CHAPTER 2

The Contrastive Structure of Content

Presupposes: the self-vindication of difference (Ch. 1).

Establishes: the structural dependence of content on contrast; the two forms of structural difference, relational and determinative; a structural explanation of the given's dependence; the ontological standing of difference.

In brief. Chapter 1 leaned on one premise: a determinate content must be distinguishable from at least one alternative. This chapter secures that premise. It introduces the *diff*, the smallest possible unit of meaning; shows that three rival theories of meaning all presuppose it; and then forces the issue with a dilemma no theory escapes: a content either excludes something, and is contrastive, or excludes nothing, and fails to be a content at all. Along the way the chapter explains why the "given" of classical empiricism cannot stand alone, where this book parts company with Derrida, and why the differences established are features of reality itself.

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1 Introduction

Chapter 1's argument rested its weight on a premise it supported without fully developing: any determinate content is distinguishable from at least one alternative. Why should that be so, and what feature of meaning makes difference inescapable? This chapter answers, where the answer carries consequences for epistemology and ontology that reach well beyond the self-vindication argument.

The answer is the structural dependence thesis: any content — any concept, proposition, or representation — must be distinguishable from at least one alternative in order to be a determinate content at all. As an observation the thesis is familiar, since Saussure (1916/1959) said it for language, Sellars (1956) turned it against the given, and Brandom (1994) built a semantics on it. The precedent runs wider than philosophy of language: Bateson (1972) defines information as "a difference which makes a difference"; Spencer-Brown (1969) opens his calculus of indication with the instruction to draw a distinction, an instruction Luhmann (1984/1995) carries into a general theory of social systems. Each of these programmes begins from the primacy of difference without

deriving it, so the convergence corroborates while the derivation remains the chapter's own.

The thesis also intervenes in a live debate. McDowell (1994) accepted Sellars's diagnosis of the given and proposed that perceptual experience is already conceptually structured, to avoid what he called "frictionless spinning in the void"; his conceptualism remains in contest with non-conceptualist alternatives (Travis, 2004; Dreyfus, 2005; Hanna, 2008). The structural dependence thesis reframes the whole dispute. The prior question is whether content is *contrastive*, before any question about whether it is conceptual — and the reframing constrains the foundationalist retreats that Sellars's own argument leaves open.

The chapter develops the thesis and the diff (§2), applies it to the myth of the given (§3), distinguishes it from différance (§4), and establishes that the diversity secured is ontological (§5).

2 The Structural Dependence Thesis

2.1 The Diff

What is the minimum condition for something to count as a determinate content — for a proposition, concept, or representation to say one thing and exclude another? Contrast. A content must rule out at least one alternative, since a content compatible with every possible state of affairs has no determinacy: it affirms nothing because it denies nothing. It is semantically inert.

Chapter 1 (§4.1) introduced the diff as the minimum unit of determinate content: one of two distinguishable items, individuated by contrast with at least one alternative, essentially relational. The concept now needs fuller development, and a three-step ladder grounds it.

Call non-existence *ontological zero*. There, nothing exists to know and no knower exists. Call undifferentiated being *ontological one*: a state that exists yet carries no internal distinction. There, something exists, though something too simple to be thought — no epistemic item can be individuated within it, because individuation requires a boundary; a boundary is a distinction. Call the emergence of at least one

difference *ontological two*. There, knowledge becomes possible for the first time: two distinguishable items now exist, each available as a diff. The transition from one to two is the structural origin of the epistemic.

A terminological distinction will matter throughout the book. *Structural difference* names the bare fact that a state is one way and excludes at least one alternative — that it carries information in the minimal sense of making a distinction. The term is chosen with care. The mind-independent side is no faint species of content, and calling it "content" would make the book's thesis read as the claim that difference requires difference. *Epistemic content* names the richer condition in which a state participates in inferential relations: serving as a reason, supporting or undermining other states, taking its place in the space of reasons. The relationship is asymmetric. Epistemic content presupposes structural difference, since inferential relations need distinguishable relata. Structural difference presupposes no epistemic content: a state can be one way and exclude another without joining any inferential network.

Two forms of structural difference. Structural difference takes two forms, and the book's results rest on them differently, so naming them here keeps a slide from occurring later. In the relational form, two items obtain and differ: two rock formations, two moments, two components of one act. They may differ in quality or, at the minimum, only in number, as two positions in an order differ while sharing every property. In the determinative form, one item obtains and excludes an alternative that does not: the state is red rather than blue, the denial occurs rather than not.

The determinative form is therefore a contrast between two states of the world, one of them actual, while the relational form is a contrast within the actual one. Equality — ontological one, in the ladder just given — has neither form, since it obtains and is no way rather than another. A diff may be individuated by either, because the alternative with which a diff is one of two need not obtain.

The foundational result of Chapter 1 needs at least one structural difference in reality, and its two routes deliver one form each: the

composition route the relational form, two components of one real act, and the absence route the determinative form, an occurrence rather than its absence. A critic who hears “difference” as the relational form alone, and asks to be shown two things, is therefore answered by the first route, while the second route answers by what the word means.

What kind of thing is structural difference, ontologically? It resists classification as any special kind of property — natural like mass, formal like a mathematical relation, dispositional like fragility — because it is what obtains wherever difference obtains: the contrast between two rock formations no mind has observed, between two moments, two regions, two chemical compositions.

The resistance to classification follows from the concept’s generality; it can be given the discipline of a criterion. Any proposed category for structural difference is a partition, and a partition presupposes structural difference, so every attempt to classify it is itself an act of partitioning and instantiates what it would classify. The priority claimed here belongs to the operation and not to some prior item, since the act of classifying cannot get behind the difference it deploys, so the demand “which category?” gets answered from within difference, with no standpoint outside it.

The limiting case. A limiting case displays the structural/epistemic layering. Consider the simplest possible detection: a sensory system that registers a stimulus against a background of no stimulus, detection against the blind field. The system need not classify or label the stimulus, place it in inferential relations, or be conscious.

