

## “The Eclipse of Difference”

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WERE ONE TO WRITE a general philosophical history of the concept of difference, one might be tempted to view it as the history of the progressive emancipation of difference from identity. Beginning with the Parmenidean conception of pure identity, of Being free of all difference, such a history would document the movement of difference from its position, in Plato, as one pole of a dialectical structure to its acquisition of the dominant role in the constitution of identity, or the Absolute, in German Idealism. The correctness of a history of this kind would seem further to be demonstrated by the fact that in contemporary literary criticism – in a certain trend at least – "difference" has become the key term. Indeed, not only does the criticism in question seem to confirm and validate the history of such an emancipation, but in this light, it positions itself as the culminating moment of this particular view of history. Difference here reigns supreme. A quick glance at recent book titles reveals the term not only apposed to everything, but in everything. It is said of anything and everything, indiscriminately, manifesting a determination that, as a practice, criticism ought to make a difference too. If at the dawn of philosophical thinking difference scarcely left the shadow of identity, identity now barely shows its face, and, with its departure from the scene, this brand of criticism would seem perhaps to have liberated itself not only from the exigency in Western thought to think of difference and identity in relation to each other, but also from the thought that difference exists only within identity, the One, the whole – whether or not the concept of difference has been taken up in the concept of the unity of all that is.

Still, this criticism does not represent a homogeneous body of utterances

and gestures, and whatever claims it may make need to be examined individually. Clearly, they are not all of equal thrust or importance. I propose the following rough classification of the critical discourses on difference. A first kind of such criticism uses the term as an incantation, in the vain hope of appearing different. This criticism has transformed the Kierkegaardian claim that to exist means to be different into the maxim that being different is requisite in order to make it in the profession. A second type is based on the assumption that difference is an elementary and original form of the *real* itself. This variety of criticism, centered on issues ranging from gender difference to differences of race, draws on empirical understanding and appreciation of difference. Combined with a thorough familiarity with the field and competence in the discipline that corresponds to it, such criticism can, of course, yield invaluable insights into sociological, political, psychological, and physiological differences. The third, and final, sort of discourse on difference sounds a more philosophical note. It is a criticism that aims at demonstrating – through reading both literary and philosophical texts – that philosophical difference is undecidable, that is, that discrete distinctions, including the difference between philosophy and literature itself, cannot be upheld. By multiplying distinctions and differences, this approach to literary and philosophical texts aims at showing that the infinite duplication and multiplication that emerges from its readings escapes the mastery of philosophy. It is on this last kind of criticism that I wish to focus my attention, in particular, on its place in the history alluded to, and especially on the nature of the concept of difference that it puts to work.

But, before beginning, I wish to recall Giorgio Vattimo's criticism in *Les Aventures de la différence* of what he terms "the thought of difference" in contemporary French philosophy.(1) Although Vattimo's target is the doctrine of difference in Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida, he approaches this doctrine primarily through the works of the latter's disciples, in particular Bernard Pautrat, Jean-Michel Rey, and Sarah Kofman. As a result, Deleuze and Derrida are portrayed as having developed a theory of difference according to which difference is repressed and forgotten by Western thought. As a follow-up to Heidegger's meditation on the ontological difference, and as a return to Nietzsche's remembrance of an originary difference under the figure of Dionysos, this theory, aimed at bringing difference back, rendering it present again, would demonstrate a way of stepping out of and beyond metaphysics. In what certainly amounts to a caricature of Derrida's thought, Vattimo

claims that for Derrida the forgotten difference is of the order of "the signified, the Platonic idea, the *ontos on* of the whole of metaphysics," since "man's discourse unfolds only within difference whether he forgets it and takes it as a natural frame, or repeats it all over again in poetic discourse."(2) In the case of Deleuze, Vattimo holds, difference is of the order of a universalized Platonic simulacrum free of all structures, models, and referents, thus annulling, in its endless duplication, the very possibility of distinguishing and establishing hierarchies between differences.(3) By repeating difference in a parodistic rewriting of metaphysics, through which full presence is to be restored to the forgotten difference, Derrida and Deleuze uphold a relation of conscious remembering of difference, thus revealing their roots in a metaphysics of subjectivity and self-consciousness. And Vattimo, concludes that the only difference this parodistic duplication of metaphysics inherent in the thought of difference – a duplication, he contends, that remains eminently contemplative in a Spinozist sense – can make is to harden and solidify the metaphysical concept of difference itself Further, rather than making a difference with respect to the whole of metaphysics, the thought of "difference dissolves difference," since it tends "to cover up and forget the different possible ways of problematizing difference."(4)

I will return later to Vattimo's reasons for so describing the thought of difference in the writings of Derrida. At this point, however, I wish to linger on Vattimo's arguments against the so-called radicality of what he construed as "the thought of difference," precisely because they seem to apply as well to the third type of literary criticism, which, in North America, seeks to debunk philosophical difference and hierarchies between concepts in the name of a generalized difference, and practice of difference. Indeed, it is a criticism that, while failing to question the metaphysical notion of difference itself, is based on its mere repetition and multiplication. By merely reenacting, even if infinitely, philosophical difference in the rewriting and duplicating of the philosophical text in parodistic fashion, instead of delving into the nature of the concept of difference itself, this criticism only contributes to a further stiffening of the classical concept of difference. It might well be a criticism that unknowingly, and despite its shocking looks, plays into the hands of what is most traditional in philosophical thought. What this practice unearths as philosophy's Other, what according to it cannot be mastered by philosophy – a plethora of differences - is what always falls under philosophy's jurisdiction. Above all, this sort of criticism only confirms

philosophy in its belief that there is no outside to it, since mere multiplication and abyssal infinitization of difference do not represent any essential threat.

Moreover, a rewriting of the philosophical text intended to exhibit and render conscious the play of difference that supposedly grounds it is possible only from a position of consciousness. Such a praxis of difference is also eminently self-reflexive. Further, the vertiginous and highly virtuoso performance through which such self-reflexivity takes shape, and in which, rather than being put into question, the elemental binarism of philosophical difference becomes overpotentiated, reveals this criticism's indebtedness to the metaphysics of subjectivity and to the ideal, if not the ideology, of subjective mastery.

