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**Difference in Sameness:
Indeterminacy in Reflective Identity**

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Honors Senior Thesis

**Advisor: Dr. Brian Martine
May 5, 1999**

What is it exactly that gives the objects of our experience their distinctly determined appearance? How is it that these entities become bounded or obtain identity? Are the elements of existence determined transcendentally before our perceptual focus passes over them or do we intervene subjectively on their behalf? Does it really matter to even ask these questions or can we understand our experience of the world without knowledge of how it is distinguished?

The purpose of this paper will be to entertain and evaluate these kinds of questions as they appear throughout the history of the Western philosophical tradition with hopes of providing a more comprehensive understanding of being and existence. Particularly, I will discuss the notion of difference or indeterminacy as it appears problematically in Plato's ontological schema. The consequences of positing absolute identities will be the focus of this section. In the latter half of the discourse, the focus will shift to a more contemporary discussion of this term's appearance in reflective human experience. Ultimately, I hope to give evidence for the claim that identity and difference have their origins in subjective human reflection. Without an understanding of the activity of this realm of human experience, the metaphysician and the layperson alike remain at odds with the apparent determinacy of existence.

Sameness in Difference?

In an attempt to reconcile fundamental dilemmas of his original conception of absolutes, Plato, in the *Sophist*¹, contemplates the possibility of combining these primary metaphysical building blocks. By doing so, he formulates a foundation consisting of three

fundamental elements: *being*, *rest*, and *motion*, and two essential relations: *sameness* and *otherness*. While the rewards of this move seem to free Plato from Parmenides' logical dilemma, the metaphysical baggage included gives rise to a completely new set of problems. With *sameness* and *otherness*, Plato describes a manner in which not-being can be introduced but fails to provide a satisfactory characterization of this new element's nature. This piece attempts an introduction to the *otherness* relation, marking the foundation for further inquiry into Plato's late ontological system.

Recognizing the untenable translation tendencies of his original forms to the perceived world, Plato attempts to account for the change that appears in the realm of reflections by introducing several foundational absolutes. In doing so, he is well aware of the dilemma encountered by Parmenides concerning not-being and is challenged to find a place for this idea in his system. Plato begins his new formulation with the form, *being*, which participates equally in the forms *motion* and *rest*. Remember the original forms did not have any interaction with themselves or other things. The new notion of participation, is introduced as a means of representing in absolute form what is experienced in the reflected world of appearances. Stated otherwise, by introducing the absolutes of *rest* and *motion*, both of which can participate in other absolutes, Plato discovers a manner in which the forms can represent stable identities that nonetheless provide a source for the seemingly unstable perceived world. If motion and rest are understood as existing absolutely by their partaking of being and are allowed to mingle with other forms, then the rigid realm of the absolutes, once an incoherent source of the reflections of the perceived world, seems to be transformed into a pliable set of concepts capable of supplying a foundation for the realm of reflection.

But, there are significant consequences of this move that must be addressed before the new system of the forms can be accepted as an accurate account of reality. Again we remember, previously, the forms existed completely separate from one another, without relation. Now it is not clear, exactly how any entity can be distinguished or designated without relation to other entities. If the forms existed completely separate from all other existing entities then it is not clear what distinguishes them either. At the very least , an identifiable thing requires a background to be recognized. Whether this thing exists outside its being perceived existence in relation to the background or other things seems completely unknowable or indeterminate. Without interaction, at least in some minimal sense, the notion of identity has no intelligible meaning. With the introduction of participation among the forms themselves, though, boundaries must be introduced for these entities.

For this reason, identity is posited in the idea or form of *sameness*. Now an absolute itself, *sameness* participates in *being*, *rest*, and *motion*, thereby determining each element's individual identity. *Being* in relation to itself is the *same* as *being*; *rest* in relation to itself is the *same* as *rest*; *motion* in relation to itself is the *same* as *motion*. Likewise, *sameness* in relation to itself is the *same* as *sameness*. The identity of these and all other subsequent forms (with one paramount exception to be named later) is determined by each element's participation with *sameness*. Through *sameness* and *being*, the forms find discrete existence amidst one another that was not even comprehensible before they were conceived of as interacting.