Fix the foundation of the case with care, because everything it will later be asked to support rests on it. When the stimulus is present the system occupies one physical state; when absent, another; and the two states are non-identical, being distinct configurations of the same material system. That non-identity is the structural difference all by itself. “Registration” and “detection” are glosses supplied by our explanatory practices, borrowed for vividness while nothing rests on them (§6.3 returns to this against the use-theorist).

Epistemic content is a further matter, since the state joins no inferential network and justifies no belief. Subconscious colour detection in the human visual system provides a concrete instance (cf. Lamme, 2003, on recurrent processing and unconscious visual representation), because colours differentiate the visual field from the blind field before any conscious attention or inference occurs. That the structural condition is so easily met is the case's whole lesson: the minimal contrast sits below the epistemic layer and is presupposed by it.

Knowledge is never "one of one." It is always "one of two": something defined by its contrast with something else. This is the structural dependence thesis. Every content is a diff; a diff is constitutively relational.

2.2 Confirmation across rival theories

The thesis must be more than an artefact of one semantic framework. Chapter 1 (§4.2) stated the convergence briefly; here it is developed.

Inferentialism. On Brandom's (1994) semantics, the content of a concept is its inferential role, its position in a network of commitments and entitlements. Central to the account is material incompatibility, the relation by which one commitment excludes another, a relation built out of difference, since two commitments are materially incompatible because they differ in a way that blocks joint endorsement. On inferentialism, therefore, a concept with no inferential connections has no content.

Structuralism. Saussure's (1916/1959) central claim — "in language there are only differences without positive terms" — holds that the identity of a signifier is constituted by its contrasts: /b/ is the phoneme it is because it differs from /p/, /d/, and /g/. The dependence thesis extends Saussure from signs to content as such. The structural role, exclusion of alternatives, matches inferentialism's; the mechanism is systemic opposition instead of inferential preclusion.

Representationalism. On causal-covariational accounts (Fodor, 1987; cf. Dretske, 1981, whose information-theoretic account makes the

dependence on differential response fully explicit), a mental state represents what it causally covaries with. One might think such theories individuate content by relation to the represented object, with contrast playing no role. But determinate representation constitutively requires differential response: a representation responding identically to every possible stimulus represents nothing determinate, and Fodor's own solution to the disjunction problem, asymmetric dependence, is itself a differential relation. Even a state covarying with a single property is individuated by its failure to covary with the others. The companion difficulty for such accounts — how misrepresentation is possible if content simply tracks causes — is registered here without being solved; the teleosemantic programme addressed to it is left open.

What the survey does and does not carry. Each enlistment will be contested from inside its own school; the contest belongs in the survey's evidential accounting. Brandom's inferentialism is a rationalist programme, so an inferentialist may resist the suggestion that a sub-inferential structural condition captures anything she is committed to. Horwich's use theory of meaning resists constitutive glosses on principle, so that distinguishable use is presupposed is an observation about his theory's applicability conditions, and no analysis he need adopt. And the Sellarsian will insist on the autonomy of the space of reasons, which the thesis does not deny, since the diff is offered as a condition on determinacy and not as a unit of justification.

The survey's role survives these contests unchanged, because the survey was not proof. Each framework is cited for what it presupposes, and not for what its author would endorse, while the burden of establishing the thesis rests where §2.4 places it, on the determination dilemma. What the convergence adds is corroboration: theories that cannot all be wrong about their own presuppositional structure.

And the corroboration runs deeper than the bare fact of agreement. The three frameworks locate the mechanism of exclusion in different domains — the space of reasons, the system of signs, causal relations between mind and world — while the structural role stays invariant across them. That invariance confirms that structural difference belongs to none of these domains individually, since it is the contrastive

condition each domain, in its own terms, identifies as constitutive of determinacy.

Contrastivism. A neighbouring programme in epistemology and the theory of reasons holds that knowledge, justification, and reasons carry a contrast argument-place: one knows that "p rather than q", has reason to A as against B (Schaffer, 2005; the essays in Blaauw, 2013). The dependence thesis is prior to contrastivism and more general. Contrastivism locates the contrast in the attitude's logical form and argues for it case by case; the thesis locates it in content itself, so that the attitude's contrast slot, where there is one, is a special case of the exclusion every content already carries. A contrastivist who denied the thesis would owe a non-contrastive content for the attitude to relate to its contrast class; the dilemma of §2.4 leaves her none. A contrastivist who replies that content-level exclusion is her thesis under another name has conceded the priority, since the attitude's contrast slot is then filled by contents that already exclude, and the dilemma, which runs with no attitude in view, is what she is endorsing: the contrast she finds in the attitude's form was in its content already, and contrastivism about attitudes is the dependence thesis read off one class of states.

2.3 Antecedents: determination and negation

The thesis has a classical ancestor, and naming it is better than letting the thesis stand as though it had none. In a letter of 1674 Spinoza wrote that *determinatio negatio est* — determination is negation. To ascribe a figure to a thing adds nothing positive; it marks a limit, registering what the thing is not (Spinoza, 1995, Letter 50). Hegel seized on the clause, generalised it as *omnis determinatio est negatio*, and made it a hinge of his logic. He credited Spinoza with the insight while holding that he had missed its full reach (Hegel, 1812; Melamed, 2012). On the received reading, the formula states just what §2.1 has called the diff: a thing or concept is determinate only through its contrast with what it is not.

The debt is real, and better acknowledged than disguised. Yet the use this book makes of the principle departs from Spinoza's and reverses Hegel's. For Spinoza the claim concerned finite bodies, since

determinate being is a limitation of an infinite substance itself without determination. This book inverts that valuation. If determination is negation, then a state that negates nothing — the wholly undifferentiated substance Spinoza exalts — is the emptiest reality, where Spinoza took it for the fullest: the boundary at which content fails, and no ground in which content is most fully present.

Hegel is an ally in the inversion; he is no target of it. The charge of acosmism is his charge against Spinoza, and not his moral (Melamed, 2012). His *Logic* opens with indeterminate Being as the emptiest of categories, passing into Nothing for want of content — the reading of the pair the partition takes without strain. Where this book parts from him is on the remedy. For Hegel the absolute must negate itself into determinacy, so the indeterminate is a stage to be overcome. Here it is no stage at all: a boundary, at which nothing acts, self-negation included.

