

Comment: Theories of Difference in the 20th Century: Spencer-Brown's Contribution

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Spencer-Brown's *Calculus of Forms* is based on an elementary operation, distinction. Reading this effort as a contribution to philosophy, means to concentrate on the concept of distinction. In this perspective, the first step must be to question the abstraction of a *form of distinction*. Our practices of distinguishing are manifold and at least four practices of distinguishing play an elementary role in common sense and scientific life: first distinguishing in a narrower sense as contrasting two or more sides, second dividing, third determining and fourth differentiating. The article shows, that Spencer-Brown identifies the form of distinction with the practice of determining. This procedure is dependent on a philosophical development of the net of practices of distinguishing, their interrelations and dependencies. The theories of difference and their most important philosophical sources, like Plato's *Sophist*, provide arguments for this task.

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1.

In everyday life we draw lots of distinctions. We distinguish between the public and the private sphere or between children and adults; we divide our universities into faculties of sciences or humanities and different disciplines; we determine the concepts we work with to be able to distinguish between items which fall under the concept and those that do not; we differentiate the aspects of a phenomenon like increasing burn-out cases. Making distinctions in a very general sense involves two perspectives. Both perspectives are necessary. Depending on the perspective we either concentrate on the *concrete contents*—some examples mentioned above (public, private, etc.) show that—or we apply one of (at least) four practices of distinguishing. These are first, *distinguishing* (in a narrower sense) as contrasting two or more sides, second, *dividing*, third, *determining*, and fourth, *differentiating*. In everyday life we take most distinctions in both perspectives for granted. We adopt distinctions in their concrete content as well as their established practice (which is hardly noticed).

The philosophical approach is different. There is a dispute about special or very basic distinctions. This dispute is one of the main occupations of philosophy. I shall give some examples: What is meant by the distinction between the first and the second substance (in the Aristotelian tradition)? Are the reasons for this distinction intelligible? Is the distinction between ideas and impressions plausible (in the Empiricist tradition)? Is it necessary and useful to distinguish between a priori and a

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posteriori (in the Kantian tradition)? Even in the philosophical tradition implicit practices of distinguishing are much less inquired than concrete contents. When is it necessary to reflect on our practices of distinguishing in general? What does it mean to introduce a metatheoretical perspective in this sense? In traditional reasoning there seem to be two answers to this question. Metatheoretical reflection about distinctions as distinctions initially emerges as the qualification of the kind of distinction one deals with. For example, many philosophers who have dealt with the distinction between humans and animals (beasts) have insisted that the distinction is not a quantitative, gradual one, but a difference in essence. This distinction has a lot of practical bearings. It touches the core of human self-understanding and brings up the necessity to distinguish kinds of distinctions. The other traditional context for metatheoretical reflection about distinctions as distinctions covers the metaphysical question of basic categories. In the platonic tradition the most elementary concepts are identity and difference.

The focus of reflection has changed with the so-called theories of difference in the 20th century. Social criticism of hierarchies such as the arrangement of gender-distinctions and the distinction used in the discourse of the early 20th century between primitive cultures and civilizations provide a practical background for many of these efforts. By these means the question of the practices of distinguishing which at first glance seems to be rather abstract becomes relevant in a concrete sense. The exploration of the margin of distinctions like the gender-distinction or the distinction between cultures brings up the need for a theoretical framework. It can be characterized by two more or less explicitly shared attitudes. First, the distinctions (and the resulting differences) are relations and not isolated essences or substances. Second, the critical question comes up in which sense one can say that these and other distinctions are founded by natural differences and in which sense one needs to consider them as variable distinctions. A common theoretical starting point when dealing with distinctions is criticizing forms of essentialism and naturalism. Just as important as the question of the starting point is the question of the theoretical aim. Is it the theoretical aim to overcome differences of gender or cultures from a universal perspective, meaning a higher identity (following the assumption: We are all humans)? Theories of difference question this philosophical purpose and try to give evidence to the formula of the difference of identity and difference (opposite to the dialectical formula of the identity of identity and difference). This implies to unfold concepts like otherness, heterogeneity and foreignness in its productive potentials and without a theoretical bias. This last point has been one of the main concerns of many French theorists of difference.

This theoretical task has not been accomplished yet. A systematic work on methods concerning description, analysis, critic and construction of distinctions (understood as established by certain practices of distinguishing) is needed. For this, constructive and reconstructive work must be done. One possible reconstructive question is: What is the contribution of Spencer-Brown's *Laws of Form* to this philosophical approach? In the following I will give a sketch of an answer.

2.

