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Genealogy of difference. The discontinuities of postmodern thought

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Abstract

According to the classical approaches of difference, on one hand, the origin of the discourse of difference was found in a new way of thinking that pursued the overcoming of metaphysics (Vattimo), and on the other hand, the discourse of difference was construed as another version of the problem of the One and the Many, which has remained a constant throughout the history of thinking (Laruelle). However, the post-metaphysical approaches to difference can be legitimated neither by understanding them as an absolutely new discourse with no relation to the previous philosophical conceptions, nor by reducing them to a classical problem of philosophy. The unilaterality of such conceptions can be cancelled by understanding difference as a new answer to a philosophical problem that preoccupied Western thinking ever since the Ancient times. Such an approach to difference starts from Hans Blumenberg’s theory according to which we should understand the unfolding of ideas as being marked by discontinuities. From this point of view, the post-metaphysical theories of difference (Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze) should be understood starting from the discontinuities between the old discourse of metaphysics where difference is subordinate to identity and the new space of thinking open after the acceptance of multiplicity as an essential characteristic of the Being.

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1. Preliminaries to a genealogy of difference

The importance of understanding the idea of difference for contemporary thinking relies on the fact that, besides its explicit approaches, in the post-structuralist theories, e.g. Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, as well as in their predecessors’ conceptions (Heidegger, Nietzsche), it can be found implicitly in nowadays thinking which values

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positively alterity, multiplicity, and diversity. In this context, one can speak about a philosophy of difference as a
dominant of contemporary thinking without understanding by this the existence of a unique discourse of
difference, but rather the proliferation of discourses engaging explicitly or implicitly the idea of difference.

The ubiquity of difference in contemporary thinking has generated debates regarding the origin and the
evolution of the idea of difference in Western thinking. The genealogy of the idea of difference has developed in
two ways: on one hand, the origin of the discourse of difference was found in a new way of thinking that pursued
the overcoming of metaphysics. On the other hand, the discourse of difference was construed as another version
of the problem of the One and the Many, which has remained a constant throughout the history of thinking.

According to the former way of understanding difference, contemporary thinking relies on “a non-
contradictory, non-dialectical consideration of difference, which is not envisage it as a simple contrary of
identity” [1]. Grounding thought on difference is the outcome of the end of the metaphysical thinking considered
to have exhausted its own possibilities to unfold. Such a conception is supported by Gianni Vattimo, to whom the
Nietzsche-Heidegger moment marked the beginning of a new way of thinking situated beyond modernity.
Overcoming modern thinking became a necessity when it was understood as the culmination of nihilism, which
affected Western thinking ever since the Ancient times and which was understood either as contesting highest
values, as with Nietzsche, or as forgetfulness of the Being, as with Heidegger. Exposing the sick character of
modern thinking was followed by the need to overcome it, but not in the sense of simply relating critically to the
values of modernity, but in the sense given by the interpretation of Heidegger’s term Verwindung, which implies
remembering the metaphysical foundations while rethinking its groundings. This meant leaving behind the
metaphysical preoccupation of searching the unique and steady ground that would lie at the base of the world
without implying the search for “another truer ground” (orig. „un’altra, più vera, fondazione”) [2]. Refusing to
ground thought on a steadier ground becomes the mark of the era beyond modernity, which focuses on avoiding
“violent” metaphysical thinking based on unifying categories. Hence, ideas such as subject as rational being –
which by means of science and technology pursues to dominate nature – the idea of truth representing reality by
mirroring it, or of history as absolute progress, are replaced in the name of a ‘weak thought’ characterised by the
lack of groundings. In this context, difference appears as an alternative to the compelling approach of
metaphysics, which subordinates the multiplicity of the world to a unique supreme principle. Claiming that
multiplicity and becoming are essential characteristics of the world by theorizing the will of power and the
Eternal Recurrence, as Nietzsche did, and conducting the exposure of the metaphysical groundings in the name of
remembering the difference between Being and beings, as Heidegger did, created the framework favoring a
horizon of thinking where the steady structure of the world was replaced by the play of difference as principle of
multiplicity and perspectivism. Yet, this opening led to a radicalisation of the discourse of difference with the
post-structuralist thinkers who wished to liberate thinking from any metaphysical residue. For this purpose,
philosophers such as Derrida or Deleuze contested the authenticity of Heidegger’s ontological difference and
reached new wordings of difference that, are in fact hiding some themes of classical metaphysics [3].