Two features keep the thesis from collapsing into its ancestor. Its security comes from the convergence of §2.2 and the dilemma of §2.4, which owe nothing to Spinoza's metaphysics of substance. And it is a claim about content and determinacy, and not about the reality or deficiency of finite things. It is silent on whether the determinate is "really real", asserting only that without contrast there is nothing determinate to be real or unreal at all.

2.4 The Determination Dilemma

The claim to be secured is that a content must exclude something in order to be a content at all, and the argument for it is a forced choice between two options with nothing between them. The thesis should be secured this way because the convergence of §2.2, however wide, is inductive: it shows that every developed theory of content requires contrast, and not that content must. The argument is a dilemma, the most general form of a pattern that recurs through the book; it formalises the principle §2.3 traced through the tradition.

Two senses of "exclude". One word needs fixing before the dilemma runs, because it carries two senses. A content may exclude in

the modal sense, ruling out ways the world could be, so "the cat is on the mat" excludes the worlds where the cat is elsewhere. And a content may exclude in the content-level sense, standing distinguishable from other contents within the space of contents — separately graspable, assertible, deniable — whatever its modal profile. Modal exclusion is the most familiar special case of content-level exclusion; the dilemma runs on the content-level sense throughout, since the difference becomes load-bearing at just one of the hard cases below.

A further fixing belongs beside it. Content-level distinguishability is a structural condition, and the feeling of understanding does not certify it, since a pair of expressions can be asserted and denied across a seminar table for a century while one of them composes no content at all. What certifies the condition is composition: the expression's materials must themselves be diffs, so that a vocabulary circular at its base must exit somewhere into a registered contrast, or pass nothing around but itself. Assertion practice is therefore evidence for the condition and not its constitution, which is why an audit can return a verdict the practice around a term resists.

The dilemma. Now the dilemma. Take any putative determinate content C. Either C has determinate character, so its obtaining is one way rather than another, excluding some alternative, or it lacks it.

On the first horn, C is contrastive by construction, since the "rather than" is an exclusion, what C excludes individuates it, and C is a diff. The horn carries a scruple: "one way rather than another" already contains the contrast, so the first horn is close to analytic; the dilemma's work is done entirely by the second, which shows that the only alternative to a contrastive content is no content at all. On the second horn, C excludes nothing. It sits compatible with everything, its own absence included, so a state's bearing C and its lacking C are indistinguishable, and C can do no individuating work: it cannot make a thought this thought and no other. A "content" that distinguishes nothing from anything is therefore no minimal content but the absence of one. And no third option exists, because "has determinate character" and "lacks it" are contradictories.

Contents and states. The dilemma quantifies over contents; its conclusion is a claim about content: whatever is determinate as a content excludes. The book's later uses of structural difference range over states of reality as well; the step from the one to the other is short; it is not the dilemma. Structural difference in its determinative form (§2.1) is a state's being some way and thereby excluding an alternative; the only state that is no way at all is equality, the undifferentiated condition; and the pair, some way or no way, is exhaustive by excluded middle. Chapter 3 defends that pair as the partition of reality and fixes equality's standing by the two-names result. Registrations fall under the dilemma directly, since a registering state that excluded no alternative would register no determinate content (§2.1). Where a later chapter says of a state or property that it is one way rather than another or no way at all, that is the equalisation principle of Chapter 6 (§2.2), which rests on the partition together with the dilemma and carries their grades. No claim about a mind-independent state rests on the dilemma alone.

Primitive positivity. The second horn will be resisted, and the resistance deserves its strongest form. The Spinozist dictum has been contested since it was coined: why should determinacy not be primitive positivity, a content's being intrinsically what it is, owing nothing to what it is not? Quiddities, and certain trope theories, model just this.

The reply concedes the natures and denies them the job. The framework needs no verdict on whether positive natures are possible, since its claim is that a positive nature with no exclusions cannot do content's work. Content individuates, making a state about this and correct in these circumstances instead of those, and individuating is discriminating, while a C compatible with its own absence discriminates nothing.

The point is functional and not verbal, and an independent quarter confirms it: in the mathematical theory of communication (Shannon, 1948), a signal that excludes no alternative carries zero information, whatever its intrinsic nature. Semantic information theory states the first horn as a definition: the content of a sentence is the set of state-descriptions it excludes, and a sentence that excludes none carries null content (Bar-Hillel & Carnap, 1953). The measure presupposes a space

of alternatives; the presupposition marks a duty the later audits discharge, since which alternatives a term really opens is fixed by what its materials compose, and a practice can hold two labels installed as live options while one of them opens no alternative at all. The positivist may therefore keep his positive natures. He cannot make contents of them without exclusions, and with exclusions the first horn has him.

Three hard cases. Three hard cases test the dilemma, and each lands on the first horn. Vague content excludes its complement even where its boundary is indeterminate, since "heap" rules out the clear non-heaps however it treats the borderline, and a vagueness that excluded nothing would be emptiness, with no tolerance in it. Singular content, the thought of that very object, excludes every other object, since its dependence on its referent sharpens the exclusion instead of dissolving it.

Necessary truths contrast as contents though not in truth-value, since that seven and five make twelve is a content distinguishable from the content that they make thirteen, each separately grasped, asserted, denied. This is where the two-senses disambiguation earns its keep, because what the thesis requires here is content-level exclusion, which the mathematical contents possess even though their modal profiles coincide.

What supplies that exclusion is composition, the condition fixed above before the dilemma ran. Each of the two contents is assembled from constituents that are themselves diffs — number from registered discreteness, sum from registered combination, identity from registered matching — and the assemblies differ, so the contents differ, with no modal contrast required. This is the route the book takes for every modally idle content: constituents anchored in registration, arranged. That it is the only route is the anchoring requirement, stated and defended at Chapter 14 (§3.6), where it is graded; the present chapter needs only that composition suffices for the content-level exclusion the mathematical cases display. A formal system supplies no rival to it, since its symbols are registered marks and its rules registered operations, so where content is fixed by a system the composition has moved to the level of the notation.

