Derrida’s Differance and Plato’s Different

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This essay shows that Derrida’s discussion of “Differance,” is remarkably parallel to Plato’s discussion of Difference in the Parmenides. Plato’s presentation of “Parmenides’” discussion of generation from a One which Is is a version of Derrida’s pre-conceptual spacing. Derrida’s implicit reference to Plato both interprets Plato and explains the obscure features of “Differance.” Derrida’s paradoxical remarks about Differance are very like what Plato implies about Difference.

Derrida’s Differance addresses the puzzle that concepts are required to construct the beings in a plurality of objects, but concepts cannot differentiate unless there is already a plurality of objects. Plato’s version of the same problem is a notational variant of Derrida’s Husserlian dilemma.

Derrida, following Davidson, is not only skeptical about the project of founding metaphysics on simple entities, but also holds that necessity has no foundation in the “world.” Plato, on the other hand, retains the idea that necessity has an objective basis in the self-evident truths of mereology.

This essay examines the ways in which Derrida’s discussion of “Differance,” is remarkably parallel to Plato’s discussion of Difference in the Sophist and the Parmenides. As I argue below, the metaphysical problems that motivate these accounts are also similar. Very roughly, Derrida’s Differance is a phenomenological version of Plato’s Different Itself. Plato’s presentation of “Parmenides’” discussion of the generation of the physical world from a One which Is is an early version of the pre-conceptual spacing that Derrida finds implicit in Husserl’s Phenomena. Derrida has never made these parallels and common grounds explicit, so this essay takes that connection as its first task.

I argue for and discuss the parallels between Difference and Differance, assuming with only the slightest arguments some somewhat controversial interpretations of Plato. I will show how Derrida’s obvious reference to Plato both

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2 An examination and discussion of the secondary literature which partially agrees or disagrees with the various theses advanced about “what Plato thought” would turn this essay into a large book of footnotes. My view is that Plato writes dialogues instead of treatises because he is usually examining arguments rather than advancing their conclusions as theses.
implicitly interprets Plato and explains many of the prima facie obscure features of Derrida's "Differance." I then argue that Derrida's paradoxical remarks about Difference are almost exactly what Plato implies about Difference, in his discussions in the Parmenides.

Roughly and briefly, the idea brought into question by Plato in the Parmenides and scouted by Derrida is that we cannot coherently describe the construction of the world as we know it by, for instance, starting with the scientific theories as we now have them and describe how we as organisms derive the world as we know it, because such scientific theories presuppose the very concepts which are being explained. So Derrida's notion of Difference addresses the puzzle of how, if all Sameness of Kind presupposes Falling under the Same Concept, and all concepts are constructed, not given, how Sameness and Difference get a purchase on the world, as it were. The model of concepts dividing up the world seems to presuppose a contradictory set of priorities: Concepts are required to construct the beings in a plurality of objects, but concepts cannot differentiate unless there is already a plurality of objects. Plato's version of the same problem is a notational variant of Derrida's Husserlian dilemma.

Throughout, I suggest that Plato and Derrida can be construed as questioning the very idea that there are isolable simple entities which can be the basis of meaning and being. Plato and Derrida question this by showing that the best such foundational system they know does not quite work. Plato differs from Derrida in continuing to suppose that there is a foundation for necessity, namely mereology, whose transparency guarantees its truth. Davidson, as opposed to both Plato and Derrida, tries to show directly that the project is incoherent.3

I. Why does Plato need Difference Itself?

The following is a not unusual interpretation of Plato's thought in the middle and late dialogues. It owes much to Findlay and other thinkers who take Aristotle's comments about Plato seriously. The exegetical point about Derrida, in any case, holds if Derrida understands Plato in this way, whether or not Plato himself thought this way.

