

## **Different Meanings: a Brief Trajectory of the Concept of Difference**

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Abstract:

*The Anglo–American literary criticism (especially mid 1960s/70s) gives us an impression that the term ‘difference’ must have originated in the structuralist model of analysis in the works of Ferdinand de Saussure. The arrival of poststructuralism dealt with the concept of difference in a different parlance in Derrida’s Writing and Difference or in Deleuze’s Difference and Repetition. However, the fundamental problem of the concept of difference has been central to the fundamental problems in philosophy and the concept has had an intriguing genealogy beginning in pre- Socratic Milesean and Pyrrhonist philosophy that came to be rooted in the idea of identity with Aristotle. The paper attempts to trace briefly the trajectory of the concept from the Milesean philosophers upto the middle of twentieth century.*

**Key words:** *Difference, Pre-socratic, Plato, Aristotle, Structuralism*

It was during the first half of the twentieth century that the popular usage of the concept of difference transformed our understanding of ourselves and that of the world. The concept was applied in almost every branch of literary and cultural studies. Ferdinand de Saussure's most influential work, *Course in General Linguistics (Cours de linguistique générale)*, was published posthumously in 1916 by former students Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, based on the notes taken from his lectures.<sup>1</sup> Saussure proposed linguistic relativity. There can be no linguistic expression without meaning, but also no meaning without language. Saussure's key contributions, to simplify things down to the simplest terms, include the concept of the bilateral signs as consisting of the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’, and the concept of the structure of language as founded on the

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principle opposition. Saussure used the analogy of a game of chess, explicating that the game is not defined by the physical attributes of the chess pieces but by the relation of each piece to the other pieces.<sup>2</sup>

Jacques Derrida's 'Différance' was first used in his 1963 paper "Cogito et histoire de la folie" [Cogito and the History of Madness]. Derrida's 'Différance' is a deliberate and perhaps mischievous misspelling of difference that plays on the French word *différer* meaning "to defer" and "to differ". The misspelling was also meant to underline the fact that the written words cannot be perfectly pronounced and, therefore, the term also served to subvert the traditional privileging of speech over writing. "Since the difference between 'difference' and 'différance' is inaudible, this 'neographism' reminds us of the importance of writing as a structure" (Spivak xliii).<sup>3</sup>

But the concept of difference has a long history and it did not quite originate in structuralism. The Cambridge University Dictionary defines 'difference' as the 'way in which two or more things which one compares are not the same.' Difference signifies the route or assets by which one individual is distinguishable from another within a given conceptual system.<sup>4</sup> To understand one, one needs to understand the difference. The concept of difference crystallizes with the concept of sameness since meanings are not self-contained but rather manufactured by their associations with each other or their difference. There exists a dichotomy between the relational and referential view of linguistic meanings but one can never position oneself outside the structure of language.

The idea of difference was rooted in the idea of identity for Aristotle. 'Sameness' and 'identity' are both antonyms of 'difference' but identity includes both 'sameness' and 'difference'. If we refer to the Dictionary again, it defines identity as i) "who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others" ii) "who a person is, or information that proves who a person is, for example, their name and date of birth."<sup>5</sup> Identity, then, means the property of absolute sameness between separate entities and it also means the unique characteristics of difference of the singular entity. It may be argued that every noun is marked by this kind of dialectic identity for, a noun effectively does two things: i) it asserts a difference, ii) at the same time it denies a universe of difference. For instance, if we say 'flower' we utter a common denominator which distinguishes flowers from fruits but also does injustice to the rich variety of flowers. In a sense every noun is a category or generalization, a potential

collective identity and a potential stereotype. Most nouns involve this double process of sameing and differentiating, a positing common essence between the members of one genus and at the same time marking them different from other species. We must note that ‘difference’ is a property of the objective world as much as it is a property of language, the tool that we use to describe the world. The concept of difference is a critical and a problematic idea in philosophy. Its full lineage lies in the advent of the problem of identity and beginning of creation in the philosophy of several centuries.

Since its primary stages, ancient Greek philosophy had endeavored to propose a rationally unified picture of the process of creation that stood in contrast to the mythologically oriented worldview of a cosmos that was largely subjected to the fleeting and conflicting whims of various imagined deities, who were gods because they possessed two basic characteristics, even if sometimes no virtues-- that of power, and, that of immortality.