Nor does the one-content mind escape — a system that has only ever tokened a single representation — because the contrast constituting content is structural and not episodic: a content is individuated by what it excludes in the space of possible contents, and not by what its bearer happens to have entertained, as the blind-field case of §2.1 shows at the level of experience.

The necessary-truths case raises one further question: what individuates the space of contents, if not the possible-worlds exclusion that necessary truths all trivially share? The hyperintensionality literature answers, since contents are individuated more finely than modal profile, whether by their constituent structure (King, 2007) or by the impossibilities they exclude (Jago, 2014). Either development supplies the content-level sense with the grain the mathematical cases display; each is compatible with composition: constituent structure is an arrangement of parts, and the impossibilities a content excludes are fixed by that arrangement; whether the parts must be anchored in registration is again the requirement Chapter 14 states.

The coarse-grained refusal. A theorist may refuse the grain itself. On the coarse-grained view whose flagship is Stalnaker's (1984), contents just are sets of possible worlds, all necessary truths are one and the same content, and the finely structured space of contents does not exist.

Two observations settle where this opponent stands. First, her theory is the most thoroughgoing exclusionism in the field across the entire contingent domain, since on her own account every contingent content is individuated by what it rules out, because a set of worlds is fixed by its complement. Second, even her boundary case lands on the first horn: her single necessary content, the total space of worlds, excludes no world while remaining distinguishable within the space of contents she recognises, from every contingent content and from the single impossible content at the opposite pole.

Every content the coarse-grained theory acknowledges therefore has at least one contrast partner, so the thesis holds on her semantics as on the fine-grained alternatives. What the coarse view cannot deliver is a

plurality of necessary contents, since the mathematical cases collapse into one node; this is a real concession of scope, made in the open.

The fine-grained refusal. The fine-grained direction invites the opposite refusal; it should be met at the same station. A theorist impressed by hyperintensional distinctions — by essences (Fine, 1994), constituent structure, or impossibility-exclusion — may propose that grain of this kind individuates without contrast, so that what a content is would be fixed by its essence, with exclusion arriving downstream if at all.

The proposal mislocates what the fine-grained tools do, since each of them individuates by richer exclusion and not by less. A structured proposition differs from its rivals in the constituents and arrangement it has and they lack. An essence-attribution, the claim that C is essentially thus, is itself a content, distinguishable from the attribution that C is essentially otherwise, and graspable only through that distinguishability. Refinement of grain therefore multiplies the contrasts available for individuation without replacing them, because the refined description must still say which item it describes, and saying which is excluding.

The essence idiom is accordingly a customer of the thesis before it is a challenger. Wherever essences are invoked to individuate, the invocation trades on content-level exclusion at the level of the attribution, and a hyperintensional distinctness claim presupposes contrastive distinctness in the very act of stating the relata as two.

Two programmes that decline the dilemma's presuppositions. The meaning-sceptic (Kripke, 1982) grants that content requires exclusion and denies the fact of it, arguing that nothing about a speaker settles which exclusions her word makes, so audits of the kind described above would inspect facts that are not there.

Two replies share the work. The sceptical thesis is itself stated in contents that exclude, since it rules out the ordinary picture on which use fixes meaning, and is graspable only against that rival, so determinate contents stand at the level of the sceptic's own claim. And the audits require less than the sceptic attacks, because a verdict of the vacancy kind — the finding that a clause composed of no registered

contrast says nothing — turns on no fact about which of two candidate exclusions a term makes, only on the composition of the term's materials, which remains inspectable while the sceptic's question stands open. Chapter 1 (§6.3) meets the same sceptic from the side of the denial's own content.

The holist declines the unit instead, since sentences face nothing one by one (Quine, 1951), exclusion belongs to whole theories, and a clause-by-clause audit weighs single words of a poem. Grant the corporate picture entire and the audit survives translation. Subtract a clause from the web. Either the web's exclusions change somewhere, in which case the clause was contributing and its contribution is its content, or they change nowhere, and a clause whose presence and absence leave every exclusion of the whole theory in place is the second horn stated in the holist's own currency.

The rim. The dilemma has a rim the convergence evidence lacks. Anyone who denies the thesis by counterexample must exhibit one, specifying a content that excludes nothing in the content-level sense fixed above, and the act of specification distinguishes the candidate from its rivals in that very sense, contrasts it with its negation, and thereby grids it — places it in the space of contents by what it excludes. Exhibited counterexamples therefore self-defeat.

One care keeps the rim in order: specification individuates a vehicle before it individuates a content, and pointing at a sentence proves only that the sentence is distinguishable. The rim therefore runs at the content level or nowhere. A counterexample succeeds only if the candidate's content is presented as grasped, grasped as distinct from alternatives, and presenting a content that way exhibits content-level exclusion in it. An exhibitor who individuates the vehicle alone has therefore produced a label and no counterexample, while one who individuates the content has produced a diff.

The remaining escape is to hold that such contents exist and cannot be exhibited: contents no possible mind could grasp as distinct from any alternative. But indistinguishability-in-principle from everything is what

the second horn describes, so the escape does not evade the dilemma. It selects a horn.

The thesis's standing can now be stated. It is not self-vindicating, since its denial is a difference and so instantiates an instance of the thesis and not its universal form. It is established by forced choice, because a challenger must reject the premise that individuation requires exclusion — that a content compatible with its own absence specifies nothing — and the cost of rejection is contents that cannot make any thought the thought it is. The convergence of §2.2 accordingly enters the record as corroboration, short of proof, since each theory, built for different purposes, was forced onto the dilemma's first horn by the job content has to do.

One scruple about strength belongs in the main text, because the chapter's vocabulary runs ahead of its argument. The forced choice delivers that every content excludes, so contrast is necessary for determinacy, while it does not deliver that contrast constitutes the content in the primitivist's sense. A theorist who holds that a nature is intrinsically what it is and excludes in consequence is therefore not refuted by the dilemma; she is only denied the contrast-free content she never wanted, and the framework needs no verdict on her natures.

Nothing this book uses needs more (note 4). Where this book calls content "constitutively contrastive", what it amounts to is the necessity the dilemma forces.