On my understanding of Plato, the Different comes to have a central place in Plato's account of the world. We first need to see why Plato is committed to the existence of such an entity. Here, as is often the case with Plato, it helps to look for Parmenidean theses which Plato accommodates. There are three levels of Parmenidean considerations:

1) The first consideration showing that Difference Itself is an entity is the Parmenidean principle "Is or Is Not." I interpret this as the plausible thesis

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that anything required to give an account of what is the case must be a being, something real. That is, there are no “components” of reality which are halfway between being things and being nothing.\(^4\) That is, being an entity is an all-or-nothing matter.

So, if difference is required in order to account for what is the case, difference is something, and we can speak of Difference Itself, that Being which is this factor in what is the case. If there is plurality, there must be Difference Itself, since a plurality requires that each of the items in it be different from the others.

2) The second consideration will establish the antecedent of the conditional: Given that Difference Itself must be an entity if Difference Itself is required in order to account for what is the case, there is still the question whether Difference Itself is in fact required for such an account.

Someone could claim that being different is a mere verbal property, that there is nothing really in common between cases of Difference. So, no entity would be required to be posited as common element the states of affairs A being distinct from B and C being distinct from D. Perhaps all such facts of difference reduce to facts about what other properties things have, so that there is no further property of being distinct which needs to be postulated.

However, there are powerful reasons to explain difference by an entity, Difference Itself, which will turn out to be logically and metaphysically prior to Forms. The considerations emerge from an argument attributable to Parmenides: Suppose that Plato understood Parmenides to argue that there is exactly one Being as follows: Suppose there were two Beings, A and B. Then, by the principle “is or is not,” something would have to make them distinct, that is, some being would have to be to account for this part of the way things are. A candidate entity might be a property A had but B lacked. But such a property would itself be a Being, and, to do its job of distinguishing A from B, would have to be already distinct from the two things it distinguishes. Thus we cannot explain distinctness by appealing to properties that distinguish, since such properties presuppose the very fact of distinctness that is being explained.

An argument that this consideration is behind Difference Itself comes from Aristotle’s version of Parmenides’ argument. In *Metaphysics* B, 1001a 30ff, Aristotle says:

> ...if Unity itself and Being itself are beings, there is a difficulty how there can be something else beside these, that is how things can be more than one. For what is different from being does not exist, so the word of *Parmenides* must follow, that all things are one and this is Being.

\(^4\) So, for instance, the configurations by which Wittgenstein hoped to avoid things other than nameable objects either are or are not. If they are not, then they can do little to tie objects together in facts. If they are, then they are beings and so nameable.
This argument can be understood as resting on the following set of considerations: Suppose that there are two entities A and B and that Being a Being is a property. Then consider the possibility of some other property, say C, which entity A has and entity B lacks. Insofar as C is real, it is an entity, and in that respect like the things A and B it is supposed to distinguish. The differentiating part of the differentiating feature C must be something other than the property Being a Being. But then, what could there be to it other than Being? Anything we could arrive at would also be a Being. If we subtract the Being component from C, we once again have something which must Be, and so must have Being. If we subtract that Being-component, we are left with a residue which must still have Being. And so on. If we try to isolate something a thing has other than being, that component itself must be and so must have being. So, as it were, Being drives out every other property. But then Being is the only property, if it is a property at all.

Aristotle presents this as a familiar consequence, so we can suppose that this argument was familiar to Plato as well, whether or not it was what Parmenides had in mind. Plato may or may not wish to have “Being” be a property. My view is that these and other problems (which we see explored in the Sophist) lead Plato away from the idea that Being is a property at all. But the underlying difficulty of would remain if “One” replaces Being. Isolating individual components as themselves is a general difficulty which is independent of whether Being is a feature.

So, if we formulate Parmenides’ challenge as “What can make two beings distinct beings?,” answers which appeal to such beings as properties or distinct spatial locations fail to answer the challenge. Such entities already must be distinct beings in order to separate being from being. So, it would appear that nothing can separate Being from Being, but Being always cleaves to being, as Parmenides says.

The beginning of an answer to Parmenides must be a regress-ender: Plato needs an entity that will distinguish itself, without requiring a further object to make it distinct from the things it distinguishes. The only possible such object would be Difference Itself. If there were an entity, Difference Itself, which explained all difference, then that entity would explain its own difference from all others. Since Difference Itself is that in virtue of which things are different, Difference Itself can be different from Being while still being a being. It is different from the things it distinguishes in virtue of itself. (Many will be reminded of some famous arguments for the existence of God.)

