

DIALECTIC OF DIFFERENTIATION: STRUCTURE, BECOMING, SYMBOL

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ABSTRACT: This work presents a dialectical ontology grounded in the act of differentiation. Being is not posited but unfolds through recursive distinction, where each act generates and transforms the conditions of further differentiation. Forms persist as aspectual configurations of difference. As differentiation recurs, it gives rise to structure, space, time, life, symbol, and society—each as a modulation in a multidimensional aspect-space. The dialectic here is not synthesis but immanent recursion: difference operating on itself. Potentiality is the unformed field enabling this dynamic. Ontology thus arises from within the movement of differentiation itself.

KEYWORDS: Ontology; Differentiation; Potentiality; Structure; Recursion; Consciousness; Aspect

Category is a form through which thought gives structure to being. A category defines the mode by which something existent can be conceived. In philosophy, categories are granted a foundational status: they determine the conditions for all thinking, articulation, and manifestation.

At the root of every category lies a simpler act—differentiation. To introduce a category is to draw a boundary that separates one from another. This act is not external to the category; on the contrary, it enables the category to take form. When we think of substance, we already distinguish it from accident; when we think of time, we distinguish one moment from the next. Every concept of causality presupposes the delineation of an effect, and even unity presupposes a prior division: without differentiation, no boundary can be drawn through which unity becomes recognizable.

It is important to distinguish between the category of the One as a logical-ontological concept and the One as an apophatic ground in metaphysical traditions. When we speak of the One as a category, we refer to a form of

singularity—a differentiated multiplicity held as one. This is the result of an act of differentiation in which the manifold is fixed as a stable “this.” The One, in this sense, emerges within the scene of differentiation, as a form of its ordering.

A different meaning of the One appears in Neoplatonism¹ and apophatic theology². Here, it is not a category but a principle that precedes all categorization. Such a One is not one among things, nor even the first term in a numerical or logical hierarchy. It is that of which no multiplicity, identity, or even singularity can be affirmed. It precedes counting, thinking, and differentiation; in a strict sense, it is not one. Its apophatic character lies in its resistance to being grasped as substance, being, or logical form.

In this text, as throughout the ontology of differentiation, we do not identify the category of the One with the apophatic origin. More strongly, we hold that no category—including that of unity—can serve as a foundation. As foundation, we introduce the concept of Potentiality: a pre-structural, unbounded capacity for differentiation, from which both differences and their stabilized forms may emerge. Potentiality is closest to the apophatic ground, while remaining distinct from emptiness or negation. It is that from which differentiation becomes possible, the basis of the act, though not the act itself.

Thus, the philosophical category of the One is a result of differentiation shaped into a distinct singularity, whereas Potentiality is the pre-categorical condition that makes differentiation possible. To conflate them is to substitute the pre-ontological with the ontological.

Differentiation is not added to categories—it is what categories are formed from. A category is a difference held in a stable form. It is the result of a differentiating act that becomes repeatable, accessible to thought, and applicable across domains. Differentiation, then, is not one category among others; it is the condition that makes categories possible. It renders thought dynamic and gives form to all content.

If differentiation lies at the origin of every categorical form, then the very logic of beginning must be rethought. Traditional dialectics, in seeking to articulate the becoming of being, begins with the category of unity—as what

¹ Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, London, Medici Society, 1917–1930.

² Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, New York, Paulist Press, 1987.

precedes division. But if we think with precision, the true beginning is not a closed totality, but the first act of differentiation. This act gives rise to both unity and relationality. To differentiate is not merely to divide, but to draw something out against the background of something else. It marks one pole as “this”—as differentiated, stable, and formed. Yet this act is not isolated: “this” becomes what it is only against the backdrop of “not-this.” Differentiation thus generates a primary duality of nodes: the differentiated and its contrast, A and not-A. This duality is not external to the act—it is inherent to it. Differentiation is not between things; differentiation creates things by differentiating.

One may affirm: only that which is differentiated exists. In this framework, existence is not a primordial given or a substantial presence, but an act—a fixation of difference within a scene where something appears distinct from something else. Without differentiation, there is no form, no content, no relation. Everything we think, perceive, or construct has already passed through an act of differentiation; it appears as differentiated.