What are the implications of the foregoing assessment of the third kind of critical discourse on difference? The most immediate conclusion is that this discourse does not break with traditional philosophical thought, and especially not with its concept of difference. If this is the case, this third form of criticism might not have achieved the emancipation of difference from identity, or the goal of bringing the history of this emancipation to a definite end. Yet before arguing that the discourse in question and its practice of difference remain, in spite of the profuse production of differences, intimately connected with identity – indeed, to such a degree that to describe this discourse as a reading centered on difference is at best one-sided - it must be asked whether difference can ever be severed from identity, and thus, whether a history of a successful emancipation of one from the other is at all thinkable. First, the history of philosophical thought shows that such emancipation was always only partial. What takes place from Parmenides to Hegel, and beyond, is a relative liberation in which difference, rather than being effaced in the face of identity, is shown to have its only meaningful place within identity, and to play a constitutive role in the becoming effective of identity, whose priority nonetheless remains unrivaled. But apart from the factual history of philosophy, there are essential reasons that prevent the severing of difference from identity. By abolishing the difference between difference and identity, philosophy would slip back into the nonphilosophical, in short, into a kind of empiricism, in which the power of the manifold and spurious infinity prevail, and where the difference that thinking makes – the thought of identity – has not yet emerged. That the bond between identity and difference is an essential bond, and is constitutive of what difference means in philosophy, becomes evident in any careful

analysis of the various articulations of difference to be found in the history of philosophical thinking. Still, Aristotle's notion of difference (*diaphora*), more precisely of *differentia specifica*, stands out as a privileged vantage point for my purposes, since this concept became the metaphysically relevant concept of difference for the history of Western philosophical thought. Since Aristotle's theory on difference is far from being clear and coherent, such a discussion ought to take the form of a learned and thoughtful debate with the relevant passages in the *Metaphysics*, *Topics*, and *Posterior Analytics*. For my purposes, however, the following exposition must suffice.(5)

Let me recall that *differentia specifica* is only one among several kinds of difference. Indeed, the term *diaphora* is much broader than simply (logical) difference. As the following passage from the *Metaphysics* demonstrates, it first signifies the "being other of things": "Things are said to be 'different' when they are other (*hetera*), but are in some respect the 'same': other not merely numerically, but formally or generically or analogically. To be different things must be generically other, or contraries, or other in their very being."<sup>6</sup> From the start it must be noted that only that which, although other, is also in some respect the same can be called different. The difference of species belonging to one and the same genus, *differentia specifica*, is just one mode of being other in the above sense. But *differentia specifica* is also the metaphysically privileged determination of being other, indeed, the determination that alone merits being called "difference." It alone provides *essential* difference, compared with which the other types of difference, although based on sameness, are of limited bearing, because their origin is ontic. This is, in particular, the case of what is *properly* predicated of things, that is, of the characteristic peculiar to a peculiar thing. The proper (*idion*, *proprium*), though always characteristic of a given thing, or species, and hence effectively contributing to its distinction, is a function of the thing's or species' relation to other things or species. It is not *kath'auto*, having only empirical necessity. The proper, as a characteristic peculiar to a peculiar thing, is neither a general characteristic nor a combination of general characteristics. Some differences, by contrast, although they rest also on the defining character of sameness, and thus qualify as genuine differences under Aristotle's definition, measured against the specific difference, seem barely to merit the title. One of them, the difference between species that no longer meet in a univocal concept, but meet only in an analogical one (such as quantity or quality), a difference which Thomas Aquinas designates *diversitas*,

according to Aristotle, can no longer properly be called difference. What then is *differentia specifica*? What sets it so radically apart from all other modes of difference, and thus establishes its essentiality, is its pertinence to the category of the genus.

Aristotle's general definition of *diaphora*, or difference, shows that difference requires that what is said to be different must in one respect be the same (*to auto ti onta*). As soon as such sameness is no longer guaranteed, as in the case of simple diversity, one can no longer rigorously speak of difference. Yet the specific, or logical, difference that permits the distinction of one species from another is a difference operative *within* the genus (and not, as in the case of the proper, within species, that is, among already constituted things). The genus is what is common to all species, yet not in the sense of one independent essence shared by all the species, but as that within which difference creates the species. Through difference the genus becomes realized as species. *Differentia* is thus, as Silvian Nacht-Eladi remarks, "the genus itself in activity ... Differentia and genus are one thing." (7) In conclusion, if difference, in the sense of *differentia specifica*, is the genus itself in activity, in its capacity of becoming different "on each occasion that it is realized in a different species," (8) then the genus, the generic, the general is that which assures the sameness of difference, and of the different. If according to Aristotle the *differentia* is the essence of the thing or species, it is thus because it is the realized genus itself, shared differently in all the things or species of a *genus proximum*. In spite of being a singular way of being genus, the *differentia specifica*, because it is difference in genus, also has a generality that sets it apart from the character peculiar to a thing. Moreover, being genus in activity, *differentia specifica* as the essence of a thing or species-as its definition – is *kath'auto*, the result not of a semantic-differential relation to other things or species, but, as Josef Simon remarks, of "*relation of the thing itself*, which therefore cancels itself out as relation. The 'specific' difference is to signify the essence itself and not to contain any demarcation of the essence." (9) In summary then, difference as specific difference presupposes the sameness of genus within which alone it is meaningful. It is as difference within genus that the concept of the *differentia specifica* is the essential philosophical concept of difference, a concept in which difference is intimately linked with identity. (10)

Yet if difference cannot properly be thought without a common milieu, an identity, a *genus proximum* in which it takes place, what happens to this requirement in a criticism which, in its readings, intensifies

