



HAL
open science

Being and Difference: the Infinite Border

Frank Darwiche

► **To cite this version:**

Frank Darwiche. Being and Difference: the Infinite Border. The Question of Borders :Among the Resident, The Passer by and The Intermediary – La Question des frontières: entre le résident, le passant et le médiateur, Université de Balamand, Nov 2017, Balamand, Lebanon. halshs-04864696

HAL Id: halshs-04864696

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04864696v1>

Submitted on 14 Jan 2025

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Being and Difference: the Infinite Border*Dr. Frank Darwiche*

University of Balamand, Lebanon.

Abstract

This paper seeks to determine the border between the individual and the other, whereby the other is ever more present, while never invading the self. It begins ontologically by evincing being as its own self, *kath'auto*, and difference, *heteron*, in Plato's Sophist. Plato's treatment arises as problematic in its tendency toward relativism. The problem is then approached epistemologically from its human aspect, and a first solution to the impasse is sought in the determination of the subject. The latter arises as either a product of the sensible world, in Hume's empiricism, or a Kantian subject accompanying my representations and/or acting as autonomous and moral. This first solution appears as incomplete, insofar as the separateness between subject and non-subject remains unbroken. A return to the ontological is then effected, as a further step is taken toward a consideration of the subject as a Leibnizian predicated-in-subject and analytical proposition, coupled with a perspectivism of the infinite within finitude. The individual being is thus revealed as constantly bordered by what determines it: the infinite. It expresses that infinite, which is actually none other than the difference as the other within and without the individual qua subject. It is finally shown that that infinite is, as border, approached qualitatively and infinitesimally and can thus never be a mere objectified extension, while it always intensively determines each individual being.

A problem arises, in Plato's system, which we may witness in *Theaetetus* and *Parmenides*. It concerns the essential building blocks of Platonic realism, i.e. the Ideas or Forms. The first dialogue deals with a rehabilitation of sensation for knowledge¹ and the second with monism², but what appears clearly in both is the emergence of the problematic of the link between the Forms and the sensible world. What surfaces in the two dialogues is that the Ideas are quite rigid, in two ways: they are, on the one hand, aloft, *aloof*, in their distance from the sensible world; and on the other, strictly *separate from each other* in their own world. What is at issue here may be summarised in one word: "links" or "relations". In other words: how are the Ideas, Beings, to be *participated to*, and how are they to establish links *amongst themselves*?

Parmenides had confirmed once and for all, at the cost of a tortuous exercise in logic, that sophists are in error: non-being does not exist in any way or fashion. This had rendered being an absolute, which could be simple or multiple – it is entire and is impossible to negate, by virtue of the non-existence of non-being³. However, Plato has to admit in the *Sophist* that the copy, the image of what is, exists. Since the image is itself not a being, we are forced to admit the existence of a being that is non-being⁴. Being and non-being must then in some way co-exist. At the same time, the reference to the "intelligible world" in previous dialogues is ignored in the *Sophist*, while terms such as "life" and "change" make their appearance along with "intelligence/thought"⁵. Such notions refer, for the first time, to existing realities; and they ensure, also for the first time, that the Ideas *communicate* with other realities. Such communication or communion, to use the exact equivalent of the Greek *κοινωνία*, means that being is an effective, real potential power, *δύναμις*⁶, which allows realities to mingle, and such mingling is what makes it possible for things to be and to reach their essence.