This perspective dissolves the false opposition between being and non-being. Being is not the opposite of non-being—it is the result of a differentiating act. Non-being is not its negation but an extreme unformedness, outside difference yet ready to be differentiated. Within the ontological horizon of differentiation, non-being is not what is absent, but what is not yet. It remains a continual possibility—a potential scene, a new becoming, a future difference.

If being is what is differentiated, then non-being is the undifferentiated: that is, Potentiality.

From this it follows: non-being neither exists nor fails to exist. It is not a “pure nothing.” Rather, it is the undifferentiated—that which has not yet been shaped as “this” or “not-this,” the latent field of differentiation, the potential of appearance. It does not enter the scene, but serves as its background, its condition of possibility. It is not the shadow of being, but that from which being may be drawn.

For differentiation to become being, it must be retained. The differentiated must remain identical to itself; otherwise, it cannot be redifferentiated or serve as a term in a relation. Thus, differentiation, in becoming stable, generates identity—the persistence of what has been differentiated.

Identity and difference are not opposites. This may seem paradoxical if we

treat them as logical antonyms: what is identical, it may be said, cannot be different, and vice versa. But within the ontological unfolding of differentiation, identity does not cancel difference—it arises from it. If what is differentiated is not retained, not held as stable, it dissolves into a flow of indeterminacy. For difference to become meaningful, each of its poles must remain identical to itself: “this” must remain “this,” and “other” must remain “other.” Without identity, there can be no differentiation.

Identity, then, is the retained moment of differentiation, which we will call a node. A node does not precede difference, nor does it oppose it; it manifests it. In the node, identity and difference are not in contradiction but held together. Identity is the form that difference gives to itself in order to be sustained within an ontological scene. Difference is the condition by which identity can be recognized as identity.

The form in which differentiation is retained we call an aspect. An aspect is the mode through which difference becomes stable. It is not the same as what is being differentiated, and it is not itself a node, but it defines the manner in which difference acquires persistence. Aspects are not properties of objects; they are operations of the differentiating. Intensity, spatiality, temporality—these are examples of such forms. When difference is held within an aspect, it ceases to be a fleeting act and becomes a relation, within which nodes emerge: stable forms sustained by the differentiating act.

When differentiation is retained in an aspect, it no longer functions as a momentary act but as a structural relation. It generates nodes—forms of identity that arise through retention. These nodes do not preexist differentiation but take shape within it as stable: A and not-A become not just poles, but nodes of difference, linked within the aspect that holds them.

It is important to clarify that a node is not the same as an object. An object implies a persistent entity endowed with properties and defined as a closed unit. A node, by contrast, is an element of the scene of differentiation. It does not exist independently, but arises as a moment within the differentiating act, held in a specific aspect.

A node has no independent being; it cannot be isolated from the configuration in which it appears. It is not defined by a set of attributes, but by a relation—a difference that it holds. Every node is linked to another through an

aspect: what is differentiated is always differentiated with respect to something else. A node and its counterpart do not exist apart, but form a pair within a configuration structured by an aspect.

A node is not a substance, but a form of stable differentiation. It is not fixed, but held; it can transform, dissolve, or be reshaped depending on how the act of differentiation or its aspect changes. A node is not a thing—it is a point in the dynamics of differentiation.

Let us consider an example. Imagine a black dot on a sheet of paper. In common interpretation, this is treated as an object: a dot with a color, shape, and position. This may seem obvious and functionally sufficient. But from a philosophical perspective, this interpretation is problematic: it assumes that the dot exists as a self-contained entity with fixed boundaries.

As Hegel showed³, a boundary is not merely a limit but a contradiction: something that both affirms and negates itself. In the case of the dot on paper, this means that its boundary is not a neutral line between figure and background. It is a moment of transition, an internal tension that constitutes the dot as a dot, yet also pushes it toward becoming a background. The boundary shifts not externally but from within, as an expression of the fact that the dot is not only a result of differentiation, but an act of differentiating, directed toward the other.