and proliferates difference? If the requirement in question no longer applies, this "difference" might no longer coincide with the philosophical concept of difference. It would perhaps be of the order of what, following Aristotle, we can barely call difference anymore. In that case, however, all the operations of this criticism remain extrinsic, and without any bearing on the philosophical concept of difference. Assuming, on the contrary, as I do here, that in effect the criticism in question continues to put classical difference to work, what kind of identity could such criticism presuppose, and knowingly or unknowingly promote, under the guise of an unlimited plurification of difference? Indeed, if Vattimo is correct in claiming that the thought of difference, as he understands it, merely solidifies and stiffens the metaphysical concept of difference, then the criticism I am considering, which is aimed at debunking philosophical difference, must, paradoxically, and at least surreptitiously foster some unity, identity, or totality in the practice of "making (a) difference." Although such critical multiplication of difference may seem to invite nihilism and subversion, nothing could be less true. Indeed, as I have already suggested, multiplication of differences is only one aspect of the practice of critical reading. It also proceeds by forcing difference into line, and to the subsequent reciprocal annihilation of all differences, to the self-cancellation of any position via its opposite, different Other. Yet as Derrida has noted, annulment and equalization of what is in the mode of *pro* and *contra* is a "free shot which aims ... to collect its interest" ("C'est le coup pour rien, qui ne se tente d'ailleurs jamais sans intérêt").(11) The interest in question is an interest in eliminating, through reciprocal equaling out of differences, difference itself. Critical readings know only one kind of difference. According to this very restricted concept holding all difference to be identical, difference is determined by a relation of inversion and reversal, of opposition, understood as a relation of equalizing canceling of terms standing against each other. This generic relation of a homogeneous kind of difference is generalized, which means that difference itself becomes annulled in an equally homogeneous whole of the differents. This whole – the end product of critical readings of this kind – is the tightly woven knit of the crisscrossed relations of inversion that string the differences together. From the outset, it has been what has made the differences the same, not merely "in some respect," but in all respects. Rather than the emancipation of difference from identity, difference eclipses itself in this criticism and becomes a genus, the genus of difference, rather than difference in genus, replacing it, as it were,

Parmenidean Being with the identity of difference. Instead of a radical break with philosophical difference, this criticism, all differences considered, repeats the former's major features, yet in a manner that impedes the possibility of questioning philosophical difference's presuppositions and limitations. Such blockage of an inquiry into the metaphysical concept of difference is, indeed, what allows this criticism to be characterized as a parodistic rewriting of metaphysics.

By contrast, Heidegger's thought of the ontological difference is an investigation into the very presuppositions of the philosophical concept of difference. I recall that Vattimo charged French contemporary thinkers with forgetting the very source of inspiration from which they drew their "thought of difference," namely, Heidegger's meditation on the ontological difference. Whether this is a correct assessment remains to be seen. Yet, compared with the parodistic rewriting of metaphysical difference in the third kind of criticism discussed, Heidegger's elaboration of difference is fundamental and radical. It amounts to a foregrounding of the classical concept of difference in a difference more originary, in that it conceptualizes that from which differents come into a relation of standing against one another. It is a thinking of difference on this side of an the possible modes that difference as relation can assume, the relation of inversion or reversal included. This is a concept of difference that not only is philosophically more fundamental than the ones evoked hereto, but that *truly* makes a difference. It is a *radical* difference, indeed, radical in all the senses of the word: it is marked by considerable departure from the usual or traditional meaning of the term; it is basic and fundamental, growing from, or proceeding from, a root which it constitutes itself. What then is the difference that Heidegger calls the difference between Being and beings, the ontico-ontological difference, ontological difference, or, in his later works, simply "Dif-ference"?

From its beginning in Greece, Western philosophical thinking has systematically unfolded in the space provided by what Heidegger calls "the one basic differentiation" ("*die* ursprüngliche Scheidung"), the difference between Being and beings.(12) This difference is, as Heidegger puts it in *Identity and Difference*, "the ground plan in the structure of the essence of metaphysics."(13) Indeed, the difference between the twofold meaning of *to on*, as *ta onta* or to *einai*, is the matrix from which Western thought springs. Yet, from the beginning, Western thought has also conceived of Being only from the perspective of beings, and with respect to them alone, understanding Being, consequently, as only another,

however excellent or superior, being or existent. In thus representing Being, and with it the difference between Being and beings, "in respect of what differs in the difference, and without heeding the difference as difference,"(14) Western thought has covered up the founding difference – not only the difference which allows for the Being of beings, but the difference in which the possibility of philosophical thought is rooted as well. Because of this consistent interpretation of Being in terms of beings (as *ousia*), Western thought, according to Heidegger, has been from the start onto-theo-logy, metaphysics, in short.

Yet, if it is true that Being is nothing but the Being of beings, it is also true that, as such, it must be radically different from beings themselves, even from the universe of beings, from being in totality. Above all, Being cannot possess ontic qualifications, and chiefly among them, being in the sense of existence, presence, presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*). As Heidegger notes, the distinction between Being and beings is not "merely a distinction of the intellect (*ens rationis*)."(15) As a matter of fact, the ontological difference is a distinction in neither the usual nor the philosophical sense of the word. It is not fabricated by our understanding, and hence of the order of understanding's activity of representation, but a distinction made by what Heidegger calls *thinking*. It is not even a distinction in a strict sense. More precisely, the difference between Being and beings is not a difference based on *distinction*. In other words, it is radically different from the philosophical concept of difference.

Even though *differentia specifica* characterizes a thing or a species as a relation determined in itself, hence as a relation that is almost not one anymore, the definition of the essence of a thing or species presupposes its distinction from other essences, or definitions. As distinction, however, the *differentia specifica* – difference *per genus et differentiam* – is rooted in relations between things or species. But relations, whether they occur between real things (ontic beings) or things of thought (universal concepts such as individuals, species, or genera), presuppose that these things are not only already determined things, or concepts, but that they are to begin with. Moreover, difference as distinction finds the "between" for the beings to be distinguished by already between them. It is a given that they already occupy. Difference as distinction, or difference as relation in such a given *between*, and between things already constituted, however, is something which our representing has added to the things or species under consideration. It is, as Heidegger writes in *Identity and Difference* "something made up by our understanding."(16) Finally, since relation

presupposes the existence of what is different, the difference added by understanding to things or species is *ultimately* ontic in origin.

