

Time as a metaphysical dilemma: Jose Luis Borges' treatment of the nature of time in his selected works

Tukumbeje Mposa
Mazambara High School
Masvingo, Zimbabwe
tuku.mchingadza@gmail.com

Abstract

The concept of time, which has been a major subject of study in various fields, defies a neat definition. Many scholars have failed to define it in a manner applicable to all fields. Generally, time can be defined as the unlimited continued progress of existence and events in the past, present and future, regarded as a whole. It is a measure in which events can be ordered from the past through the present into the future. Some schools of thought deny the existence of time. They argue that the present is undefined and indefinite; and the future has no reality except as present recollection. In some of his works, Jose Luis Borges (1899–1986) describes time in a linear manner, that is to say, that humans experience time as a series of present moments, one following the other. The past and the future both exist nowhere but in the human mind. Borges seems to agree with the notion that time is but a figment of the mind. In other stories, his perception of time is circular. Thus, the focus of the current article is on time, which is a metaphysical dilemma, and Borges' treatment of the nature of time in his selected works.

Keywords: circularity of time, figment of the mind, linear time, metaphysical dilemma

Introduction

Latin American literature consists of oral and written literature in several languages, particularly Spanish, Portuguese, and the indigenous languages of the Americas. It rose to particular prominence globally due to the literary movement known as magical realism. As Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes has noted, Jose Luis Borges (1899–1986) renovated twentieth century Latin American literary language and cleared the way for the new narrative styles of prose (Delbanco and Cheuse 2010, p. 517). Borges loved libraries and delighted in textual complexity. He was interested in questions about the nature of reality, personal identity, history and time. The major focus of the current article is time, which is a metaphysical dilemma, and Borges' treatment of the nature of time in his selected works. The concept of time has no meaning before the beginning of the universe. Hawking (1998) states

that St Augustine believed that time was a property of the universe that God created and that time did not exist before the beginning of the universe. For Borges the most compelling problem that human beings have ever faced is the contradiction of time that passes and the identity that endures (Johnson 2009). Borges believes that if the problem of time could be resolved, then any metaphysical dilemma could be resolved. He intimates that humans cannot do without the intuition of time for the problem of time touches humans more than any other metaphysical problem. Borges opines that time cannot be measured in days the way money is measured in pesos and centavos, because all pesos are equal, while every day, perhaps, every hour, is different (Juan Murana in *Brodie's report* in Hurley 1970). Time is not an entity; therefore, it cannot be measured. This is so simply because time does not exist. Clocks only measure the gaps between the occurrences of events (Jonnalagadda 2007). In this article, the author will discuss Borges' treatment of the nature of time in his various works.

Borges was a poet, a short story writer and an essayist. His philosophising on metaphysical dilemmas was due to his wide and extensive reading on literature. He was an avid reader who played around with various literary works in order to come up with his own fictitious stories. His interest in philosophy and religion enriched and shaped his works of fiction. Borges believed that the problem of time touches humans more than the other metaphysical problems because the others are abstract. According to Bartoloni (2010): "In order to unravel this pervasive and fundamental metaphysical problem for his own narratological purpose, Borges explores far and wide the extensive literature on time."

Borges sought to interrogate what other philosophers think about time in order to deduce his own conclusions. Like most Latin American writers, in his work Borges interweaves the fantastic with the real in a way that is almost believable to the reader. His fantastical stories tell of human efforts to achieve complete and orderly knowledge, efforts that must fail but nevertheless dissolve common beliefs and reveal the paradoxical nature of time among other abstract concepts. Some of his fantastical, mind-bending and imaginative works question the nature of time and these become the focus of the article. The present discussion on time as a metaphysical dilemma focuses on the irreverence of time, the river as an allegory of time, its constant change and its linearity or circularity. Textual examples will be drawn from Borges' works: *The secret miracle* (1944); *Heraclitus* (1969); *The garden of forking paths* (1941); *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (1962); and *A new refutation of time* (1944–1946).

Time, a constant change

Borges draws upon the river as a mystical symbol for the flow of time and eternity. In many cultures, rivers symbolise both eternity and constant change and have appeared in mythology as routes connected to the afterlife (Skiba 2001) <Not in References>. For Borges, time is a metaphysical dilemma that is "mysterious, relentless and unreal". In his poem, *Heraclitus*, published in his poetry collection, *In praise of darkness (Elogio de la sombra* 1969), Borges celebrates the river as the flow of time which goes on endlessly and drags everything with it. From this observation, it may be concluded that Borges seems to be implying that problems may come but with time they will be resolved. The river signifies eternity as it flows on forever and is usually too wide to be seen across. He opines that the river could symbolise the flow of time, never-ending yet always changing.