Sameness is another such entity, which makes things be the same, and likewise makes itself the same as cases of sameness. So the participation regress disappears.

5 If there is a God of Being which explains all beings, then that God is the sole entity which requires no explanation, but exists in virtue of its own nature.
3) The third consideration is Parmenidean in the sense that the character Parmenides in the *Parmenides* develops it: If natures were self-sufficient, independent entities, then Difference would take its place among them, perhaps having especially wide and interesting scope.

The "third man" argument\(^6\) shows that we cannot think of Forms as being anything other than the natures they explain. If the Form Man were anything other than the nature it explained, i.e. if it were the nature Manhood in a kind of ideal substratum, then the nature itself would be something other than (i.e. in addition to) the Form. So Forms must be nothing other than the natures they are. As soon as a Form has more than one component, those components become objects of enquiry. In particular, the component which is the nature itself becomes yet another Form. So, Forms must be simple objects, entities which ARE the Natures they explain. This seems to be the import of the first section of the *Parmenides*.

This result, however, turns out to be impossible. There can be no simple objects. The arguments in the second part of the *Parmenides* show that such single items are not possible: Suppose that there is a single being. Its singleness is distinct from its being. So, given the Parmenidean principle above, a single being is immediately two. Furthermore, given that there is a difference between the singleness and the being of the entity, there is a third thing, the difference between them.

But now these three entities are each single beings different from each other. And each of them is thus plural, and so on. There are no cases of entities which are just one thing. Even the very natures which Forms are supposed to be must be indefinitely complex, as soon as we try to isolate the character just by itself. Difference makes impossible any character being just itself. The play of difference divides every nature from itself. According to the argument of the *Parmenides*, we cannot have a nature just by itself present before the mind. As soon as we put such a nature before our minds, we see that the nature also has other components, at least Being and Difference from others. But the effort to pare such accretions away and get to the pure nature itself is always frustrated, since any such core must itself exist and be different from other things.

By the arguments of the *Parmenides*, every entity is both the same and different from itself: Each nature or Form is different from itself in the sense that there is something to it besides the nature itself. Each of these entities which is supposed to be F Itself turns out to be F plus something else.\(^7\) On

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\(^6\) *Parmenides* 132al-b3. I omit any discussion of this vast literature. I am willing to defend the interpretation that follows by showing that it solves the immediate difficulty of the Third Man, and that it makes sense of subsequent parts of the *Parmenides*.

\(^7\) Note that the solution to the famous Third Man regress in the first section of the *Parmenides* requires that Forms just be the characters they explain rather than having them as attached characters. The attached characters picture of Form and the feature it
my interpretation, the *Parmenides* is a demonstration that there cannot be an entity which is in no way plural. So even a nature is something distinct from that nature.

One could say, reading Plato as a source for Derrida, that any Nature Itself is always deferred: It is different from any grasp we can have of it, and different from any being which could “express” or have it. We might even speak of the “materiality of the Form,” the fact that any Being which might be supposed to be a Nature Itself is always something besides that nature. The *Parmenides*, then, seems to have implicit exactly Derrida’s ideas of deferral. We can never get at “Man Itself,” because it is always (at least) also the distinct natures One and Being.

Each physical thing is the same and different from itself in the sense that having distinct features is being different things, while it is the same as itself. Furthermore, anything lasting through time is, as Plato notes, both the same and different, since it is the same thing being at different times. Sameness and difference of a single thing is temporality. Furthermore, distinct instances at different places or times of the same nature make the things same and different and may be interpreted to make the nature same and different as well.