The result of all this is the realisation that each thing is one and two. In other words, there is a division at the heart of being that, nonetheless, does not undo its unity: each thing is at the same time what it is, *itself*, and different from *others* (*ἕτερον* becomes the fifth genus). These two determinations are the *limits* of each thing, i.e. its essence. They may be formulated as two overarching ontological principles: Identity and Difference. This is the new shape of Plato's being, which applies not only to the Ideas themselves, but to all entities. Those two principles are made possible thanks to mutual *communication/communion*, and they are the very definition of each and every entity. The limit of each entity thus discovered possesses two sides or faces: one looks unto the entity itself and the other beyond it, toward the outside, what Plato will later call "the region of the other"⁷. If entities were to speak, they would say that they are what they are and are different from what they are not. The "region of the other" is then made up of what each being is not. There precisely is the sphere of non-being. We may say that the big old problem of non-being posed by Protagoras and the sophists has been solved: to speak of non-being is in fact to speak of negation; and negation in this case turns out to be a matter of formulating difference – and no longer the sign of opposites or the formulation of a contradiction. In other words, when we deal with non-being, we are saying that a being is *not*, and to say that it is not is to say that it

¹ Plato, *Theaetetus*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.

² Plato, *Plato's Parmenides: Text, Translation & Introductory Essay*, Las Vegas, Parmenides Publishing, 2010.

³ Plato, *Parmenides*, 165e-166c.

⁴ Plato, *Sophist*, 240a-d.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 248e, 249a.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 247c-e.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 257d, 258a-b, 258d-e.

is *different* from something. Being and Difference: all seems to have been settled then. Platonism at its highest point has made a special place for the other. The border between an entity and another is no longer one of sheer inertness and isolation.

Notwithstanding such conclusions, we do soon realise, on further reflection, that the difference in question is a *relation*, and that such relation appears as a sheer assertion of relativism. Indeed, the non-being may be a non-*being*, but in the end the very expression lacks determination; for we must say what the being is and is not each time. More precisely, each non-being is a non-being-something. If that something, whatever entity it may be, is no longer there, non-being cannot be considered, either ontologically or logically, at all. There is then, despite Plato's conclusions, no non-being in itself – it is always relative to a specific entity. Plato had even asserted, in the same dialogue, two things: “*the different* is always said in relation to another” and what is the same is “the same as itself⁸.” However we may turn this, Plato had taken the ground from underneath his feet by so saying, for he had made both the same and the different, i.e. the other, relative. His solution may be ‘correct’, but it refers to no true οὐσία. Its impasse is that of a whole system – the ontological Platonic system. In fact, the ontological path seems blocked, and with it all attempts at accounting for the different as an effectively existing ontological entity. We are then urged to look for a determination of the other through other means. We may then, thus armed, come back again to the ontological and attempt a determination anew. We shall thus seek a solution, a delimitation of the other, on the epistemological-subject path, before returning the question of actual existence.

We are to ask how the individual is epistemologically formed, and we may focus our work and ask how the individual human subject – as the most complex of all and thus the locus of any problematic concerned with this issue – is formed, i.e. how it finds its limits, its definition. A first path to determining such a “being” consists in leaving the ontological platonic aporia altogether and looking at the subject epistemologically, first as synthetic then as analytic, the second being, as we shall see, a much better solution in welcoming the other *outside* and *within*. We will start with the synthetic.

I take synthetic formation here in the larger sense, i.e. as a linking together of different elements. We may then take either the empirical or the transcendental path. Hume will aptly represent the former and Kant, obviously, the latter.

Refusing the Cartesian Subject as field of the Absolute⁹, Hume inherits Locke's idea of *tabula rasa*¹⁰ – itself drawn from Aristotle, in that the subject as the self-subject is not always already there but *becomes* what it is, through the senses which build experience, ἐμπειρία¹¹. For our own purposes, this makes the border between the subject and others, whatever they may be, permeable, at least in a sensory sense. It allows Hume to refute the self's absoluteness.

Hume's empiricism is most radical, in that he will go back, for *any* question asked, to the *impressions* left by the senses, such impressions being purely and simply the criterion of truth¹². All ideas are weaker copies of the impressions; complex ideas are then nothing that exists in reality as such, and all substances are mere ideas and not real, sensual beings. The idea of “self”,

⁸ *Sophist*, 255d and 254d respectively.

⁹ Descartes, “Meditatio I”, *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, Paris, Vrin, 1904, p. 17-23.