This illumination brings us to the most significant consequence of the revised doctrine of the ideas. At the exact instant that a form is conceived of as identical to or the

same as itself, one must admit of its necessary difference to another. Difference or *otherness* appears immediately as a mandatory consequence of identifying individual forms in the presence of others. Rest, being identical to itself, is other than motion. Actually, it is only by partaking of difference that rest can affiliate itself with motion at all. The *otherness* relation of contraries will be discussed in more detail shortly, but this example plainly illustrates the appearance of difference as a necessary consequence of the determination of identity. In fact, all forms participate in *otherness* in relation to one another. Even *sameness* partakes of *otherness* when compared to other forms. But here is where the proverbial buck stops. While *sameness* can participate in *otherness* by relation to another absolute, *otherness* cannot partake likewise of *sameness*. Here, at the heart of the revised doctrine of the ideas, Plato confronts the most challenging metaphysical conundrum of this system head on.

Initially, one offers assent without complaint. *Otherness* could not partake of *sameness* or it would be the same, therefore making it impossible for the forms to relate to themselves or to be different from one another. More plainly, if *otherness* were the same as itself then no difference would be possible. Two distinct forms would not be different from one another; they would be the same as each other. And one is already committed to the identity of discrete absolutes with the introduction of participation among them. Therefore, *otherness* cannot have identity or partake of *sameness*. But, what does this conclusion truly mean? If *otherness* cannot partake of *sameness* and procure identity, then can it be considered a form at all? As Plato describes the revised system it seems that identity is a crucial characteristic of all absolutes, but it is, at the same instant, the one element that cannot be ascribed to *otherness*. How can this apparent

contradiction, the necessity of difference that has no identity, be resolved? We move away from this crucial dilemma briefly to further describe the peculiar nature of the *otherness* relation.

Focusing our attention more broadly once again, we remember that *being* (and now all others except *otherness*) partakes of *sameness* in relation to itself and of *otherness* in relation to others. In the former relation, existence and identity are confirmed through *sameness*. In the latter, it appears that non-existence and difference are affirmed through *otherness*. But can non-existence exist? It would seem that *otherness* circumscribes not-being in a similar manner as *sameness* circumscribes *being*. While *sameness* provides identity for forms that partake of *being* (except *otherness*), *otherness*, provides a type of non-identity to those forms that partake of *otherness* by allowing these forms to not-be another. By non-identity here, I mean not-the-same-as—where rest in relation to itself is the same as rest, rest in relation to being is not-the-same-as being. The identity of rest is rest; the non-identity of rest is being (or any other form for that matter) The *otherness* relationship, necessary for discrete entities in relation, appears to embody the concept of something not-being another thing. Another example follows.

Rest is the same as or identical to itself by partaking of *sameness*. *Rest* is other than or not identical to motion by partaking of *otherness*. While identity binds *being* to *rest* in relation to itself, the non identity of *otherness* binds not-being to *rest* in relation to *motion*. Again, though, how does one describe non identity, not-being *otherness*? We have decided that it must exist, it must partake of *being*, but we cannot be clear exactly what identity it has. *Otherness* clearly cannot be described as having being in the

same manner that the other forms do. Perhaps further investigation will illuminate the elusive identity of *otherness* that we seek.

Returning to the relationship between *sameness* and the other absolutes, a heretofore unmentioned characteristic rises to the surface. In the participation of *sameness* with these forms, it is noticed that the relation is one-to-one or between only two entities. In the relationship between *being* and *sameness* that gives being identity, only these two forms interact with one another. There is no mediating element in the schema. In the difference relation, though, this is not quite the case. Here, *otherness* is exactly a mediating element between two distinct identities. Whereas the *sameness* relation involves two elements, *otherness* always involves three. Note this observation in the previous example. *Being* stands in relation to *sameness* as an 'other' only through *otherness*. The relation is not just *being* to *otherness* or *sameness* to *otherness* but *being* to *sameness* through *otherness*. Three terms are necessary instead of just two. While this distinction fails to draw us closer to finding a boundary for *otherness*, it does provide at least one intuitive foothold for discovering the fundamental characteristics of this enigmatic relation.