It is important to see that authors who center their theoretical attention on concepts of distinction and/or of difference come from different disciplines (e.g., philosophy, sociology, mathematics, ethnology, linguistics) and various traditions within them. The theories of difference do not form a theoretical unity. It is not possible to define a canon of texts and authors. In his book *Philosophien der Differenz*, Heinz Kimmerle (2000) suggests a selection.² It is indisputable that French authors like Derrida, Deleuze and Lyotard have worked out theories, or more specific, philosophies of difference. Kimmerle also integrates two French feminist philosophers in his outline, namely Irigaray and Kristeva. He focuses on Adorno and his concept of the non-identical (*Nicht-Identische*) as a German philosopher of difference. But a view on the common sources of inspiration mainly looking at French authors shows clearly that the research on difference is not only a philosophical task. Besides the readings of Nietzsche, the critique of the Hegelian dialectics and the study *Identität und Differenz*³ by Heidegger, the influence of authors like de Saussure, Lévi-Strauss and Freud is constitutive. The philosophical discussion is not separable from other disciplines. On the contrary the systematic interrelation between the disciplines is and stays an important feature of the theoretical inquiry of difference. This is why theorists like Luhmann and Spencer-Brown belong to this line of thought. Their contribution has to be reconstructed, evaluated and linked with other contributions from a philosophical perspective.

3.

The proposed distinction (in a wide sense) of practices of distinguishing is neither self-evident nor self-explanatory. It is itself a product of a philosophical inquiry of the two perspectives on distinctions. The Platonic *Sophist* is one of the important sources for philosophical questioning of distinctions and differences. I have come to the following reading while drawing the attention on the use of distinctions in this dialogue: One concrete distinction is at question: the distinction between a sophist and a philosopher. Socrates proposes three practices of distinguishing to his dialogue-partner, the foreigner from Elea for the sake of getting the difference between a philosopher and sophist right. What contrasts do you use in Elea to grasp (through these contrasts) their difference? (1) How do you determine the concept philosopher, and how do you determine the concept sophist? (2) Do you divide the field of dealing with public affairs in three parts (sophist, politician, and philosopher) or in less than these? (3) The foreigner from Elea chooses the third practice. The first part of the *Sophist* is a philosophical critique of the implications of methods of *diarexis*. Using the practice of diarexis (a division or—with an added claim of completeness—a classification) means to separate a generic concept (like dealing professionally with

2. Heinz Kimmerle: *Philosophien der Differenz*. Eine Einführung, Würzburg 2000.

3. Martin Heidegger: *Identität und Differenz*. Stuttgart 1957.

public affairs) into its species concepts. Species concepts function in a manner of classification. Concrete objects or facts have to be subsumed under one (and only one) of the species concepts. The foreigner from Elea drives the investigation into a blind alley because the criteria of division are chosen arbitrarily. The used concepts like deception and pretense are not sufficiently explored. The practice of division remains unsuccessful as it is not grounded in the practice of determining. The next step in the line of thought is the attempt to *determine* what “non-being” means because sophistic acts of deceiving and pretending seem to be dependent on the concept of non-being. The question is: What is “non-being”? Through the practice of determining it becomes possible to delimit the meaning of a concept from all other concepts for the sake of identifying what falls under the concept and excluding what does not fall under the concept. But is this a possible undertaking in the case of a “non-being”? What are possible objects that fall under the concept of “non-being”? The question is puzzling and seems self-contradictory. One is confronted with the *contrast* of “being” and “not-being” again. What does “being” in opposition to “non-being” mean? What is expressed as one side in contrast to the other? Distinctions (in a narrower sense) such as contrasts are characterized by mutual reference of the sides of distinctions to one another. A common way of contrasting consists of building up contradictory oppositions. If the contrast between “being” and “non-being” is understood in this way the question: What *is* “non-being”? seems to become completely senseless. Are there alternatives to contradictory oppositions? The answer to this question requires a forth practice of distinguishing: the *differentiation* of the net of the most elementary interdependent concepts. According to the foreigner from Elea these are the following: difference, identity, being, rest and motion. Together they constitute a broader structure. They cannot be isolated from one another. Whenever one uses one of these highest concepts the reference to the others is implicated. And whenever one uses any concept at all the highest concepts are necessarily applied.

Plato does not only present different rules of these four practices of distinguishing. He also suggests a line of dependence between the different practices. The whole dialogue “Sophistes” and the reflections of difference are of utmost interest for theorists of difference in the 20th century. Even if they do not follow the ascent to the highest conceptual level the text remains a source of inspiration for the criticism of our practices of distinguishing.

