

The Philosophy of Difference: Questions and Stakes
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Abstract:

The philosophy of difference has sought to give renewed attention to marginalized themes that the logos excluded during the modern period, especially myth, or mythos. Human beings long believed that they could master their reality and their lives through reason. Reason thus became the principal foundation of hegemony. Under this monistic view, modern philosophy moved away from the principles and values it had sought to realize. Contemporary philosophies therefore sought to reorient their discourses. They moved from the absolute to the relative, from the self to the collective "we", and from centrism to openness and plurality.

Keywords: philosophy of difference, plurality, centrism, identity, the marginalized

Introduction:

We usually search for the good life and for the ways and means through which it may be achieved. We establish ethics, systems, and beliefs in order to regulate conduct within this life. We also seek to organize the way of living with the other in all political, economic, and social fields. In order to regulate this life, we enact laws and spread the values of justice and truth so that it may continue. Everything we do, and everything we invent, is done for this life. Human existence cannot be separated from the process of becoming that belongs to life itself. Life is the form of existence that compels the human being to invent and to try whatever appears possible, so that new opportunities may be created.

Today, after these successive historical stages of life moving toward an unknown future, human beings have discovered that they have lost much of their humanity. This humanity has continued to deteriorate because of intellectual systems that were once believed to open new horizons for life. Yet human beings have found themselves attempting to destroy life through destructive systems and totalizing authority. This reveals an imbalance in their view of the way of living that life itself requires. They therefore began to search for new hopes that could revive life for human beings who suffer the calamities of violence, impoverishment, ignorance, dispossession, and alienation.

This process eventually led to the formulation of an objective view of difference. It gave priority to the recognition of the legitimacy of difference and to granting it a formal cultural status. Humanity today seeks to adopt the values of openness, tolerance, relativity, pluralism, and human rights. From difference, and from its history, we can know who we are, where we stand, and what the limits of our age may be, as Jacques Derrida says. Yet making cultural difference recognized requires subjecting the philosophy of difference to research and analysis, in order to identify its determinants, manifestations, figures, and symbols. The culture of difference and its philosophy can then be rooted as values. They may also be translated, in practice, into a behavioral culture shared by people.

Through this, world peace may be achieved, and a partnership of being may prevail among the inhabitants of the earth.

The central problem addressed in this research paper is therefore as follows: What are the categories of the philosophy of difference? What are the stakes on which it relies? Is the recognition of difference as a culture a project that can be realized in the age of globalization and the unitary and totalizing order?

1/ The Question of Difference under the New World Order:

The development experienced by modern societies formed the first and preparatory stage of what later came to be known as the age of globalization. This was a stage of intellectual, political, and economic maturity at higher levels and wider horizons. It aspired to unify the world according to a universal system that would turn the planet into a global village, supported by advanced technology and rapid exchange. The capacities of technology “open, in the literal sense of the word, a new space of communication among human beings. They reconfigure being-with-the-other. They outline a world marked, at the same time, by unprecedented solidarity and radical decentralization. It gathers, and through gathering, it singularizes.”¹ This unification, which the mechanisms of the new order seek to shape in the world, aims to create a space of interaction among civilizations that were once isolated. The modernization brought by the third millennium seeks to establish a society in which boundaries are no longer fixed and capacities are no longer limited. It decenters place, time, and the human being.

Whatever name this new stage may bear, whether globalization, empire, or postmodernity, the new space formed through its discourses and practices has achieved a qualitative leap. It is a decisive point of passage and transformation. It marked the end of one millennium and the beginning of another, with a change in the conditions of human existence. This transformation embodies a vast creative process with an unprecedented capacity for rapid movement. It has also accelerated the development of the mechanisms of power and the practices of politics.

