Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia

PESA CONFERENCE 2014

Conference Papers No ISBN

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PESA CONFERENCE 2014

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Title: Nothing but time: Duration, systems theory and musical creativity

Abstract:
This paper offers a critique of the kind of intellectual frameworks typically used to explain creativity in music (for example, the kind of research questions typically asked of a student commencing a music project at postgraduate level). These questions are typically analytical, say around the conventions of a genre and how they can be used to produce new work, but they fail in my view to acknowledge creativity as a process, analytical questions being more suitable to assess a finished work, not one that hasn't even started yet, or is in process. The conventional academic wisdom is that the "new" is a revoicing or recombining of the familiar, but in this formulation, the "new" remains essentially untheorised. I use concepts around creativity as novelty from Henri Bergson, such as duration and movement, to offer a critique of systems theories of creativity (Toynbee, McIntyre and Csikszentmihalyi) that seek to reduce the creative process to a series of "choices" between different pre---existing creative possibilities. In its place I propose a focus on novelty, duration and movement as aspects of creative process.

This paper argues that Western thought has struggled with the concept of creativity, because of its tendency to see knowledge as the discovery of eternal and changeless truths and laws about the world. However, the philosophy of Henri Bergson, partly as interpreted by Gilles Deleuze, has "transformed philosophy by posing the question of the 'new' instead of that of eternity" so that we can ask afresh "how are the production and appearance of something new possible?" (Deleuze, 1986, p. 3).

Traditionally creativity was explained as a mysterious force either issuing from Nature, the cosmos, a deity, or, in the case of artistic creation, from the intuitive "genius" of the human mind. More recently it has been demystified and theorised as a mechanism – ranging from materialist accounts of evolution in science to critical theoretical reflections on "art" and creativity as the product of complex cultural systems. Bergson argues that neither model is adequate, because both assume that "all is given" – ie either that there is a final cause or author, or on the other hand that the phenomena can be adequately understood as conforming to a set of laws that arise from scientific observation (Bergson, 1944, p. 45). What both accounts omit, according to Bergson, is time. Time means that all is not given, because we don't know the future, which is both scary (because human knowledge is not absolute) and exciting, because it makes novelty possible. Rather than understanding the world in terms of fixed, eternal truths, Bergson argues that change and difference are primary, and this is one with his insistence on time, or as he calls it, duration. This is not clock time, divisible, measurable, linear, predictable, spatial, but more like time as experienced, though not reducible to experience, rather a way of linking individual consciousness to continuous, indivisible, open---ended processes of change. Bergson proposes that creativity is a fundamental life process, and that human creativity provides the best means to participate in, if not understand, it. Creativity is a differentiating movement in time.

Bergson's philosophy is built around apparent dualisms, but dualism is his method, rather than his end point (Matthews, 1999). His concept of difference is not about variations between two terms, or how one term negates the other, rather difference is a creative force operating in time to produce multiple varieties of newness (Grosz, 2005). As we have already seen with difference, Bergson's philosophy is based on paradoxes – for example that the only certainty is change. In paradox, logic collides with lived experience: A is not A; identity is not itself, experience taking time into account, whereas logic does not (Colie, 1966). He tends to use paradox in two ways – the first is to analyse traditional philosophical paradoxes and show how they are badly analysed composites – that they mix two different kinds of knowledge – intellectual on the one hand, and time---based, broadly experiential, or intuitive (Deleuze, 1991). This leads to the formulation of a series of paradoxes – that questions contain more than answers, that nothing is more than something, that

disorder is more than order, that the reality of a work of art precedes its possibility, that continuity and heterogeneity, or singularity and multiplicity can co---exist, and that creativity, far from being an optional add---on or culmination of experience, is in fact its fundamental generative principle.

Bergson's career in philosophy began with the explication of Zeno's paradoxes of motion, such as Achilles and the tortoise (1944, pp. 328---30). Mathematics tells us that because the space between Achilles and the tortoise is infinitely divisible, he will never overtake the tortoise. However, Bergson argues that it is mistaken to substitute the analysis of the movement for the movement itself --- while space may be infinitely divisible, movement is continuous and indivisible – if you break a movement up into a series of steps, it is no longer the same movement (think of a melody). Moreover, movement takes place in time --- we don't actually know when or where the movement is going to end, whereas mathematics necessarily treats the movement as complete, or at least predictable. The intellect treats movement as a series of frozen positions. So the paradox arises from the mixture of two modes of knowledge, or the attempt to explain one in terms of the other. The same argument can be applied to systems theories' attempt to explain novelty as the recombination of pre---existing elements. "If I consider parts… abstractly, I cannot understand the movement which goes from one to the other. Imagine I am starving at A and at B there is something to eat, when I have reached B and had something to eat, what has changed is not only my state, but the state of the whole which encompassed B, A and all that was between them" (Deleuze, 1986, p. 8).