From the foregoing it ought to be clear that the philosophical concept of difference does not account for the "between" in which one finds that things and species in their difference are already present. Consequently, the question arises: "Where does the 'between' come from, into which the difference is, so to speak, to be inserted?"(17) The difference that this "between" makes is necessarily more fundamental than all philosophical (logical) or commonplace distinction. Since this difference is presupposed by all difference as distinction and relation, it must be "older" than distinction and relation. To circle back, then, to the difference between Being and beings, let me note that if this difference were a distinction, it would also apply to a region in which one "finds that Being and beings in their difference are already there."(18) Yet Being is not there in the same way as beings are. If beings are what *is*, Being refers to the being (in a verbal sense) of beings, to what gives being. The difference between Being and beings is the difference between Being as the horizon whose opening makes it possible for beings to appear within it, and beings as those things which appear and come to stand within that horizon itself (including the manifold relations and differences that go with them). It is a difference between dissimilars, in other words. The difference between Being and beings, the ontico-ontological difference, is therefore the (ontological) difference which *Being itself* makes and in which difference as relation (between existent things, or between them and the non-homogeneity of what metaphysics calls reality, the One, God, being, and so on), that is, difference between things or concepts, can come to the fore, difference according to what Jean-Luc Marion has termed "the 'vulgar concept' of difference."(19) The ontological difference is no distinction at all; it is not a difference *between* Being *and* beings, it is what lets beings into the between of their manifold differences. The ontological difference which comes specifically into view as soon as Being is thought in its difference from beings, and beings in their difference from Being, is thus the "Dif-ference (*Unter-Schied*)" that opens the "between" for the difference between Being and beings as well.

To bring this unheard-of difference into view, properly and on its own terms, yet not, as Habermas contends, as "Being, as distinguished from beings by way of hypostatization,"(20) but as the Being *of* beings, is the primary task of thinking. The subject matter of thinking is Being in its difference from the beings whose Being it is, in short "difference *as*

difference," difference as the difference of Being and beings, difference as such *difference*.(21) This then, is the point where the excellence of the question of Being, that is, of difference as difference, becomes apparent. It is also the moment at which it ought to be obvious that the difference Heidegger attempts to think neither originates in the philosophical concept of difference as distinction nor extends that concept by metaphysically hardening it in a manner similar to that designated by Vattimo as "the thought of difference." As the "ground" of all difference based on relation and distinction, difference as difference not only is in a position of anteriority to difference, but also differs in nature from the vulgar concept of difference. It is incommensurable with vulgar, consequently with philosophical, difference as well.

By elaborating in the following what sort of "experience" in thinking inaugurates Heidegger's meditation on the ontological difference, I hope to render this privileged status even more telling. Heidegger's concept of the ontological difference derives from his elaborations on man's relation to what is – to man's existence in the world, as well as to beings in the world. As he notes in *The Essence of Reasons*, whatever shape the human being's relations between him and beings take, they presuppose that the human being (or, for that matter, *Dasein*) has always already surpassed beings in a totality, and in totality.(22) Only on condition that the whole of what is has been surpassed can any distinguishing and deciding occur within the realm of beings. Seen in the light of beings, all relation to them, say their representation, is always already above and beyond them. "The representation of what is, judged from what is, is always beyond what is – *meta*."(23) In the human being's relation to beings, beings thus become equivocal (*zweideutig*) and twofold (*zweifältig*). They not only are represented as beings, but faced in their Being as well. What this means is that all of the human being's relations to beings, himself and the human Others included, are grounded in the possibility of the essence of *Dasein* that Heidegger calls *transcendence*. Whether or not the human being is aware of it, he has transcended himself, as well as the totality of what is, in the thought of the Being of what is. Consequently, the breaking up or out of the ontological difference is rooted in *Dasein*'s surpassing, in the transcendence that characterizes it in essence. As "*a basic constitutive feature of Dasein that happens prior to all behavior*," transcendence occurs in the form of the rift between Being and beings. This rift of the ontological difference is the possibility of "*the ability [of the human being] to differentiate*," and to distinguish. It is an ability,

Heidegger remarks, "in which the Ontological Difference becomes factual."(24) In sum then, the thought of the ontological difference follows from the insight that all relational differentiation between beings presupposes prior to it that beings be experienced in their Being, and in what is present in its presencing (*Anwesen*). The thought of the ontological difference is thus rooted in an experience *with* common or philosophical difference, which in essence is of another order than both empirical difference and what has been abstracted from it. The thought of the ontological difference as grounded in *Dasein*'s transcendence of beings toward their Being is *thinking at its most elemental* in that it provides the very "between" for common and philosophical difference, or distinction, that is, for common and philosophical thinking. Articulating the recognition that the human being is always already turned away from what is toward its Being, the ontological difference is also the *most elemental philosophical thought*. Finally, with the exploration of this elemental thought of difference, there begins *philosophy as discipline*, or metaphysics, as thinking in which the difference that thought makes – the thought of Being – is forgotten. The unmistakable privilege of the ontological difference thus becomes evident. It is the recognition of the difference that thinking makes with respect to what is, the immediate, or the universe of beings. The ontological difference articulates the rift instigated by thinking as thinking in what is by transcending it toward its Being. The ontological difference is a function of thinking's most elemental characteristics. As a consequence, Jean-Luc Marion's contention in *God without Being* that "to think outside of ontological difference eventually condemns one to be no longer able to think at all"(25) comes as no surprise.

If thinking at its most fundamental is the thinking of the difference that thinking makes, of the thought of Being that surpasses beings, one cannot but agree with Vattimo's verdict on "the thought of difference." Instead of indulging in a self-reflective parodistic repetition of the play of metaphysical difference – a repetition and a play oblivious to the very opening of Being that permits its restricted, however infinite, or abyssal economy – it is more important for one to take up again Heidegger's meditation on the ontological difference intent on deepening the thought of this difference itself.(26) Needless to say, if the fate of thinking as thinking depends on the elemental thought of the ontological difference, it is of capital necessity and urgency not only to further expand on that thought, but to reawaken it to begin with. Indeed, as Heidegger has pointed out, this thought, because it is so elemental and simple, is always

prone to an inevitable degeneration. It is always exposed to the possibility of slipping into triviality, even of emptying itself of all content. Such covering up of the question of Being, or of the ontological difference, is not accidental, but is, as *Being and Time* asserts, grounded in the very nature of the discovered.(27) It stems from the fact that the ontological difference is the opening difference for all other distinctions, whose very appearance pushes the originary difference from which they arise into oblivion. This is already sufficient reason to keep the question alive. Still, the question has suffered a recent decline in interest among those who busy themselves with difference and differences – the French thinkers of difference according to Vattimo and, or rather, I would contend, certain North American critics. Yet, in addition this particular unconcern with the ontological difference – an unconcern that fosters the multiplication and hardening of metaphysical difference – another, very different indifference to ontological difference has taken hold in certain trends of contemporary thinking, with entirely different implications. When I say "indifference" in this case, I do not mean a mere lack of general concern or engagement, a neglect based on naiveté, ignorance, or personal taste. On the contrary, it is a deliberate indifference, one that is fully aware of the ontological difference's status for thought as such, one that is not only conscious of the consequences of disinterest, but even wills them. Of the thinkers whose work is actively engaged in such disinterest I name a few: Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, Paul de Man, and, in a certain way to be elucidated hereafter, also Jacques Derrida. In what is to follow, I will concern myself with such an indifference to the ontological difference in two diametrically opposed positions, those of Marion and Derrida, which divide along a line that separates theology from philosophy. I choose to discuss the question of the indifference to the fundamental difference in the writings of both thinkers, not only to show that such indifference lends itself to different styles of thought and diametrically opposite intentions, but to demonstrate that a certain indifference to that difference, rather than fostering a petrification of metaphysical difference, as is the case with the criticism and practice of difference, opens an entirely new vista on, and field of research about, difference *itself*.

