CHAPTER 17

Certainty, Perfection, and Dogma

A clock has shown the correct time for a thousand years. It is perfect. It could still break in the next second. Perfection says “no error has been detected”. Infallibility says “no error is possible”. Chapter 17 argues that no finite body of evidence carries you from the first claim to the second. That leap is how a useful rule hardens into a dogma.

The chapter picks up from Chapter 16, which argued that the major ethical traditions confuse obeying a standard with morality itself. A standard, on that account, is an instrument: a compressed record of earlier empathic insight, valuable and revisable. So what happens when such a record is declared beyond revision? It is cut off from the thing that gave it authority.

Two conditions make that severance possible. One is how certainty feels. A mathematician with a proof and a dogmatist with a creed feel the same conviction. The other condition is objective. The step from a clean record to a guarantee cannot be made with evidence at all.

Two axes, four states, and one illusion

Take any claim and ask one question. Could its denial be held by someone and be true? If it could, the claim is logically open. If it could not, it is logically closed. “God created the universe” is open, since its denial is coherent. The denial of “difference exists” is coherent, yet any holding of it is an act with parts, so each holding instantiates what it denies, which makes it closed.

The second axis measures feeling. Two thoughts compete over any claim: that it could be different, and that it cannot. The axis asks which of the two pulls harder.

Crossing the axes gives four states. Rational certainty is a closed claim held with the pull toward closure, and the mathematician is the model. Irrational certainty is an open claim held the same way, and the dogmatist is the model. Rational uncertainty is an open claim held with a fitting pull toward possibility, and it is the healthy default. Irrational uncertainty fills the last box: a student follows a valid proof and cannot bring herself to believe the conclusion.

As a rule, the first two states cannot be told apart from the inside. Where the denial of a claim is contradictory, the certainty is rational. Where the denial is coherent, the certainty is not thereby irrational. A coherent alternative may be held as merely improbable, and holding it so is rational. So the diagnosis takes the logical axis and a judgement about the evidence together.

The claim is structural in one part and typical in another. Telling the two states apart from within would need a felt mark of grounding, and nothing in the classification carries one. Work on how people monitor their own thinking does

find signals of ease and of knowing. No such signal tracks a claim's logical standing.

Certainty turns irrational in one of two ways. It may treat a coherent alternative as impossible. Or it may hold that alternative beyond the reach of evidence. The second is the commoner. A dogmatist seldom calls the denial of her creed contradictory; she declines to let anything count against it.

This verdict grades reflective certainty, the kind reached by questioning a claim and weighing its denial. A certainty held before any questioning is pre-reflective, neither rational nor irrational, only not yet graded. Wittgenstein's hinge beliefs sit there, such as that you have two hands. Their denial is coherent, and to hold them fast is no error. A hinge hardens into a dogma only at the reflective stage, when the alternative is raised and then refused a hearing.

Perfect now, breakable tomorrow

Perfection is the limiting case of correctness: conforming to a given standard, as a spelling is checked against a dictionary. One detected error overturns it. It is also dated: the verdict is made on the evidence of the moment.

The gap follows quickly. Perfection compares an output with a standard using the evidence in hand, which is finite. Infallibility would require the same verdict under all possible evidence, and that space has no end. So perfection warrants rational uncertainty, and a claim of infallibility for such a standard is irrational certainty.

Two routes could make a claim always perfect. The first is an omniscient guarantee: the source knows everything and cannot err. The second is self-vindication, where the claim could be false only in conditions in which nobody could make it. Chapter 1's occurrence premise is the example, since to deny that anything happens is to make something happen.

The chapter then turns the verdict on the book. Only three items reach the second route: two premises of Chapter 1 and the result built from them, that at least one difference obtains. Everything above that is perfect and revisable, since each result rests on premises a challenger could contest.

Only God can prove God

Imagine meeting a being who says it knows everything. You can check an answer only where you already know the answer. A million correct replies would show only that it has answered correctly so far. To verify omniscience you would have to hold every possible truth yourself. So, in the chapter's words, "Only God can prove God".

A second argument goes deeper. Knowing all possible evidence requires a mind that holds every truth apart from every alternative. That is endless internal structure, which Chapter 8 called infinite diversity. The classical

Abrahamic traditions also describe God as absolutely simple, with no internal distinction at all. That is the other infinity. Chapter 8 argued that the two conditions are opposites, and Chapter 10 argued that simplicity joined to intelligence is incoherent. The chapter then limits the argument. It bites only the simple God of those classical forms. Theologies that give up simplicity escape it. They do not escape the first argument. By itself, it defeats the claim that any finite body of evidence reaches infallibility.

Four stages into dogma

The conflation produces one pathology in four stages. At the first, a standard earns its authority by matching the available evidence, and that is perfection. At the second, the record becomes a claim of permanent adequacy, and this is the break. At the third, revision is foreclosed, since any challenge is read as the challenger's mistake. At the fourth, the standard is severed from the foundation that gave it authority, and authorises itself.

The slavery case runs through all four. The moral code of the antebellum American South was perfect in the technical sense, matching the standards then in use. Those standards were themselves corrupt, and evidence was available that the community refused to take up. Then the code was declared incapable of error, because God had ordained it. What was barred was existing moral facts. By Chapter 16's result, the responses of the enslaved were present and made the wrongness then. At the fourth stage the code no longer answered to the empathic responses that had generated it.

Science gets the same test. The ten-year dismissal of the finding that a bacterium causes peptic ulcers had no declaration of irrevisability behind it, and the correcting process stayed in place. The chapter reads that as perfection correcting slowly. Explaining an anomaly away is third-stage conduct, and it becomes the pathology only where the corrective process is itself disabled. Lysenko's Soviet agronomy is the case where it was. Political power dismantled the correcting process there, which is why the scientific case is rare.

The objections the chapter answers

One objection turns the thesis on itself. If no claim is infallible, then the claim that no claim is infallible is revisable too. The reply is that this result comes from the structure of the argument, and no survey of cases. The chapter concedes the rest in the open: its own central claim is perfect and revisable.

Another objection comes from believers. For many, the authority of scripture is a conviction of faith, owing nothing to any inference from a clean record. The chapter does not deny that the conviction is sincerely held, or that a powerful experience of the sacred lies behind it. A person can treat a text as excellent without calling it incapable of error. The felt impossibility of error sits on the pull axis, and the conviction is no evidence that the text is infallible.

What the chapter claims

The two-dimensional classification is graded *established*, the rung below the book's top mark. That grade means the result follows validly from premises the book defends, so a challenger has to reject one of them.

The distinction between perfection and infallibility is also *established*, and it carries one condition. Two arguments share the result, with unequal reach. The evidence argument holds against any guarantor at all. The structural argument holds only against the God who is omniscient and simple at once.

The four-stage anatomy is graded *constructed*, the rung below that. It is the best available positive account, coherent and well motivated, with rivals still in the field. The chapter stakes it on a claim it admits is refutable: the four stages work the same way across scripture, institutions, moral codes and science. The identity is one of function, in what each stage does. In scripture and institutions the second stage is often declared; in science it is enacted, with nobody announcing it. A documented standard declared beyond revision that kept its corrective process would demote the anatomy from a mechanism to a description.

Chapter 18 presses on what is left. If standards are revisable, an agent engages with them instead of submitting to them. Yet the hierarchy of values from which she judges any standard was never chosen by her.