3 The Myth of the Given Revisited

3.1 Sellars's diagnosis and its limits

Sellars's (1956) critique of the myth of the given ranks among the most consequential arguments in twentieth-century epistemology. The myth is the foundationalist assumption that some epistemic items — sense-data, raw feels, immediate apprehensions — carry their content intrinsically, independent of all inferential relations, and can therefore serve as the ultimate justificatory foundation for empirical knowledge. Sellars argued that no epistemic item can carry content in isolation: to

know that this is red requires knowing what red is, which requires distinguishing red from not-red, which requires a network of classificatory capacities that are themselves inferentially structured.

The diagnosis is powerful; its scope is limited in a specific way: it shows that *epistemic* content requires inferential relations. A foundationalist who accepts that epistemic content requires some classificatory capacity while denying that the capacity must be inferentially structured can resist it — and the resistance is no hypothesis. Campbell (2002) argues for a relational view on which perception puts us in direct contact with objects, providing non-inferential, non-conceptual justification. Travis (2004) argues that perceptual experience has no representational content at all — the senses are "silent." Hanna (2008) argues for a Kantian non-conceptualism on which intuitions have proto-rational, non-conceptual content. Each attempts to rehabilitate something like the given.

3.2 The structural explanation

The structural dependence thesis yields a further explanation of the given's failure, prior to the inferentialist one and independent of it. The foundationalist's given is, by design, a self-standing epistemic item: an atom of content that carries its meaning intrinsically, with no reference to other items. In the present terms a self-standing content is a "one of one" — a diff without a partner — and a diff without a partner is semantic noise. A content without any contrast has no boundary; it excludes nothing, includes everything, and is therefore indeterminate. Indeterminacy is the absence of content, and no impoverishment of it.

The relationship to Sellars can be stated with the structural/epistemic distinction, which also fixes the scope of the structural explanation. No foundationalist ever posited a contrast-free given: sense-data are red as against green, while Sellars's own diagnosis already runs through the distinguishing of red from not-red. Sellars argues that the given cannot justify, since an item with no inferential connections has no epistemic content and can serve as no reason. The present thesis argues that the given cannot be self-standing as a content: whatever justificatory status the foundationalist claims for it, its

determinacy is relational, fixed by contrast with what it is not, so the item is given only as one of two and is never innocent about what it is given as. The constraint bites even though every foundationalist calls her given determinate, because "determinate" here means one of two: a given that is one of two is given with its contrast, so no given is given alone, and the direct contact the acquaintance theorist prizes is contact with something already distinguished. The two diagnoses concern different things, justification and determinacy; the structural one is prior, since Sellars's richer condition can arise only where the minimal one is met. What the priority buys is a constraint that survives the retreats the epistemic diagnosis leaves open. The constraint binds: each retreat presents its item as determinate, and "determinate" means one of two, which is the thesis, so the foundationalist's own word commits her to the relational character her position was built to deny. Because structural difference is category-prior (§2.1), the foundationalist gains no exemption by relocating the given to a non-inferential, non-conceptual, or non-linguistic domain, since the relocated item must still be one of two. Structural difference is tied to none of these domains and presupposed by all of them.

3.3 McDowell, non-conceptualism, and the acquaintance retreat

McDowell (1994) argued that perceptual experience must be conceptually structured to serve as a rational constraint on belief. The non-conceptualists (Dreyfus, 2005; Hanna, 2008) denied this, while Travis (2004) denied the shared premise that perception carries representational content at all. Both sides assumed that the critical question is whether perceptual content is conceptual or non-conceptual.

The dependence thesis suggests both have been asking the wrong question, since the prior question is whether content involves contrast at all. If the experience distinguishes what is perceived from at least one alternative, the content is a diff, and the minimum structural condition for epistemic function is met. Whether the diff is conceptual is therefore a further question about the kind of content, subordinate to the condition for content.

The priority claim can be stated in full, since both sides presuppose contrast. McDowell's concepts must be determinately distinguishable from one another, because a concept indistinguishable from every other concept is no concept; Evans's (1982) generality constraint records the point for conceptual content, since a thinker who can think that *a* is *F* must be able to think that *a* is *G* and that *b* is *F*, a contrast in both places. The non-conceptualist's candidate contents — acquaintance relations, non-conceptual intuitions, sensory availabilities — must likewise be determinate, which requires distinguishing what is perceived from what is not.

The contrast question presupposes no conceptuality, since a state can be one way and exclude another without that contrast being conceptually articulated, as the blind-field case shows. This asymmetry of presupposition is what makes contrast the deeper condition, because the debate about the kind of content cannot begin until the condition for content is met.

Two consequences follow. First, the reframing vindicates what is right in both camps. McDowell is right that perceptual content must be structured, since the required structure is contrastive whether or not it is conceptual. The non-conceptualists are right that non-conceptual experience can carry content, provided it involves contrast. An experience of pure undifferentiated sensation — a Jamesian blooming, buzzing confusion without internal contrast — therefore fails to qualify as content of any kind.

Second, the reframing reaches the acquaintance view — a view that never posited contrast-free content, so what follows is a constraint the view must meet. Grant Campbell, for argument's sake, that perception is a relation to objects instead of a representation of them. The perceptual relation, if it is to provide content — if seeing a red object is to differ epistemically from seeing a blue one — must still involve a distinction, since acquaintance without contrast is acquaintance with nothing determinate. Travis faces the same constraint from another direction, because if perception is "silent", its epistemic relevance is that it makes objects available for thought, and availability is itself contrastive: an object is available when distinguished from the

background, from other objects, from its absence. Even on the strongest anti-representationalist view, therefore, the thesis identifies a condition perception must meet to play any epistemic role.

3.4 The space of reasons as a space of differences

The thesis also illuminates the internal structure of the space of reasons. Every inferential relation Brandom analyses — entailment, incompatibility, evidential support — operates on a distinction between its relata. Remove the distinctions and the relations collapse, because nothing remains for inference to relate. The dependence thesis thereby provides inferentialism with something it does not supply for itself: an account of what makes the space of reasons possible. Brandom analyses the internal structure of the space; the thesis identifies the precondition for its existence, the availability of at least one distinction. The two accounts complement one another.