Within this totalizing framework, which globalization seeks to impose on states through its new order, the fate of identity becomes an unavoidable question. We must also ask how its totalizing discourses contribute to the negation of difference by creating a world system that seeks unity within multiplicity and thereby displaces difference. “There is a group of thinkers who believe that globalization emerged as an alternative to all other affiliations. This group is supported by businesspeople who care about nothing in life except profit.”²

In his reading of contemporary international reality, the American strategist Samuel Huntington says: “In the post-Cold War world, the most important distinctions among peoples are no longer ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural.” Accordingly, peoples and nations try to answer the important question: Who are we? The answer is usually given in the traditional way familiar to human beings, by referring to the things that matter most to them. People define themselves through descent, religion, language, history, values, customs, and social institutions.³ This means that conflict will be between cultures. In other words, future conflict between civilizations will be ignited by

¹ Marcel Gauchet, *Religion in Democracy*, trans. Shafiq Mohsen, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 1st ed., 2007, p. 90.

² Bouzghaya Baya and Ben Daoud Larbi, “The Problem of Identity and Cultural Globalization,” *Journal of Human and Social Sciences*, p. 661.

³ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, trans. Talaat Al-Shayeb, 2nd ed., 1999, p. 39.

cultures more than by any other factor. Culture is one of the strongest factors that both divide and unite peoples, inside and outside a single entity.

Huntington also says: “In the new world, cultural identity has become the main factor in determining a state’s friends and enemies. While a state could avoid taking sides during the Cold War, it cannot lose its identity. The question ‘Which side are you on?’ has been replaced by the question ‘Who are you?’ Every state must find an answer to it. This answer is its cultural identity. It determines the state’s place in world politics, just as it determines its friends and enemies.”⁴ This means that relations among states have come to be defined by cultural identity and difference.

Greek philosophy considered the principle of identity to be one of the logical principles and universal categories. In the modern period, however, identity moved beyond the philosophical field and became an existential problem posed by every cultural group at different levels. This was especially true in anthropology, whose researchers are known for their interest in similarity and resemblance. This intense concern with the question of identity reveals the depth of the crisis experienced by the present age. Lévi-Strauss regarded this crisis as a new malady. “All of this later led to the question of identity and to a reconsideration of its problem, especially with the generation of the 1968 student revolt and its strong tendency toward divergence and difference, that is, the difference of cultures from one another. This led Jean-Marie Benoist to say that the question of difference permeates our present age. We have entered an age of diversity, difference, fragmentation, and disintegration.”⁵

Difference has even become a philosophical current. It includes a group of philosophers known for their critique of Western centrism, such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, Julia Kristeva, Martin Heidegger, and others.

There is no doubt that Heidegger’s remarks on identity and difference shows how identity has become a central theme in Western philosophy since Plato. Multiplicity can be understood only through this concept. For this reason, philosophy “from Plato to Hegel is a philosophy of presence. By this we mean that consciousness recognizes only what is present within it. This presence takes the form of signification, meaning, law, and identity. In this way, consciousness conforms to its own categories, which means that human thought becomes the center of the universe. Yet the reversal that took place in philosophy from Heidegger onward, and from which Derrida began, speaks of a philosophy of absence. It is the philosophy that speaks of the different other, who never ceases to withdraw through the becoming of difference.”⁶ This current arose as a reaction to what happened in Western thought during the modern period, when self-centering became the new given of the major transformations that occurred in the various scientific fields and changed life and the ways of looking at it.

Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Foucault present “the early Greek age, prior to the triad of the discourse of truth (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle), as the age of difference, becoming, and art, or the Dionysian age par excellence. The later age, however, is the age of completed Platonic-Christian truth. It was therefore an age of stability, ready-made forms, totality, and closure, an Apollonian age.”⁷ Totalizing thought is nourished either by religious discourses in particular, which derive their legitimacy and

⁴ Ibid., p. 203.

⁵ Approaches to Modernity and Postmodernity: Selected Dialogues from Contemporary German Thought, trans. Mohammed Al-Sheikh and Yasser Al-Tai, Dar Al-Tali’a, Beirut, 1996, p. 12.

⁶ Adel Abdullah, Deconstruction: The Will to Difference and the Authority of Reason, Dar Al-Hasad for Publishing and Distribution, Damascus, Syria, 1st ed., 2000, p. 13.