In terms of the ontology of differentiation, the dot is a node in which difference is retained in the aspects of color and position. But this node contains a tension that generates motion: difference does not merely fix the dot—it reveals it as a moment in the differentiation act. The node is not stable; it is sustained only insofar as the differentiating act is active, and within that act, the transition to the next already begins.

Thus, the dot is not an object, but a node of differentiation, arising within a particular aspect. This node does not exist on its own; it is embedded in a configuration—linked to another node, the background. Their difference is articulated within the aspects of color and spatial position. Only within these aspects does the scene arise in which the “dot” is differentiated from the “background.”

The dot, then, is not an entity with attributes, but a moment of difference: a

³ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977.

stable retention of the differentiated within an aspect. A shift in aspect (for instance, to thermal perception) destroys the distinction, and the “dot” ceases to be differentiated. It disappears as a node within the configuration, even if its physical trace remains. A node exists only insofar as it is differentiated.

Hegelian philosophy, since we have evoked it, is an effort to think of objects in terms of movement—even if the “objects” in question are logical forms or ideas. Yet what Hegel frames as dialectical motion still presupposes the object: differentiation appears as a transition between already formed entities. The process is decomposed into moments, which must then be externally linked—via a triadic scheme or systematic architectonics.

In the ontology of differentiation, there are no objects—only processes in which the differentiating momentarily sustains a configuration of differences. What appears as an “object” is a local articulation of difference within an aspect. Movement does not occur between objects, but within the act of differentiation itself: what shifts is the configuration, the aspect, the tension of retention. A node does not evolve or transition—it dissolves when differentiation is lost and arises anew when differentiation is reformed.

This eliminates the need to think of anything as a substance that persists through transformations. Where dialectics relies on the presumption of a stable logical form, differentiation proceeds without a ground: a scene appears not because something has changed, but because differentiation has changed.

Here arises an aspectual relation—a configuration in which difference acquires form, and the differentiated gains stability. This is not a logical pair or a mechanical dichotomy, but an ontological scene. Differentiation within an aspect forms stable differences—configurations that can themselves be further differentiated within new aspects. This is what we call a projection of the scene of differentiation into a new aspect. Ontology unfolds not as a sum of entities, but as a structure of differences, retained and projected within aspectual space.

From the moment differentiation is introduced as the primary act, and the aspect as its form of retention, ontology gains direction. It is no longer a collection of ready-made entities but becomes a process unfolding from within. Each subsequent step is determined not by external addition, but by the internal application of differentiation to what has already been differentiated.

When differentiation is directed at a node—that which has already been

retained as identical within difference—it opens the possibility of a new aspect: a form in which the same difference can be held otherwise. If differentiation is directed at an aspect, it does not yield a new form, but reveals internal tensions, structures, and layers within what is already held. This is the dialectical movement—not linear, but topological: a deepening, a stratification of the differentiating process.

Ontology thus proceeds as the progressive unfolding of differentiation within itself. This unfolding is neither linear nor cyclical, but fractal—a consequence of the logic of differentiation itself: in differentiating, it generates not only new contents but new forms of differentiability.

The initial act of differentiation is retained within the aspect of intensity—the form in which the difference between A and not-A is expressed as a degree of differentiation. Intensity does not define the difference itself, but its mode of presence: the extent to which A differs from its counter.

When differentiation is directed at this aspect, it may proceed in two directions. In the first case, it is fixed as the identity of intensity—a stable difference between A and not-A. This does not nullify the difference; it stabilizes it. Difference becomes repeatable, structured as a relation. A configuration emerges: A and not-A remain distinct, but their difference is preserved. This generates primary structurality—a difference sustained through a form of identity.

In the second case, differentiation manifests as a divergence of intensities, thereby giving rise to space. Space emerges as a scene of varying intensities of differentiation, a mode of retaining difference in the form of divergence. Geometry, in this sense, is an ontological consequence: it structures differences as a multiplicity of positions, each retaining its own intensity without collapsing into the others.

Each of these differentiated directions—relation and space—can, in turn, be further differentiated. Thus begins the fractal unfolding of differentiation: each step retains difference, but also opens new directions in which it can be further differentiated.