For Marion, the "relation" of communion between the human being and God is a relation of absolute asymmetry, in which the Other, the God-Father, is absolutely inaccessible to man, the son. For this negative theologian, God is Other to the point of having no being anymore –

*God without Being* is the title of one of his books – and hence, unlike beings, God is no longer subject to the opening event of Being, the last and ultimate form of idolatry. The human being's "relation" to this invisible Other, beyond all possible appropriation, is no longer a relation of difference, and, consequently, is no relation at all. One of the poles of the "relation" remains, indeed, in total indeterminacy; all that takes place within it is exclusively attributable to God. It is a gift. Borrowing the term from Urs von Balthasar and Levinas, Marion conceives of the nonrelational communion between man and God as *distance*. "Distance implies an irreducible gap, specifically, disappropriation. By definition, it totally separates the terms that, precisely for this reason, can play through in their sending and return," Marion writes.(28) In the irreducible gap that totally sets the two distant poles apart, God, without being, and thus free from the "tyranny" of Being, "dissolves the link that links Him to our thinking." As the ab-solute, "he is freed of all relation, thus also of all thinkable relation by which He would be linked to an absurd other than Him."(29) And yet, in a paradox of faith, this absence of relation is conceived of as the possibility for a communion between the human being and God that becomes more intimate as God becomes more undefinable.

For the problem that I seek to address here, it is important to remark that compared with the "difference" that the ab-solute God makes with respect to the human beings and the world, everything else, ontic difference first and foremost, fades into utter indifference. But more than this, ontic difference's most fundamental distinction, "the fundamental ontic difference between what is and what is not [,] becomes indifferent – for everything becomes indifferent before the difference that God marks with the world," Marion claims. Commenting on Romans 4:17, where God is said to give life to the dead and to call the nonbeings as beings, Marion argues that faced with the call of God, the intra-worldly difference, between the dead and the living, is not destroyed, but rather is superseded by indifference, since "nonbeings are revealed as beings only by virtue of the call of God."(30) But God's indifference to the fundamental ontic difference can also manifest itself the other way around. From an exegesis of a Pauline text, 1 Corinthians 1:28, where it is written that "God chose the ignoble things of the world and the contemptible things, and also the non-beings, in order to annul the beings – in order that no flesh should glorify itself before God," Marion concludes that "that which is can be, for God, as if it were not: the fact of being a

being – and of remaining such, for it is not a question here of destruction, but of annulment-in no way insures against nothing; just as nonbeing, once chosen, is discovered as if it were, so being, once annulled, is discovered as if it were not."(31)

But in light of the difference that God marks with the world, not only does ontic difference become indifferent, but the most radical of all differences – the ontological difference – veers into insignificance as well. In a difficult and compact exegesis of 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, Marion argues that that text also "outwits Being by setting being in motion as if it were not bent to the fold of Being."(32) What transpires through Marion's analysis of this Pauline text is that in "the world" the decision to attribute being to something "depends neither on the categories of a philosophical discourse nor on Being deploying itself in ontological difference, but on instances separated by the limit between 'the world' and the 'call' of the God who gives life." Indeed, "the world" extends being to something by distorting beingness, and with it ontological difference. The reason for this is that " 'the world' in its funding does not belong to the domain of ontological difference or of the fold Being/being."(33) It is from the start dazzled from the outside by the invisible light of God, and all its attribution of beingness to itself and to worldly things is a function of "the world's" attempt to become its own foundation, to be founded on itself, against God. Marion remarks: "Before the difference between beings, before the conjunction of beings to Being, before the fold of ontological difference, the 'world' holds the discourse of the acquisition of funds – to glorify itself before God." This distortion of beingness by "the world" is, according to Marion, the funding that the philosophical discourse on Being dissimulates. Yet, "the world's" judgment of what is and what is not, a judgment made in the intention to forge itself, and in which "Being [is led] astray outside of the path of Being, to the point of outwitting the Being in beings, of disarticulating ontological difference,"(34) is repealed by God, not by refuting it, or by destroying it, but by opposing to it the glory of Christ, which makes the world's self-glorification pale into insignificance. Rather than being what permits the world to found itself, with Christ, being is attributed to that which, in the eyes of "the world" does not appear, namely, to "that which believes in the call" of God.(35) God's abrogation and inversion of the judgment of the world does not ontically destroy it. Nor does His attribution of being to the believers, inverting "the world's" self-forging attribution of being to itself, proceed on the basis of Being. Marion

concludes: "A line, along which the 'world' divides into beings and nonbeings that on which it wants to found itself, crosses another line, along which the call reestablishes beings and nonbeings in the measure of their faith. The crossing of these two lines decidedly distorts the play of being by withdrawing it from Being, by undoing being from the rule of Being. This crossing traces a cross over ontological difference, a cross that abolishes it without deconstructing it, exceeds it without overcoming it, annuls it without annihilating it, distorts it without contesting its right. In the same way that a window opens the view to an immense space that it nevertheless measures by a crossbar, this crossing opens ontological difference to a differing that renders it indifferent only by excess and that places it in reserve only in that it preserves it from an entirely different dilemma."(36) In a gesture of deliberate and calculated theological distortion of Heidegger's notion of the *Es gibt*, Marion calls this play radically foreign to that of Being, a *gift* of the distant God. Whereas the self-funding attribution by "the world" of beingness to itself also precedes the correct philosophical discourse on the ontological difference as the latter's hidden ground, the divine gift of beingness is radically anterior to that difference. Not only does it annul this difference by its sheer indifference to it, but the gift of God frees beings from the tyranny of Being. Marion remarks: "The gift liberates Being/being through the very indifference by which it affects it. The gift, in liberating Being/being, in liberating being from Being, is itself finally liberated from the ontological difference – not only the sending, not only the distortion, but the freeing of the first instance, charity."(37) In conclusion, then, "all of ontological difference ... find[s] itself reinscribed in the field of creation: the *creatum*, while remaining neutral, would go beyond the strict domain of the *ens (creatum)* to comprehend as well, though in a different capacity, Being taken as '*neutrale tantum*.'"(38)