The title of the poem as well as the reference in the poem to the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, who famously compared the flow of time to the flow of the river, remarking, "You could not step twice into the same river, for other waters are ever flowing to you" (Cohen 2006). The moment you step into the same river, different waters flow, simply meaning that although you step into different water, the river remains the same. The idea that you cannot step into the same river twice is actually paradoxical in the sense that the river itself is the same river but the waters that make up the river are forever changing. Heraclitus is of the view that everything moves on and nothing is at rest, hence his comparison of existing things to the flow of a river. Cohen (2006) asserts that Plato thinks that Heraclitus uses the river as an example of what he takes to be a general condition: everything is like a river in this respect. This is to say that nothing retains its identity for any time at all and in fact that there are no persisting objects. Borges ponders this allegory of time as a river "whose source is unimaginable" and which "runs through sleep and through deserts, through cellars". A famous Borgesian quote reads:

Time is the substance from which I am made, time is a river which carries
Me along, but I am the river, it is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger,
It is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire
(www.goodreads.com/quotes/306296-tim).

Borges was fascinated by rivers which he believed were a symbol of eternity and infinite wisdom. For him, time is a river that drags everything along and carries him along as well.

Another great thinker, Ka no Chomei (AD 1153–1210) echoes Heraclitus' quote when he says, "the flow of the river is ceaseless and its water is never the same" (en.m.wikipedia.org/...Kamo_no_Chomei). From this quote and Borges' poem, it is the author's contention that time is ever flowing but it brings different burdens and problems to different people. The clock does not stop ticking for any individual, it is only that each moment brings new surprises for human beings. Life is constantly changing. Every day people lose something in order to gain something new. The source of time is unknown and is unimaginable but it continues to run through sleep, through deserts, through cellars and the question as to what time actually entails remains unanswered, "What web is this, of will be, is and was?" Borges equates time to a web, a maze or a labyrinth and this is well demonstrated in his story *The garden of forking paths* in which he presents the idea of forking paths through networks of time.

Heraclitus, a fierce critic of mankind, was the first philosopher to put the problem of change and order at the centre of his system (Kirk in Halsey 1969). He maintained that the physical world was a place constantly changing, and most of the change, he envisaged, was between opposites. For Heraclitus, differentiation contained an inner unity, for example, night and day which superficially appear to be utterly separate and opposed, actually form a single, underlying continuum by virtue of their unbroken succession (ibid). This is echoed in Borges' poem, *Heraclitus*:

Morning that once was dawn
Day that once was morning.
The crowded day that will become the weary evening (Skiba 2001, p. 586).

Morning, dawn, day and evening seem to be opposites but in a way they all make up one unity. It is just the concept of time presenting itself in different ways, demonstrating its nature of constant change.

The relevance of time

Borges questions the relevance of time in his works. How relevant is time to a person in great trouble, for instance, a person facing death? Given that time to fulfil one last wish is granted to an individual on his/her deathbed, will that time be of any significance to him/her? Borges asks all these and other questions regarding the relevance of time in his short story, *The secret miracle*. Borges interrogates the importance and relevance of time in this story about a man, Jaromir, who was sentenced to death by German firing squad in 1943 for being Jewish as well as for opposing Anschluss. He undergoes psychological extremes as he awaits his death in prison. Jaromir prays wistfully to God that he be granted one year to complete a labyrinthine dramatic work. He addresses himself to God:

If I exist at all, If I am not one of your repetitions and errata, I exist as the author of *The Enemies*, In order to bring this drama which may serve to justify, to justify You, I need one more year. Grant me that year, You to whom belong the centuries and all time (Hurley 1970, p. 364).

Here, Borges seems to be questioning the existence of humankind. Jaromir asks God to grant him that one year in order to glorify His name. He believes that everything belongs to God. Borges (ibid, p. 368) writes:

He had asked God for an entire year in which to finish his work: His omnipotence had granted him the time. For his sake, God projected a 'secret miracle' German lead would kill him, at the determined hour, but in his mind a year would elapse between the command to fire and its execution.

When Jaromir's wish is granted, he passes 'from perplexity to stupor, from stupor to resignation and from resignation to sudden gratitude'. God does grant him that final wish – a year of time just before he is supposed to die but the year exists only in his mind. In the fraction of a moment prior to his execution, "the physical universe came to a halt". Time and possibility expand into the discovery of a perfect final phrase. In his mind, he completes and polishes his play during the course of this metaphysical dilemma. This leads to the argument that time is but the figment of a person's imagination. Can it be true then that time is:

nothing more than the conjecture of the mind to make sense of the impinging reality of creation – a figment of collective human imagination which does not exist but has been collectively ratified to be ok and has a stamp approval from great thinkers? (Jonnalagadda 2007).