⁷ Ismail Mahnana, The Arabs and the Question of Difference: The Impasses of Identity, Origin, and Forgetting, Dar Al Aman, Rabat, 1st ed., 2014, p. 91.

sacredness from revelation and thus become discourses inhabited by surveillance and punishment, or by ideological, metaphysical, political, state, or technical discourses.

This is what the French anthropologist Gérard Leclerc indicated when he said: “In the simplest matters, we must rethink the historical and sociological problem of the sense of centrality. What has been called ethnocentrism was not the work of European occupiers alone. It was also the work of Arabs, Chinese, Hindus, Eskimos, and the Indians of the Amazon.”⁸ Fanaticism therefore stands as a barrier before the philosophy of difference and plurality. It even makes coexistence among these systems of belief difficult and threatened by internal strife. This is what we witness locally and globally in identity conflicts. For this reason, “the crisis lies in the type of relationship that must be established with identity, and in the need to reconsider and rebuild the mode of belonging to individual or collective identity.”⁹ Anthropology therefore focuses on deconstructing the foundations of the identities of different peoples and civilizations, in order to move beyond them and propose strategic alternatives for tolerant and open identities.

“Thus, the new form made possible by the phenomenon of globalization and the eruptions of postmodernity is an attempt to deconstruct the dominant forms, old and modern, whether rooted in religion and theology or in secular and humanist origins. This is done in order to understand the impasses of humanist doctrines and to uncover emancipatory projects.”¹⁰ In other words, it seeks to displace all illusions and forms of concealment embodied in modernist projects. This displacement of central thought gives philosophy a new role and task. John Dewey makes the task of philosophy the clarification of people’s ideas and of the events that accompany their lives. In this sense, philosophy will remain a companion to the human being as long as it finds the proper ground for critical speech, namely freedom.

2/ Postmodern Discourse: Questioning Certainty and Deconstructing Identities:

The fate of philosophy depends on freedom. Freedom is the space in which the different visions of thought move. Rorty speaks about renewal within philosophy itself and says: “We shall always need redescription in philosophy, just as we need it in the sciences and the arts. When we bury philosophy, we always bury a particular abandoned system of description. Philosophy will never remain a graveyard, because the new descriptions that replace those that were abandoned will, sooner or later, themselves become abandoned. There will once again be philosophers to carry out the task.”¹¹

Philosophy today is among the most skeptical fields, for it continually questions and displaces its own discourses. A certain pattern of philosophical thinking has been surpassed. In that pattern, philosophy appeared in the form of grand projects that promised the human being salvation and ideal perfection, from Plato and Aristotle onward.

For this reason, postmodern philosophers call for moving beyond the theoretical and metaphysical dimension of philosophy. This dimension turned philosophy into a subjective activity carried out by the philosopher in isolation, without producing any effect in social reality. This means that philosophy must activate its roles in living reality by understanding philosophy as “interpretation that, instead of

⁸ Gérard Leclerc, *Cultural Globalization: Civilizations at Stake*, trans. Georges Katoura, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Jadid United, 1st ed., 2004, p. 57.

⁹ Mohamed Jadidi, *Modernity and Postmodernity in Richard Rorty’s Philosophy*, doctoral dissertation, 2005/2006, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Philosophy, p. 09.

¹⁰ Ali Harb, *The Discourse of Endings: The Openings of Globalization and the Impasses of Identity*, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca and Beirut, 1st ed., 2000, p. 192.

¹¹ Previously cited source, p. 163.

looking at knowledge as the search for an exact vision of reality, sees it rather as the acquisition of habits of action that make it possible to confront reality.”¹² Philosophy is not a mirror that reflects reality and represents its truths with precision. It does not establish eternal theories across history. This current seeks to distance philosophy from the foundational view that sees it as establishing absolute truths. The philosophical current known as postmodernism is, rather, a skeptical current toward all forms of culture, authority, politics, and all systems of knowledge.

