CHAPTER 6

Cognition and Zero Complexity

A person born deaf does not hear silence. She has no hearing at all, and so no field in which a sound could be missing. A person born blind does not see darkness. She has no such field either. Take every difference out of one of the senses and you do not get a dim version of it. You get none of it.

Chapter 6 turns that observation into a tool. It calls a state with no internal difference a state of zero complexity. The rule it defends is the zero-complexity constraint. Nothing that needs even one difference can be a feature of a state that has none. No content, no feeling, no knowledge, no intention, no awareness.

The chapter opens with a question. Can the ground of all things think? Chapter 4 argued that the chain of what holds in virtue of what may end. If it does, only one end leaves nothing further to explain: a state with no internal difference, which the book calls equality. If the chain ends there, the bottom of reality has no mind.

Panpsychism says that consciousness is basic and runs all through nature. The constraint does not refute that view. It gives it a floor. Consciousness may go all the way down, and “all the way down” stops where differences stop.

The smallest thing a feeling must do

The argument has three steps. First, from Chapter 2: any definite content is a diff, one of at least two, marked off by its contrast with an alternative. Second, the bridge step: any thinking or feeling state is some way, as against no way at all. Third, from Chapter 4: a state of zero complexity has no internal difference. So it is no way at all, and nothing can be known, meant or felt there.

The bridge step is the new one, and one opponent denies it. Call her the resolute intrinsicalist. A felt quality, the hurt of a pain, is simply itself, complete, owing nothing to any contrast. Evidence from the senses cannot answer her. That evidence already treats qualities as contrastive, which is the point in dispute. So the chapter argues from her own word. She calls the quality phenomenal: there is something it is like to have it, for the subject. Then ask one question. Does the quality’s presence differ, for that subject, from its absence? If it does, there is the contrast, and one difference is enough. If it does not, the quality adds nothing to what it is like to be her. A what-it-is-likeness that makes no difference to what it is like is a contradiction in her own terms. The chapter calls this the phenomenal-idleness argument.

Evidence from the senses then arrives under its own name, the equalisation principle. Remove every difference within hearing, including the one between sound and silence, and you arrive at deafness. Do it to feeling and you arrive at numbness. Numbness is no faint feeling. It is the edge of feeling.

The chapter limits that evidence itself. Each case silences one sense while the rest of the person carries on. Arguing from a silenced part to a whole state is an induction, and inductions can fail. So the weight stays on the idleness argument, which applies to whole states directly.

A floor under panpsychism

Micropsychism says the basic physical things have tiny experiences of their own. A quark has charge, spin and mass, so it is already one of at least two things that can be told apart. Micro-experiences can extend as far down as there are things with internal differences, and no further. The constraint says what consciousness needs. It stays silent about what is enough.

Cosmopsychism says the cosmos as a whole is the one basic conscious subject. The differentiated universe is enormously various, so the constraint leaves it alone. It closes one option only. A state of zero complexity cannot be a subject, since a subject must be some way. The constraint does not force her down to the terminus, the far end of the chain of grounds. That step belongs to Chapter 4, and she is free to contest it.

Russellian monism says consciousness is the inner nature of physical properties. Red is red by being neither blue nor green. Take the colour differences out of your visual field one by one and you do not reach a bare redness. You reach the blind field. Experimenters have tried this. Fill a whole field with one flat colour and it either drains away or fills itself with invented shapes. So the chapter keeps the lesson narrow. In the one place where contrast has really been removed, nothing the constraint forbids has turned up. She may reply that the basic qualities need not behave like human ones. She then owes an account of how contrastive qualities arise from non-contrastive ones. The chapter claims no refutation here. No Russellian puts her basic qualities at zero complexity. So the constraint refutes no Russellian view anyone holds. It marks a limit every such view must observe. It also records one variant it cannot reach, a quality that nobody undergoes.

The meditator’s empty hour

Robert Forman argues that meditators in many traditions report a pure consciousness event: awake and conscious, with no object and no content. If the report is sound, it looks like a counterexample.

The chapter offers a fork. Perhaps the state keeps one difference, such as its contrast with the ordinary waking state on either side of it. Then it sits inside diversity, the realm of differentiated states, as a limiting case. Perhaps it keeps none. Then it is the point where consciousness stops.

To choose between them, the chapter reads the shape of the reports. The event is always reported as an episode. It began when concentration deepened, it lasted a while, and it ended. Whatever is accurately remembered that way had a beginning, a close and a place among the meditator’s other states. Each of those is a difference. A position in time is already a difference, as Chapter 5

argued. So either the memory tracks the state, and the state had that much structure, or it does not, and the advocate has withdrawn her own evidence. She keeps her right to depths beyond words. She loses remembered evidence for a structureless episode.

What every theory already assumes

Giulio Tononi's integrated information theory says a system is conscious exactly when a quantity it calls Φ rises above zero. Φ measures how far a system's present state constrains its past and future beyond what its parts do separately. That needs at least two states the system could be in. A state of zero complexity scores zero.

The chapter refuses to count this as a win. Handed a state with no structure, the machinery has nothing to work on. The theory does not test the constraint; it is an instance of it. Its rivals stand on the same floor. Their agreement displays a shared grammar and no convergence of separate findings. The chapter names this the presupposition floor, the level every measuring theory assumes before it measures anything. That is why none of them can disagree with the constraint and none can confirm it.

The chapter also states what would refute it: a credible attribution of consciousness to a system with no internal differences whatever. No current theory offers one, and the chapter says why none could without changing the subject. The book's General Conclusion calls this an empty specification. It sits outside the list of things that could really prove the framework wrong.

The objections the chapter answers

The first comes from the hard problem, as David Chalmers framed it. Experience is not exhausted by what a system does or by what it represents, so a raw feel might need no structure. The reply is that the constraint asks for one thing only, that the state be some way. A quality no functional account could capture is still a way of being. A feel that is no way at all is no feel.

The second is about scope. Zero complexity might never obtain, since a reality with no bottom level has no terminus. The chapter agrees the result applies only if the chain of grounds ends, and only if it ends in equality. A bottom level with differences in it stays open, and the constraint says nothing against it. The constraint still bites on any theism that makes God the simple ground of all being. It bites on any cosmopsychism that puts its subject at the undifferentiated terminus.

What the chapter claims

The chapter reaches three results, and grades all three *established*, the rung below the book's top mark. For this book that means each is validly drawn from premises it defends, so a challenger has to reject one of them.

The first is the constraint itself. The chapter is open about its character. Once zero complexity is defined as the absence of every difference, the constraint is close to analytic, near to true by the meanings of the words. What the chapter is built to earn is the idleness argument and the evidence from the senses.

The second is the floor under panpsychism. The third is that the terminus is unintelligent, with no knowledge, will, intention, awareness or design. This one carries two conditions and an open question. It holds only if the chain of grounds ends, and only if it ends in equality. Chapter 11 takes up whether equality is possible at all.

Chapters 9 to 12 take the theological road. Chapter 7 takes the other one: if every act of thinking is a diff, what are the limits of thought?