Derrida’s characterizations of Differance as spacing (spatial) and deferral (temporal) have almost exact parallels in Plato: Difference Itself is both the same as itself, and different from itself, since Difference Itself is and Being is different from Difference Itself. If Difference Itself accounts for distinctness, Difference Itself is manifest in the Receptacle and Time, since each of these is a way of making things both the same and distinct. That is, if we think of the Receptacle as something like Space, and treat the Receptacle as a manifestation of the Different, then this aspect of Difference Itself permits natures to have more multiple cases. As Aristotle describes Plato’s theory,8 the Forms are generated by the One being applied to the Great and Small (= Difference Itself; the principle of Differentiation) and then the Forms are applied to the Great and Small again to generate the spatio-temporal particulars. Roughly, the Forms or natures are the various different ways of being one thing; and spatio-temporal particulars are spatio-temporally different cases of those different ways of being one thing. The Different is manifest in spatiality and temporality and in any differentiation. So it is the great instancizer and subdivider. Thus, following Aristotle’s remarks, the One or Being becomes the many Kinds, i.e. ways of being one being, each of which are then differenti-

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ated into the many spatially and temporally distinct cases of being each of the many kinds of Being.

For purposes of illumination of Derrida’s notion of Differance, there are several other important properties of Difference Itself to be emphasized: Difference Itself is not an ordinary nature, according to Plato, and according to the exigencies of the case. Difference Itself is prior to the Forms, the entities which are natures of Beings. (Parts of the Different Itself seem in the Sophist to be the natures of non-beings, as noted above.) Each of the Forms must already be different from everything else in order to be an independent being which can be a nature. By the regress argument ascribed above to Parmenides, Forms must be distinct entities not in virtue of the natures they are, but rather in virtue of Difference Itself. So Difference Itself distinguishes objects prior to there being Forms. That is, the various properties things have are distinguished by raw difference, that is, by Difference Itself, not in virtue of anything present in one and lacking in the other.

Derrida says similar things about Differance: Differance is not exactly a thing and not exactly a concept, for reasons that are analogous to Plato’s. Differance distinguishes prior to any imposition of concepts, and generates the manifold for concepts to organize. Conceptual systems, according to Derrida’s Saussurian account, are systems of differences, and so Differance is prior to concepts. That is, things are not different because different concepts apply, but rather different concepts apply in virtue of Differance.

The consideration that Difference Itself is not a quite a nature is more than merely that Difference Itself is a meta-nature. Being and Sameness are similarly meta-natures. Difference Itself is especially problematic because it is that being in virtue of which instances can exist. It is, as it were, half of the meta-Nature, Instancehood Itself. Instances of natures are different from each other and from the natures they are instances of. If we believe Aristotle and identify the Great and Small with the Different Itself, then Natures themselves, the Forms, are different instances of Oneness, that is, different ways of being one thing.

This characteristic of Difference Itself infects all entities whatsoever. Earlier dialogues such as the Phaedo take the feature being both the same and different from itself as a characteristic of physical sensory objects which distinguished them from Forms. The Parmenides, as is widely recognized, shows that every entity whatsoever, including Forms and the One, has this characteristic. So Plato removes one of the distinctions between “reality” and the sensible world. In effect, his argument in the Parmenides is a deconstruc-

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9 See “Differance,” p. 3.
10 “…Differance is not, does not exist, is not a present being (on) in any Form…” (“Differance,” in Margins of Philosophy, University of Chicago Press, 1982. P. 6; “…Differance is neither a word nor a concept…” ibid., p. 7.)
tion of his earlier position that the world is to be understood on the basis of simple entities.

II. Why does Derrida need Differance?

Suppose that Derrida has shown that there is no presence-before-the-mind in the way required to have Husserlian meanings. Derrida's argument in *Speech and Phenomena*,\(^\text{11}\) roughly, is: Any meaningful object, i.e. any spoken, written, or thought-token, must be repeatable. Any essentially repeatable object presents itself as having other possibilities of occurrence. But such "possibility of recurrence" is not a presentable property, not something that an entity can wear on its face. Thus a meaningful item, as such, necessarily is something that cannot be there at once. Its essence, as it were, involves absence.\(^\text{12}\)

The obvious question at this point is what is meant by "presence" and why a modal feature cannot be "present." Derrida's major exploration of this question occurs in "White Mythology"\(^\text{13}\) where he makes it clear that he thinks there is no basis for this prejudice beyond a persistent, indeed constitutive-of-philosophy obsession with light and vision metaphors for the intellect. That is, only a certain picture of what thinking is, namely having something before the mind in the way that we have a visual sense-impression before the mind, leads us to think that only what is visualizable is clear and available as a starting-point for understanding a given topic.