Consequently, to Vattimo, post-structuralist philosophy of difference is the thinking of the forgetfulness of
difference returning to the metaphysical way of thought either by celebrating archi-structure (Derrida) as
referential of the classical idea of eternity, or by proclaiming the primacy of simulacrum over reality (Deleuze) as
continuation of metaphysical ‘mythologies.’ From this perspective, the post-structuralist thinking of difference
moves away from the initial intention of grounding a post-metaphysical thinking (Heidegger and Nietzsche).

The latter modality of approaching difference considers difference to play an important role in classical
metaphysics, within the debates on the relation between unity and multiplicity. In this case, difference does not
imply a detachment from the metaphysical way of thinking as it justifies itself by its relation with identity. This
idea is supported by François Laruelle [4], who agrees that the philosophy of difference reunited a “constellation”
of contemporary authors originating from Nietzsche and Heidegger’s thinking. But the discourse of difference
represents a repetition of the philosophical problem of the One and the Multiplicity that was present in the
Western thinking ever since the Ancient era. Difference appears as „a general syntax and a concrete, invariant
type” [4], i.e., as a modality to articulate the philosophical language acting as a concrete principle both at the formal and at the content level, thus generating a philosophical discourse centred on category, such as Contradiction, Existence, and Structure. Although Laruelle considers difference to be syntax and a way of understanding the real (as multiplicity) common to some authors, such as Heidegger, Nietzsche, Derrida, or Deleuze, he claims the irreducibility of the approaches of difference and the impossibility to subordinate them to a unique theory. Each of the theorisations of difference is irreducible, which renders the post-structuralist discourse of difference heterogeneous, made of a mixture of theories and practices of understanding multiplicity. As a continuation of the Greco-Occidental problem of the relation between the One and the Multiplicity, difference provides an answer to the problem of the unity of the contraries that has been left unsolved throughout the history of Western thinking. Therefore, difference is an alternative to the answer represented by Dialectics regarding the surpassing of the contraries within a totalising unity. The role of difference is to cancel any attempt to render uniform the contraries by destroying the classical metaphysics idea of unity in all its forms: presence, identity, and representation. Notwithstanding, difference provides another experience to the One where the relation among the contraries is not described in terms of subordination with a view to creating a unity but in terms of mutual intertwining [4]. Difference turns into a transcendence which includes the contraries and which makes no longer possible the existence of exteriority that the contraries ought to surpass in order to reach one another. Thus, unity becomes transcendent and the One becomes a condition, be it tacit, of the possibility of thinking the difference. Consequently, the discourse of difference does nothing but leave the essence of the One undetermined, the One becoming thus the transcendent condition of difference.

According to these attempts to explain the emergence of the idea of difference in contemporary thinking, this idea is a mark of discourse that contested the grounding of the being on identity and the search for the unity of the word. However, these approaches, which either relate difference to an anti-metaphysical intention or consider it a repetition of a classical metaphysical theme, failed to understand the current discourses of difference from the perspective of the dialogue with the Western philosophical tradition. Therefore, the post-metaphysical approaches of difference can be legitimated neither by understanding them as an absolutely new discourse with no relation whatsoever with the previous philosophical conceptions, nor by reducing them to a classical problem of philosophy. The unilaterality of such conceptions can be cancelled by understanding difference as a new answer to a philosophical problem that preoccupied Western thinking ever since the Ancient times.