The systems theory of creativity, as discussed in McIntyre (2006, 2008), Csikszentmihalyi (1988), and Toynbee (2000), sets out agents and possibilities in various fields, structures or domains and sees creativity as arising from interactions between them. I think these theories have important insights in terms of seeing creativity as a social process, as "greater" than the individual creator, and in emphasising intertextuality – the extent to which new work is a recombination or "revoicing" of existing parts. But they fail to understand the experience of creativity, or to link that experience to actual creation, to explain how novelty is possible in a field where everything is already given, for example why it gave rise to "that" work as opposed to another. It is possible to show how grass grows in terms of a complex system of interactions between seeds, soil, weather and environment. But no two blades of grass are the same and while this might be trivial in some contexts, in an artistic or cultural context, the difference, not the similarity, is what excites our interest and engagement. I will proceed by problematizing the terminology of systems theory, for example "field" and "possibility".

McIntyre, Toynbee and Csikszentmihalyi propose that creativity is an "activity whereby products, processes and ideas are generated from antecedent conditions by the agency of someone … and the resultant novel variation is seen as a valued addition to the store of human knowledge" (McIntyre, 2006, p. 202). That is, there is an agent (presumably the artist) and structure, typically split between a formal field (in McIntyre a domain of knowledge) and a social or cultural field. In Toynbee the split is between a field of production and a field of works. Both theorists use Bourdieu's concept of habitus to mediate between structure and agent (so that agents and structure are continually rewriting each other). Both also note that manoeuvring in the field has to do with the acquisition of cultural capital.

The question arises – how do we know something is novel? McIntyre and Csikszentmihalyi's answer is that the field tells us so. This argument is somewhat circular – besides it could just as easily be argued (as Bourdieu does) that novelty is actually cultural capital, which isn't really novelty at all (Bourdieu, 1996). Also, what form does this recognition take? Is it critical reception, sales (the answer surely depends somewhat on the field)? What about retrospective recognition? What is new about the works apart from the fact that they are "recognised" as such? Nothing, according to McIntyre: "the information that goes into the creative idea existed long before the creative person arrived on the scene" (2008, p. 41). For Toynbee it is about the translation or transgression of existing work or ideas. Although arguing (correctly) that one of the advantages of the systems model is that it does not privilege the creator (creativity can start at any point in the system), nevertheless both McIntyre and Toynbee offer a model which places the creator in some kind of field from which they "choose" different possibilities, constrained and enabled by their habitus and the nature of the field itself. "Producing variations in the symbols systems, they make decisions and choices about them. The limitations on autonomous decision making are… set by the field and domain, acting as both … constraints and enabling factors" (McIntyre, 2008, p. 49). Toynbee talks similarly about the "selection of possibles", his eventual point being that authorship is "social", as in the example of Charles Mingus, because Mingus drew on many traditions of African American music (2000, p. 46). But clearly there is a difference between analysis of complete body of work and a creative process. One deals with a (reasonably) finished body of work, one with a process of becoming.

Field is obviously a spatial metaphor, which we fill with ideas, concepts or examples. Bergson argues that "the habit of proceeding from emptiness to fullness is the source of non---existent problems" (1965, p. 113). Rather, he argues for treating reality as a fullness from which space is extracted by an act of mind. If we are always experiencing something, the experience of nothing (or of space) is a logical impossibility, or rather it relates to the human experience of lack – "nothing" is the lack of the thing we were looking for. Or as John Cage puts it in relation to musical

experience: "there is no such thing as silence" (2011, p. 51). Perception is always interested, or, if you like, because we're always in the field, we never see it as a distinct thing, except perhaps in retrospect. But then the creative act is already over. To put it another way, perception is action (another paradox), and this is never more true than in a creative process.

The most radical inversion is that of the possible and the real, and this is the one that relates most directly to creativity. Conventionally we think that the possible is less than, and precedes the real, which actualises or fills out possibility. But for Bergson it is the opposite way round – the reality of a creative work precedes its possibility. Like nothing, possibility is an act of mind, so it includes the real plus the mind engaging with it. Bergson imagines he is asked to predict what will occur in the field of post---war drama: "If I knew what was to be the great dramatic work of the future, I should be writing it" (1965, p. 118). The creation of a work is what makes it possible. The obvious analogy is evolution – while scientists can classify and analyse what has already occurred, they can never predict what new forms life will take in the future. And so it is, to some degree, with cultural processes as well. In McIntyre's discussion of the Beatles' "Yesterday" (2006) he explains how interactions of the field, domain and agents gave rise to the conditions that allowed "Yesterday" to be written. But what can never be explained is why it was that song that was written and not another. It's always possible to explain something in retrospect, but this is to look for the mirage of the past in the present.