4 Différance and the Priority of Difference

The structural dependence thesis has a significant precedent in the continental tradition; it deserves more than a footnote. Derrida's (1968) différance is explicitly a claim about the priority of difference. Drawing on Saussure, Derrida argued that meaning is constituted by the play of differences and deferrals among signs, that the subject "is not present, nor above all present to itself before différance", and that différance is "older" than Heidegger's ontological difference. The convergence with the present thesis is substantial, since both hold that difference precedes presence, precedes the subject, and constitutes meaning. On this central point, Derrida was right.

The divergence concerns what follows. Derrida refuses to treat différance as a ground or structural condition from which consequences can be derived, since it "governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority". For Derrida, treating difference as a foundation would reinstate the metaphysics of presence, turning difference into a new "ground" functioning like the presence-concepts

— substance, essence, God, reason — that Western metaphysics has always privileged.

The thesis parts company at this very point; the reason is that difference belongs to a different structural category from the presence-concepts. A presence-concept grounds by self-sufficiency, positing a self-standing entity fully present to itself, occupying a position within the categorical structure it grounds: substance grounding attributes, essence grounding existence. The diff grounds by constitutive dependence, since it is not a self-sufficient item but always one of two, defined by contrast, and, being category-prior (§2.1), it belongs to no categorical structure. It is the condition that makes categorical structure possible. Identifying it therefore installs no new self-present ground, because the Derridean concern targets grounds of the first type and the diff is a ground of the second.

Gasché's infrastructures and the functional reading. Gasché (1986) provides the most rigorous analytic reconstruction of Derrida's project: the quasi-transcendentals — différance, trace, supplément — are "infrastructures", conditions that make conceptual opposition possible without being capturable within any opposition. The diff differs from them in being thematisable, since it can be defined, its properties stated, and consequences derived; and it passes Gasché's own test for the reinstatement of presence, whether the thematised condition functions as a self-sufficient origin fully present to itself, because its articulation reveals it to be constitutively non-self-sufficient. A Derridean will answer that this meets the wrong criterion. In "Structure, Sign and Play" (Derrida, 1978) the target extends beyond self-present origins as a metaphysical kind to whatever occupies the position of centre, the element that governs the whole structure while escaping the play it governs. On this functional reading relationality earns no exemption, since what matters is the role, and the diff's role in this book is total. It grounds content here and partitions reality in Chapter 3. It terminates grounding in Chapter 4. It bounds time in Chapter 5. And Chapter 1 has shown that its denial self-defeats in every mode of holding, which, from the Derridean's chair, makes it the purest available

specimen of the incontestable governing term deconstruction exists to interrogate.

The audit invited. Concede the functional description in full: the diff is a centre, openly and by design. What follows concerns the method and not the label. Deconstruction works as a procedure, exposing the centre's disavowed dependence on what it excludes — speech deconstructed through the demoted writing it relies on, presence through the excluded absence that constitutes it. Merely having a centre therefore supplies no target, since the procedure needs two materials: a gap between the centre's official self-sufficiency and its actual dependence, and a suppressed other on which the dependence can be demonstrated.

Applied to the diff, the audit returns empty on both counts. There is no disavowed dependence, because the diff's dependence is total and declared: relationality is its definition, and a method that works by opening the crack between a term's official story and its real one finds no crack where the official story is dependence itself.

And there is no suppressed other, because the diff's opposite — equality, the undifferentiated — is enthroned, never demoted: the second member of an exhaustive partition (Chapter 3), the terminus of grounding (Chapter 4), the boundary of time (Chapter 5), and, by the concession of Chapter 1 (§6.4), a coherent condition at which the diff's own vindication law holds only vacuously and its denial is true unheld. A centre that certifies the coherence of its own absence, assigns that absence half the ontology, and concedes conditions at which its denial holds has therefore already performed on itself the operation deconstruction would perform on it.

What survives of the challenge is a vigilance requirement the book accepts: the governing term's exemption from contest must be earned by demonstration, never smuggled by rhetoric, and Chapter 1's occupancy test is the receipt. Where différance was deliberately kept unstable, neither a word nor a concept, so as never to become a centre, the diff takes the opposite wager: full thematisation, full centrality, openly declared, with the deconstructive audit invited and returning

empty. The disagreement that remains is therefore clean — whether such an audit can ever return empty — and that is the exhaustiveness question.

A further reason the Derridean refusal is not compelled by the priority of difference generalises the audit's second count. The deconstructive strategy requires that the conceptual space around the proposed foundation be open, so that something always lies outside it, something on which the foundation turns out to depend.

Chapter 3 argues that the diversity/equality partition is exhaustive: any state is either differentiated or undifferentiated, and no third possibility exists. If this is correct, the space around difference is closed, since the only alternative to diversity is equality, which is no rival concept on which diversity secretly depends but the condition defined by diversity's absence. The deconstructive reversal requires a third term the binary has suppressed, and the exhaustiveness of the partition entails that no such term exists.

The counter-argument to Derrida is therefore conditional on the exhaustiveness claim on both readings of the deconstructive target — the presence reading answered by the diff's relationality, the functional reading answered by the audit — and the conditionality should be stated plainly: if a third condition exists that is neither diversity nor equality, Derrida's refusal regains its force. The present chapter stakes the claim; the next provides the defence.

The deconstructionist's rejoinder should be voiced before the section closes. Derrida would say that deriving determinate philosophical consequences from différance is the very relapse his method exists to prevent, since différance is no concept to build on but the condition that destabilises every building, so a framework converting it into a foundational premise has re-metaphysicalised what was designed to resist metaphysics.

The answer is that the charge assumes what the self-vindication result denies: that the priority of difference can be left without consequences. A différance that destabilised every determinate claim would destabilise the claim of destabilisation, which is itself

determinate, contrastive, and grid-bound, and the exhibitive closure of Chapter 7 (§4.1) states the cost of this move, since closure cannot be escaped by performance. Derrida's own texts are determinate texts, and their deferrals are particular deferrals, distinguished from the assertions they defer.

The framework therefore does not tame différance by ignoring its instability. It observes that the instability is itself structured, and structured instability is diversity under another name. What separates the two projects, in the end, is a decision about consequences: Derrida declines to draw them on methodological principle, while the present account holds the declining to be one more determinate move within the space it purports to suspend.

