Ontology of Differentiation: Being, Consciousness, and the Game

Denys Spirin

Published by Denys Spirin, 2025.

ONTOLOGY OF DIFFERENTIATION: BEING, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE GAME

First edition. April 16, 2025.

ISBN: 979-8231582761

Written by Denys Spirin.

Introduction

The present inquiry develops a philosophical ontology in which differentiation is posited as the primary ontological category, preceding all traditional metaphysical foundations. Unlike most systems that take being, consciousness, form, or act as their starting point, the proposed approach is grounded in a more fundamental level—designated here as *Potentiality*.

In this context, Potentiality is neither reducible to Aristotelian potentiality as directed becoming towards a predetermined form, nor is it mere possibility preceding actuality in the classical sense. Rather, it is conceived as primordial indeterminacy—an ontological pre-field wherein the possibility of differentiation emerges as the self-determination of the differentiating itself, rather than a transition toward actualization. Potentiality, therefore, is undifferentiated yet differentiable, from which structure emerges precisely as differentiated, though not as a pre-established structure.

A key thesis of this ontology is the assertion that differentiation is not a derivative form of cognitive, perceptual, or subjective activity; rather, it constitutes a *primary ontological act* from which all structures of being arise. Differentiation is not an operation performed by a subject but the very condition under which anything at all becomes possible. In this sense, being and differentiation are not opposed: being is understood precisely as *differentiation that is held*. To exist means to be manifest, and to be manifest means to be differentiated. It follows from this that fundamental categories such as space, time, subject, and object do not precede differentiation, nor do they determine it; instead, they emerge as stable forms generated by the act of differentiation itself in its structured manifestation.

Methodologically, this study follows a logic of ontological unfolding: from the indeterminate to the determinate, from possibility to structure, from difference to form. The starting point is Potential-

ity as an undifferentiated yet differentiable pre-field. The first structure to appear in this field is differentiation itself, understood as the minimal ontological boundary between "something" and "not-something." This boundary is not pre-given, not a substance, nor does it exist within space or time. Rather, it is differentiation itself that makes space and time possible. Space and time are thus interpreted here as modalities of differentiation's manifestation: space as the stable distribution of differences, and time as their sequential retention.

The next step in the ontological analysis introduces the concept of the node—a structure in which differentiation stabilizes and acquires persistence. A node is not identical with a subject, a body, or an event; it is a process of differentiation that allows rhythm, stability, and ultimately self-direction. Nodes always presuppose the modalities of space and time, as without them differentiation cannot achieve structural form. Within the node, differentiation not only becomes fixed but can also repeat itself, enabling what is understood here as memory—the ontological persistence of differentiation through a sequence.

Further, the concept of node systems is introduced—structures in which individual nodes enter into relationships, creating more complex configurations of differentiation. Each such system can, in turn, be treated as a node on a higher level, giving rise to a fractal architecture of differentiated reality. On this basis, it becomes possible to analyze stable forms of differentiation, ranging from elementary nodes to meta-level structures, encompassing the living, the reflexive, and the potential.

In subsequent chapters, six forms of ontological retention of differentiation will be analyzed, each of which expresses a modality through which differentiation attains structural persistence. These forms do not constitute a hierarchy; rather, they represent different ways in which differentiation structures and sustains itself:

Stage R0 — the flash of differentiation. A minimal act in which difference appears without persistence. There is no memory, no structure, only the pure event of distinction.

Stage R1 — structural differentiation. Difference is retained in fixed form: crystals, genetic codes, chemical patterns. This is differentiation without perception or movement.

Stage R2 — morphogenetic and sensorimotor differentiation. The organism responds to difference through spatial configuration and movement. Time appears as directed action.

Stage R3 — symbolic differentiation. Language emerges as a medium through which differentiation is held in absence. The differentiated no longer needs to be present to be sustained.

Stage R4 — reflexive differentiation. The act of differentiation becomes aware of itself. Subjectivity arises as the capacity to reflect upon one's own differentiating.

Stage R5 — ethical differentiation. The other is recognized as another differentiating being. This stage marks the emergence of responsibility, relation, and personhood.

Stage R6 — collective differentiation. Systems emerge that hold differentiation beyond the individual: culture, society, artificial intelligence. Differentiation becomes recursive at the systemic level.

Before turning to the broader implications of the model, a part of this study is devoted to exploring the relationship between the proposed ontological framework and several philosophical and religious traditions — including Christianity, Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism, and Islam. This analysis is not meant as a reduction or critique, but as an attempt to uncover how enduring forms of differentiation are sustained within these traditions, as seen through the lens of ontological differentiation.

The aim of this work is not to construct a new system in the traditional sense, but to uncover an ontological structure in which differentiation functions as the very condition of systematicity. It does

not assert or impose order, but indicates its possibility through differentiation. Where fixed forms lose their persuasiveness, only one task remains: to differentiate what differentiates, and thereby to disclose Potentiality as the generative ground of all forms.