Thus, if modernity “affirms pure essences and fixed truths, and gives priority to themes, contents, and meanings over forms, structures, and utterances, postmodernity appears to have a structural and relational character. It considers the essence of a thing to depend on its relation to what is other than it. In other words, a thing is constituted by what differs from it, and it does not cease to summon its opposite.”¹³ The aims of postmodern thought are defined through the critical current that opposes this idea and calls for non-essentialism. In fact, this tendency seeks to remove the dualistic character of philosophical thought, which claims the existence of an outer appearance and an inner essence. “In this matter there is a decisive point in the fate of philosophy. Philosophy, which usually searches for essence and makes it its first concern, itself becomes devoid of essence. It is as if, through this behavior, it loses its purity, or the dearest thing it claims to possess. If it loses what it claims to possess, it will then stop claiming the right to teach it to others.”¹⁴

In his book *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze stood against “all forms of philosophy’s surrender to what is other than itself. He strongly opposed the dominance of analytic philosophy and the various forms of ‘return to...’, such as the return to Kant, the subject, ethics, or human rights, which were widespread in the philosophical field. Deleuze stood against the notion of the ‘end of philosophy’. He argued that this notion was untimely and more philosophical than ever, while affirming that philosophizing remained possible.”¹⁵ Deleuze tried to refute the claim that philosophy had died. He affirmed that its work had not ended and would not end. Its work is not merely a matter of abstraction and contemplation. Rather, its task is to invent new ways of life, starting from the task assigned to it, namely the creation of concepts such as novelty, difference, and becoming, in order to break its isolation.

Yet Deleuze did not simply write about the features of philosophy as it creates concepts. He “began to put those features into practice, in a living and concrete manner: how the question of philosophy works as it creates the concept here and there, demanding its legitimate share in all the sciences and arts, and thereby offering exemplary questions about what a concept can and cannot do within the literary text, scientific theory, the forests of colors (painting), melodies, and the most abstract contemporary mathematics.”¹⁶ This means making philosophy more willing to enter the literary and scientific questions raised by human thought, in order to discover their secrets.

In this way, the philosophical question changes from the “I” to the “we”. It becomes a question about the present: “What are we in the process of becoming?” Deleuze draws the task of philosophy from Nietzsche. It is to work against the past, and on the present, for the sake of a time to come. This is the function of what he called the “untimely”, or the “non-present” character of philosophy in the

¹² Mohamed Jadidi, *Modernity and Postmodernity in Richard Rorty’s Philosophy*, p. 181.

¹³ Ali Harb, “Modernity and Postmodernity: Reversing the Question and Changing the Concept of Possibility,” *Al-Bahrain Al-Thaqafiya*, issue 23, January 2000, p. 87.

¹⁴ Mohamed Jadidi, *Modernity and Postmodernity in Richard Rorty’s Philosophy*, p. 176.

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Wafa Shaaban, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 1st ed., 2009, p. 9.

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Muta Safadi, National Development Center, Beirut, 1st ed., 1997, pp. 7-8.

Nietzschean sense. This is what Deleuze means when he says that the aim of philosophy is to summon new forces, whether artistic, political, social, and so on, or to enter into relation with the emerging forces of the age that escape it and point toward the future.¹⁷ Deleuze does not doubt the capacity of the human being, whom he regards as a thinker as long as he possesses the capacity to think. Difference, for him, means “moving away from presumed identity.”¹⁸ As Derrida says, “in the beginning there was difference.”¹⁹

The purpose of this claim is to desacralize the role that had been assigned to philosophy. Philosophy had come to resemble religion in claiming to possess truth or a privileged place within culture. “Indeed, all the elements and components of this culture are of equal importance and value. Yet if the discourses of these elements become saturated with a tendency toward monopoly and domination, as philosophy does in its essentialist speech, as science does in its objective discourse, or as religion does in its guiding role, culture then turns into relations of force and hierarchy.”²⁰ The essentialist discourse that characterized modern philosophy is a discourse rejected by contemporary philosophy because it claims knowledge and grants legitimacy to ideas.