Marion sees the gaze of boredom as it has found exemplary literary expression in Valéry's *Monsieur Teste* as a first step toward seeing the indifference with which a faith in a God defined in terms of *agape* regards the ontological difference. The gaze of boredom, he claims in an analysis that implicitly, but also critically draws on Heidegger's interpretation of this existential mood, is, indeed, an attitude in which all idols become disqualified and rejected for what they are, namely, idols of the visible (yet without boredom's being already in possession of what Marion calls the icon of the invisible). In conformity with Heidegger's claim that "genuine boredom", "profound boredom", "removes all things and

men and oneself along with it into a remarkable indifference," and that in it "everything about us seems so hopelessly commonplace that we no longer care whether anything is or is not,"(39) boredom is indifferent primarily to what is, to beings, its own being included. "It abandons, so far as to abandon itself, with neither love nor hate, through pure indifference," Marion writes,(40) and he adds, "Before the fact that being is, boredom does not budge, does not see, does not respond. Boredom does not suffer any exception to its crepuscular gaze, and the being purely there forms no exception. No idol before boredom, not even the unsurpassable spectacle of a given being. But, as nothing more essential than given being ... can ever appear, boredom will never manifest itself more absolutely than in its uninterest for the given being. Boredom, which lends no interest to given being itself, and undoes itself from that which gives given being: Being, which here sets in motion ontological difference, in the open."(41) In conclusion, then, to boredom, nothing, including the ontological difference, makes any difference anymore.

Although boredom is only a preliminary step toward theological indifference to difference, not yet that indifference itself, Marion's analysis of it permits us to situate and to evaluate such indifference from a philosophical point of view. But before trying to do so, let me emphasize that Marion does not naively strike the most fundamental difference with indifference. He is aware of the philosophical implications and pitfalls. That such is the case becomes evident when he notes that to conceive of "a being that no longer refers to Being ... but to another instance, in relation to which another difference is freed, a difference more essential to being than ontological difference itself,"(42) "does not coincide ... with the metaphysical lack to think ontological difference; for to think within ontological difference without thinking that difference itself, following the example of metaphysics, obviously implies that one still thinks from it."(43) Marion's attempt at "a game *without* ontological difference"(44) seeks to avoid both the dangers of metaphysical thinking and empiricism, which he knows to stand in an irreducible complicity with the first. He aims at a dismissal of Being that would, indeed, free beings from their "dependence" on Being, thus shielding beings and the differences between them from referring to Being. By dismissing that through which beings are – Being – and by thus determining them without recourse to Being, Marion hopes to set beings free for another and, as he puts it, more essential difference, the difference with God. Such a theological difference, according to Marion, would fall prey neither to metaphysical

naïveté nor to theological empiricism.(45) With this I return to the question of the philosophical implications of such indifference.

It follows from boredom's indifference to everything, including the ontological difference, that in this state of mind one is no longer affected by provocations of any sort, and least of all by essential provocations. As Marion holds, boredom is blind, lucidly blind, "blinded by its very lucidity."(46) It is blind in particular to all "amazement, stupor, bedazzlement, which alone allow the silent 'voice' of Being to make itself heard."(47) Yet if boredom is blind in a lucid way to wonder, to the *thaumazein*, that is, the amazement at the fact *that* beings are, "the wonder of wonder," as Heidegger refers to it(48) boredom deliberately closes itself to the very possibility of the thinking of Being, the thought of the difference that Being makes with respect to beings, in other words, to the possibility of philosophical thinking. In short, boredom's indifference is also, and primarily, indifference to thinking. In its indifference it thus shares the theological indifference to difference. As Marion acknowledges, to think outside the ontological difference is to be no longer able to think at all. But, he adds, "to be no longer able to think, when it is a question of God, indicates neither absurdity nor impropriety, as soon as God himself, in order to be thought, must be thought as 'id quo majus cogitari nequit,' in other words, as that which surpasses, detours, and distracts all thought, even nonrepresentational."(49) Still, Marion's theological indifference to the ontological difference does not spring from blind and simple faith. Furthermore, this non-ontotheological theology—a theology that dispenses, as the ultimate in idolatry, with the notion that God has being—that conceives of itself as a non-ontic science, thus refuting Heidegger's contention in "Phenomenology and Theology" that theology is of ontic origin, abandons neither thought in general nor the thought of the ontological difference. Quite the opposite is the case, since for Marion the ontological difference is, indeed, "a *negative* propaedeutic of the unthinkable thought of God," that is, of a difference before which even the ontological difference must blend into indifference.(50) Thinking, especially thinking at its most extreme, that is, as the philosophical thinking of Being and the ontological difference, is the necessary springboard for a thinking of the Ab-solute that in return will strike the thought that has negatively led up to it with total indifference. In *L'Idole et la distance*, Marion refers to such a thinking of God as a "thinking *without postulates*."(51)

According to Marion, a twofold indifference also dominates Derrida's

thought of differance: an indifference of differance to all (ontic) differences between differences and an indifference to the ontological difference, in that the latter is made to be a particular case of the general differing of differance.(52) Before I confront this assertion and with it Marion's contention that in spite of its indifference to the ontological difference, differance remains trapped within its horizon, let me remark on the claim that in the light of differance all ontic differences lose their specificity. Obviously, a satisfactory refutation of this claim would require a thorough determination of the "status" of differance. For the moment, I refer only to the empirical evidence that Derrida's work, like that of the so-called postmoderns, is characterized by an unmistakable sensitivity to differences, to the difference, even the heterogeneity, between them. As Hegel noted in *Philosophy of Right*, ontic differences – "the infinite variety of circumstance," the "endless material and its organization" – are not of philosophical concern. Since philosophy is philosophy, its "attitude to this infinite multitude of topics should of course be most liberal" (*PR*, p. 11), he writes. A similar liberalism is obvious in all of Derrida's writings, not because ontic differences are insignificant for the business of philosophy, but rather because, with the thought of differance, the sensitive philosophical distinction between the ontic and the ontological is shown to remain, in its very irreducibility, "indebted" to ontic difference. The recognition of an encrypted referral of philosophy to ontic difference, to its plural and even incommensurable nature, fosters a liberalism of a different kind. But what of the claim that Derrida is indifferent to ontological difference. To respond, let me first elaborate, however briefly, on Derrida's treatment of this Heideggerian concept.