Each of the early Milesian philosophers sought to unravel and pinpoint a first principle or *archê* among the five primitive elements that they believed the cosmos was comprised of, namely, earth, water, air, fire, and ether. Thales argued that water was the primary principle of all things, while Anaximenes voted and argued in favor of air and Anaximander insisted that the *apeiron* or the infinite was the beginning of everything.<sup>6</sup> Heraclitus (c. 535 – c. 475 BCE) thought it was Fire. He attempted a rudimentary explanation for the turns of fire. Heraclitus’s fire carried an ontological significance only in a very restricted nous:

“When earth dies, it becomes water; water, air; air, fire; and back to the beginning.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus we find an important point of departure in Heraclitus from his Milesian predecessors. Fire is one of the classical elements but it is of a dynamic nature. It creates and also destroys. Heraclitus insisted on its transformation.

Heraclitean fragments say:

“You cannot step twice into the same rivers; for fresh waters are flowing in upon you.”<sup>8</sup>

“We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not.”<sup>9</sup>

Heraclitus emphasized the apparently paradoxical nature of the cosmos. On the one hand there is an eloquent logic in the proposal in which one may step into the same river twice, step out and step in again. The body of water is marked as the same body by its flow between the two banks, if they are the same land markers they are the same flow. But here is also the paradox: the water that one stepped into for the first time is completely gone by the next moment. The river flows. It is replaced by an entirely new arrangement of particles of water. Here lies the meaningful sense of one cannot step into the same river twice. It is the particular flowing between the particular landmarks that makes the river a particular river. Its identity, therefore, like the identity of the human who steps in, is a fizzy temporariness. We see things around us — rivers, men, women, animals, trees and so forth — but everything is transitory, and we are left deceived. The true nature of nature continuously eludes us.

“Men are deceived in their knowledge of things that are manifest.”<sup>10</sup>

Heraclitus is known as the great thinker of ‘becoming’ or ‘flux’. The being of the universe, the most crucial datum of its nature is in its becoming; for its only permanence is its impermanence. We may look at Heraclitus as the first philosopher of difference, for while his predecessors endeavored to identify the one embryonic element out of which everything emerged, Heraclitus thought of the world to exist in a permanent state of flux.

Parmenides of Elea (c. 515 BC-?) was likely young when Heraclitus was an active philosopher. Parmenides’ views came down to us from the extant fragment of his poem titled *On Nature*. The poem was originally divided into three parts: i) A proem (preamble), which introduced the entire work, ii) a section titled "The Way of Truth" (aletheia), and, iii) a section titled "The Way of Appearance/Opinion" (doxa).

The proem is a narrative sequence in which the narrator travels beyond the paths of the mortal to receive a revelation from an unnamed goddess (Persephone or Dikē) on the nature of reality. “Aletheia”, most part of which is extant, and “doxa”, most part of which is lost, are the spoken revelations of the goddess. Parmenides explicitly objected to Heraclitus’s critical diagnosis that human beings in a delusory way perceive permanence in a universe where change is the only permanent reality. Parmenides believed that all beings are One, and denied the absolute possibility of change. He believed that the cosmos is full (not void),

uncreated, eternal, indestructible, unchangeable, immobile sphere of being, and all sensory evidence that perceive of change is illusory. A Parmenidean fragment states, "Either a thing is or it is not," meaning that creation and destruction is impossible.<sup>11</sup>

A paper on science may take a different turn from here. This argument for the one rules out the argument of becoming and passing away as the nature of things. We will refer to Patricia Curd, who in *The Legacy of Parmenides* clarifies that,

The crisis at the heart of Parmenides' argument, "is or is not," rules out any candidate for an ultimate entity in an explanation of what there is that is subject to coming-to-be, passing-away, or alteration of any sort. Such an entity must be a whole, complete, unchanging unity: it must be a thing that is of a single kind ... But it does not follow from this that there can be only one such entity. Parmenides' arguments allow for a plurality of fundamental, predicationally unified entities that can be used to explain the world reported by the senses.<sup>12</sup>

Thus Parmenides seemed to have claimed that permanence did exist, but it was precisely what most people, including Heraclitus, missed out for remaining preoccupied with the mundane. The being of the cosmos was, in the present is, and is not in its becoming, as Heraclitus had thought.

The Pyrrhonist philosophers (3rd – 1st Century BC.) include Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360-c. 270 BC, who is customarily credited with founding the school of skeptical philosophy), Sextus Empiricus, Aenesidemus and Agrippa. The core practice of the Pyrrhonist was setting arguments against arguments to achieve an *epoché*, or a suspension of judgment. To their benefit Aenesidemus and Agrippa developed sets of stock arguments that underline the concept of relation and difference. The ten tropes of Aenesidemus that have come down to us are:

Different animals manifest different modes of perception.

Similar differences are seen among individual men.

For the same man, information perceived with the senses is self-contradictory.

Furthermore, it varies from time to time with physical changes.