Taylor therefore affirms that peoples “are called to mutual recognition, because their enduring differences both interact and complement one another. On this basis, together they form an integrated unity within humanity.”²¹ Difference is a natural phenomenon in existence, established by the divine will. This difference is a difference of diversity, not a difference of opposition. Diversity is always a source of richness and fertility. The historical conditions of today, and the changes witnessed by the new millennium, have been supported by scientific developments that have shortened distances among peoples. They have even turned the world into a single village in which all peoples have met, with their different cultures, customs, and histories. This encounter presupposes coexistence while preserving identity within this plurality. In the past, this question was viewed as an individual or subjective matter, since diversity was confined to the private sphere.

Cultural plurality has become a social question. It means recognizing the multiplicity of nationalities, ethnicities, and races. The question has acquired political weight, and it has effects on society and political practices. Taylor says: “While the politics of duty required people to respect universal human dignity on the basis of a complete disregard for plurality and a refusal to distinguish between the differences that distinguish individuals from one another, the politics of plurality urged a move beyond this perspective and the adoption of cultural difference as the basis on which matters related to differences should be addressed.”²²

Intercultural exchange creates dialogue among different cultures and opposes homogeneity. It is as if it offers a service to groups by searching for the elements of understanding and coexistence and by respecting the continuity of the social bond within different systems. It also helps to strengthen rapprochement among all components, majorities and minorities, “through exchange, communication, interaction, consultation, and the formation of a shared culture that does not abolish any particularities or seek to absorb them in order to homogenize them.”²³ Humanity is realized only

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, previously cited, p. 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Kazem Jihad, Dar Toubkal Publishing, Casablanca, 2nd ed., 2000, p. 31.

²⁰ Mohamed Jadidi, *Modernity and Postmodernity in Richard Rorty's Philosophy*, previously cited, p. 176.

²¹ Saeed Matar, *Questions of Plurality and Difference in Western Liberal Systems: An Introduction to the Study of Charles Taylor's Works*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Beirut, 1st ed., 2015, p. 69.

²² Saeed Matar, *Questions of Plurality and Difference in Western Liberal Systems*, previously cited, pp. 79-80.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

through the acceptance of the other. This can happen only within a pluralistic space, through the breaking of barriers and the destruction of idols and dogmatic certainties. Many cultures have given themselves the right to plan and dominate by promoting arguments of progress and civilization. This was the policy of Western colonialism in the modern period. Recognition of the specificity of identity therefore moved from the individual and personal level to the collective level. Hegel emphasized the reciprocal dimension of recognition, since it cannot be limited to one side. He said: “The dynamic of recognition can succeed only if it includes two.”²⁴

The philosophy of difference is therefore a critical philosophy directed against the current of identity thought. Deleuze says that “the philosophy of difference is linked to the absence of foundation, and that difference lies behind everything, while there is nothing behind difference.”²⁵ The thought of difference seeks not only to displace subjective certainty and identity-based singularity. It also opens the door to plurality. Abdessalam Benabdelali confirms this when he says that singularity becomes weak before the power of plurality, oneness becomes narrow before the breadth of diversity, limitation to the ego becomes poverty before the richness of the other, withdrawal into the self becomes a barrier before the openness of horizons, and closure upon the self becomes a limit before the infinity of possible dimensions.²⁶

Thinking difference and plurality means thinking outside identity and self-enclosure. It means that we should not exclude the other or make the other identical or similar. For this reason, the philosophy of difference emerged in opposition to Western rationality, which claims to possess the foundations of enlightenment. Postmodern philosophy seeks difference instead of producing binary oppositions. The problem of identity and difference in Arab-Islamic thought took on a historical dimension different from its Western formulation. We may even say that the shock of the Other, namely Western colonialism, stood behind the emergence of this problem. The question “Who are we?” did not appear alone. It appeared together with many questions that provoked Islamic reason. Why did others progress while we fell behind? Is the modernization of religious discourse sufficient to bring about a renaissance? Are the features of identity determined only by preserving constants? Can difference become a legitimate philosophy within Islamic society without compromising identity?