Such an approach to difference starts from Hans Blumenberg’s theory according to which the history of ideas no longer is to be approached by delimiting certain periods characterised by a set of similar ideas having a common origin. According to Blumenberg, concepts and theories represent answers to questions arising from needs that have become conspicuous at a certain time in history. History is made of the plurality of these answers that try to offer solutions to a constant matrix of need throughout time, which means that “different statements can be understood as answers to identical questions” [5]. Therefore, we should not look for radical beginnings in history, as the total detachment from old theories that could be used to mark the limits of historical eras, but we should understand the unfolding of ideas as being marked by discontinuities. This means that as theories reach contradictions that cannot be solved they are replaced by other theories that may provide answers to new requirements. The transition from one stage to the other is not a gradual process but ‘reoccupation’ often takes place without being noticed. All one could ascertain is the existence of a threshold marking the transition from the old theory to the new one without any intermediate step. From the perspective of this way of conceiving the history of ideas, the proliferation of the current theories of difference represents an answer to the old problem of the unity and the multiplicity. However, this does mean that such approaches represent the continuation by other means of a way of thinking present ever since the beginnings of philosophy. We should rather analyse the current theories of difference from the perspective of the needs emerged together with the idea that the Being is not unitary. Therefore, the current theories of difference should be understood from the perspective of the discontinuities between the old discourse of metaphysics where difference is subordinate to identity and the new space of thinking open after the acceptance of multiplicity, as an essential characteristic of the Being.
In terms of the conception of the history of ideas of Blumenberg, Nietzsche and Heidegger represent the threshold that allows the transition to the new understanding of the world from the perspective of difference. In other words, their role was to reveal the ultimate consequences of classical philosophy, which gave priority to identity, unity, and totality, heralding the need to re-position thinking on principles other than those of the metaphysics of identity. This means that, on one hand, the post-structuralist conceptions represent various attempts to ‘re-occupy’ the thinking space that gradually frees itself from the classical philosophy bias. On the other hand, one should bear in mind that ‘re-occupation’ is conducted in the name of overcoming thinking grounded on identity, leaving room for reinterpreting metaphysics from the perspective of difference. Consequently, grounding thinking on the play of difference implies engaging a plurality of discourses that aim at overcoming the philosophical tradition by relating to it differently.

2. The end of the metaphysics of identity

To Heidegger, understanding difference is conducted by starting from the critique of traditional metaphysics characterized by the forgetfulness of the Being. By searching for the understanding of the Being as a permanent presence, metaphysics brings being to the foreground, turning it into the grounding principle of all things. Approached from the perspective of permanence, being is thought in its essential features, as a foundation that subsists by itself as it is considered to be of divine nature. Therefore, metaphysics reveals itself as onto-theology, as a discourse on the supreme being that is now seen as being at the origin of all things. As an ultimate and steady grounding of the world, the Being of being is considered to always be identical to itself. Thus, the principle of identity becomes the basis of Western metaphysics, cancelling the difference between the Being and being, which leads to the occultation of the foundation of metaphysics and to the impossibility to grasp the truth of the Being.