In addition, this data differs according to local relations.

Objects are known only indirectly through the medium of air, moisture, etc.

These objects are in a condition of perpetual change in colour, temperature, size and motion.

All perceptions are relative and interact one upon another.

Our impressions become less critical through repetition and custom.

All men are brought up with different beliefs, under different laws and social conditions.

Superordinate to these ten modes stand three other modes:

- I: that based on the subject who judges (modes 1, 2, 3 & 4).
- II: that based on the object judged (modes 7 & 10).
- III: that based on both subject who judges and object judged (modes 5, 6, 8 & 9)<sup>13</sup>

Superordinate to these three modes was the mode of relation. Owing to the "circumstances, conditions or dispositions," the same objects appear different to different beings, animals and humans and to the same human from time to time. The same temperature may feel different after extended exposure to extreme temperature, the same honey may taste bitter. Even the passage of time is relative. Our perceptions vary based on positions, distances, locations, beliefs, dogmatic conceptions. Since all things appear relative, the Pyrrhonist philosophers proposed suspension of judgement about what and how things absolutely and really exist.

Plato (428/427 or 424/423 – 348/347 BC) attempted a synthesis of the Heraclitean and the Parmenidean hypothesis in his theory of forms. Throughout his *Dialogues*, he unswervingly gives credibility to the Heraclitean observation that all things in the material world are in a constant state of flux. The Parmenidean inspiration is also evident in Plato's philosophy that genuine knowledge must concern itself only with the eternal and the unchanging. Given the transient nature of material things true knowledge does not apply to the mundane world but rather to the Forms which are eternal and unchanging of which these material things are

only representations. For Plato, everything that existed in the physical world partook both in being and in not-being. Every circle is a circle to the extent that we recognize its resemblance, but is not a perfect circle or rather the absolute embodiment of the circle because if it is manifested it cannot be perfect. Manifestation is, therefore, grounded in difference from the Platonic form.

Aristotle (384–322 BC) in *Metaphysics* made a conceptual distinction between difference and otherness. Aristotle spoke of ‘continuity,’ ‘wholeness’ or ‘unity,’ of ‘number’ and ‘kind.’ In the organic sense a wo/man is one, s/he is also numerically one, her/ his living body institutes one wo/man, as different to many wo/men. Aristotle used the concept of otherness to characterize existing things which have not one ‘difference’. He applied the term difference only when there was some definite sense in which two things may be said to differ, which required a higher category of identity within which a dissimilarity might be drawn:

Evidently, then, 'other' and 'unlike' also have several meanings. And the other in one sense is the opposite of the same (so that everything is either the same as or an other than everything else). In another sense things are other unless both their matter and their definition are one (so that you are other than your neighbour). The other in the third sense is exemplified in the objects of mathematics. 'Other or the same' can therefore be predicated of everything with regard to everything else-but only if the things are one and existent, for 'other' is not the contradictory of 'the same'; which is why it is not predicated of non-existent things (while 'not the same' is so predicated). It is predicated of all existing things; for everything that is existent and one is by its very nature either one or not one with anything else.<sup>14</sup>

Differences in genus are evidently pronounced, while differences within species are minute but a special contrariety is complete, embodying an affirmation or negation of a particular given quality by which genera are differentiated into species. In Aristotle’s view, first, there is the identity that two different things share within a common genus and, second, there is the identity of the characteristics by which two things are differentiated. For instance: material versus non-material, living versus non-living, sentient versus non-sentient, rational versus irrational, and so forth. This difference then is a way in which a thing that is A is an A, is not like a thing like B which is B, while both belong to a higher category of identity (genus). He specified that the other and the same were

opposed but difference is not the same as otherness. Aristotle thought of difference in terms of identity.

Following Gottfried Wilhelm (von) Leibniz's (July 1646 – 1716) *Principles* the concept of difference in western philosophical thought was traditionally viewed as being opposed to identity. Of the seven fundamental principles proposed by Leibniz the first two include Identity/contradiction and identity of indiscernibles. The second principle, also referred to as Leibniz's Law states that:

If every predicate possessed by x is also possessed by y and vice versa, then entities x and y are identical; to suppose two things indiscernible is to suppose the same thing under two names.<sup>15</sup>

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) argues that it is necessary to distinguish between the thing in itself and its appearance. Even if two objects have absolutely the same properties, if they are at two different places at the same time, they are numerically different. Thus two things of the same constitution if located at different places at the same time are numerically different. By common sense, they are obviously different entities.