¹⁰ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999, Book II, chap. 1 and 2.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. McR. McKeon, New York, Random House, 1941, 100a-b.

¹² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Second Edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978, p 94-98.

of identity that may be independent of sensory experience – such is the Cartesian *Cogito* – is refuted in the following manner:

Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is deriv'd; and consequently there is no such idea.¹³

What Hume means is that such an idea does not correspond to anything or, more precisely, to any impression. He sees the mind as “a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance... and mingle... There is properly no simplicity in it at one time”, and thus of course, no “identity in different¹⁴...” In other words, the mind or, better still, reason does not exist before experience-qua-impressions, and there is thus no absolute subject as a continuous substance. If this is the case, then it is no longer possible, as a Cartesian may claim, that identity be a subject actively uniting its perceptions; rather, it “is merely a quality, which we attribute to them, because of the union of their ideas in the imagination, when we reflect upon them.” The qualities that give that union are “resemblance, contiguity and causation”, all of which arising from or depending on experience¹⁵. What we are, what our being is for Hume, in the end, is succinctly stated thus: “a bundle or collection of different perceptions... in a perpetual flux and movement¹⁶.”

How synthesis, in the wider sense I have given it here, functions in this case is as a bringing together through the work of the imagination and memory, relying on belief, viz. causation, and resemblance. However, the price of this, as the reader can easily surmise, is very high: what we call subject is in the end simply dissolved, and reason, all *a priori*, becomes a mere bend – formed from habit – of the imagination. With this in mind, we can clearly say that the border between me and the other here is dissolved, or rather is placed out of the problematic of identity. All is perception/impression/idea. We are before constantly shifting bundles of perceptions that form each and all.

We may go toward another form the subject takes on in its relation to what is other, with the aim of giving a less unstable vision, i.e. one where limits are clearly present and serve to thus define the subject and its action. Two possibilities in that regard emerge from Kant.

First, we may consider the subject as what always accompanies my representations. Since human knowledge is discursive, this imposes a specific form of that subject:

... we should take nothing that we can attain for a final subject, and... the substantial itself could never be thought by our ever-so-deeply penetrating understanding, even if the whole of nature were laid bare before it; for the specific nature of our understanding consists in thinking everything discursively, i.e., through concepts, hence through mere predicates, among which the absolute subject must therefore always be absent¹⁷.

Kant then moves on to determine what the “I” actually is:

... the I is not a concept at all, but only a designation of the object of inner sense insofar as we do not further cognize it through any predicate; hence although it cannot itself be the predicate of any other thing, just as little can it be a determinate concept of an absolute subject, but as in all the other cases it can only be the referring of inner appearances to their unknown subject¹⁸.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 251-2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, trans. and ed. G. Hatfield, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, § 46, p. 86.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*.

The subject is, as for Hume, not a substance; but Kant adds that it is an idea acting as “a regulative principle.¹⁹” This “I”, as a regulative idea, has a specific function: bringing together, uniting, all my representations. This subject accompanies all operations that bring together my perceptions, my concepts, be they pure or empirical. This means, of course, that it is not in control of them beyond its regular function, and its intervention in experience or thought has no motivation, if left as such. Hence, the importance of determining it further, more precisely as a moral I, with a responsibility. That is of course the work of the *Kritik der praktische Vernunft*, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, where I is a person, i.e. a moral agent.

The first formulation of the Categorical Imperative in the *Kritik der praktische Vernunft* states: “So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle of a universal legislation²⁰.” The moral subject takes on all of humanity, and thus all of the other subjects, as he acts, and his responsibility shows in his applying or refusing to determine his will by the universal maxim. The preceding sections determine the moral person more precisely: §5 and 6 give it the exclusive possibility for autonomy, i.e. the determination of the will through the law of reason alone, independently from any empirical influence.