The development of metaphysics construed as the history of the forgetfulness of the Being can be divided into three eras, each one having its own way of concealing the truth and the difference between the Being and being [6]. In the Ancient era (after the Presocratics), the Being was interpreted either in the Platonic sense as ἰδέα, i.e., what makes possible grasping the ‘visible form’ (αἴσθησις) of being, or in Aristotelian sense as ἐνέργεια, i.e., coming to presence and maintaining as consistency. The truth in this case was understood from the perspective of the relation of resemblance (ὁμοιωσίς) or correspondence (adaequatio) between statement and reality. In the following era, the Middle Ages, the Being was understood as actualitas, i.e., as reality which fulfils itself in God, the supreme being. Moreover, the truth was understood as starting from the Roman idea of empire, which is compliant with the order imposed on reality. The modern era, the last metaphysical era of forgetfulness of the Being, is characterised by understanding of the truth as certainty and of grounding the beings on man as subject. The subject knows the reality by means of its representation, i.e., by transforming it into an object. Coming the Being to presence is also part of this process, as the Being has to become an object subjected to representation in order to be thought by the subject. The end of the modern era is represented by Nietzsche, who, despite the overt anti-Platonism of his philosophy, continues to remain within the framework of metaphysical thinking. To Heidegger, Nietzsche’s conception does nothing but taking the Being’s thinking as permanence to the ultimate consequences by giving consistency to becoming, by construing it as will of power and Eternal Recurrence. Thus, it becomes the essence of the Being. The last stage of the forgetfulness of the Being is represented by technology, which sets upon nature to challenge it forth immediately. The Being is no longer unconcealed, merely as standing-against, but now it is challenged forth as ‘standing-reserve,’ which is to be subjected to command and manipulation. Thus, modern technology represents the fulfilment of the metaphysical ideal of domination over the entire reality. It is precisely in this radical forgetfulness of the Being that the possibility of rethinking the relation between man and Being appears. As, in technical thinking, which relies on modern science that approaches being via calculation and planning, revealing it as setting-before, the breach between man and Being becomes obvious. Technology is the framework (Gestell) for bringing man and Being face to face with a view to their mutual challenge. The framework, which constitutes the active nature of technical thinking, is the prelude of
the event of appropriation (\textit{Ereignis}), where man and Being are to be appropriated in their essential togetherness. In the event of appropriation, the identity between man and the Being is thought in the Presocratic terms as belonging together. This is not the case for metaphysical thinking where identity is a characteristic of the Being. Identity in the metaphysical sense is understood as unity of a multiplicity that is ordered within a system due to a principle that accomplishes the synthesis of contraries. Abandoning the interpretation of identity in the sense of sameness becomes salient in the German idealism, which as a fulfilment of Western metaphysics, approaches identity as an abstract notion. \textbf{Hegel illustrates this idea in approaching the Being as “indeterminate immediacy,”} i.e., as the „being-thought of what is immediately thought, without regard as yet to the thinking that thinks this thought apart from mediated disclosure” [7]. Conceived as the universal abstract, the Being is seen as thinking that thinks itself and that is externalization at different stages in the history of philosophy in order to reach full development. Thus, it acquires a dialectical determination, because thinking, in order to reach itself, i.e., to think of itself must undergo the various stages of the dialectical-speculative process. Dialectics becomes thus an activity specific to thinking where the difference in the sense of contradiction is a necessary step in order to achieve unity and identity of contraries. In this way, the identity of thinking and the Being is no longer understood in the Presocratic sense, as with Parmenides, where the unity between the Being and thinking is given by sameness, as belonging together of the Being and thinking. However, to Hegel, the identity of thinking with the Being is understood as representation in thinking of what exists in reality.

This means that to Heidegger, the thinking of the Being no longer assumes that \textit{Aufhebung}, the dialectical movement whereby complete fulfilment of the Being is achieved, but a step back to the beginnings of metaphysics in order to remember what remained un-thought originally. The Being will no longer be thought of from the perspective of progressing from „emptiness to its developed fullness” [8], but from the perspective of the relation with being. The Being is not something that is added to being for the latter to acquire existence, but it is unconcealed in the overwhelming of being. However, this overwhelming is not understood as the movement of surpassing, which has as result the unconcealing, but the two, overwhelming and unconcealing, appear together as mutually belonging. In other words, being is presencing means the dynamic of coming into presence, which makes possible what is present (being). Such thinking of difference, as perdurance of overwhelming and arrival, does not transform the relation between the Being and being into a relation of opposition to be surpassed via a dialectical movement. The connection between the Being and being is the appropriation seen as a reciprocal relation that is possible because of difference. Moreover, difference is not approached as the specific difference between the Being and being, whereby the Being is certified as a metaphysical grounding and it is transformed into an absolute principle that grounds all the beings. Such an approach to difference remains within the framework of metaphysics, not making possible the understanding of how being reaches its Being. Difference must be understood as what makes possible the existence of the Being and being and relate to one another in mutual dependence. It is not a grounding principle, it is the one that makes the Being come to presence and thus appear what is present.

The consequence of Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics is establishing difference as a necessity of understanding the Being in order to overcome the metaphysical way of thinking that has concealed ever since its beginnings the authentic relation of man to the Being. Understanding difference as what makes possible understanding how the Being comes into presence and relates to being, as belonging together, represents the end of the grounding of the Being on the principle of identity and of its understanding as permanent presence. Thus, Heidegger’s philosophy found that thinking that grounded the Being on identity had been exhausted and announced the beginning of a new relation to the Being, which theorizes difference as its foundation.