Let us apply differentiation to the aspect of space. When differentiation emphasizes the fixation of the differentiated within space, it gives rise to position. Position is the identity of the differentiated in space: the difference is preserved

but anchored, held as a point—as a place within the overall structure of the scene. It is a form of orientation: the “where” of the differentiated. When differentiation emphasizes divergence instead, what appears is spatial expansion. This is not merely a difference between positions, but a difference between modes of spatial unfolding. In such differentiation, space acquires dimensionality—as a way of continuing differentiation and unfolding difference into a potential multiplicity of directions.

Differentiation applied to relation, in turn, yields either the identity of structure—the repetition of the very form of differentiation—or its division into whole and parts, producing a hierarchy of differentiated forms: a scene in which differences are distributed across levels. The whole is what retains the configuration of differences; the part is what maintains a distinct form within the configuration. Their distinction is the result of an act of differentiation.

Thus, the successive application of differentiation—to structure and to space—produces the following:

- From structure: difference (whole/part) or identity (repetition of form);
- From space: difference (expansion) or identity (position).

This expands the scene of differentiation both in depth (structure) and breadth (space).

Now let us apply differentiation to the node itself. Identity here signifies a static condition, unchanging, with no internal articulation—as in the case of a boson whose internal state cannot be further distinguished. In contrast, differentiation produces an internal split: the act distinguishes how it differentiates. This introduces two moments—what differentiates, and what is differentiated within the act itself. The node distinguishes itself as something other, which means the node changes—it enters becoming.

Becoming is a transition in which differentiation continues through differentiation. At the same time, it retains the link between what differentiates and what is differentiated, forming identity—a kind of coherence. To fix this sequence requires a form: the aspect of time.

The aspect of time holds the node of differentiation as changing, as both identical and different from itself. It marks the difference between moments

within a single differentiating structure. Thus, differentiation becomes extended, and its structure becomes fluid. Time expresses the configuration of differences in sequence, where each difference is retained through transition, and a structure arises in which differentiation maintains itself in motion. Such a structure possesses its own tempo, directionality, and internal coherence. This is the scene of becoming, where difference holds itself as movement.

The next aspect emerges as differentiation is again applied to the node. The node now reveals itself not as a point of differentiation, but as a process—a structure extended in time and space, shaped through relations with other nodes. As noted, differentiation splits into two moments: that which changes in space and time, and that which is retained—identity and difference as an internal configuration.

Life is a structure in which this configuration becomes stable. Difference is retained in time through self-maintenance: each act of differentiation not only continues but establishes the conditions for the next. An autopoietic system does not merely differentiate; it reproduces the very possibility of differentiation. Its states are linked so that differentiation does not break, but develops within a preserved form.

Vital differentiation permits change without disintegrating the structure. A node is alive if it differentiates itself as differentiating. This does not require awareness—it is sufficient that it maintains a boundary between itself and what lies beyond. Thus arises the scene of the living: a structure in which difference continues itself.

Differentiation within the aspect of life manifests through the generation of variation by means of reproduction, giving rise to a multiplicity of forms. Each act of reproduction allows for deviations—mutations—that do not dismantle the structure but reveal its capacity for transformation, enabling evolutionary diversity. Repetition in life is never fully identical, which keeps it mobile and open to novelty.

The identity of life is expressed in autopoiesis through a projection into the spatial aspect (e.g., DNA code): an active process of self-maintenance. A living system preserves its integrity by creating and restoring boundaries in response to its environment, through the coordination of processes such as metabolism and protection. Autopoiesis is not a static condition but a dynamic scene in which life

sustains itself through interaction with what lies beyond.

The process of life unfolds, as before, along two directions: horizontal, where differentiation of aspects generates a diversity of forms; and vertical, where differentiation of differentiation (of the node itself) creates new aspects. These directions reflect the multidimensionality of the aspectual space.

Horizontal differentiation of the node expands the scene of life by generating multiple forms. It operates within an already given aspect, increasing variation without altering the mode of differentiation. As a result, distinct life forms emerge: organisms, plants, animals, fungi. Each form is a unique configuration of retained difference shaped into a specific structure. A plant, for example, retains spatial difference through roots, stems, and leaves, while an animal adds mobility and temporal dynamics through motion and behavior. This requires the ability to retain the sequence of events, which leads to the emergence of memory—a structure for holding temporal differences that allows a living being to orient itself within a sequence of before and after.