In the essay "Differance," Derrida claimed that "*differance*, in a certain and very strange way, [is] 'older' than the ontological difference or than the truth of Being" (*M*, p. 22).(53) Whatever perplexity such assertion may provoke, whether because of the quite correct assessment that, indeed, nothing can be more *radical* than Being, or because of the uninformed opinion that the search for something older (in a very strange way) would merely confirm the competition among philosophers looking for deeper and deeper grounds, two things need to be mentioned. First, something "older," and older in a very strange way, clearly indicates that what is to be thought with differance no longer partakes in the philosophical genealogy of the term *older*, from, for example, its conception in mythical theology as what "is most honorable," namely, "Ocean and Tethys as

the parents of becoming and water as that by which the gods swore," to Thales' understanding of the ground and origin of the world as the older principle,<sup>54</sup> to Heidegger's originary, that is, ontological understanding of the anteriority of Being (*früher, die Frühe des Seins*). Second, the need to think a difference "older" than the ontological difference is prescribed by Heidegger himself. This is clear, as I shall try to demonstrate hereafter, from the whole thrust of Heidegger's argument in *Identity and Difference*. Yet, as will also be seen, Heidegger follows up on this prescription in only a very limited way. One might object that Heidegger's notion of Appropriation (*Ereignis*) makes good on his own demand. But Appropriation, though perhaps "older" than the ontological difference, does not conceive, *in terms of difference*, of a difference "anterior" to the ontological difference. As he has said, "from the perspective of Appropriation it [even] becomes necessary to free thinking from the ontological difference."<sup>(55)</sup> The need to thus eliminate the conceptuality of difference, including ontological difference, from the thinking of Appropriation originates in the different nature of the later Heidegger's "categories" of thinking. They are, Ute Guzzoni remarks, "of an onticity and a concreteness which implies a wholly new kind of generality – a generality not of superordination and subordination, but of juxtaposition, relation (*Bezug*), constellation."<sup>(56)</sup> In contrast to Heidegger's relinquishing of the notion of difference, I wish to show that difference (in a very strange way) follows up on Heidegger's call in *Identity and Difference*, and rather than abandoning the traditional conceptuality of difference, saves it as a legitimate conceptual construct and problematic, susceptible to still another turn, and one very different from what the unifying, harmonizing constellation of Appropriation is meant to achieve.

In *Identity and Difference*, Heidegger sets out to bring the subject matter of thinking – Being as difference – into focus so that difference as difference comes into view. In following difference as such "to its essential origin (*Wesensherkunft*)," Heidegger seeks to think Being "in terms of the difference," "Being as well as beings ... *by virtue of the difference*," from which they appear.<sup>(57)</sup> But since such a meditation on difference as difference takes place, unvariably, "in the language of tradition," and yields "to the key words of metaphysics, Being and beings," difference as difference becomes – "tentatively and unavoidably" – determined as the difference of Being and beings." In other words, although Heidegger wishes to think difference as such, difference as difference, his meditation characterizes the plane in which the differing occurs in terms of what

arises from it. Difference *as* difference, ineluctably, turns out as the difference between Being and beings. Although difference as the between, as *Unter-Schied*, is "only" the aperture for the bipolar Being/beings grid (and all subsequent binary schemes), and not binary itself (at least not in a simple fashion), the power of tradition and the inescapable key words of metaphysics compel thinking to conceive it in bipolar terms. Heidegger is thus forced to admit that his thinking remains only on the way to the essential origin of difference as such.(59) But, at the same time, the necessity of thinking difference beyond ontological difference has been established in all clarity, and is described as a task that can no longer be achieved within the horizon of metaphysics.(60)

It is important to realize that all Heidegger's attempts on the way to thinking difference as such in *Identity and Difference* remain caught within the predicament outlined here. Indeed, his major move in that work, thinking difference as such as the differentiation of coming-over (*Überkommnis*) and arrival (*Ankunft*), proceeds from a step back into the more essential characteristics of the ontological difference, and in no way escapes the binary grid of metaphysics. Starting from the insight that Being *is* beings (*is* being understood transitively), Heidegger restates the difference of Being and beings as a difference between what transits (without leaving its own place) and what arrives in the unconcealed in which it is sheltered (although the unconcealed is not there without what arrives). Heidegger writes: "Being transits [that], comes unconcealingly over [that] which arrives as something of itself unconcealed only by that coming-over." Or, "Being shows itself as the unconcealing coming-over (*Überkommnis*)," whereas "beings as such appear in the manner of the arrival that keeps itself concealed in unconcealedness." As a result of this reformulation of Being and beings, the difference between both, the between in which the differentiation occurs, becomes recast as the occurring of "the being apart, and the being toward each other (*Aus- und Zueinander*), of overcoming and arrival." Whereas difference holds open the space in which Being and beings relate to each other in their difference from each other, this aperture itself, the *Unter-Schied*, is categorized as a "space" of *auseinander-zueinander*, of "away from and toward each other." Difference, then, is the "dif-fering (*Austrag*) of the two [and not just any two, but of Being and being in a more fundamental interpretation]," that thus enter a "relation" of differing from and being held toward each other, a "relation" that for its part does not escape the figure "two" either.(61)

Yet, although the attempt to think difference as difference, free from all categorical determinations of Being, the name Being included, "fails" or, more precisely, remains on the way, the task itself continues to exist. Even though Heidegger recognizes that the ontological difference, or Being, is ultimately an obstacle to thinking difference as such, this in no way means that he would have rid himself entirely, with the notion of Appropriation, of the question of difference. It is certainly the case, as Vattimo, has asserted, that the history of the metaphysics of Being coincides with the history of difference. Yet, the decline of Being, in Heidegger's later work, does not for that matter signify a decline of the *problematics* of difference. Heidegger's emphasis on difference as such in *Identity and Difference* must suffice as evidence here. Indeed, the thought of difference as such is not an ambiguous or dubious gesture on Heidegger's part, one endowing difference with a structural consistency or a metaphysical stability akin to the Platonic *ontos on*, shielded as it were from the event-character of Being, as Vattimo holds.(62) Heidegger's efforts to free the thought of difference from Being are precisely intended to prevent such a thing from happening. Indeed, difference *as such* lacks the quality not only of Being, but of propriety as well, and to such an extent that no *as such* is appropriate to it. To think it remains therefore an infinite task.