3. Beyond metaphysics: Diference as \textit{différance}

According to Derrida, Heidegger’s critique of the metaphysics of identity was not enough to overcome this way of thinking. Heidegger’s endeavour, even if it aimed at removing the primacy of identity, which concealed
the authentic approach of the Being, is still within the framework of logocentric thinking, for which the world should be explained in terms of pairs of contraries (soul/body, thinking/matter, good/evil, being/nothingness, etc.) that are valued from the point of view of how they express presence. Thus, metaphysics as onto-theology presents itself as metaphysics of presence seeking a steady foundation that by means if its presence (or by presencing, in Heidegger’s case) would ground the foundation of all being. However, in Heidegger’s understanding the Being as stepping back to presencing or concealing in unconcealing fails to challenge the very presence, to the extent that the Being is still occupying the position of transcendental signified [9]. Therefore, Heidegger’s critique fails to remove fully the metaphysical assumptions, metaphysics continuing thus to manifest itself, by exercising its dominance over language. If, as Heidegger himself admits, the language of metaphysics is inherent to our thinking, while he acknowledges that „economically and strategically he had to borrow the syntactic and lexical resources of the language of metaphysics” [10], it means that the ultimate interrogation as to how the Being manifests itself as presence should be addressed to language. The ontological difference, which Heidegger regarded as the end of onto-theology, becomes thus merely a temporary moment of the openness of the Being, insofar as it only suggests a derivation between the Being and being, between presencing and presence.

The attack on the metaphysics of presence is to be conducted starting from deconstructing the metaphysical holds in language, which means challenging the way language was understood in the Western thought as representing speech. Against phonocentric thinking, which by valuing voice as an expression of the spontaneity of the signified and its immediate presence, claims that writing is secondary to speech, Derrida suggested to replace the term of difference with *différance*. The distinction between the two, given by substituting the letter ‘e’ with ‘a’ is inaudible, it is not manifest in pronunciation, nor is it heard, nor as species of sensitivity, nor of the intelligible, marking thus the limits of speech as a form of manifestation of presence. Hence, the *différance* is that which avoids any attempt at theorizing in terms of the categories of presence as it is located beyond any onto-theological approach, being that which actually „it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return” [11]. Furthermore, replacing the difference with *différance* also contributes to invalidate the classical concept of language, seen as a closed system of signs, where the signs are presences for something absent. According to Saussure’s conception, the sign is characterized by arbitrariness and differential character. This means that, on the one hand, the connection between signifier and signified is not necessary, and, on the other hand, that the signs distinguish by their difference from other signs. If each sign acquires its place within language as a result of what it is not, this means that language can be regarded as a system of differences. However, these differences are seen as effects of the play of *différance* without understanding it as their origin.

*Différance* is what makes differentiating possible, hence signifying, due to the double movement it implies of differing and deferring. These two meanings of the term *différer* refer to a spatial movement and a temporal one. Thus, on the one hand, *différance* refers to spacing produced by differentiating from something else, as the distance or interval occurring against another. On the other hand, *différance* implies a delay, postponement, a temporization, whereby the relation with presence is deferred. By *différance*, spacing and temporization are thought of together as becoming-space of time and becoming-time of space. Hence, *différance* insofar as it avoids presence, transforming the present into an interval made up of traces of differences, becomes archi-trace, archi-writing. This means that it reflects what lies beyond the horizon of writing construed as secondary to speech. *Différance* dismisses thus the metaphysical ideas the “originary constitution” of time and space, and temporality as transcendent horizon of the Being, which favours the present as a dominant value. Moreover, *différance*, even if it finds its echoes in Hegel’s philosophy, by the temporality it implies, it is not to be taken for Hegel’s difference, understood as a contradiction. The latter is merely a moment to be surpassed, „into the self-presence of an ontotheological or onto-teleological synthesis” [10]. *Différance* is precisely what avoids this totalizing process of the *Aufhebung*, it refers to what cannot be integrated and remains un-grasped in this process, implying the negation of a concept and then lifting it up on another level with a view to its conservation. In other words, *différance*, together with “its non-synonymic substitutes,” “archi-writing,” “archi-trace,” “spacing,” “supplement,” “pharmakon,” “hymen,” which can be found all over the place throughout the history of
philosophy, dismisses metaphysics of presence in its most concealed assumptions. Its origins should be sought in those authors, such as Nietzsche or Freud, who challenged the idea of subject as it has been developed in the modern era, by denying the primacy of consciousness as guarantee for self-presence. To Nietzsche, *différance* is theorized in terms of the play „of different forces, and of differences of forces” [11], which governs the entire world. To Freud, *différance* stands for the differences between the forces of breaching that make up the content of the unconscious. To the above, one can also add Levinas’s conception of otherness, construed as responsibility for the Other, who should not be assimilated to the Same, but being preserved and maintained. In all these attempts to undermine the metaphysics of presence, *différance* appears as trace, as absence of presence, of what can never be brought to presence. The trace is what does not refer to a concealed substratum to explain the emergence of meaning, but it opens the chain of differences whereby the sign acquires meaning. Hence, it cancels the idea of the presence of meaning, as a “simulacrum of presence” which signifies the sign by means of a network of traces. The trace is the one which does „not depend on any sensible plenitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic” [9], but that makes all these realities possible. It is that which transcends all binary contraries of classical metaphysics, without giving any positive values to the poles of these contraries, but merely allows for these dualities to exist. Without transforming itself into a proper name meant to explain everything, as in metaphysics, the trace makes no longer possible the existence of any exteriority. Everything happens as a result of differences or alterities, and the trace as *différance*, by differing and deffering, makes all these intervals possible.