Potentiality and Differentiation

A philosophy beginning not from being but from differentiation requires a radical rethinking of the structure of ontological thought. If differentiation is affirmed as primary rather than derivative, then the very notion of origin must be reconsidered. In this approach, origin cannot be conceived as an event or a fact, since any structured form already presupposes differentiation. Origin, within this ontology, is conceived as pre-structured possibility—as Potentiality, out of which all manifestation unfolds.

Potentiality is not a thing, has no properties, and does not exist as an object. It does not belong to space or time, but rather makes these possible by serving as their ontological condition. Potentiality is not a "before" in a chronological or causal sense, but a "through" in an ontological sense: it is the pre-field in which form emerges as differentiation. Every form, every boundary, every stable manifestation is already the structuring of difference, and thus an unfolding of Potentiality as its manifestation.

At this stage, a question arises: can Potentiality be addressed without reducing it to a fixed concept? If a concept is understood as a completed intellectual form, the answer is negative. Within this approach, Potentiality is conceived as a limiting condition for thought—not something that is thought of, but something through which differentiating thought becomes possible. It is not an object of reflection but the ontological condition for the very possibility of reflection. In this sense, Potentiality is introduced as a premise, not as a given or substance.

Differentiation does not emerge within Potentiality as if from a container, but rather as its ontological manifestation. In what can be differentiated, Potentiality already operates. Thus, differentiation and Potentiality are not different entities, but different modes of manifestation of the same condition: Potentiality is the undifferen-

tiated pre-field, whereas differentiation is the minimal ontological shift, the tension enabling one to first say, "this—not that." Without this shift, neither subject nor object, nor indeed a world, can exist. Yet differentiation itself cannot be absolute; it is possible only as the holding of a boundary, as localization, as stable form.

Differentiation is thus not merely the boundary between "this" and "that," but also the ontological means of maintaining this boundary. It cannot be described as a relation between two previously given entities, because these entities themselves arise only by virtue of differentiation. Differentiation, therefore, is the primary act generating any structured form.

An attempt to comprehend becoming through internal differentiation can be found in Hegelian dialectics. The classical triad—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—may be interpreted as a sequence in which differentiation not only emerges but also organizes thought's movement. Thesis and antithesis are already differentiated states, while synthesis fixes a new differentiation arising from their relationship. However, in Hegel's system, differentiation is not preserved as ontologically autonomous; it is conceived as a moment to be overcome, subsumed into conceptual unity. Hegelian dialectics strive toward wholeness, in which differentiation loses its autonomy, dissolving into synthetic unity.

In the proposed approach, differentiation is neither reduced to the function of a concept nor requires synthetic resolution. It is preserved as the ontological foundation, requiring no sublation. Here differentiation is not a transitional stage on the path toward identity, but a fundamental category through which any structured form becomes possible. This position demands a formal language and conceptual apparatus different from Hegel's dialectical logic, wherein differentiation is subordinated to the movement toward the Absolute.

To clarify the notion, we introduce the concept of the node as a process of differentiation, through which structural manifestation acquires stability. A node is differentiation stabilized within a boundary. It cannot exist without space and time, as retaining form demands temporal duration (stability) and spatial extension (structure). Space and time, therefore, are not external parameters relative to the node, but modes of its manifestation: the node is not something located within space and time; rather, it is that through which space and time arise as differentiated forms.

Differentiation is possible only between nodes. A node cannot differentiate itself; it is affirmed as differentiating solely in relation to another node. Hence, any differentiation presupposes not only form but relationality. A node becomes a node only insofar as it differentiates another node and is differentiated by it, forming a minimal system of differentiations.

The differentiated need not necessarily become a fixed form. It may remain unstable, momentary, incompletely structured. Yet even in such cases, it already "was"—not chronologically, but ontologically: it became differentiated, manifested, and thus entered the structure of existence. To exist is to become differentiated. Thus, differentiation is not only an ontological foundation but the sole mode of being itself.

The transition from Potentiality to differentiation, and then to the node, is not a chronological sequence of events or stages. It is a logical rather than temporal unfolding. A node is the point where differentiation is held sufficiently to produce stability. Within the node, not only form but also repetition becomes possible—and thus ontological memory, direction, and rhythm.

The proposed approach, in which differentiation is understood as an ontological foundation, finds conceptual resonances in various philosophical traditions where manifestation is regarded as primary. These traditions should not be viewed as direct analogies or external

confirmations, but as different expressions of the same differentiating structure manifested in diverse languages and contexts.

Thus, in Martin Heidegger's later philosophy, being is understood not as the presence of beings, but as an event (*Ereignis*) through which openness of beings first becomes possible. Ereignis denotes an original belonging-together wherein being and beings first relate. It is neither act nor fact, nor causal structure, but the rhythm of disclosure enabling differentiation. Being here is not given as an entity but manifested through the act of differentiation. In terms of our model, *Ereignis* indicates Potentiality—not as a substance or force, but as the ontological condition enabling differentiation. Differentiation in this context is not a function of consciousness, but a mode of being: the manner by which something can be what it is. Thus, Heidegger's thought moves from an ontology of presence to an ontology of differentiation.