Unlike this latest general discovery, perhaps an inquiry focused on the specific kinds of *otherness* that are found among the forms will further illuminate the character of *otherness*. Earlier, when outlining the existence of difference, I spoke of the interesting relation between contraries. *Rest* and *motion* share a relation of difference which appears to be categorically different than that between something like *rest* and *being*. In the latter, the significance of otherness begins and ends with identity. *Rest* is other than *being* in no significant way other than that its identity is different from *being*. However, in the

difference between *rest* and *motion*, another distinction can be made. In addition to being discrete from one another, *rest* and *motion* share a difference, characteristic of all contraries, of absence. *Rest* is simply the absence of *motion* and likewise *motion* is nothing more than the absence of *rest*. In this sense, opposites or contraries in the realm of the absolutes share a dual affiliation with *otherness*. In the one sense, opposites are different than one another simply in the determination of their individual identities. But also, in a more specialized sense, these types of forms relate to one another as the absence of the other. The difference between contraries appears to be identifiably different than that between other absolutes. But, what does this resolve in the characterization of *otherness*?

It would seem that we have discovered a seam in the non identity of *otherness*. By identifying differences in *otherness* relationships, an unspoken *sameness* is assumed for these different types and *otherness* suddenly appears to have taken up identity. The *otherness* of *rest* and *motion* has a categorically different identity than that of *rest* and other forms. This difference can be observed in other forms that share a contrary. Is this conclusion absurd? It definitely seems contrary to our initial logical foundations. But, how could this particular conception of absolutes be otherwise? As *otherness* occupies the role of not-being, it assumes counterintuitive characteristics not present in the remainder of the forms. Through *otherness*, these individuals obtain the wild card allowing both distinction and interaction. And as we have discovered, although *otherness* cannot possess the particular kind of identity that it affirms in others, 'it' does seem to show signs of possessing a specialized identity. While further investigation is necessary

to confirm the plausibility of *otherness* in Plato's new formulation, significant progress has been made concerning the initial ramifications of this term's introduction.

At this point in the inquiry we must move away from Plato's notion of transcendental absolutes to explore more contemporary theory. We will not discard or ignore what has been gained by this inquiry, though. Despite the difficulties involved in holding this view as a complete account of human existence, there are significant lessons to be learned from the previous exposition. The most important of these is the knowledge that sameness and difference, hereafter distinguished by the terms determinacy and indeterminacy, appear to be essentially linked to one another. In the quest for determinate identity, one inevitably discovers indeterminate difference. Keeping Plato's determinate absolutes in plain view, we move now to focus on the indeterminate realm of human reflective experience.

Reflective Resistance

In *Experience and Nature*, John Dewey acknowledges that although Plato's forms in their entirety have been discarded by the philosophic community as a comprehensive account of existence, nevertheless the basic foundational assumptions of this stance are maintained problematically in the modern philosophic tradition. The modern thinkers, beginning with Descartes, drop the notion of these elements (being, rest, motion, etc.) as absolute ends in themselves but imprudently relocate the determinacy of these elements within their theories as specific conscious aims, equally separate from the reality which they give meaning to. "Final causes' were either wholly denied or relegated to a divine

realm too high for human knowledge. The doctrine of natural ends was displaced by a doctrine of designs, ends-in-view, conscious aims constructed and entertained in individual minds independent of nature.”²

In a sense, though, Descartes was very close to the conclusions eventually offered by Dewey when he inquired into the metaphysical certainty of human experience. But his decision to retreat into the realm of reflective experience, re-entering the realm of immediate experience only after reason had determined its safety, creates an epistemic gap between mind and matter that can be reconciled on by means of his *deus ex machina*. Descartes’ mistake lies in his assigning primacy to the objects of purely psychological reflective experience, rather than immediate experience itself. Instead of concluding that reason alone bridges the gap between the mind and the external world, perhaps he should have eliminated the gap altogether by positing rationality as the interpreter of the interaction of the senses with the external world. Descartes recognizes the fallibility of the senses but nevertheless maintains the innate determinacy posited by human observations of the world. He denies the products of immediate experience as metaphysically certain but preserves their chief metaphysical conclusion. The result is the complete divorce of subject and object, mind and matter, into separate entities, which to this day remain irreconcilably distinct from one another, crippling any serious philosophic theory emanating from this starting point.

