

Genealogies of the Event

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Matthew Moore

Nathan Widder, *Genealogies of Difference* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002)

1. Nathan Widder's *Genealogies of Difference* is an ambitious book, in which several agendas are at work. On one level, it is an investigation of the ancient and medieval roots of an important contemporary idea: that ineffable something (the negative, *différance*, the semiotic, the virtual, non-identity, the invisible, the unconscious)[1] that both makes possible and disrupts any scheme of identity and hierarchy. Widder adopts the Deleuzian language of the event to talk about this "difference that differs from identity and difference" (4). On another level, Widder argues that ontologies that leave out something like the event are ultimately incoherent, unable to meet even their own criteria of success. Finally, Widder sketches the outlines of a politics and a political theory rooted in an ontology of the event.
2. The strengths of the book seem to me Widder's admirable ability to show the roots of this apparently modern ontology in ancient and medieval thought (especially his very engaging discussion of the Gnostics) and the way in which his sharp statement of the issues helps to clarify what is at stake in the renewed interest in ontology that has emerged in political theory over the past few years.[2] The book's weaknesses seem to me the brevity of Widder's discussion of the more robust pluralism he envisions, and a dense and difficult chapter on Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. As I argue below, I also think that Widder has overlooked problems within the ontology of the event for which he argues, and that he has thus missed an opportunity to explicate and defend it more fully.
3. For readers who are intimately familiar with the work of Deleuze, I imagine that much of *Genealogies of Difference* will be familiar. However, for those interested in the genealogy of the event, and for those interested in contemporary debates about ontology, there is much to be gained from this book. Widder's evident passion for the issues makes for lively reading, and his preliminary explorations of a plurality that springs from a "groundless difference" are as intriguing as they are incomplete (7).

Ontologies Eventful and Total

4. Clearly, it is very difficult to talk about an unrepresentable something whose manifestations have in common only their resistance to being subsumed under a single organizing schema. (Diana Coole has an excellent discussion of this difficulty in her recent *Politics and Negativity*, which looks at the concept of "negativity" in thinkers from the 19th and 20th centuries.) Widder does a nice job of expressing this key concept: "This singular-multiple event, precisely by being unlocalizable, implies a certain movement: a flux by which it consistently surpasses itself while eluding capture by a telos, dialectic, or other representational schema; and a repetition that involves a recurrence not of 'identical states' but rather of the excessive heterogeneity that destroys all models of identity" (6).
5. Widder's most fundamental argument is that theories of identity -- even dialectical theories that acknowledge the constitutive role of difference -- are inadequate and ultimately incoherent if they do not recognize that there is a fugitive, unrepresentable force in the cosmos that simultaneously makes possible and undermines any determinate conceptualization of identity. He writes: "For as will become clear in subsequent chapters, thinking that attempts to conceive difference and plurality through the strictures of identity must invariably introduce exogenous factors that compromise the very task it has set itself" (4). Through his genealogical investigation of the singular-multiple event, and the more determinate theories in response to which it developed, Widder offers us a chance to assess this claim.
6. Widder begins his investigation with Hegel, whose dialectical conception of identity manages both to promise the recognition of destabilizing difference and, simultaneously, to domesticate it. As I read him, Widder's main criticism is that Hegel cannot account for the momentum of dialectical development. At each moment in the dialectic, one form of being is confronted with another that is apparently opposed to it. Hegel argued that the

opposition would be resolved through the creation of a new and more determinate identity that included both elements. Widder acknowledges that this is a possibility, but argues that Hegel has given us no strong reason for thinking that it is necessary. Hegel has failed "to foreclose the possibility that every being might also paradoxically presuppose that which deconstructs or decomposes the totality" (34). While we know from Hegel that any identity we might posit will be incomplete and not fully determinate, we have not yet been given a reason to think that this incompleteness will necessarily move towards a more determinate identity as part of a greater whole, rather than moving towards a less determinate identity as one manifestation of an underlying process of constitution that is irreducibly heterogeneous and fragmentary. Hegel has shown us the question, but not the answer.

2335. In Chapter 3, Widder examines Aristotle, as well as Epicurus and Lucretius, seeing in them, respectively, a failed attempt at an ontology of totality, and an early precursor of an ontology of the event. As Widder sees it: "Plato seeks to tame difference through a transcendent One serving as its cause and measure; Aristotle aspires to reduce it to the role of specification within a totality" (62). However, Widder argues, Aristotle cannot quite escape from elements of difference that rupture his notion of totality. Once Aristotle has separated substance and accident, it becomes possible to imagine an ungrounded plurality of being that would exceed any posited totality. Aristotle seeks to tame this wild difference by giving priority to one type of causation -- the final cause, or *telos* -- which can rein in the promiscuity of accidents by tying them to a determinate developmental path. Yet, Widder argues, this preference for the final over the efficient, material, and formal causes is ultimately ungrounded. Similarly, Aristotle's paradoxical argument that there is nothing outside the universe -- that it is not infinite, yet nor is it bounded -- seems to Widder to tacitly recognize an excess that surpasses and undermines Aristotle's attempt at totality.

2336. More generally, although he does not put the point in quite this language, Widder is pointing out that any totalistic ontology will face the problems that Hegel was trying to solve. Any assertion of a totality necessarily relies on a conception of the beyond, of that which is on the other side of the limit that demarcates the totality. On the other hand, any assertion that the universe is infinite makes impossible the kind of determinate schema that is sought in the first place. Either way, there is something that exceeds and undermines determinate conceptions of identity.

Not surprisingly, Widder finds Epicurus and Lucretius much more appealing. He reads their

Widder's depiction of the Gnostic approach to ethics: "The ethical promise of gnosis is that recognition of the divine within the self will temper lustful desire.... Care of the self both follows from and leads to a form of fullness that is not one of completeness" (112).