This consideration is quite powerful: In particular, by this argument no particular is properly nameable in virtue of a meaning. No meaningful state can occur only when a particular event is happening, for instance. This has consequences for the desire to designate the present, the self, and the moment by some kinds of thought-tokens which are also meanings. In particular, consider presence:

For the present to present itself as present is for it to present itself as directly after the immediate past and directly before the immediate future, as Husserl himself has shown. But the present's presence thus involves necessary reference to the non-present. Husserl takes the "now" to be a point, so that there will be no distance between the sequence of interior words of a silent monologue and the meanings they express in thought.\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^\text{12}\) Derrida is making a point related to Sellars' in "The Myth of the Given" and "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind."
\(^\text{14}\) This lack of distance, Derrida argues in the first chapters of *Speech and Phenomena*, is necessary because in order to have a genuine distinction between indication and expression, there must be possible a pure case of expression. The "point" character of the now in which the self talks to the self allows there to be no "real" signs going on when a person has an interior monologue. So the "now" must be a self-presenting point at its core,
The general point of the argument, apart from the details about Husserl’s theory, is that such terms as “I” and “now” are meaningful, and so repeatable apart from the specific application they have at a moment. What can “interior meanings,” the tokens of the language of thought, then name? Only repeatable, general terms. But that means that no meanings can convey a particular. So, in particular, no term can be true only of this very moment or this very person. By their very nature, meaningful items have application elsewhere. So, my term “I” is, to the extent that it means something, a term which can be used without me. Similarly, my term “now” can be so used. So, we hear on a dead man’s answering machine, “I am not here now.” So what does this imply about presence, the place where these meanings are displayed? That the “now” and the “I” are both Forms, rather than pure particulars, so that there are no “cases” with which to start. At the very bottom of experience and the world, there is always already repetition and bringing under concepts.

Derrida examines the idea of giving an account of how a language/world/conceptual system gets underway on the basis of the environment, and the biological underpinnings common to humans as organisms. After all, he says, “Differences do not fall out of the sky.” To call what we start with The World or Experience would be already to apply some predicates which would imply a given. But there is no experience and no world as an array of objects with properties prior to conceptualization. So, “Differance” and “instituted traces” could be imagined to sort of start the process. On the one hand, we cannot really talk about a “conceptual scheme” “uncategorized world” or “unconceptualized experience,” for precisely the reasons Davidson has outlined in “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme.”

But according to Derrida, we have to recognize that something goes on before a person begins to talk and think. While “the world” does not come

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15 The pros and cons and precise definitions of haecceities would take us very far afield. Both Plato and Derrida take it to be obvious that there can be no haecceities, idealities which by their very nature can be true of only a given particular. They accept without question Aristotle’s argument/observation that there can be no definition of a particular. Plato does hold that there are some natures which can have only one instance, such as the One Itself, but a consideration such as “might some other particular have been the One Itself” makes as little sense as the question to David Lewis whether there might have been other possible worlds. Since both Lewis and Plato reduce necessity to brute fact and mereology, the answer is in some sense “no.”

16 Some such consideration is at work in Husserl’s insistence that meanings are idealities, irreal. They can be the same in many locations.


18 In Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 183–98. As soon as we imagine a field to be divided up, we have posited objects with identity conditions. Roughly, to be formed into objects, a manifold must already be an entity and so formed.
divided up into entities and categories, it is not homogeneous either. Both “divided up” and “homogeneous” presuppose a World as an entity already there divided up into One or more objects. Something about what happens must allow concepts to get started, by providing some “texture” to make distinctions. Or so it seems. Derrida and Davidson would agree that if we cannot say how this happens, we cannot whistle it either.