Older, earlier, than the ontological difference, then, is difference as' such, or dif-ference (*Unter-Schied*). It is a difference that can only be thought in terms of what originates from the difference, never as such. Indeed, difference as such incessantly and invariably comes forth as ontological difference (and, subsequently, as vulgar difference) only to withdraw in such coming forth. The difference older than ontological difference is thus to be characterized as a dif-fering into two (Being and beings, first and foremost) in which unconcealment is necessarily covered up *as such*. It is a dif-fering that, although not of the order of the binary, cannot but take the shape of difference. To think it *as such* – on this side of metaphysical language – is precisely to think it as the inevitable, if not fated, differing into two.(63)

With this I circle back to Marion's contention that differance is indifferent to the ontological difference.(64) If differance, as Derrida holds, is "older" than the ontological difference, moreover, older "in a very strange way," differance is, undoubtedly, indifferent to the primacy and excellence of the ontological difference, including difference as such, difference as difference, from which the ontological difference originates.

Indeed, as Marion clearly apprehends it, Derrida's indifference to the ontological difference manifests itself in his taking it, in spite of all its philosophical priority, as just one kind of difference among others, as it were.<sup>(65)</sup> Differance brings ontological difference into conjunction with a number of other concepts of difference, differentiation, differing, deferring, and so forth. Still, this kind of indifference to the question of Being, and to the Heideggerian concept of difference as difference, implies no abatement of the necessity and urgency of that question. Nothing can replace it, nor can it come to stand propaedeutically for something else. The indifference of differance is thus of a nature entirely different from that of the distant God. If Derrida could characterize differance as "older," in a very strange sense, this does not mean that differance is an older, or earlier, ground of the ontological difference or, for that matter, of the other kind of differences clustered together in its quasi-synthetic arrangement. Indeed, differance recognizes an irreducible difference between differences, a difference finally antithetical to the notion of a ground, even if that ground were, impossibly difference as such. Differance is a cluster of a number of concepts of difference. But each one of these concepts enters differance by one or several structural features of differing, dif-fering, deferring, differentiating, and so on, which constitute differance as a grid of traits on which each (the fundamental and originary ontological difference, as well as the difference as such that dif-fers into it) draws in order to be the incommensurable concept of difference that it is. From each sort of difference, differance takes up a trait of differing, that is, the *minimal, and iterable, trait of identity*, that characterizes this difference in its very heterogeneity. Rather than dismissing identity (and the inner necessity that links identity and difference), rather than generalizing difference, which, as *Glas* acknowledges, would result in a general homogeneization (G, p. 199), differance articulates the minimally identical traits of all particular kinds of differing, taking, moreover, the incommensurability between differences into account. And yet, such concern with the identical does not, therefore, confer structural stability, and even less the status of an *ontos on*, upon differance. Given that the minimally identical traits of differing that it knots together are ultimately incommensurable, differing, dif-fering, and deferring, differance as an infrastructure can never close upon itself. Not only is it structurally open, but it differs from and defers itself.

As the quasi-synthetic arrangement of traits distributed among a variety of concepts of difference, differance inscribes all those concepts

that are based on differential duality, as well as difference as such, which inevitably dif-fers into the ontological difference. Differance, consequently, must also be understood as the attempt to foreground not only difference as binary opposition, but, more important, difference as binary, polar, dual, to begin with.(66) Differance itself, therefore, cannot any longer be of the order of the dual, and follows paths of thought that are generally blocked by twoness. The elemental arrangement of the differing, dif-fering, deferring traits of differance aims at tying the becoming dual of difference or rather the becoming (metaphysical) difference of difference, to traits in excess, and in a relation of dissymetry, to difference as dual, or to the necessity with which difference develops into duality (and, subsequently, opposition). Not only does differance not entail the generalization of difference, not only is it not a structure akin to the Platonic *ontos on*, it resists, as their foreground, all binary codes and binary formalization.

Contrary to Marion's assertion, differance does not remain within the horizon of the question of Being. By weaving the ontological difference's characteristic traits into the quasi-synthetic arrangement of differance, the question of Being loses none of its radicality. Rather, as the most radical, hence, different kind of difference, it submits itself with a special urgency to being questioned in the light of a differing to which it itself must bend. The indifference to the ontological difference that such inscription entails does not, however, stem from an indifference to thinking. Indeed, only by developing and further refining, in a formal manner, as it were, the minimal traits that constitute the ontological difference, difference as such, and the relation between both, could the Heideggerian problematic of Being and of the "between" be tied into the cluster of traits of difference that is differance. In addition, the very gesture of drawing the constitutive differing traits of a manifold of (incommensurable kinds of) differences into one formation is an eminently philosophical gesture. It is the attempt, as it were, to account for the fact that difference is said differently, *diaphora pollakos legetai*. In Derrida's thinking, one that conceives of itself as philosophical in a non-ontotheological sense, thought is not abandoned, not even in a propaedeutic fashion, as was the case in Marion's negative theology. Although the silent voice in which Being is heard is divested of authority in that the ontological difference is tied by one of its characteristic traits into the quasi-synthesis of differance, thinking is not therefore annulled. By being shown to be linked by one of its main traits to a cluster of differences,

philosophical thought as the thinking of Being encounters an essential, because structural, limit. However, this limit also opens up new possibilities for thought, possibilities foreclosed not only by the metaphysical definition of thinking as the thinking of Being, but also by Heidegger's restriction of the essence of thinking to the thinking of Being. If, indeed, one can, in the case of Derrida, speak of an indifference to the ontological difference, it is an indifference to difference as the capital unifying and opening "ground" for all differences (between beings, and between themselves). By tying this capital difference – the ontological difference, but also difference *as* difference – to a cluster of lateral differences such as differance, thought encounters the very limit of its limitlessness.