Consequently, Derrida aims at overcoming the metaphysics of identity by reflecting on what this way of thinking leaves un-thought. The difference construed as *différance* does not cause the overthrow of a system of thinking, replacing a metaphysical principle with its opposite, but it makes possible the transition beyond traditional thinking of relating to the Being. This means that *différance* opens the possibility of thinking of what always remains outside classical metaphysics, which was based on the opposition between identity and difference.

### 4. Difference and the metaphysics of immanence

Understood from the perspective of the concept of difference, the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze represents a confrontation with traditional philosophy, which is challenged as it approached difference from the perspective of transcendence. The problem of theorizing, throughout the history of philosophy, of an inappropriate concept of difference that generated philosophical unsolvable problems, as the problem of univocity of the Being within a plural world is strengthened by Deleuze’s finding regarding the preference manifested by the Western thinking for a philosophy of transcendence against immanence. The secundarity of immanence appears in all those philosophical doctrines, starting with Plato and continuing with Mediaeval Christian philosophy, and then with modern philosophy until phenomenology, which theorized what is beyond the field of experience under the name of One, God, Subject, Ego, Other, etc. Without seeing the multiple theorizations of transcendence as being connected within a dialectical movement, Deleuze shows that in the modern era one has reached a theorization of the „transcendence within the immanent, and it is from immanence that a breach is expected” [12]. Placing transcendence in immanence is a sign of the exhaustion of metaphysical transcendence, which opens the possibility for metaphysics to be rethought from the perspective of immanence. This does not mean that metaphysics should be overcome via a critique of its assumptions in order to discover its un-thought substrate, as with Derrida or Heidegger. Rather, metaphysics should be reconsidered from the perspective of immanence, starting from a new approach of difference, which in the metaphysics of transcendence, was subordinate to identity.

In the transcendence approach of difference, as it was conducted starting with Plato and continuing with Aristotle, Leibniz or Hegel, difference is construed as a relation with something from outside, being considered an exterior difference. In Plato’s philosophy, this exterior relation takes the form of finality conveyed by the Idea
of Absolute Good, the one who is at the top of the hierarchy of Ideas. Thus, the platonic difference is construed as a final difference, which can only grasp the differences of degrees, without being able to provide a necessary grounding to the Being. Aristotle distinguished between common or proper (communis or propria) difference where the relation of contrariety is conveyed by accidental elements, and specific difference, where contrariety refers to the essence of objects. The specific difference plays the role of a formal cause, meaning that it is a predicate applying to the genus, in order to form the species. Thus, the Aristotelian difference still remains an exterior difference as it is a predicate that requires relating to an exterior concept. Leibniz introduces the idea of infinitesimal difference, engaging the concept of infinite in understanding the difference. Difference appears both at the level of the small infinite, as difference of monads regarded as autonomous, and in the large infinite, as differentiating the things or possible worlds. However, although Leibniz succeeds in offering a different explanation for difference, starting from the infinite and not from the abstract opposition of contraries, he grounds the difference on the principle of sufficient reason, thus reducing it to identity. Hegel returns to the Aristotelian conception of difference as opposition of contraries, taking the idea of difference, as an exterior relation, to the last consequences. Difference is understood from the perspective of dialectical movement that characterizes the Being, as a contradiction affecting all things, to the extent that „the thing differs from itself because it differs first from everything it is not” [13]. Difference displays thus a double hypostasis: on one hand, as a moment of the Being’s self-denial, with a view to its self-determination, and, on the other hand, as an irreconcilable contradiction to be surpassed on another level, by synthesis. In both instances, difference cannot be thought without an exterior determination, and, furthermore, it is thought in the abstract terms of dialectics that have no relation with reality whatsoever. Thus, the dialectic of Hegelian contradiction cannot grasp any differences of degree, or form, being considered an abstract difference.