This result is essentially where Dewey begins his critique of Western philosophy. He states, “the abandoning of acknowledgment of the primacy and ultimacy of gross experience [allows for] Mental attitudes, *ways* of experiencing, [being] treated as self-sufficient and complete in themselves, as that which is primarily *given*, the sole original

and therefore indubitable data.³ As was stated above, the retreat from sensory experience of the world as the starting point for reflective inquiry into the nature of existence sets us as odds with experience even before we begin. Without considering the significance of this priority, the manner in which *something* is experienced is given precedence over the original experience itself. Result: “We get the absurdity of an experiencing which experiences only itself, states of and processes of consciousness, instead of the things of nature,”⁴ sabotaging all hopes of understanding our direct experience of the world itself. For this and other reasons outlined methodically throughout his book, Dewey challenges contemporary philosophic inquiry to adopt “empirical” methods of inquiry, utilized so effectively by modern science, to locate primacy in the act of reflecting instead of the finished product of reflected experience which has already translated immediate experience for its own varied purposes.⁵ Only then do we have an opportunity to reveal that which is determinate (or indeterminate) of existence.’

A non-empirical method simply will not do here. Inquiry that begins with the reflective products of experience as the primary or given inevitably leads to an inexorable separation of mind and matter. Once this occurs, objects of nature are isolated from the experience through which they were realized. This reflected experience of natural phenomena is taken to be complete in itself and the immediate experience is disdainfully discarded as secondary. As stated above, ‘Experience’ is reduced to an experience of itself instead of the objects of the natural world. This diminished experience casts a yearning glance back at its ancestor. Like the child’s apprehensive gaze, over the shoulder, to his parents, as the teacher leads him away to his first day of school, reflective experience too, calls anxiously to the immediate experience which initially gave rise to it, wondering if it

will be reunited with this experience again. For the child, the end of the day will see him return to his loved ones. For the objects of reflective experience, though, the end of the non-empirical analysis will result in a permanent separation from the experience through which they were originally conceived. The reflective distinctions will have no way of eliciting understanding of the natural world exposed by immediate experience.

However, that distinctions of identity and difference are conceived through reflective experience of the world is in no way disputed here. This characteristic remains a unique feature of human consciousness. That these identities, or even the elements we perceive as making up identities, are innate to the actual objects perceived is questioned here as at the very least epistemically unattainable if not completely false. For every reflection upon immediate experience requires a choice (conscious or subconscious) that inevitably includes certain perceptions while discarding many others. By beginning with reflections as primary, non-empirical inquiry effectively ignores a large portion of the world offered by immediate experience. How can this analysis hope to offer a comprehensive account of being when, by design, its sole source of evidence intentionally abridges its findings before reporting to the authorities? Do not misunderstand; this selective emphasis of reflection is not in itself a problem for the careful thinker. Instead, it is the denial of this selection that is the problematic feature of non-empirical inquiry, a problem noted here by Dewey. "Deception comes only when the presence and operation of choice is concealed, disguised, and denied."⁶

Therefore, we turn to the type of inquiry that embraces the subjective nature of reflective experience rather than conceal it. Empirical inquiry, as demonstrated by modern scientific thought, is such an inquiry. Scientific analysis takes care to note

explicitly the design of its reflections and choices made in the course of its study so as to signify the place of this experience among others. Taking this step, we have already brought the objects of reflective experience closer to their origins in the natural world. By noting the particular method and choices of an individual experience one ascertains the purposeful interaction between mind and matter that before assured their respective distinction. Instead of deceptively ascribing objectivity to all experience while neglecting the bias of particular reflection, this method embraces the subjectivity of experience and makes its objective claims only after the choices made in the determination of experience have been accounted for.