5 From Epistemic to Ontological Diversity

The structural dependence thesis operates at the level of content. A critic might concede it while insisting that the diversity so established is merely representational, a feature of how thought is structured. Chapter 1 (§5.3) placed ontological diversity at the top tier on two self-vindicating premises and closed four retreats. This section develops one of the closures, the structural asymmetry, from within the thesis itself, adding what the category-priority of §2.1 contributes to it.

For most predicates the idealist retreat is stable, because representing a property does not require instantiating it: a flat retinal image can represent a three-dimensional scene, so the idealist can hold that mind-independent reality lacks extension while the mind represents the world as extended. For difference the retreat collapses, because the representation of difference must itself be a case of difference. Having really distinct representations — "reality is undifferentiated" alongside "my conceptual scheme imposes difference" — is having difference. The mind cannot represent determinately without its states really differing from one another, because determinate representation requires the content to exclude some alternative (§2.1), and exclusion is a distinction among the mind's own states. For this predicate, therefore, the gap between representing and instantiating closes.

The category-priority of structural difference (§2.1) deepens the asymmetry. The idealist's attempt to confine diversity to the representational domain presupposes that structural difference is the kind of thing that can be located in one domain while absent from another. Structural difference is instead the condition obtaining wherever any state is one way and excludes another, regardless of domain, so a mind whose states really differ has structural difference, which loses no reality by being located in the mind.

Either mind-independent reality contains at least one difference, or it does not. If it does, ontological diversity is established directly. If it does not, so that all diversity lives in the mind, then the mind itself must contain real diversity, because a mind whose states did not really differ would have no distinct representations, no determinate beliefs, and no individuated contents. And since the mind belongs to reality, its internal diversity is ontological diversity. On neither horn, therefore, is diversity merely representational. Difference is real.

The convergence of Chapter 1's two premises and four closures with the development here secures the ontological conclusion: self-vindicating at its foundation, where Chapter 1's occurrence premise operates and needs nothing this chapter supplies, and established in the present development, which is the tier this chapter claims for it.

Where the argument stands: the diff has been defined, the structural dependence of content on contrast confirmed across rival theories, and the determination dilemma stated (§2); the given's dependence has been explained structurally (§3); the priority of difference has been separated from Derrida's (§4); and the step from epistemic to ontological diversity has been taken (§5). What follows meets the objections.

6 Objections and Replies

6.1 The triviality objection

Objection. The claim that content requires contrast is old news. Saussure said it for language. Sellars turned it against the given.

Brandom built a semantics on it. The "structural dependence thesis" relabels a widely shared observation.

Reply. The objection is partly right, since the observation is familiar and the chapter claims otherwise nowhere. The novelty lies in the analysis built on it, which does four things the observation alone does not.

First, the diff fills a gap. Brandom has "commitment" and "entitlement" and no minimum structural unit of content; Saussure has "sign" and treats it as a signifier/signified complex; Sellars has no term for the minimum contrastive element. The structural/epistemic distinction (§2.1) then makes the unit's framework-independence explicit. Second, the structural explanation of the given's dependence — a diff without a partner is no content — is prior to Sellars's and constrains the acquaintance retreat (§3.3), which his does not reach.

Third, the cross-theoretical convergence is assembled here as it has not been assembled before, across inferentialism, structuralism, and representationalism at once, and as structural and not terminological, with its contribution entered at the strength §2.2 assigns it: the survey corroborates and does not prove, each framework is cited for what it presupposes, with the thesis carried by the dilemma of §2.4. Fourth, the clarification of structural difference's category-priority (§2.1) is new; it is what enables the structural asymmetry argument of §5, which the bare observation does not yield.

6.2 The Sellarsian sufficiency objection

Objection. Sellars's own argument suffices to defeat the given, and the foundationalist retreats the chapter blocks have been answered by Sellarsians (deVries, 2005; O'Shea, 2007). The dependence thesis therefore adds nothing the inferentialist tradition cannot provide.

Reply. The two arguments do different work. Sellars's diagnosis depends on the claim that content requires inferential relations, so a philosopher who holds that some content is non-inferential can resist it while granting everything else. The dependence thesis rests on the weaker claim that content requires contrast, which every inferential

relation presupposes while the converse fails (§§2.1, 3.2), so it constrains the positions that resist Sellars: where the foundationalist posits non-inferential content, the thesis grants the possibility and fixes its shape, since the content must be one of two, contrastive and so relational, and can be given only as such. The blind-field case illustrates: the registering system has structural difference without inferential structure, so Sellars's argument finds nothing to diagnose there, while the dependence thesis still constrains it. The Sellarsian tradition has answered Campbell, Travis, and Hanna within its inferentialist framework (deVries, 2005; O'Shea, 2007). The present constraint depends on no inferentialism, so it remains available to philosophers who stay agnostic about whether all content is inferentially structured.

6.3 The use-theory objection

Objection. The thesis claims that contrast precedes language — that the grid of diffs is ontologically prior to the linguistic practices expressing it. The later Wittgenstein (1953) argued that meaning is constituted by use: a word means what it does in a language game. No pre-linguistic diffs wait around to be labelled. The thesis reifies a structural feature of description into a metaphysical feature of reality.

Reply. The objection identifies the chapter's most consequential commitment relative to the dominant position in post-Wittgensteinian philosophy of language, the use-theory in its several forms: Wittgenstein's language games, Horwich's (1998) deflationary account, the pragmatist tradition. The thesis does challenge it, while the challenge is more limited and more defensible than the objection suggests, since it claims only that the minimal structural condition for content, contrast, precedes any particular linguistic practice that deploys it.

Fully articulated semantic content may well be constituted by use, since the meaning of "red" need not be fixed before anyone uses the word. Even on the use-theory, though, the moves in a language game must be distinguishable from one another, because a game in which no move differs from any other has ceased to be a language game.