Against the concept of difference as exteriority, Deleuze would oppose difference as theorized by Bergson, e.g. internal difference. In this case, difference is no longer seen as the external contradiction between opposite things or qualities, but as the result of internal dynamics of the Being, which implies a movement of differentiation from self. The drive of this movement is the élan vital, which, as the essence of life, is what generates the different forms of life by means of differentiation. It is the process of differentiation that, by dissociation and dichotomy, actualizes the virtual in divergent lines, creating the multiplicity of living beings in the world. Differentiation is thus an immanent force, which does not determine an object from the outside, as causality does be it final or formal, but it is the action producing actualizing lines, which belong to the same totality that is life. Nor is it a moment of negativity that is to be surpassed, but it is „essentially positive and creative” [14].

Bergson’s conception of difference is Deleuze’s starting point in formulating a theory of difference that is not subject to the identity, as it was construed from the point of view of contradiction and negativity. Deleuze shows that such a theory, which detaches from the framework of the principle of identity, cannot be achieved without shifting from the understanding of the Being, characterized by unity, to the understanding of the Being as multiplicity. This transition comprised three stages: first, the Being was univocal and neutral (Duns Scotus), then, via Spinoza, the Being surpasses the stage of indifference, identifying itself with nature, thus becoming, „an object of pure affirmation” [15]. However, the Being thus understood, is conceived as independent from modes, without providing their direct understanding and the understanding of the differences that individualize them. Therefore, the last step in the thinking of the Being as multiplicity was done by Nietzsche who theorized the will of power as permanent becoming, which denies any identity, and the Eternal Recurrence as the Being of such becoming, as identity that is subject to difference, by thinking the Same starting from Different. Hence, the Eternal Recurrence is the repetition of difference and its selection, to the extent that „it is not the Whole, the Same or the prior identity in general which returns [...] Only the extreme, the excessive, returns; that which passes into something else and becomes identical” [15]. Therefore, the Eternal Recurrence, as repetition implying the dissolution of prior identities, is regarded as the full accomplishment of the Being, in its univocity. To Deleuze, admitting the multiplicity of the Being means that we should no longer consider this multiplicity as
constituting itself in a unity. Conversely, the multiplicity should be regarded as free from any organization that would lead it to forming a totality. Thus, the world appears to be made of a variety of multiplicities, because „everything is a multiplicity in so far as it incarnates an Idea” [15]. The Idea, in this case, is not the Platonic Idea subsuming multiplicity, but it represents a pure multiplicity, which consists of differential elements, as well as the differential relations between these elements, which are not subordinated to any identity. In other words, Ideas have a virtual content, which is actualized by determining the differential relations that constitute them in order to take the form of distinct species. In this process, it is necessary to distinguish between differentiation, which implies determining the virtual content of the Idea, and differenciation which means „the actualisation of that virtuality into species and distinguished parts” [15]. If differentiation refers to determining the content of the Idea, differenciation is the process of actualizing the virtual, which corresponds to finding a solution in a certain context. Together, the two form the notion of differentiation, which grasps the integrality of the object construed as being made up of a virtual part and an actual one. From the perspective of these distinctions, one should consider two explanations: on one hand, the idea of differenciation does not include the idea of negativity, nor does differentiation. If differentiation is pure positivity, which excludes any negative determination, differenciation refers to the production of actualities in the virtual domain. Thus, the negative does not appear to be at the origins of the process of differenciation, and of difference, but it is rather derived and separate from the process of actualization. On the other hand, actualizing the virtual does not imply identity. As what is actualised does not resemble the virtual, „actual terms never resemble the singularities they incarnate” [15]. Hence, differenciation, by producing divergent lines that do not resemble the virtual multiplicity, is in fact a process of creation. Actualizing the Idea is due to the dynamic processes, which dramatise the Idea. This means that actualization creates a space, according to differential relations, which manifests itself as both interior space and exterior extension. In addition, actualization has a temporal dimension, manifested in the times of differenciation, which forms differential rhythms playing different roles in actualizing the Idea. And last but not least, actualizing also requires consciousness that generates spatial-temporal dynamisms and that „itself traces directions, doubles movements and migrations, and is born on the threshold of the condensed singularities of the body or object whose consciousness it is” [15]. This means that dramatizing the Idea actually is the differenciation of the object by determining the extension, duration, and quality. Thus, actualizing the Idea implies the differenciation occurring both at the qualitative level, via the differential relations contained in the Idea, and at the quantitative level due to the singularities in the Idea. Deleuze’s immanent approach to difference continues with its analysis at the sensible level, which manifests as intensity. Intensity is considered to be difference revealing the qualitative content of quantity. Intensity requires development within extension, within an extensity of qualities. Difference as intensity tends to cancel itself in this development and to homogenise. From the perspective of the relation with difference, intensity is seen as having three characteristics: it includes quantitative difference, which cannot be cancelled in the difference of quantity; including inequality, it asserts difference and does not transform it into a moment of negativity; and thirdly, it appears as implied difference, which does not require a connection with something from the outside. Intensity is what determines the process of actualization; by means of intensity, the dramatisation of spatial-temporal dynamisms determines the actualization of qualities. Thus, intensity individualises qualities and actualizes the potentiality of the virtual while ensuring the integration and communication of differential elements. Hence, intensity is the one that produces, by differenciation, quality and extensions, representing the being of the sensible where different relates to different.

