In summary, I believe the idea of a "backwards time", in spite of its defence by Jan Faye, is better left to psychology. This conclusion, and here I abandon Borges, can be used to shed new light upon one of the basic problems of the philosophy of history and historical theory.

#### 4. HISTORY, AND THE (UN-)REALITY OF THE PAST

In this connection, I want to quote P. Gardiner [1961]: "Past events have caused philosophers worry, although the remedies they have proposed as cures for this worry have, as so often, proved worse than the disease. For they have ended by producing theories of the past which amount to a denial of the legitimacy of speaking of past events at all, and which destroy the validity of the assumptions they set out to justify. In what sense can I be said to know an event which is in principle unobservable, having vanished behind the mysterious frontier dividing the present from the past? How can we be sure that anything ever really happened in the past at all, and that the whole story is not an elaborate fabrication, as untrustworthy as a dream or a work of fiction?"

So the philosophical problem turns out to be this: Truth is traditionally defined by correspondence between an object and our subjective perception of it, between the thing and our thought, in agreement with the scholastic formula: *adaequatio intellectus et rei*. But how can the perception of historians correspond to something that no longer exists, i.e., a non-existent reality? How does such reality differ from a pure illusion?

As Gardiner [1961] says, philosophers have proposed the most strange solutions to this problem; the most extreme of these being maybe that formulated by M. Oakeshott, cf. Collingwood [1946]: "History, because it is experience, is present ..; but being history, the formulation of experience .. *sub specie praeteritorum*, it is the continuous assertion of a past which is not past and of a present which is not present", which is nonsense.

But, in a brighter moment, Oakeshott expressed himself somewhat more soberly: The past is only open for our knowledge in so far as it makes itself known in our present experience. Consequently, the classical expression: "wie es eigentlich gewesen" (Ranke), should be replaced by another formula: "what the sources oblige us to believe".

Some similar viewpoints have been expressed by B. Croce and R.G. Collingwood. According to Croce, history is simply "simultaneous to us" in the sense that it "represents the consciousness of our present acts". According to Collingwood, moreover, history is synonymous to the "re-enactment of past experience"; thus he finds the criterion for the truth of history in the *Idea of History*, i.e., the "idea of an imaginary picture of the past"; an idea he claims to be "innate" in the sense of being *a priori* to historical science.

However, Gardiner opines that, in these authoritative declarations, one may detect an irrational hostility towards the past, based on the reason that the past is not the present; so he argues against using spatial metaphors such as "the past is spread before our eyes", since they beguile us into committing what he has termed "the time machine fallacy".

This error arises if we believe that past actions and events, although non-existent, nevertheless "subsist" as an independent "reality" in some imaginary, or "virtual", world. Thus historians are deluded to believe that, if only they could be informed of this world, everything would be all right. Unfortunately, such revelations are relatively rare.

None of these thinkers were fools. But there are indications that, in the course of their grappling with these difficult questions of existence, they have produced arguments that are all too easily misleading. How do we best avoid all these pitfalls and errors? A.O. Lovejoy, America's "grand old man" of the history of ideas, has offered a proposal that he hopes may resolve the difficulties; thus he writes, cf. Meyerhoff [1959]:

*"I conclude that the consequences sometimes drawn with respect to historiography from the 'presentcentric predicament' are inadmissible. The predicament .. is a fact, but it is a predicament of all knowing at every instant at which a knowing can occur ...*

*The primary objects of the historian's inquiry are "a set of events irrevocably there in the past", having their own properties and relations in their own times, which it is his first business to endeavour to ascertain. In so far as philosophers say .. that this is not his first business, they tend to undermine his morals as a historian".*

This suggestion, in all its simplicity, is alluringly trustworthy. But, does it resolve our difficulties, after all? Rather than referring us to the present, it acknowledges the past in its own right, and this is acceptable. But only up to a point. Its disadvantage is that it bestows too much glory upon the past.

The postulate of the reality of past events is inevitably misinterpreted ontologically in the direction of an illegitimate metaphysical hypostasis. We are still thwarted by the pitfalls of language. Lovejoy has just stated the "time machine fallacy" in a new variant. So, is it impossible to avoid scepticism?



## 5. CONCLUSION

As I see it, the solution is so close at hand that we only avoid seeing it because we are all the time stumbling over it. We cannot avoid confronting the question of truth; but we have perhaps stated our question erroneously. The difficulties arise because we try to derive truth from reality, and so we constantly search for some form of correspondence between two simultaneously existing entities: our thought and its object.

When applied to history, we must accustom ourselves to the fact that our thought will never become simultaneous to its object, simply because what we think of is past, departed, reality. That there is a set of events "irrevocably there in the past" is an illusion. On the other hand, our perception can both be, and persist to be, simultaneous, not with the reality of the past, but with the truth concerning the past. What characterizes this truth is to be found in *the correspondence between what we think about the past and the traces which the past has left behind in the present, i.e., in our still existing sources.*

In this way reality, meaning: *past reality, is seen to be something first emerging due to the acquisition of truth by human reason.* For reality is variable, whereas only truth perseveres. Thus it becomes ***evident that the concept of truth is more profound, and more comprehensive, than the concept of reality.*** Today's much acclaimed *realism*, whether naïve or reflected, is thereby unveiled to be nothing but *fiction*.

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