4.

Theorists of difference have investigated the practices of distinguishing in a constructive and in a critical manner. I can only mention some examples. The very influential contribution of the linguist de Saussure can be understood as an explication of the practice of differentiation. Not only has he developed specific linguistic differentiations like *parasème* (mental aspect of the sign) and *apósème* (phonetical aspect of the sign). This is explicitly no division. But the differentiation shows different aspects of one common structure. Saussure has also given a theoretical

model for the practice of differentiation itself. The basic principle of difference points out the semantic dependency of a language form by showing its systematic correlations to other forms. The meaning of a sign is determined not by itself, but by the differences between the signs. A single sign is completely meaningless. Saussure unfolds the practice of differentiation as necessarily and extensively used in all language-acts. He gives the practice of differentiation one possible precise theoretical explication for linguistic purposes. Theorists of difference have tried to produce a philosophical development of the principle of difference. Derrida has undertaken a transfer to other areas. He has worked on a dynamic transformation of the structural model. He works out one semantical dimension of the verb *to differ*, which covers the verbs *to postpone*, *to displace*, *to shift*.⁴ What something (in general, not only a sign) is depends on something other than itself. Elementary are not the individual, specifying characteristics or the relation to oneself, but the being-related to something other than oneself. What one is, is systematically supplementary to this manifold being-related. With a postponed letter the temporal interplay between supplementary meanings is called *différance*.

A second very important trace of thought concentrates on the practice of distinguishing (in a narrower sense) as contrasting. It is the critical review of a common standardization to reduce distinctions between two contrasted sides to oppositions. In doing so it is often forgotten that oppositions display only one mode of contrasting next to others. Deleuze's⁵ point of attack is the overemphasis of the aspect of negation, negativity and contradiction in the dialectical use of distinctions in the Hegelian tradition and in the tradition of the French existentialists after World War II.⁶ He tries to show a contrast between the negation-oriented concept of distinction or difference and a negation-free, positive concept of difference.⁷ This positive concept means to understand difference as a constitutive power of reality. It has to be explicated as individuating intensity. This idea is not only opposed to the dialectic and existentialist tradition, but also to the Aristotelian concepts of species differences. Positive differences have a power of self-differentiation. They differ from each other through themselves and not only because they are mediated through a third. This power generates singularities. Negation as central aspect of distinction is a problematic reduction. It cannot take into account the superposition of perspectives and the coexistence of aspects.

4. Jacques Derrida: *Die différance*. In: *Randgänge der Philosophie*. Passagen, Wien, S. 29-52 (frz. "La différance", in: *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris: Minuit, 1972).

5. Gilles Deleuze: *Differenz und Wiederholung*, München 1997 (2. Aufl.) (frz. *Différence et Répétition*, Paris 1968).

6. See Descombes, Vincent: *Das Selbe und das Andere*. Fünfundvierzig Jahre Philosophie in Frankreich 1933-1978. Frankfurt, 1981

7. Compare my question to the discussion of Dirk Baeckers talk where I am referring to his text: Was leistet die Negation?, in: *Gilles Deleuze. Fluchtlinien der Philosophie*, hg. v. Friedrich Balke und Joseph Vogl, Munich 1996, 93-102.

5.