Consequently, Deleuze, by theorizing the Being as immanence and difference as the basis of this immanent Being, relates to metaphysics in the sense of retrieving and not overcoming it. Theorizing difference as internal difference does not merely imply a critique of previous concepts, which subordinated the difference to identity, but also a reconstruction of metaphysics on other principles. In this way, difference is used against the metaphysics of identity with the intention to continue the metaphysical discourse from the perspective of the multiplicity of the Being.
5. Conclusion

What one can draw from analysing contemporary discourses of difference is that difference represents a break from the old discourse of metaphysics, which would prioritise identity, implying the subordination of reality to a transcendent totality that homogenises the diversity of the empirical world. Notwithstanding, this does not mean that the discourse of difference is the continuation of an anti-metaphysical attitude, characterised by a set of common ideas that would dominate the current thinking. Similarly, difference should not be understood from the perspective of the reversal of logic present in the Western thinking ever since its beginnings. Such approaches do nothing but understand the current theories of difference from a unilateral perspective, without taking into account the discontinuities inherent to the history of ideas.

The discourse of difference is anti-metaphysical in that it is directed against the metaphysics of identity. From this perspective, difference as it is currently theorised in philosophical thinking, differs from the difference, as it was understood in classical metaphysics. The latter, in its various approaches, i.e., Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel, is subjected to identity, expressed in different ways: One, genus, synthesis of contraries.

What characterises the current difference is not its anti-metaphysical character, insofar as difference is used, in some versions, to reconstruct metaphysics (Deleuze), but the understanding of the Being as multiplicity. This reversal was initiated by the anti-Platonism of Nietzsche, who, by theorising the will of power, grounded the world on becoming, and then it was carried on by Heidegger, who explicitly theorised difference as an authentic way of understanding the groundings of the Being. In the terms of Blumenberg, Nietzsche and Heidegger are the threshold that marks the end of the metaphysics of identity and herald the new ‘seriousness’ of the difference approached as the grounding of the multiplicity of the Being. Consequently, subsequent versions of theorizing difference are answers to the new questions raised at the time the unitary character of being was abandoned.

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