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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

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