This argument seems pertinent to the explanation of the evolution of music scenes, the Dunedin Sound for example. There are two points here – first that many accounts often seem to cite the same kind of precedents: isolation, university town, possibly inclement weather, a lack of cultural stimulation, a few highly educated record collections, perhaps a college radio station – sounds like Dunedin… or Seattle, or Athens, Georgia… and so on (McLeay, 1994; Shuker, 1998). The second point is that if the Dunedin Sound had not been some kind post---punk alternative guitar rock but had been another genre like electronica or a ska revival, the same factors would be cited. "If the event can always be explained afterwards by an arbitrary choice of antecedent events, a completely different event could have been equally well explained in the same circumstances by another choice of antecedent – nay, by the same antecedents … otherwise perceived" (Bergson, 1965, p. 122).

Frith similarly argues against the idea that people create music, which expresses their social conditions, emotions, culture etc. A Marxist model might show how a "base" produces a particular cultural superstructure, but "the difficult trick is to do the analysis the other way round, to show how the base produced *this* superstructure" (1996, p. 109). Rather than identities creating music, music creates

identities. It's "not that social groups agree on values which are then expressed in cultural activities … but that they only get to know themselves as a group *through* cultural activity, through aesthetic judgment. Music is a living of ideas" (1996, p. 111).

The idea that there is more in the possible than the real means that the analysis of the work as a series of choices always comes after creation. What appear as choices retrospectively are not primarily experienced as choices at the time. Would the same choices lead to the same work? No, because time has moved on – so the choices could not be the same because they would carry with them the weight of experience (eg of having previously made these choices). This is like trying to recreate a demo that you like because it has a distinctive quality. It never works – you have to remake it in a different way. Creativity is not a repeatable process, or rather it can be repeated – but it will be different.

Part of the problem is that the term "possibility" contains at least two different meanings, which such accounts conflate and present as one. There is possibility in the sense of "nothing hindering its realisation" – it is possible, though unlikely, that I will resign my academic position and become an ice---cream vendor next week. This is also possibility in the sense of a rational choice, where I can see different courses of action and choose one. The idea of "absence of hindrance" has been allowed to merge imperceptibly into the idea of ideal pre---existence – as if the possible was an idea or choice in my mind that I can choose to bring into full existence (Bergson, 1965, p. 121). Or that possibilities were laid in front of me, as on a table, and I chose one. Toynbee comes close to this concept when he describes the radius of creativity as an arena of possibles – about which musical agents "made particular decisions at particular moments" (2000, p. 39).

Obviously the point Toynbee wants to make is that creative action is just like any other action – it consists of an agent, operating in a series of fields or domains, selecting possibilities, constrained and enabled by habitus. And it's certainly important to recognise that creative fields are not totally different to other spheres of human action, otherwise "some notion of the ineffable power of the artist will drift back in" (2000, p. 39). But I don't think that creative possibility is the same as "absence of hindrance" or "rational choice". "Potential is not … an ability to add on to something that is" (Colebrook, 2002, p. 15). Rather it refers to a transformation. Questions of choice ultimately go back to the idea of free will, which is usually discussed in terms of the relation between agent and structure – each influence each other. Obviously the more can be known about the agent and structure the more likely we can predict what will happen, but ironically this sets us on the path of determinism – if we could know everything, it suggests, everything could be

predicted. But choice is not merely an oscillation between two possibilities. The possibilities do not actually exist -- they are abstracted in mental space as fixed points, which the ego "chooses" between, but what is real according to Bergson is the evolution of the mental state, which changes constantly (after all if it did not change, how could one come to a decision?) (Bergson, 2001, pp. 175---176). Hence he sees not fixed points, but many tendencies of a "self which lives and develops by means of its very hesitations..." the continuous living activity of the self (2001, p. 176). Choice is a dynamic process.

Bergson and Deleuze see philosophy, art and science not as bodies of knowledge but as creative activities – as the creation of problems, that is the correct framing of questions, and the avoidance of false problems caused by mixing different modes of knowledge. They argue that questions, just like answers, can be true or false, and decry the standard academic model in which teachers ask questions and students answer. Rather they would apply the test of true and false to problems: "True freedom lies in a power… to constitute problems themselves" (Deleuze, 1991, p. 15). To refer to an inversion that is typical of Bergson's thinking – problems and solutions are like possibility and reality -- there is more in the problem than there is in the solution. The correct posing of the problem *is* the creative act.

A standard question used at my institution is "what are the techniques, conventions and practices of genre X, and how can these be used to create new work?" This kind of question clearly refers to a systems model of creativity -- it implies that new work is simply a recombination or revoicing of existing elements. According to Bergson, such a problem is based on a faulty premise – the creation of novelty is taken for granted. It reifies at least two errors – "mistaking the more for the less" -- reducing the creative act to a series of pre---existent possibilities (the techniques, conventions, etc.) when Bergson argues that the possibilities are created by the creative act, not the other way round. Alternatively the question contains another kind of error – what Bergson calls a badly analysed composite which arbitrarily groups together things that differ in kind. The idea of conventions and techniques is clearly spatial, that of novelty relates to duration. The new is reduced to a quantity – ie with the new work, there will be now more, where there was previously less. The new is like a brick, added to an existing pile, but there is very little in this situation that could be considered novel. Rather, creativity is a kind of movement or change that takes place in time.

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