Of course, Derrida here uses modal notions which have not been constructed out of clear and distinct ideas. “Allow” would not be allowed at this point in a foundational, systematic construction of the world. If we held Derrida to a Husserlian project or took his enterprise to be something like David Lewis’ in *A Plurality of Worlds*,19 then of course such use would be illegitimate. But, apart from such projects, we have something like Quine’s “Epistemology Naturalized,”20 an account which describes the world but does not construct it.

This “texture” cannot be distinctions between spatio-temporal regions such that one region has a feature which another region lacks, because features require differentiation and the construction of subjects to have them, and differentiation requires features. The pre-property, pre-conceptual, pre-differentiation texture is “Differance.”

Why can’t we just notice the way things are different? Derrida, along with Davidson, Quine, and Goodman, holds that there is no Sameness “given”21 in nature. So, how does Differance work? For Derrida as for Plato, the possibility of repetition requires a mix of Sameness and Difference. Two occurrences of “Frog” or frogs, for instance, are the Same and Different. They are two occurrences of the Same mark and they are distinct occurrences of that mark. Derrida takes this to be true both of thing and of a Sign, since both must be identified under some Kind in order to be the same thing or sign repeated (as the Same) on distinct occasions in distinct spots. We are making the thing or sign be the same thing or sign by taking distinct events to be occurrences of the Same. Such takings are not random, but they are not dictated by anything either. In the sense of “arbitrary” as “arbitrated, judged, thoughtfully decided” they could be said to be arbitrary. Judgments of Sameness are not determined, but that doesn’t mean that just anything goes. How does this accommodate

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21 The core idea of Davidson’s position on the Given could be put as follows: Of course there is sameness in nature. Pigs are all the same in being pigs. However, if we ask “What is it in virtue of which pigs are the same?” we have two kinds of replies: 1) We can cite the various biological facts and theories in virtue of which pigs are the kind of animals they are. 2) We can say the triviality that pigs are the same in being pigs. What Davidson denies is that there is something deeper than the triviality but distinct from the scientific. “Metaphysical Realism” is precisely the view that there is this deeper helpful explanation of an objective sameness which helpfully supplements “is a pig” being true of all of the pigs.
the fact that, even if Sameness is not entirely there in nature, there clearly are innate dispositions to respond in the same way, by some construction of “same way?” We discuss this below.

The sign-relation has the place in Derrida’s thought that instantiation does for Plato. And the differences between the sign relation and the relation of a Form to its instances bring about the important differences between Plato and Derrida. The basic issue is that of presence. Plato’s Forms were supposed to be before the mind as entities which mean themselves. His paradigm of the grasp of a mathematical proof from a diagram compels him to take the mind to be something which just grasps Forms as they are, until the logical and Parmenidean considerations occurred to him. Plato does not conceive of knowing as grasping interior tokens which mean their referents. Rather, thought grasps the Form Itself, in a dialogue such as the Phaedo. The difficulty, which leads to the self-deconstructions of the Parmenides, is that such natures cannot be grasped as just what they are, since they cannot be isolated from their necessary accompaniments. Plato thus addresses his version of the “materiality of the signifier,” but does not question the necessity which is grasped in the Form. Plato comes to realize in the Parmenides is that the mereology does not start with atomic elements, but rather has parts and wholes all the way down. Thus Plato does not question the apprehension of necessity, as Derrida does, but rather the apprehension of fundamental elements.

For Derrida, following Sellars the difficulty with Forms is that they would be present as essentially repeatable, as being the sort of thing that necessarily could have instances. Derrida argues that such features cannot be present. So, the natural Form-instance relation is replaced with the arbitrary sign-referent relation.