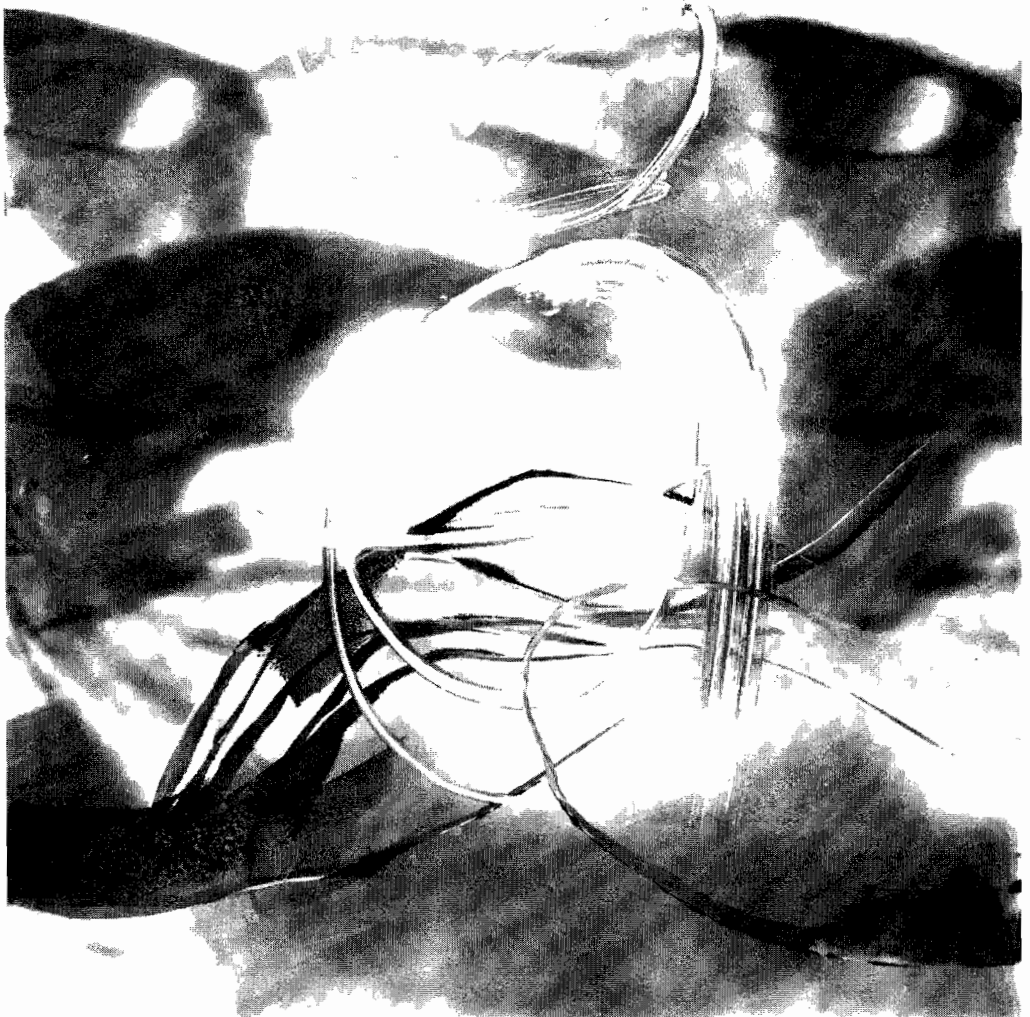
The Platonic question of the relations and dependencies between practices of distinguishing can be applied to Spencer-Brown. His proposal differs from the Platonic one. It is gained through a formal consideration. He first asks: What is the most elementary act? It seems to be to determine something. This means to distinguish it from the rest and to indicate it (and not the rest). Focusing on the form of this elementary act one is tempted to use a spatial metaphor. The something determined is a certain area in an open space. The determination is accomplished by establishing a border. Determining one object means to isolate it from the rest. This allows the productive act to treat this rest as another object and to distinguish and indicate two sides from one another, one inside and one outside the drawn border. In a quasi-mathematical abstraction one can imagine that this unlimited space (the determined part and the rest) is completely empty. (Outside this quasi-mathematical abstraction every space—or better context—is filled with prior structures, either the space of language or the social space or whatever. The practice of differentiation organizes the relations between the distinguished side and the system.) But even the imagined empty space is not radical emptiness or nothing at all. It has constituting dimensions. In order to set up a boundary these dimensions are to be taken into account. It must be a boundary that produces two different sides. That means that each side is only identical with itself. It is not identical with the other. If the sides are represented by signs they must apply to this basic rule. Tokens of the sign representing one side can be identified with each other. Tokens of the signs representing different sides cannot be identified. But the operations which unfold the basic rule allow results that do not satisfy its own basic condition. In his construction of a formal calculus founded on the basic rule Spencer-Brown shows that there are possible operations which result in the identification of different states. That means they are exposed as inconsistent and contradictory. This evokes the necessity to widen the framework and to introduce time and feeding-back-structures. The new framework also introduces a new practice of distinguishing. The practices of determining and distinguishing (in a narrower sense) by contrasting two sides lead to the practice of differentiating—the self-reflexive texture of all our acts of distinguishing within all sorts of practices. (Here the theoretical figure of the *observer* enters the scene.) The practice of dividing (classifying) is not reflected explicitly, but one can infer that it derives from the other three practices and needs theoretical clearing up about its dependencies and its implications.

Spencer-Brown has always been aware that he touches a very elementary level of thought which crosses mathematical concerns. While the efforts of the theories of difference in the 20th century concentrate more on the critical development of single practices of distinguishing Spencer-Brown takes over the question from the *Sophist* about the interrelations between the practices and their legitimation. He proposes an alternative to that. But this contribution of Spencer-Brown can only be understood if

his investigations are contextualized in the theories of difference of the 20th century and their philosophical sources.

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