Wittgenstein's own rule-following considerations (PI §§185–242) reinforce the point, since the problem arises because a rule must distinguish correct from incorrect applications; that distinction is a diff. Kripke's (1982) meaning-sceptical paradox is therefore a problem about which diffs a rule selects, and not about whether diffs are required, because even the sceptic presupposes a difference between following a rule and violating it, or no sceptical problem can be stated.

The attribution objection. A different Wittgensteinian pressure targets the blind-field case itself; it deserves separate treatment. The critic makes an attribution point: the vocabulary in which the case was introduced, "registers" and "detects", is our vocabulary, applied from within our explanatory practices, and nothing about the physical system wears "registering" on its sleeve, so a case described in practice-laden terms cannot establish contrast prior to practice.

The objection is correct about the vocabulary and powerless against the case, because the case was built (§2.1) on a foundation the vocabulary merely glosses: the system's stimulated state and its unstimulated state are non-identical physical states. Ask whether that non-identity is a product of descriptive practice. To answer yes is to hold that before language, light-struck photosensitive chemistry was indistinguishable from unstruck — that photography, vision, and photosynthesis owe their workings to grammar. No use-theorist holds this, since the use-theory is a theory of meaning, and converting it into the theory that physical states owe their non-identity to practice is an overreach its own proponents would refuse. Even Kripke's sceptic doubts which function past usage determines, and not whether the physical tokens of that usage were distinct from one another.

So grant the attribution point in full: which transitions we call detections is settled by our practices, and a different practice might carve the system differently. But every carving carves something. Every rival description distributes over physically non-identical states, where the non-identity is what the rival descriptions are descriptions of. The objection therefore relocates the vocabulary while the contrast stays where it was — the structure Chapter 1 (§6.3) found in the nominalist's deflationism.

Brandom (2000) provides a productive final engagement, occupying as he does the intersection of inferentialism and pragmatism. Brandom argues that the norms governing discursive practice are implicit in the practice itself, made explicit through the giving and asking for reasons. The thesis is compatible with this pragmatism about norms while insisting on a structural precondition for the practice: the availability of distinguishable moves, which is itself no norm or rule.

That availability is what must be in place before norm-governed practice can begin, as the analysis of material incompatibility (§2.2) confirmed from inside Brandom's own semantics. The priority at stake is therefore structural and not Platonic, since you cannot have use without distinguishable users, utterances, and contexts, so these distinctions are what make use possible, and never its products. The use-theorist remains free to hold that everything above this level — the richness of meaning, the texture of language games, the normative structure of practice — is constituted by use. The thesis claims only the floor, never the building.

7 Conclusion

The chapter yields three results.

The structural dependence of content on contrast. Content is constitutively contrastive: any content is a diff — one of two distinguishable items, not self-standing — secured by the determination dilemma's forced choice (§2.4) and corroborated across inferentialist, structuralist, and representationalist theories (§2.2). The structural/epistemic distinction identifies the level at which the thesis operates: structural difference is the contrastive condition itself, wherever difference obtains, prior to any category of mind or reality.

The myth of the given. The thesis explains why the given cannot be self-standing as a content, a diagnosis prior to Sellars's and independent of it: it constrains the acquaintance-based, relational, and non-conceptual retreats his argument leaves open, since each must still present its item as one of two; it reframes the McDowell/non-conceptualist debate around contrast.

The ontological standing of difference. For the difference predicate specifically, representing difference requires instantiating it — an asymmetry that fails for predicates in general — so the idealist's attempt to confine diversity to the representational domain is structurally misconceived. Combined with Chapter 1's two premises and four closures, the conclusion is placed beyond coherent resistance. The departure from Derrida, treating difference as a structural condition from which consequences can be derived, is staked here, conditional on the exhaustiveness of the diversity/equality partition, which the next chapter defends.

If at least one difference obtains in reality, a further question presses. Does the presence or absence of contrast exhaust the space of metaphysical possibility? Could there be a state that neither has nor lacks distinction — a state escaping the partition altogether? Six major traditions have proposed candidates: Deleuze's difference-in-itself, Hegel's dialectical synthesis, paraconsistent dialetheias, Whitehead's process ontology, the apophatic traditions of negative theology, and ontic structural realism. Chapter 3 tests the partition against all six.

Grades and Dependencies

1. Grades. All three results are graded *established*. The structural dependence thesis is established with its content-level sense anchored: distinguishability is certified by composition from diffs, with assertion practice entering as evidence only (§2.4). The thesis is deliberately not promoted above *established*: its denial instantiates an instance of the thesis, not its universal form, so it is not self-vindicating, and Chapter 1's vindication law inherits this tier (Ch. 1, note 1). The dilemma of §2.4 presupposes no result of Chapter 1; only §5 draws on the occurrence premise, so the tier the vindication law inherits from this chapter is never returned to it, and no circle arises. The Premise Register records the full dependency chain.

2. Where the grain concession is used. Three later passages lean on structural individuation, and the coarse-grained concession must be met at each. The quality-space argument of Chapter 6 (§3.3) needs only a space with more than one position, which both grains supply. The content-level truthmaker

formulation (Chapter 10, §4.2) and its use against infallibility (Chapter 17, §5.2) need more — a plurality of necessary contents — which the fine-grained developments supply and the coarse semantics declines. Those passages accordingly carry a grain condition, recorded where each is made, and each retains a fallback that holds on either grain: the containment fork of Chapter 10 (§3.2). The forced choice survives on either grain; the grain fixes only how densely the space of contents is populated.

3. **A second lodging point.** Beside the forced choice, a challenger who would widen the content-level sense back to bare assertibility owes an account of why the feeling of understanding certifies composition — the question Chapter 14 (§3.6) makes concrete when it audits the value-vocabulary under the anchoring requirement.

4. **What the necessity supplies.** Nothing the book uses needs more than the necessity the dilemma forces. The zero-complexity constraint (Chapter 6, §6.5) runs on it. The biconditional and its closure (Chapter 7) run on it. The trilemma of Chapter 14 (§3.5) runs on it. The identification of consciousness with detected distinction (Chapter 13, §2.3) runs on it through the zero-complexity constraint. The teleosemantic residue of §2.2 is named and left open at Chapter 14 (§2.2). The essence-idiom result of §2.4 is used at Chapter 14 (§3.5).

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