For a sign, there is no distinction between the representation of a sign and its reality. A photograph of an “A” is itself also an “A,” as are the names of “A” in quotation-marks. A sign is not quite an “instance” which fits a Form, since its being an entity cannot be specified apart from the Form it is an instance of. Thus, the occurrence of another case of a sign does not fit the “type-token” distinction, because that would suppose that we could identify

22 Although this would take us far afield, I would argue that Plato takes mereology to be the one kind of necessity which needs no more fundamental explanation, but is completely transparent. In this, he agrees with such modal metaphysicians as D. M. Armstrong (in numerous works, most recently A World of States of Affairs, Cambridge University Press 1997) and David Lewis (for instance in his On the Plurality of Worlds, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986.) That is, the necessities of the part-whole relation are taken as utterly obvious, not subject to deeper explanation, and an appropriate foundation for the rest of the metaphysics of modality.

cases of the sign and then group them into types. But the type is essential to
the sign. It is part of the essence of being a sign at all that it be repeatable as
a case of this Form. The sign is a sign at all by virtue of being able to be
repeated. So the meaningful-ness of a sign, what makes it be a sign, is
iterability, having distinct re-currences possibly. Therefore, the sign cannot
be present as what it is, since it must present itself as necessarily iterable,
necessarily something which can have other occurrences. Thus it is not quite
a token, since what it presents itself as, having other occurrences, is not
present. It is also not quite a type, since it is located in space and time.

Another way of putting this: Since we are, by denying the given and deny-
ing that there is a magic language, making concepts into signs, the concepts
under which signs fall in order to be the signs they are involve us in a
regress. Signs become as it were the foundation of Forms, and so their con-
straint by the Forms under which they fall cannot be a genuine constraint.

To deny "presence" is to deny that there is a "given." To deny that there is
a given is to say that sameness always partly depends on contingencies about
what we take to be the same. And that makes un-determined, arbitrary judg-
ments of sameness, of falling under the same sign, primary.

III. Derrida and Plato, Differance and Difference

So what about Plato's Different and Derrida's Differance? Plato's construction
of nature is like Derrida's construction of the world-and-experience, with
some important difference, that between Difference Itself and Differance.
Plato's Different divides things up according to what is best, and does so for
eternity. So, the major significant difference between Plato and Derrida is that
Plato's generation is necessitated and therefore permanent, whereas Derrida's
generation is contingent and fluid. Plato still invokes a transcendental, the
Good. As I have argued elsewhere, the Good is a modal notion. Thus Plato,
unlike Derrida, seeks a construction of what must be from what is.

In almost every other way, Plato and Derrida agree:

First: Remember how, for Plato, Triangle is different from Square in
virtue of Difference, not in virtue of the natures Triangle and Square. So it is
Difference which makes those natures distinct, not anything "given" about
the natures themselves. Otherwise, a regress would result. If we appeal to the
natures' own natures to explain how the two natures are different, then those
two natures of natures would already have to be different in order to make the
entities they are natures of different from each other.

Second: Plato's Difference divides things in space and time, if we under-
stand the Timaeus and the logic of the situation, and accept Aristotle's charac-
terization of the Great and Small as a function of Difference. So, Plato's
Different is and is the source of both distinctness in space and deferral in time, just as Differance is.

Third: An apparent difference between Difference and Differance is only apparent. One might think of Plato’s account as ontology and Derrida’s account as conceptual. But for both thinkers, this distinction is suspect. Without presence, there is no world opposed to the conceptual scheme which organizes it. So Derrida’s account is an account of the world as much as an account of “conceptualization.” For Plato, the soul’s affinity to the structure of reality likewise makes the distinction between a conceptual account and an ontological account suspect. Plato’s generation of the world is logical, from the logos and its requirements. So the conceptual and the ontological are not really distinct for Plato.

Fourth: Both Differance and Difference are quite peculiar natures or entities, since they both are prior to any “conceptual scheme,” or universe of entities with features. In the Sophist, Plato says that parts of the Different are natures of “what is not F.” But such negative Beings are very different from entities which instantiate positive natures. Differance likewise has to be construed, if construed as real at all, as some kind of phenomenon prior to the beings of the world. On my reading of Derrida, Differance is a sort of mythical phenomenon, a fiction which is described as what would be required if there were to be a construction of the world from a foundation. That is, Derrida need not be taken as thinking that there is indeed a phenomenon in the world, Differance, but rather as showing that the project of construction of the world from foundational entities requires this very weird quasi-phenomenon, Differance. This I construe as an argument, not for the existence of such a strange pseudo-phenomenon, but as an argument against the project itself. Thus Derrida agrees with Davidson that the very idea of a conceptual scheme is impossible.