Time does not exist at all; it is only a figment of the collective human imagination. This argument has led many critics to deny the existence of time. They say that time exists nowhere but in the human mind. The year of still time given to Jaromir by God does not make the difference that he perhaps had hoped for, leaving the reader questioning the relevance of time. Borges seems to suggest that time may be granted to any individual but may not really change the circumstances they are in, thereby revealing its irrelevance. Despite being given time to complete his play, Jaromir dies before the firing squad.

As the condemned man is awaiting trial, he transcends into spiritual conversations via prayer which is rewarded accordingly with the year granted by his creator. This supernatural event of being granted the chance to finish his labyrinthine play is incorporated into the realistic narrative, leaving no room for the reader to question the improbability of such an event. Borges calls for the reader to forget rationalism and scientific reason in order to understand his fiction. The disruption of the natural order happens and then the natural order is restored as if nothing had happened. There is no explanation for all of this but then no one can question the veracity thereof. This disruption is widely known as magical realism but, for want of a better term, some critics call this Borgesian supernatural event “divine or spiritual realism” because of the intervention of God himself. Borges plays with this notion of time which is useless for it does not help Jaromir in his situation. Some consolation is given in that he at least is able to complete his play. For Borges the world is dependent on God, and it is He alone that may grant people all their wishes. The moment that God decides to stop thinking or dreaming about humans, then the world will cease to exist and there will no longer be eternity.

Borges discusses the theme of religion in *The secret miracle*. The story begins with an epigraph from the Quran, the Holy Book of Islam. Jaromir searches for God in a Catholic library and here Borges discusses the human being's quest to find exactly where God is located. The librarian asks Jaromir what he is looking for, to which he replies, “God”. The librarian tells him:

God is in one of the letters on one of the pages of one of the 400 000 volumes of the Clementine.
My fathers and fathers of my fathers have sought after it. I have gone blind looking for it. He removed his glasses and Hladik saw that his eyes were dead (Hurley 1970, p. 365).

The reference to Judaism, Islam and Catholicism shows us that Borges does not care much about the ways in which religions exclude one another, but rather about the ways in which they relate to each other (Shmoop University 2014b). By referencing Islam, Christianity and Judaism, he makes the protagonist's story universal, that is, his experience is not a Jewish one but a human one.

The author concludes that for Borges that time is indeed a fallacy for this is Jaromir's argument in his play. His own experiences in jail support this idea that time is an erroneous belief. It is a misleading notion that raises a person's hope but the moment the person has his/her hopes high, all hell breaks loose. This point refutes the one in which Borges believes that time as a river drags everything with it. In *The secret miracle*, the year of still time granted to the man facing death partly makes him realise his dream but at the same time does not grant him pardon from the firing squad.

The nature of time

One critic has claimed that it is very natural for people to think of time as a line running from the past to the future, with the past being the part of the line behind them while the future concerns the part that lies ahead of them. Borges describes time as linear meaning that humans experience time in a present series of experience, one following the other. However,

as soon as a moment is experienced, it ceases to exist. The existence of the past is no more real than that of the future. Both exist nowhere but in the human mind. The past belongs to the realm of the imagination. In many magical realist texts time is cyclical rather than linear. Time does not always move forward. There are great shifts in the narrative's time sequence that reflect a reality that is almost outside of time. Rogers (2002) posits that the great shifts in the narrative's time sequence account for ghosts and premonitions and that time is indeed a great repetition rather than a progression. The distant past is present in every moment. The future has already happened.

The garden of forking paths is a huge riddle or parable whose theme is time. Here, Borges is of two conflicting views that time is linear and it is circular. The story is devoted to a greater extent to creating a spatial metaphor for time. Put differently, Borges is trying to take an abstract, non-visual idea, namely time, and make a model for it. In fact, *The garden of forking paths* is a metaphor or a model to help envision the infinitely diverging, spreading network that Tsu Pen imagines time to be (Shmoop University 2014a). This short story chronicles a man's journey to inform the Germans about the British military's position. Yu Tsun wonders what he should do to convey his knowledge. As he is contemplating on what to do with this knowledge, he reflects a lot. He depicts time in a linear manner and posits that everything happens to a man precisely now. Century follows century, yet events occur in the present; countless men may be in the air or on the land and sea, yet everything that happens, happens to oneself (Hurley 1970, p. 272). Borges seems to be suggesting that whatever happens to a person, happens to that person alone and it is his/her sole responsibility to make the right decision. Time is experienced as a series of present moments, one following the other. A moment ceases to exist as soon as it is experienced. The past and the future exist nowhere but in the human mind. The past belongs to the realm of memory while the future belongs to the realm of imagination.