For one part of space, although it may be perfectly similar and equal to another part, is still without it, and for this reason alone is different from the latter .... It follows that this must hold good of all things that are in the different parts of space at the same time, however similar and equal one may be to another.<sup>16</sup>

We may briefly refer to Simone de Beauvoir's (1908 – 1986) *The Second Sex* where she referred to the category of the 'Other' saying that alterity is fundamental category of human thought. She explained that no group can ever identify itself as one without setting up an opposite group. It takes only three travellers to catch up in a train for the other co-passengers to become others. She was, of course, advancing her theory of women as the 'Other'.

The concept of difference thus travelled its own history before surfacing within the context of Structuralism. Within the praxis of Structuralism the concept of difference originated in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913) whose lectures were collected and published posthumously as *Cours de linguistique générale* in 1916 and available in English translation as *Course in*



*General Linguistics* in 1959. Structuralism casts the concept of difference into another important philosophical valence.

There are two broad characteristics of twentieth century philosophy that are reflected in Saussure – first, the focus considerably shifted from things in themselves to the relationship between things, and second, that philosophical problems in the twentieth century began to be seen as problems about language. A laconic expression of both of these philosophical tendencies can be found in Saussure’s proposition that “in language there is only difference and no positive terms”.<sup>17</sup>

Reading Saussure might produce a wonder in us because of his technical use of the word ‘difference’. Saussure used the term ‘value’ to express the way in which meaning is generated by difference. One of Saussure’s basic propositions is to view the linguistic sign as a two-sided inescapable entity – the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified.’ The value of a sign is generated by difference between words. There is no extralinguistic veracity to confirm the meaning of words. The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary and there is no reason for attaching a particular signifier to a particular signified except in rare cases such as in onomatopoeic signs in which the signifier actually sounds like the signified and is therefore motivated rather than arbitrary. But it is only convention that repeatedly attaches a particular signifier to the signified and the association gains force through repetition. Meaning exists on a network of differences. Saussure’s synchronic study indicated the ‘presentia’ and ‘absentia’ and ‘syntagmatic’ and ‘paradigmatic’ relationship of words.

In order to elucidate the importance of the system of differences that assign value to a sign, Saussure invoked analogous questions of identity. His famous analogy is that of the train under synchronic identities. Saussure pointed out that trains, much like signs, are systems of differences without positive terms. He pointed out that the identity of 8.45 from Geneva to Paris is not substantial but relational. The coaches and the engine that make up the physical train may be changed from time to time but it would remain the 8.45 from Geneva as long as the difference with, say a train running at 7.45 from Geneva, was maintained. As long as the difference is maintained the identity of the train will remain secured. The 8.45 train will be perceived as the same train also regardless of which day of the week it departs.

We assign identity, for instance, to two trains “the 8.45 from Geneva to Paris”, one of which leaves twenty four hours after the other. We treat it as the ‘same train’ even though probably the locomotive, the carriages, the staff etc. are not the same ... the train is identified by its departure time, its route, and any other feature which distinguishes it from other trains.<sup>18</sup>

Saussure established the same argument with an analogy of chess boards. Within the structure of the chess board the identity is attained by the relation and differences with other pieces. The real identity of the train or the chess pieces are effaced by the concept of difference. Applying the very idea to human beings we see that a wo/man’s cells are cyclically changed, s/he grows in height, gains or loses weight, wears different hairstyles and looks, acquires different skills, but carries the tag as the same person. It is therefore obvious that identity in general, the identity of a person, or that of a social group, might not so much be located on the identity of the body of an individual but rather in the relations between that person and others. A person might not even be defined by inherent characteristics, like forgetting or acquiring skills, learning new languages etc. but drawing from Saussure’s train or chess pieces her/his identity is to be understood through the relationship that the person has with other people, in a system of family, in friendship and in social groups. Such is the relational view of personal identity. The same might be said of collective identities like community or national identity. Claude Levi Strauss, an anthropologist (1908 – 2009) adopted the Saussurean model of language to his analysis of social relations in such a way that the analysis yielded structural homologies across cultural differences.

Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and Benjamin Whorf (1897-1941) have offered a culturally deterministic view that linguistic differences and cultural differences might be the same thing. For Sapir ‘Difference’ is a culturally relative way of making discriminations and the system of differences in a language system therefore becomes the reality of that culture.

The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. . . . We see and hear and otherwise

experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation." <sup>19</sup>

When poststructuralism arrived, there must have been some surprise in store for those who viewed the concept of difference only as a structuralist issue. Derrida's *Writing and Difference* (1978) and Giles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (1994) seemed only marginally related to structural linguists. Derrida's work where the concept of difference underwent some significant alterations made very little reference to Saussure. In Deleuze's major work *Difference and Repetition* there was only brief reference to Saussure. Critics like Brian Massumi pointed out that Deleuze's approach to language is more closely derived from stoic philosophers than from Saussure.