Two things may be said in this regard. First, the subject, as it effects its regulative work as an “I” idea does in the end have a concomitant experience that always goes with it, and that is the sum of not only the phenomena and objects as such but of the phenomena following upon interventions in the world. Moreover, the autonomous determinations of the will lead to actions within the world, and thus to empirical modifications and “creations” that include the other in its human and sundry forms – hence the epistemological affects the ontological reality. Secondly, the “true” moral subject here in question is the *truly* moral subject. As such it is then ever more independent of anything that might affect its will through empirical means. In other words, the more the subject is independent of all syntheses involving the empirical the more truly it is what it is, i.e. autonomous.

However, it may be argued that as it is constituted, this subject erects an ever stronger border between itself and all particulars that might otherwise affect will, including empirically present others in their circumstances and the consequences of their activities. There is a constant distancing through a bolstering of the erected border between the moral subject and the other in all its empirical determinations, despite the open possibilities for inter-subjectivity later exploited by Fichte²¹.

The two epistemological solutions I have provided as synthetic or attending over a synthetic determination of actions and/or of the subject have the advantage of avoiding all relativism and of establishing a border, that may be vague at times but does afford a certain definition, contingent each time on an epistemological and/or moral project. We may ask ourselves whether we could stop at this point, or whether we may accomplish what might seem impossible: establishing a border between one subject and the Other in the largest sense – which includes moving from the epistemological to the ontological again – while accounting for all that is Other in every determination and act of that very subject. Despite this apparent impossibility, I should like to assert and show, in this last part, that such an endeavour is not a far-fetched speculation, at least discursively speaking. It involves moving from the synthetic to the analytic on the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. W. S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing Company, IN, USA, 2002, § 7, p. 45.

²¹ See for example: Allen W. Wood, “Fichte’s Intersubjective I”, *Inquiry, Special Issue: Kant to Hegel* ed. S. Hahn vol. 49, nb 1 (February, 2006).

episteme-logical and the onto-logical plane – the “logical” ensuring here the link necessary to the move from *episteme* to *einai*. I have found this potential by going back about a hundred years before Kant, to the Leibnizian concept of the individual as an analytical proposition and its consequent perspectivism.

In Section IX of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* Leibniz defines the composition of what he will later call his monad in the following manner: “Every individual substance...”, considered in its entirety, i.e. in its full concept, includes therein “its experiences together with all the attendant circumstances and the whole sequence of exterior events²².” In other words each being, in so far as it exists, is an analytical proposition. Leibniz gives in §VIII the example of Alexander the Great:

When we carefully consider the connection of things we see also the possibility of saying that there was always in the soul of Alexander marks of all that had happened to him and evidences of all that would happen to him²³...

If we do not develop this thought, it might seem that Alexander, or any other subject, is simply predetermined and closed off in itself, with an impermeable border between him and anyone or anything else. This may, however, be quickly dispelled as we understand what is included in the proposition that is constitutive of Alexander or any being out there²⁴.

Leibniz adds that Alexander’s concept, like every other, includes “...traces even of everything which occurs in the universe²⁵”. In other words, each individual being, i.e. each complete subject-predicate, contains infinity in the form of infinite perceptions, past and present. Far from being recluse and closed unto itself, it has the universe within it as perceived – conscious or unconscious – reflection. At the same time it itself *is*, in so far as it is defined and thus finite.

We can say two things that determine that concept’s essence: First, it is in a way a species unto itself. This is one of Leibniz’s major contributions to defining the modern individual:

... it is not true that two substances may be exactly alike and differ only numerically, *solo numero*, and... what St. Thomas says on this point regarding angels and intelligences (*quod ibi omne individuum sit species infima*) is true of all substances²⁶...

This is the famous principle of identity of indiscernibles, whereby every being differs

²² Gottfried W. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics, Correspondence with Arnauld and Monadology*, trans. George R. Montgomery, 1873 Press, New York, 1902, §IX.