The notion of time as linear is challenged when Yu Tsun arrives at Albert's place. Albert argues that Yu Tsun's ancestors did not believe in a uniform, absolute time. They believed in an infinite series of time in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times (ibid, p. 290). In this Borgesian construction of time, all presents, pasts and futures exist simultaneously. Time forks, perpetually, into countless futures. A person may be your friend but in other dimensions of time, that friend of yours may be your enemy. Here, the concept of time needs to be rethought. The forking of the decisions suggests that time is not linear rather it is a web or a network of possibilities. The image of the labyrinth is thought of as a forking of time. Borges uses the recurring image of a labyrinth that folds back upon itself in infinite regression "so we" become aware of all the possible choices that ultimately lead to different endings. He claims that in all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others. "[Man] creates, thereby several futures, several times, which themselves proliferate and fork" (ibid, p. 286). Borges opines that humankind's search for meaning in a seemingly infinite universe is fruitless, thus his use of a maze as a riddle for time and space. The world is endless and meaningless and for humankind to be in pursuit of any kind of sense is useless.

Borges denies that time is linear and comes to think of it as forking or branching. The branches represent possible future continuations of history. At each moment in time there are many possible continuations – many branches and none of them is marked as "the future". As

mentioned earlier on, in *The garden of forking paths*, Borges has mixed feelings on time. For him, time is both linear and circular given the two stances that he takes in the story.

Borges' refutation of time

The idea of refuting time pervades all of Borges' work. Borges, in *A new refutation of time*, sets out to make clear once and for all his understanding of time and he does it by also drawing on his previous, unsatisfactory accounts. In this essay, Borges is "busy revising and correcting but it would be more appropriate to say intensifying his notion of time". He believed that the problem of time touches humans more than the other metaphysical problems and because of this, he dedicated most of his time to research about time. Borges would draw on his earlier theories and other philosophers' ideas to formulate his new thesis. Bartoloni (2010) observes:

The difficulty in discerning a clear and tangible arrival on all of Borges' discussions on time resides precisely in the continuous shifting between his rational self and his narrative self: a shifting which is also the cause of the inherently ambiguous and hesitant nature of Borges fiction. What is this refutation about and how does he carry it out?

In *A new refutation of time*, Borges argues that the negations of idealism may be extended to time (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_New_Refutation_Of_Time). He tries to demonstrate that there is no time. He seems serious about this denial that there is one time linking experiences. He recycles some quotations from philosophical idealism that he has used elsewhere: Berkeley, Hume and Schopenhauer. If Berkeley denies that there is an object existing independently of our perception of it, Hume denies there is a subject apart from a mere recollection of sensations, Borges denies there is no time. He negates the idea of time intended as a linear succession of instants. He proceeds on the assumption that if man is reduced as according to Hume, to a collection of sensations, a single repeated perception, either in one man's perception or in the experience of two different men, suffices to prove that time is a fallacy since this repetition will destroy its linear sequence. If humans live in a world divested of spirit and matter, asks Borges, in a sphere which is only visible as long as "I" see it or think it, and vanishes in the moment that "I" turn my back on it, or according to Berkeley in a world whose tangibility is only a grandiose prop erected by God, how can this world contemplate the notion of succession (Bartoloni)? All these arguments still hinge upon his negation of time succession. Borges is also confused about the distinction between linear time and circular time.

Conclusion

Borges was a great thinker who stretched the meaning and basic rules of space, time and infinity. On the nature of time, he pondered the effects of allowing one second to instantly become one year. Discussed in the article is the concept of time and how Borges treats the nature of time in his works. The author discovered that Borges has conflicting ideas on time. It is very difficult to discern a tangible standpoint on time when it comes to Borges' works

because he shifts his position continuously, even in the same story. He brings out the idea of time being both linear and also circular in his works. However, in his later works, Borges refutes his earlier notions of time and even denies the existence of time. As noted in *The garden of forking paths*, referring to Yu Tsun, philosophical debate consumes a good part of Borges' works. Of all the problems, none disturbed him, none gnawed at him more than the unfathomable problem of time. Hence, his declaration that time is a problem that affects humans more than any other metaphysical problem.

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