“Those who wrote on the subject in the Islamic context mean by difference the divergence of viewpoints among Muslims concerning matters of their religion in the first place, and concerning their position toward other peoples, cultures, or religions in the second place.”²⁷ The question of identity in Arab-Islamic thought is therefore a question that remains framed either by a religious determination, embodied mainly in the appearance of sects, theological schools, and Islamic movements in conflict with one another, or by an ethnic determination, as in the case of Amazighs and Arabs, Kurds, and Persians. In the statement of the symposium “Identity and Heritage”, it became clear that the symposium “did not reach a definition of the concepts of identity and heritage, nor a precise determination of the components of each.”²⁸ The symposium also “raised many questions and

²⁴ Previously cited source, p. 84.

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Wafa Shaaban, Arab Organization for Translation; distributed by the Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 1st ed., 2009, pp. 57-80.

²⁶ Abdessalam Benabdelali, “Fear for Identity, or Fear of Difference?”, article published on the website of *Al-Awan Philosophical Magazine*.

²⁷ Saad Al-Bazai, *Cultural Difference and the Culture of Difference*, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, Morocco, 1st ed., 2008, p. 16.

²⁸ Suhair Lotfy, *Identity and Heritage Symposium*, Arab Regional Center for Research and Documentation, Beirut, no edition, 1984, p. 153.

inquiries. The most important concerned the issues of the crisis of Arab society, identity and heritage, and the Arab civilizational project.”²⁹

Yet when Ali Oumlil compares the situation of the Arabs in the past and the present in his book *The Legitimacy of Difference*, he says: “Muslims were strong in the past. Internal difference was accepted, and there was no embarrassment in presenting the beliefs of other peoples. Their beliefs were treated through a presentation that sought neutrality, in a way that could only come from self-confidence, as in al-Shahrastani’s *The Book of Sects and Creeds* and in al-Biruni’s comparisons of the beliefs of the people of India. But when Muslims became weak in the modern age and turned into the defeated group, talk about internal difference became unacceptable. Calls increased for standing in a single rank against an enemy who was different and opposed.”³⁰ Societies that are defeated and under external pressure see unity and solidarity as the solution for standing against the other who is different from them and opposed to them.

The question of identity in religious societies, if one may use the term, is more sensitive than in secular societies. The differences that occur in these societies are rooted in disagreement over the interpretation of religion. For example, what happened in Islamic history and became known as the Great Fitna was sectarian and governed by the tendency of the “saved sect”. What unites these sects is the logic of narcissism, superiority, and exclusion of the other. Every religion or sect believes that it is the religion of truth and that whatever lies outside it is unbelief. Jews believed that they were God’s chosen people. Christians believed that they were the followers of “the way, the truth, and the life”. Muslims believed that they were the best nation brought forth for humankind.

Conclusion:

The call for difference had many causes. The first was the phenomenon of violence that swept the world as a result of colonial policies. Contemporary philosophies therefore sought to renew their discourses and to shift their concerns from the self to the collective “we”, that is, from individualism to the community and from centrism to difference. For some philosophers, the matter was also connected with other questions. The American historian Todd May says, in a book on difference in four philosophers, namely Nancy, Derrida, Levinas, and Deleuze, that these philosophers, together with the Frankfurt School, including Adorno, Fromm, Horkheimer, and others, were concerned with difference as a kind of ethnic resistance. Such resistance is carried by a group that asserts its differences against the authoritarianism and despotic essentialism imposed by the majority.³¹ This call for difference therefore has roots, in the author’s view, in their Jewish origins. When it moves beyond a single cultural field, this can happen only through accepting opposing ideas and different cultures that help open the door to plurality.

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²⁹ Ibid., p. 138.

³⁰ Ali Oumlil, *On the Legitimacy of Difference*, Arab Cultural Center, Beirut, 2nd ed., 2005, p. 101.

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