Differentiation of space and other aspects (such as intensity or structure) gives rise to perception, or qualia. Qualia are projections of external differences onto the internal scene of the living node, enabling it to distinguish both its environment and itself. A plant perceives light through photosynthesis; an animal, through sensory systems like vision or smell. Qualia shape difference into subjective experience, forming the basis for interaction with the world.

The diversity of life forms is shaped by the multidimensional structure of the aspectual space. Space and time form its main axes, but additional aspects are layered onto them: intensity (e.g., metabolic activity), structure (e.g., organ hierarchies), relation (e.g., ecological interaction). Each life form occupies a unique position in this space, defined by a specific combination of aspects. Horizontal differentiation, then, produces expansion: life multiplies, filling ecological niches, from bacteria to complex ecosystems.

Vertical differentiation, by contrast, deepens the scene by generating new aspects—new modes of retaining difference—and thus adds new dimensionalities to the aspectual space. When a node differentiates itself recursively, it transforms the modality of differentiation and transitions to a new level of configuration. Life as an aspect is the first step in this direction; further vertical differentiation opens new domains: perception, symbol, society.

The structure of aspects is fractal: every act of differentiation generates new differences, which can be retained in new aspects or multiplied within existing ones. This fractality appears in the way life unfolds across levels—from cells to organisms, from instincts to symbols. Each level preserves the logic of differentiation, while expanding it through new configurations and forms.

The next step in vertical differentiation is the recursive differentiation of qualia by animals. When an animal begins to distinguish not only external differences but also its own projections of those differences—images, sounds, smells—a new aspect emerges: the symbol. A symbol is a form in which difference is held as transmittable, decoupled from its immediate carrier. It enables the living system not merely to respond to the world, but to designate it, creating stable structures that can be reproduced in other scenes.

Animal signals—cries, gestures—or marks along a path are proto-symbols: they retain difference in a form accessible to another. The symbol crosses the boundary of the biological, shaping difference as something that can be conveyed, interpreted, or reused in a different context. This opens the path toward language, culture, and consciousness, where difference becomes not only an act but an object of reflection.

When the node differentiates the symbol, a new aspect appears: the patterning of symbols and of the self. The patterning of symbols, held as identity, gives rise to science—a system that identifies stable relations among symbols. Science retains recurring structures in symbolic scenes, whether they are natural laws (physics, biology) or formal systems (mathematics, logic). Scientific theories encode differences as models, where symbols—formulas, terms—are organized to predict and explain.

At the same time, the differentiation of the symbol as self gives rise to personhood: a node that becomes aware of its own difference. Personhood arises when a symbolic act of reflection stabilizes the “I” as a persistent difference, distinct from others. This is not merely a subject, but a scene where difference is held as self-awareness. Personhood shapes internal regularities—thoughts, desires, values—into a unique structure that is preserved through time via memory and reflection.

The recursive differentiation of personhood as a node of self-awareness gives rise to ethics—the aspect of relation to others. By differentiating itself, the person

becomes aware of another “I” as equally distinct. A tension emerges between individual structures, held together as mutual recognition and responsibility. Ethics is a dynamic configuration in which personal difference takes the form of interaction. Moral norms or empathy mark boundaries between “I” and “you,” preserving difference while enabling coexistence.

Further differentiation directed at groups of persons gives rise to society—an aspect in which multiple personal differences and ethical tensions are structured into a shared order. Society is not merely a collection of individuals; it is a field in which differences of consciousness and ethical tension are configured into stable patterns: norms, institutions, communities. For example, legal systems or cultural traditions retain the difference between persons but allow their interaction within a collective scene. Society unfolds as a fractal structure, where each difference—individual or collective—becomes a node for further differentiation.