Notice, no one method for reflective determination is perceived here as more primary than another so long as the subjectivities of its activity are accounted for in its respective conclusions. Materialism and idealism alike offer insightful conclusions concerning the nature of human experience but do so only if their particular stances are observed within the subjective context from which they originate. Where is the unity and objectivity of experience once the mandatory subjectivity of human reflection has taken its course? This is the empirical question and the results are striking even before particular analysis is undertaken?

Not only is human reflection rejoined with the objects of immediate experience but it is also given a future existence as a prophecy of experiences to come. Given this and that condition, the result will follow. Neglect for the conditions of subjective reflection, mistaking these experiences for objective truths, prevents non-empirical thought from accurately describing and predicting its proposed objective world—hence the mysterious gap between mind and matter and the confusion as to which direction to

search for the solution. Non-empirical inquiry, with its dualisms and presumptive determinism often creates more problems than it solves. Like an academic puzzle factory, this method is maintained to ensure the need for philosophers and to produce a steady supply of unsolvable problems. “For empirical method [though] the problem is nothing so impossible of solution. Its problem is to note how and why the whole is distinguished into subject and object, nature and mental operations.”⁷ For greater insight into these questions, we journey back historically to briefly study consciousness as it develops in the first reflective humans.

The advent of human consciousness in the biological evolution of our species marks not only the beginning of rationality but also the inception of metaphysical distinction. As human beings begin to draw their immediate perceptions of the world together for the first time into conscious reflective thought, several crucial characteristics appear. Where previously perception of the world and the course of action that ensued followed instinctual, subconscious rationality⁸, the dawn of consciousness brings about an awareness of the apparent cause and effect relationship of events. Boundaries drawn before only subconsciously reveal themselves to the newly aware conscious observer. Events as discrete entities that lead directly to other distinct events appear everywhere in the newfound ‘experience’ of these first human thinkers. With this awareness of certain bounded events as causally connected to other similar events comes the revolutionary realization that these circumstances could be otherwise, that the situation could be different. Although this distinction remains purely pragmatic for literally thousands of years, its realization marks the very beginning of metaphysical reflection and the uniquely human quest to understand existence.

We note that this early awareness of difference pertains almost completely to very general events of human experience. For this reason, the recognition that the parts of these events, the objects of the natural world, are also being bounded with individual identity largely escapes naïve consciousness. But here we must pause to note the significance of this ignorance, for it will survive indefinitely, well past the arrival of human philosophical reflection. At this point in human history, unbeknownst to man himself, subjective reflection makes its first choices in the interpretation of immediate experience. These choices set a standard for the exposition of sensory information to become reified over the course of hundreds of generations to follow.

The correct manner, the most useful for survival, for identifying the objects of the external world originally involved constructing the most efficient interpretations of the immediate experience of this realm, the realm of *assumed* cause and effect. I stress assumed here because of the interpretation necessary simply to connect experience in this way (a caveat far too many thinkers since this earliest reflection have failed to observe). By the time human consciousness evolves to a point where it can afford to expend energy reflecting on conscious reflection itself, the notion that many of the entities of immediate experience are innately determinate (rather than subjectively determined through conscious reflection) has all but been decided. Two important dilemmas arise here; 1) human reflection assumes its interpretations of immediate experience as an awareness of innate or universally stable characteristics of the objects themselves rather than a highly subjective glimpse of immediate sensory information; and 2) as a result, the 'events' of early consciousness begin their slow exodus to the garbage heap of metaphysical constructs.

To their credit, the Greeks attempt to maintain the integrity of human experience as complete events, the quintessential example being Aristotle's elaborate causal analysis of experience. But their commitment to the objective identity of the perceived elements of the world places their inquiry at odds with that of the complete event of human experience. Unable to reconcile the apparent determinacy of their reflective experience of the world with the indeterminate elements that remain, these thinkers back themselves into a narrow corner, the consequences of which reverberate long after this paradigm of thought is put into practice. This claim is illustrated nowhere more clearly than in Plato's attempts to identify the universals reflected in the realm of observable entities. As explicated earlier, the forms beginning with the assumed determinacy perceived by reflective experience nevertheless require an important element of indeterminacy in order to account for the apparent instability of the objects of human experience. He finds that for an object of human reflection to exist and have identity it must also contain an element of difference or not-being. To be, to exist determinately, a bounded immediate experience must necessarily *not be another*. Without acknowledging the subjective choice involved in the determination of these entities, the thinker remains confused as to how his seemingly determinate object maintains a degree of indeterminacy. I state again here that reflecting on Plato's forms is not fruitless inquiry. Exhausting the possibilities of holding out for transcendent absolutes has not marked a regression in philosophic thought. To the contrary, by means of this study we have a heightened understanding of the roles of identity and difference and their elusiveness to objective characterization. One final pass though, perhaps will further convince us that these two ideas appear everywhere and nowhere in our experience of the world.

