CHAPTER 7

The Grid of Meaning

Think of a passage of music that moves you in a way no words reach. The feeling seems to mean something. Yet it does not seem to be a matter of one thing set against another. Whole traditions rest on cases of this shape. Immanuel Kant held that things as they are in themselves lie outside what we can know.

Chapter 2 showed that any definite content is a diff. A diff is the book's name for a unit of meaning fixed by its contrast with an alternative: one of two. Is there anything meaningful that is not a diff?

The chapter argues that there is nothing of the kind. Every attempt to show otherwise defeats itself, because pointing beyond meaning is itself a contrast. The chapter calls the whole collection of contrasts the grid.

Meaning and contrast, both ways

The central claim runs in both directions: meaningful if and only if a diff.

One direction is the easier. Every diff is meaningful. A unit fixed by contrast is one way and no other, and that definiteness is its meaning.

The other direction is the strong one. Everything meaningful is a diff. Suppose something carried meaning while contrasting with nothing. It would exclude no alternative, so it would carry no information. Such an item is no content at all.

The chapter then runs the argument the other way round. To identify anything is to tell it apart from something else. Even calling an item beyond meaning marks it off from what lies within.

Against Chapter 2's background, this can look true by the meanings of the words. Chapter 2 secured the claim, so the work here lies elsewhere. The contribution is what the claim shuts off: the six hard cases below, and the closure argument.

Five theories of meaning point the same way, which the chapter says corroborates and does not prove. Defenders of at least two of the five would reject this use of them.

Six hard cases

Six phenomena in the literature look like counterexamples. Three claim content beyond contrast, and three are the cases readers reach for.

Mystical reports describe states beyond all distinction. A state that is felt and remembered is one way and no other, even when no words fit it. A state with no

internal distinction at all is the boundary of experience, as Chapter 6 argued, and no form of it.

A quale, such as the redness of red, might seem a simple and unanalysable quality. Remove all chromatic contrast, though, and what is left is the blind field, where nothing is seen.

Martin Heidegger held that mood discloses the world before any definite thought, and that anxiety discloses it as a whole. Anxiety differs from boredom, the chapter replies. The contrast has moved up a level, between an anxious world and a world that is not. A harder Heidegger case, the disclosure of nothing at all, is moved to Appendix B and not dismissed.

The three checks go quickly. Ned Block holds that experience overflows what the subject can report, which the chapter grants, while peripheral red is no peripheral blue. The empirical detail is left to Chapter 13. Bertrand Russell’s acquaintance with a simple quality needs no inference, and the chapter grants that while keeping the contrast. Tim Bayne finds in consciousness a unity beyond its parts, and a unified field differs from a scattered one.

Three grids, and three ways a thought can fail

The claim generates three collections, nested inside one another. The ontological grid holds every real distinction, registered or not. The epistemological grid holds every diff, meaning every content some mind has grasped. The linguistic grid holds the labels. Every label names a diff, and every diff is a real event. Not every diff has a label, and not every distinction has been registered.

The nesting holds firmly at one level and loosely at another. Take the thinking itself, the event of registering. There it never fails, because a thought is a real occurrence. Take what the thinking says, and it can fail. The old theory that burning releases phlogiston was a thought in good standing, and no distinction in the world answers to it. That gap is what makes error possible.

Language is the test, and here the chapter corrects itself. For natural distinctions, a label does not create what it names. Money and checkmate are harder, since they exist because of declaring acts, as John Searle argued. So the doctrine that a new word never creates a new distinction is false as stated. What survives is weaker and is enough: a label cannot attach to nothing.

Three grids give three places to fail. There may be no distinctions at all. Registration may lag, leaving a placeholder for something true and undiscovered. Positing may overshoot, as “round square” does.

The closure of the grid

The closure argument has two premises. Every cognitive act is meaningful: assertion, denial, questioning, doubt, and even deliberate silence, which sets speaking against not speaking. Everything meaningful is a diff. So every

cognitive act is a diff, and none gets out. Assert that something lies beyond all contrasts, and the assertion is one more contrast.

The chapter marks a careful difference here. Kant's limits are limits of our own minds. This limit comes from what meaning is, so it holds for any mind that means anything. Kant leaves room for things with properties we cannot know. On this argument there is no such region, only the point where the conditions for meaning run out. It grants the Kantian a great deal. Reality may hold distinctions no mind ever registers, and they may stay unregistered forever. That is most of what one sort of Kantian wanted.

Ludwig Wittgenstein held that something can be shown and not said. Whatever is shown, the chapter answers, is shown as one thing and no other. That meets the traditional reading of him. On the resolute reading of Cora Diamond and James Conant, the early Wittgenstein points at no hidden content. So read, he is the closure's ally, and is owed only the mechanism.

Thomas Nagel argued that there is something it is like to be a bat that no human mind can know. That case fixes the scope. The closure says only that nothing meaningful lies permanently beyond all possible grids. The bat's experience is a set of contrasts in the bat's grid and outside your own.

Nagel also wanted a view from nowhere, a standpoint above all perspectives. The closure supplies a feature shared by every perspective. The objectivity Nagel was after was about the world itself, and the closure does not supply it.

One result follows for doubt. To doubt something is to hold it apart from an alternative, and holding apart is a difference. A sceptic can suspend judgement on any particular claim. She cannot coherently extend that suspension to the existence of difference, because suspending instantiates it. This applies Chapter 1's result, with doubt in the place of denial.

The objections the chapter answers

The first objection is that the chapter breaks its own rule, since it describes a state with no distinctions in it. Describing a boundary is one thing and crossing it is another, the chapter replies. Graham Priest, who holds that some limits of thought are contradictory, presses a sharper version with a schema the chapter accepts. It denies one condition of that schema. Every attempt to specify a meaning outside the grid arrives inside it.

The second objection comes from dialetheism, the view that some contradictions are true. If it is right, perhaps difference both exists and does not. Even a true contradiction is a meaning, the chapter replies, and so a contrast. The denial instantiates what it denies whether or not it is true, and dialetheism itself is left standing.

The third objection concerns what resists words, such as the feel of music. The chapter grants that many states have no adequate label, and that costs the

claim nothing. Having no contrast is a different matter, and that collapses into the boundary where meaning runs out.

What the chapter claims

The chapter yields three results, and all are graded *established*, the rung below the book's top mark.

The first is the two-way claim that the meaningful and the contrasts are one domain.

The second is the architecture of three grids, and it carries a condition. Its first containment is stated as a requirement on language, which Chapter 14 later uses as an anchor. A vocabulary whose words are defined only by each other must touch a grasped contrast somewhere or contribute nothing. The taxonomy of failed thought inherits this grade and adds nothing of its own.

The third is the closure, in two forms of different strength. The exhibitive closure says that no meaning can be put forward without being a contrast. Every attempt to refute it supplies the refutation, which makes the mechanism *self-vindicating* in form. The chapter refuses to grade it that way. The argument runs through Chapter 2's thesis, and no result is more secure than a premise it uses. That is its condition. The ontic closure is stronger: no meaning outside the grid exists at all, whether or not anyone could put it forward. It is *established* too, and takes the two-way claim as a further premise. Nothing later in the book uses it, which the chapter says an auditor should notice.

The floor beneath doubt is *established* as well.

Chapter 8 takes up a word that sits inside the grid. The usual definition of infinity, "without limits", names two opposite conditions at once, and Chapter 8 pulls them apart.