The recursive differentiation of the node—from symbol to society—illustrates a vertical deepening of ontology. Each new aspect—science, personhood, ethics, society—emerges as a transformation in the modality of difference. Science encodes symbolic regularities; personhood gives form to self-awareness; ethics structures relations; society establishes collective order. This sequence reflects the fractal logic of differentiation: as difference deepens, it generates not only new content but new modes of being, where each level preserves traces of the

<i>Recursive Differentiation</i>	<i>Expansive Differentiation</i>
Time, Becoming	Space, Structure
Life	Mutation, Reproduction
Symbol	Language
Consciousness, Patterning	Creativity
Ethical Relation	Conflict, Culture
Society	Institutions, Norms

previous, while enriching the scene.

Table 1. Ontological Directions of Differentiation

This table presents two complementary vectors in the ontology of differentiation: recursive (vertical) differentiation, which generates new aspects through self-application of the differentiating act, and expansive (horizontal) differentiation, which multiplies forms within a given aspectual configuration.

Society does not conclude the process, but concentrates the configuration: in it, differentiation reaches a level where retention becomes collective. Each individual act of differentiation is included within a broader configuration in which linkages between nodes take the form of norms, structures, and institutions. Yet even here, differentiation does not vanish; it is retained at a higher level of coherence. Society is not an endpoint but a point at which the scene itself becomes differentiable—the logic of differentiation, embedded in the social fabric, becomes reflectively accessible.

Where differentiation previously acted as becoming—in life, perception, symbol, and personhood—it now becomes a mode of organizing the possible. It is no longer just an operation, but a code of configuration that defines which forms of stability are permitted, which relations can be sustained, which nodes can be regenerated.

In this unfolding, differentiation reaches its complete form: it differentiates the structure of differentiation itself. Not merely a scene, but a metascene appears—one in which the structure of differences can be modified, analyzed, and reconfigured. This is not a return to the origin, but a completion of the cycle: differentiation, having passed through aspects, forms, and levels, returns to itself—as something that can now be retained, reshaped, and transformed.

Here, the possibility of Game emerges—not in the sense of entertainment, but as a space in which differentiation unfolds freely, without a predetermined code. The Game is a scene where the structure of differences becomes not only necessity, but possibility. It opens a modality in which differentiation can maintain stability, but also alter it.

Thus, the fractal unfolding of differentiation reaches its closure without finality:

- from act to stability,

- from stability to becoming,
- from becoming to symbol,
- from symbol to selfhood,
- from selfhood to relation,
- from relation to society,
- from society to the differentiation of differentiation.

This is a conclusion not in the form of closure, but as a point where differentiation can be simultaneously held, understood, and released. Here, the scene of differentiation becomes its own form. It does not require an external foundation—because differentiation sustains itself.

All the multiplicity of forms of being has thus been derived as the result of the dialectic of differentiation—its recursive application to itself. Such recursion generates a multidimensional aspectual space in which differentiation not only retains forms, but opens the possibility for new modalities of retention. Every form of being is a configuration of differences, arising within a particular aspect and retained there as a stable form. But it is precisely differentiation, when applied to what has already been differentiated, that allows for the transition to new aspects, new scenes, new depths of structural coherence.

Becoming, life, perception, symbol, personhood, society—none of these are substances or levels in a hierarchy. They are the outcomes of a repeated act of differentiation, in which each retention becomes the basis for a new differentiation. The process is not linear, not circular, but fractal: each structure carries within itself the potential for further splitting, linking, and transformation. Differentiation does not move from simple to complex; it opens a modality in which any form can be reinterpreted, reshaped, and reinitiated.

From this emerges a scene of freedom—not as arbitrariness, but as the capacity of the differentiating to modify the very structure of its differentiations. This is the point of emergence of the meta-level: differentiation no longer addresses only the other, but also the structure of the configuration in which it operates. Here the Game opens: a scene in which difference becomes possibility, not only necessity.

The Game is a form of retention that is not bound to a fixed form. In the Game, the differentiating is not required to maintain stability—it can create it anew. This is a space in which new configurations, new nodes, and new aspects become possible—not through external intervention, but from the logic of differentiation itself, carried to its full articulation. In this sense, the final step is not synthesis or closure, but the disclosure of the scene of differentiation itself as living, open, and potential.

And here, in this open horizon, differentiation does not conclude—it only reaches transparency. It differentiates itself as differentiating.

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