In passing, Heidegger makes the following comments concerning the elusiveness of not being. “It is perfectly true that we cannot talk about nothing, as though it were a thing like the rain outside or a mountain or any object whatsoever. In principle nothingness remains inaccessible to science.”⁹ The latter remark should be interpreted as ‘inaccessible to observation.’¹⁰ For it is true, difference, one thing not being another, appears anywhere and everywhere immediate experience is drawn together in consciousness yet in no instance will one actually observe the object of difference itself. It is everywhere our gaze turns yet it is nowhere. Otherness remains purely within the framework of reflective experience.

At the risk of circularity, this notion illuminates a peculiar side of Parmenides’ dilemma. Perhaps, “that it is and that it is not possible for it not to be”¹¹ is the only distinction that can be made outside of the realm of reflection. But once human consciousness, reflective interpretation of immediate experience, is introduced, not-being/ otherness/ “that it is not” certainly appears to make room for itself. Returning to our early humans, the characterization “being is” seems to describe quite adequately the world of pre-conscious man, a being with only immediate experience of the objects of the world. There is no difference or not being for this creature, no change or becoming. There is only undifferentiated immediate experience. Only after reflective experience emerges is there a change in this continuum. But is this circular reasoning? Is it invalid argumentation to claim that “being is” remains the only possible response for non-reflective consciousness until the individual finally reflects upon his immediate experience, thereby bounding this experience and implicitly positing the proposition “being is not”? And does the more important revelation that objects of nature are

subjectively bounded by human consciousness rather than objectively determined (whether transcendently or materially) allow us to move away from the theoretical problems of the Greeks and their western descendents all together? We will continue to look ahead, searching for the answers to these important questions, keeping an eye out at all times on that which we have already learned.

After searching within and without human experience, we have focused in on the possible origins of the identity of our experiences. This identity, often assumed uniquely determined by the entities of experience itself, nevertheless alludes us when we search for it there. Instead, this inquiry has found determinate being to be a product of reflective consciousness' interaction with the objects of the real world. This experience is one in which identity is determined as a process of reflective choices within a particular set of immediate experiences. Sameness and difference cannot be experienced outside of this reflection. Removing these concepts from the particular elements and events to which they are applied inevitably leads to confusion in understanding how it is we experience the world. Furthermore, we can live with this conclusion, the necessary marriage of determinacy and indeterminacy, so long as we take care to note each element's place in the reflective composition of individual experience.

¹ Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*

² Dewey, p 95

³ *ibid.*, p 15-16

⁴ *ibid.*, p 11

⁵ While Dewey's notion of "empirical" resembles that of scientific method, there are subtle differences that become more apparent during the course of his analysis. I will not discuss these particular differences in this piece, but this should not hinder one's understanding of the general ideas offered below.

⁶ *ibid.*, p 29

⁷ *ibid.*, p 9

⁸ Here, I intend a post facto designation of rationality to actions that *appear* to exhibit the use of reason but in fact are the product of natural selection in evolutionary fit beings. Reason is followed instinctually instead of consciously. For a more detailed discussion of this notion, see Dennett, Chapter 2-Making Reason Practical.

⁹ Heidegger, p 25

¹⁰ Although Heidegger repudiates empirical analysis of the world here, I do not believe him to be critiquing the same empirical inquiry which Dewey requests of the philosophic community. Heidegger seems to reject the type of analysis focused specifically on physical determinacy of the external world; this is the type of analysis Dewey would describe as non-empirical materialism.

¹¹ Curd, p 45

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