A similar direction appears in the personalist philosophy of Christos Yannaras, a contemporary Greek theologian. In his hypostatic ontology, the difference between persons is not an accident or secondary property, but the ontological condition of selfhood. For Yannaras, the being of the person is possible only in relationality to the other, rather than on the basis of self-identity or substantiality. A self-enclosed being cannot exist as a person. Personhood is openness and differentiation, affirmed precisely in this differentiation. Difference for Yannaras does not destroy unity, but is the mode of relational being. This corresponds to the assertion that a node differentiates only another node; differentiation is possible only in a system where each element is affirmed through differentiating another.

Ideas similar to differentiation as an ontological foundation, irreducible to subjective activity or logical function, have appeared in other philosophical contexts. Gilles Deleuze conceptualized differentiation as primary ontological power independent of identity or negation. In his philosophy, differentiation does not disrupt form

but generates it, preserving its own openness. Jean-Luc Nancy views differentiation as co-being: differentiation connects rather than divides. Being is understood as always already co-existential, arising through differentiation as the condition of relation to the other. In an earlier philosophical context, similar intuitions can be found in Nicholas of Cusa's concept of *coincidentia oppositorum*, where differentiation is not abolished but held as a necessary condition of determinacy. Potentiality in Cusa is not form, but a limiting condition in which differentiation first becomes possible.

In all these approaches, differentiation is not interpreted as an intermediate stage between identity and form, but as the condition through which form becomes possible. These philosophical traditions, despite differences in method and terminology, point toward a common intuition: the differentiated is not secondary to being, but constitutes its internal structure. In the present ontology, this intuition is systematically developed: differentiation is affirmed as the ontological ground of existence, and being is identified with structured, stable differentiation requiring neither external guarantee nor synthetic resolution.

The Node of Differentiation

If differentiation constitutes the fundamental fabric of Potentiality, the next necessary form of its ontological retention is the *node*. A node is an ontological structure in which differentiation not only occurs, but also stabilizes, repeats itself, and becomes structured. The node is to be understood as minimally stable differentiation localized in a process that admits relationality. A node is neither an object nor an event, but rather the form through which differentiation is held, allowing structured manifestation to become ontologically possible.

A key feature of the node lies not only in its capacity to differentiate but also in its openness to being differentiated otherwise. Differentiation, when fixed conclusively, turns into a static form incapable of ontological change. Nodes that differentiate each other once and for all create a closed system—logically complete but ontologically inert. Within such a system, differentiation loses its activity as a condition of being and becomes a passive form. Therefore, differentiation acquires ontological significance only when it preserves the possibility of redefinition within a stable form, remaining open to new differentiation.

From this, it follows that space and time are not external parameters, but modalities for expressing such redefinability. Time is the ontological condition under which a node can differentiate with respect to itself — allowing a sequence, change, or transition within a stable structure. Space, by contrast, is the condition under which a node can differentiate with respect to other nodes — allowing copresence, extension, and relationality. Both are not backgrounds, but modes of differentiation. Thus, space and time do not constitute a backdrop for differentiation, but rather arise as results of the internal structure of differentiation itself, a structure that admits change. Spatiality expresses a stable difference between differentiations (separation), while temporality expresses a stable difference across differ-

entiations (sequence, rhythm, repetition). The node is not located in space and time; rather, it is that through which space and time become differentiated and differentiable.

Thus, a node is not simply a localized difference, but a form in which differentiation is retained within boundaries, maintaining structural openness. At the same time, the node must not be identified with the subject, body, or act of consciousness. It precedes these categories, understood as already formed structures. A node can be pre-linguistic, pre-perceptual, and pre-ontological in the traditional sense. It neither thinks, perceives, nor acts. The node is not a function of a subject; instead, it constitutes the ontological form within which manifested differentiation is retained. All subsequent forms of differentiation—from the living to the reflexive—presuppose already structured spatio-temporal relations, that is, an already unfolded structure of nodes.

Differentiation is possible only in relationality. A node cannot differentiate in isolation: it is affirmed as differentiating only insofar as it differentiates another node and is differentiated by it. Consequently, differentiation not only structures but also relates. Each node is not an autonomous unit, but an element of a relational structure wherein differentiation occurs not between pre-existing entities but through the nodes themselves. Thus, the structure of differentiation is fundamentally relational: nodes are affirmed as differentiating only within a relational system.

Formally, this can be expressed as follows: *a node is a localized, stable differentiation actualized in a spatio-temporal form, which is affirmed as a node by virtue of relationality with another localized differentiation*. The node is not pre-given but discovered as stable differentiation within a broader system of relational differentiations. It does not arise as a point against a background but is structured as the self-retention of the differentiating within the scene that it itself defines.