²³ *Ibid.*, §VIII.

²⁴ This of course implies that we conflate the predicate-in-subject principle and the analyticity principle. I am of course aware of the later critiques of this conflation, including Hegel’s, who refutes, in the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* for instance, the existence of completely independent substances, by referring all subjects to an absolute substance. However, we shall leave such objections – which merit much longer investigation – aside for the purposes of this paper, in so far as we follow Leibniz in our solution, and Leibniz himself effects such conflation.

We refer the interested reader to Hegel, “Die Wahrheit der Gewißheit seiner selbst”, in *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), p. 145: “Was für das Bewußtsein weiter wird, ist die Erfahrung, was der Geist ist, diese absolute Substanz, welche in der vollkommenen Freiheit und Selbständigkeit ihres Gegensatzes, nämlich verschiedener für sich seiender Selbstbewußtsein[e], die Einheit derselben ist; *Ich*, das *Wir*, und *Wir*, das *Ich* ist.” Also to “Gewißheit und Wahrheit der Vernunft”, *ibid.*, p. 182: “Weil nun so der Vernunft die reine Wesenheit der Dinge, wie ihr Unterschied, angehört, so könnte eigentlich überhaupt nicht mehr von *Dingen* die Rede sein, d. h. einem solchen, welches für das Bewußtsein nur das Negative seiner selbst wäre. Denn die vielen Kategorien sind *Arten* der reinen Kategorie, heißt: *sie* ist noch ihre *Gattung* oder *Wesen*, nicht ihnen entgegengesetzt. Aber sie sind schon das Zweideutige, welches zugleich das Anderssein *gegen* die reine Kategorie in seiner *Vielheit* an sich hat. Sie widersprechen ihr durch diese Vielheit in der Tat, und die reine Einheit muß sie an sich aufheben, wodurch sie sich als *negative Einheit* der Unterschiede konstituiert.”

²⁵ *Ibid.*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, §IX.

qualitatively from every other, and that necessarily, by the fact that all its experiences, its perceptions, and its positions in the world are its own alone in the totality of its concept. No individual can be reduced to a numerical, quantitative representation of a species, be it human or otherwise. Each is an end (in the Aristotelian sense) in itself.

Secondly, each being contains, perceives all, consciously and unconsciously or virtually. Thus what is finite has the infinite within it: all that is *ἔτερον* is in the subject as well. The old Platonic *aporia* is overcome. The subject is not a fortress against the infinite and its threat of chaos, but its very limits hold that very infinite within, which determines it and its history²⁷.

We may say, going back to the ontological question: being is bordered by what *determines* it: the Infinite. What is beyond is not mere foreignness, it is a determinant of being. Moreover, each being as an analytical proposition, i.e. as a subject containing all its predicates, expresses its content and thus the infinite²⁸ otherness within it.

Such infinite may be approached as the border between being and the other, within being. It is to be regarded as qualitative and infinitesimal. Its presence signals the ever-changing determination of the subject, which makes him unfettered by any one identity. The assertion of its infinitesimal character speaks for its containment within, its conscious and unconscious operations and its impossible reduction. The border is, however paradoxical that may seem, within.

As such, what may now be termed “the infinite border” – and I am tempted to say the “infinitely receding border” – escapes mere objectified *extension* – a notion Leibniz goes so far as calling it “imaginary”²⁹. Being is thus never mere material being occupying a particular space and possessing a power of production, but an infinite reflection of and on the universe, i.e. on everything else. It is determined *intensively* by the presence of the infinite other within. It is also what it is by virtue of the point it departs from in the universe, which no other occupies, and which thus gives it an exclusive point of view, justifying the principle of identity of indiscernibles.

At the end of this journey through being and the other, we may say that we have come full circle. What Plato placed on the outside/exterior is now inside with no contradiction. The *ἔτερον* went from being a problem to being the very solution to defining being and all subjects.

²⁷ *Ibid.*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, XII.