Thus, Derrida’s concept of Differance conceals an attack on Metaphysics. He shows that seeking an understanding both different from natural science and non-trivial leads to mysterious quasi-entities which should lead us to question the motives for the entire project. The principle which reflects the demand for such a science is the principle of non-circular conceptual construction: No explanation of B by A is possible if the understanding of A requires that B exist. Briefly, this is the requirement that a kind of understanding is available which orders the world intellectually, according to the demands of reason.

To state this Davidsonian interpretation in more detail: Davidson, in “The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” argues that there is no sense to supposing either that “the world” is homogeneous or textured independently of what we

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say about it. This does not mean that Davidson thinks that the world we describe pops up out of nowhere, or that we make everything up. Rather, Davidson’s position is anti-constructionist, anti-foundationalist, and deeply anti-metaphysical. On Davidson’s simple exposition of what is the case and what we say, there is no room for the science of Metaphysics to exist beside real Science.

Davidson says that whether the world is already divided up (metaphysical realists view) or whether we divide it up (idealism, some construals of Deconstruction\textsuperscript{26}) is a bad question, and needs to be deconstructed, by showing that it presupposes precisely what it is trying to explain away. According to Davidson, we say how the world is with our terms, in our language. What it takes for “there are frogs” to be true is that there are frogs. No explanation of that phenomenon is any better except the (metaphysically unhelpful) exposition of the conditions required on a given planet for frogs to come into existence and continue. No “analysis” in terms of properties and the subjects they inhabit gets anywhere. English sentences are as good an exposition of what is the case as any other language. The end of metaphysics is actually as simple as that.\textsuperscript{27} Now, there are contingencies about what we say—features of the way we talk about the world which could have been otherwise. These contingencies provide the basis for change in what we say when and “how we conceptualize the world.” If things could have been otherwise, then they can be otherwise, and such contingencies need to be stated somehow. The appeals to Differance, traces, etc., and the speculations about the origin of consciousness are Derrida’s version of the phenomenological attempt to do so.

Davidson and Derrida can perfectly well say how things could be different, but without supposing that the world need to be described in some “pre-conceptual” terms. His suggestion would be just to use our regular terms to describe the way organisms respond to the environment and how consciousness arises, even though the terms in explanation could only have been arrived at by the very processes they explain.

Here is the phenomenological and, more generally, philosophical principle which Derrida shows to lead to weird concepts like “Differance”: In the understanding of a phenomenon, we may not use any concepts which already presuppose the phenomenon being understood. This principle, which I take to be

\textsuperscript{26} Derrida’s deconstructions are not demonstrations of the unusability of concepts but are rather akin to Wittgenstein’s work in their practical import. Only on the foundationalist presuppositions which he rejects would a failure of foundationalism show the unusability of a concept which has been deconstructed. See my “Wittgenstein as Conservative Deconstructor,” in \textit{New Literary History}, Volume 19, Number 2, Winter 1988, pp. 239–58. In the case at hand, the fact that something like Differance would be required for an account of the origins of concepts only argues for the reality of Differance if we are committed to the foundational project.

\textsuperscript{27} I belabor this point in “True Figures,” in \textit{The Interpretive Turn}, Edited by Hiley, et al., Cornell University Press, 1991, pp. 197–217.
the operative principle of phenomenological analysis and of metaphysics uni-
versally, presupposes a foundational project which makes no sense unless
there are meanings which magically connect to their referents. Apart from
such meanings, it is perfectly legitimate to describe situations, including the
situation in which we acquire language and understanding of the world, in the
terms of our current language. What else can we use, as Davidson says.