In *Positions* (1981) Derrida described the approach to deconstruction's binary oppositions as having three phases: the first phase is an exposure of hierarchy of the assumed superiority of one term over the other, the second phase is the reversal of that assumed hierarchy in order to promote the secondary and derivative term to the position of superiority, and the third phase was the reinscription of that opposition which involved the disruption of the arrangement of the difference between the two terms. Derrida argued that the privileged is nothing more than an inherited prejudice. The term 'difference' carried within it not only the structural relations of a word that linked it to a stable language system, but also to the temporal relations of the word to other words which preceded it and followed it. The Saussurean model had proposed that meaning be analyzed as a spatial structure. There may have been an interest in narrative time in theory, but in practice, the dimension of synchronic analysis was generally disregarded. Derridean concept of difference can be understood as an attempt to think about difference and time at the same time thus allowing a temporal dimension into the analysis of language. This model of difference brought to the fore a trace structure that implied that the relationships between the elements of a sentence were always in motion, that any sign was always qualifying those preceding it in the sequence, or waiting to be qualified by those that followed it. 'Protension' and 'retension' were hints of the future and 'traces' of the past which, he argued, constituted the present. When Derrida referred to the metaphysical concepts of meaning, time or history, he drew attention to this foundational illusion of presence. Thus, the Derridian sign is a structure of

exclusion. The whole idea of the sign as a carrier of meaning is based on the principle that its meaning could be fenced off from other meanings.

Gilles Deleuze (1925- 1995) is perhaps the most substantial philosopher of difference of the twentieth century. Like Derrida, his concept of difference does not begin with Saussure, but is rooted in a longer tradition of philosophers of difference such as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Bergeson and Heidegger. Difference is easily conceived as a kind of division of something singular and self-identical, as the identification of species within a genus in such a way that difference cannot be asserted without involving the existence of identity of the undivided at the same time. For Deleuze, difference is too often thought of as an inferior number in an opposition with the concept of identity. In *Difference and Repetition*, (first published in Paris, 1968,) he sets out the arguments that oppose difference to representation in general on the grounds that representation is the logic of mediating identities as static entities.

The immediate defined ‘sub-representative’, is therefore not to be attained by multiplying representations and points of view. On the contrary, each composing representation must be distorted, diverted and torn from its centre. Each point of view must itself be the object, or the object must belong to the point of view. The object must therefore in no way be identical, but torn asunder in a difference in which the identity of the object as seen by a seeing subject vanishes....Every object, everything must see its own identity swallowed up in difference, each being no more than a difference between differences. Difference must be shown differing. <sup>20</sup>

Deleuze’s position can be understood not only in relation to structuralism but also to Hegelian dialectic thinking. Why, he asks, does Saussure at the very moment when he discovers that “in languages there are only differences” add that these differences are, “without positive terms” and equally negative? And equally he claims that a Hegelian (meaning a philosopher concerned with dialectics and contradictions, and therefore with binary oppositions) feels ill at ease in a “complex or perplexed differential mechanism...” in the absence of the uniformity of a large contradiction,

It seems to us that pluralism is a more enticing and dangerous thought: fragmentation implies overturning. The discovery in any

domain of a plurality of coexisting oppositions is inseparable from a more profound discovery, that of difference, which denounces the negative and opposition itself as no more than appearances in relation to the problematic field of a positive multiplicity. One cannot pluralize opposition without leaving its domain and entering a case of difference which resonate a pure positivity and reject opposition as no more than a shadow cavern seen from without.<sup>21</sup>

Deleuze is one of many poststructuralists whose work can be seen as a kind of opposition to opposition, or an attempt to liberate thinking from the structures of opposition and open it to multiplicity.

Cultural critics from diverse academic positions speak of alterity. It generally more or less involves, again to simplify in simplest terms, a general property of otherness that is the secondary identity in relation to which a dominant identity is structured. But there remains another aspect of alterity and otherness. Alterity often refers to a kind of other-worldliness to an ungraspable or indefinable quality of the Other. Jean-François Lyotard (1924 – 1998) begins his work *The Differend* (1983) with the following account:

As distinguished from a litigation, a differend [différend] would be a case of conflict, between (at least two) parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for the lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgement to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them (and both of them if neither side admits the rule).<sup>22</sup>

A 'differend' therefore is an actual and unsolvable dispute which is in a sense generated by unbridgeable cultural difference.

Thus we see that although the concept of differential ontology takes us specifically to Derrida and Deleuze, the problem of 'difference' is as old as philosophy itself.

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