2863. With Aquinas, Widder argues in Chapter 5, a new problem emerges: explaining how knowledge of god is possible, given the apparently vast differences between the human and divine natures. In the work of Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham we see a series of related attempts to answer this question. Although Widder gives careful consideration to these arguments, his aim is focused on a subversive ontology that he thinks emerges in the latter two thinkers. Duns Scotus, in arguing that the starting point for knowledge of god is recognizing the univocal being shared by both god and man, offers a kind of empty totalistic ontology. But when this univocal conception of being is combined with Ockham's nominalism and conventionalism, Widder thinks that we can see a hint of an ontology in which all of being shares a common element whose essence can never be named or represented transparently. Here again, we see some of the roots of the event.

2864. As I have tried to suggest, one of Widder's agendas is to demonstrate that what we might call positive ontologies -- ontologies that do not recognize a destabilizing element that cannot be systematically predicted and represented -- are incoherent. On one level, this point seems quite correct. The history of thought is full of puzzling aspects of experience -- change, differences in perception, the antinomies of the size of the universe (bounded or infinite?) and the beginnings of causality (infinite regress or unmoved mover?), etc. -- that both call for a comprehensive explanation and appear to make such an explanation impossible. Yet it seems to me that Widder has not recognized (at least, not explicitly) the ways in which his ontology of the event is open to the same kinds of criticism.

2865. I see two general problems with the ontology of the event. The first has to do with the difficulty of policing the boundary between ontology and epistemology. Is the fugitive, destabilizing aspect of being a product of the structure of existence, or is it a product of the limitations of our concepts? If it is the latter, is the limitation avoidable, for example through better instruments, or more experiments? It seems to me that these questions (prosaic though they be) are unanswerable within Widder's approach. We have no basis on which to choose one or the other explanation.

2866. The second problem is closely related to the first. Because the flux and flow that is the event cannot be captured or represented in a positive scheme, it must remain ineffable and, more importantly, abstract. Nothing could count as evidence either for or against Widder's ontology. Its very abstraction and negativity (resistance to representation) means that the event could never be pointed to, nor could an empty space be identified where once the event had been. In this version, the event takes on a bit of the character of the Kantian thing-in-itself: an hypothesis that we need to make sense of experience, but for which we can offer no evidence. My point is not that Widder's ontology is wrong, or even that it has more problems than those he criticizes. Rather, my point is that it has *just as many* problems as its competitors, and there is no obvious way to choose among them. Widder has done an admirable job of describing the ontology of the event, but in my view he offers us no strong *ontological* reasons to believe in it.

Pluralism and Groundless Difference

However, Widder does offer strong *ethical* reasons for preferring the ontology of the event. He focuses on the Nietzschean theme (precursors of which he finds in the Epicureans and the Gnostics) that the desire for a totalistic system is the result of resentment at the uncertainty and instability of life. This theme comes up repeatedly in the book, but perhaps the sharpest statement of it is expressed in his discussion of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*: "In this way active wills *affirm their difference*, which is to say, they affirm a

2923. Although I admire Widder's ethical vision, some parts of his argument worry me. In several places, it seems to me that he suggests that his ontology of the event is capable of producing a positive ethical program. For example: "The responsibilities carried by this sensibility are not denied by the lack of foundations but rather follow from it" (154-55). Also: "The ethical rejection of the friend/enemy binarism, then, signals neither the 'death of politics' nor a withdrawal into apathy. It rather invokes an ethical sensibility with political effects, one drawn from *an ontology of belonging together* and a decentered pluralism that Deleuze and Guattari label 'rhizomatic' and oppose to 'arboreal'" (58, my emphasis). What does he mean by "an ontology of belonging together"? Does he mean to suggest that an ontology of the event shows that separations within being are arbitrary, and thus that there is some sense in which political unity is a better reflection of our ontological underpinnings than is the friend/enemy distinction?
2924. What makes me worry is the suspicion that Widder is flirting with the mistake he is so concerned to avoid -- legitimating normative claims by rooting them in ontology. It seems to me that the most potent promise of the event is the ability to criticize and undermine any such move, any creation of a hierarchy of norms. Further, looking for values in ontology (if that is what Widder is indeed hinting at -- he never says so explicitly) seems to me to conflate two concerns. If the structure of being is as Widder describes it, that does not yet tell me how to feel about it. Widder joins Nietzsche in urging us to overcome resentment and a stubborn refusal to accept the contingency of being. That is potentially an admirable ethos, but the very necessity of *choosing* it shows that one's ethical orientation is not determined by one's ontology. At times it seems as if Widder is suggesting that affirming an ontology of the event and affirming an ethos of overcoming are one project; I am suggesting that they are two projects, though each lends support to the other.

Finally, these issues about the relationship between ontology and ethics point to the relationship of Widder's book to the recent resurgence of interest in ontology. Widder raises some important questions about what he calls "ontological minimalism," which he describes as the view that "once the search for an ultimate Truth and all its accompanying transcendental or divine frameworks are rejected, thought is compatible with groundlessness to the extent that it rests on the fewest fundamental assumptions possible" (2). Widder is critical of this approach, seeing it as "a continuation of metaphysical remnants by other means" (2). His position adds an intriguing voice to the on-going debate, and demonstrates one of the reasons *Genealogies of Difference* is an important contribution to the literature.

Matthew J. Moore is a graduate student in Political Theory at the Johns Hopkins University. He can be reached at Matthew.Moore@jhu.edu.

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Notes

[1] See Diana Coole, *Negativity and Politics: Dionysus and Dialectics from Kant to Poststructuralism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 2.

[2] See, for example, Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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