CHAPTER 8

The Original Illusion

Try to picture nothing at all. Form the picture before reading on.

Now look at what you made. Almost certainly it was dark, empty space. Darkness is something: a visual experience, a contrast your eyes register. Empty space is something too, with positions, a here and a there. Asked for nothing, your mind handed you a thin something. This chapter is about that swap. Why it happens, why you cannot catch it happening, and what it has cost.

The state you were reaching for already has a name in this book. Chapter 3 argued that whatever obtains is either differentiated or not. The book calls the first diversity and the second equality. Chapter 4 argued that the hierarchy of grounding, which is what depends on what, ends in equality if it ends at all. Chapter 5 argued the same of any bounded run of moments. One state stands at the end of both roads, and the book calls it the terminus.

The chapter will show that a mind built from distinctions cannot picture that state. It always puts a disguised version of diversity in its place. Language meets the terminus under three names, and the names are numbers: zero, one and infinity.

Three names, and one that does not fit

“Nothing” sets the terminus against being. “The One” sets it against manyness. “The infinite” sets it against limit. The chapter examines each name separately, and they do not stand to the terminus in the same way.

Take the sentence “there might have been nothing”. It can mean two things. On the first reading, not even an undifferentiated state obtains. That is outright non-existence, which is no state at all. Chapter 4 argued that it excludes itself, since its obtaining would contradict its own definition. On the second reading a featureless condition does obtain. That condition is the terminus, and the terminus is being. So the word forks, and only one prong has any content.

The second name shares a word with physics. When a Neoplatonist says the One is beyond all multiplicity, the sense is old: one without internal manyness. Such a state has no internal distinctions, so it is the terminus, and the chapter calls this an identity and no interpretation. The word also belongs to physics, where a singular point is one at which a formalism’s resources give out. On this second address the singularity holds no unity and no priority. It is an edge of the differentiated, and no name of the terminus at all.

The third name is the one the chapter calls most dangerous. Said of the natural numbers, “infinite” means endless structure, each number distinct from the last. Said of God by theologians who speak of God only by denial, it means a being beyond every category. A determination is a limit, since to be this is to fail to be that. So a state with no determination inside it is without limits in the

strict sense. One definition, “without limits”, covers both conditions, and no context sorts them.

Why the picture always fails

Darkness is the wrong model, because darkness needs a visual system registering light against its absence. A wholly undifferentiated state offers nothing at all to detect.

The right model is one you own already. Chapter 6 calls it visual silence: the blind field, the region behind your head. It is neither bright nor dark, because it is not presented to you at all. You cannot picture it. You can find it. Keep your eyes forward and raise one hand in front of you. Move it slowly out past your shoulder. The hand never enters a dark region. It never crosses a visible edge either, since a seen edge would be one more contrast. At some point it is simply no longer seen.

Finding it teaches what no image can: absence without darkness and without a boundary.

The field models the terminus and is no specimen of it. The world behind your head stays as differentiated as everything else. Turn round and the field is gone.

The other names fail in the same manner. Picture the singularity and you get a dot, which has a place, an edge and surroundings. Picture the infinite and you get an endless void, which has positions and distances throughout.

Every image projects diversity onto a state defined by diversity’s absence. It does this in one of two directions: an expanse left over, or everything crowded into a point. You can suppose that a state with no internal distinction obtains. You cannot imagine it, because every mental image has structure inside it. The terminus is shown unimageable, and nothing follows about whether it is possible.

You cannot catch the swap from inside, because you have no undifferentiated image to compare the substitute against. Henri Bergson, who called absolute nothingness a pseudo-idea, reached the same place. He blamed an intellect built for action. The chapter puts the failure in the make-up of content instead, so the swap is compulsory for any mind whatever. It also returns what Bergson discarded. The substitute image is wrong about its label, and it still answers to a real condition.

Two kinds of infinity

Infinite diversity is endless extension that keeps its inner structure, made of limited steps and with no outer bound.

Infinite equality is the terminus under the third name. Limits are absent inside it as well as outside: no parts, no boundaries, no identities. Calling it very large misdescribes it, since the distinctions that make size possible do not obtain

there. Both conditions satisfy “without limits” in full, in opposite ways, and neither is a feeble version of the other.

Chapter 6’s zero-complexity constraint says that no property needing distinction can characterise a state with none. It bites at infinite equality and not at infinite diversity. So when a tradition calls God infinitely intelligent, the chapter asks which infinity is meant. Thomas Aquinas, who held both that God has every perfection and that God is absolutely simple, is the chapter’s clearest case. The first claim seems to need inner richness, and the second forbids it. Aquinas did not combine them carelessly. He named a third sense instead: full determinacy with no composition. The chapter’s charge is that this is no third option. It also admits that the charge borrows a premise from Chapter 10, that grounding many perfections needs matching inner structure. Until Chapter 10 earns that premise, the charge stays diagnostic.

The objections the chapter answers

The first objection is that the two infinities are trivial, since Chapter 3’s division yields them at once. The chapter grants the entailment and locates its contribution elsewhere. A. W. Moore’s history of infinity cuts the word into a mathematical and a metaphysical cluster, and the metaphysical cluster spans the division. Aquinas cuts it into privative and formal infinity. Neither cut runs along the line.

The second objection is that grouping the three names assumes the shared reference it ought to prove. The chapter answers from the order of its own argument, where each identity is argued on its own, and the third name is never claimed to name one thing.

The third comes from negative theology, which holds that God is beyond every category, the division between diversity and equality included. The chapter replies that the division is exhaustive. Passing beyond it would need a third state, and Chapter 3 forecloses that. So to be beyond all categories is to sit at infinite equality.

What the chapter claims

Four of the chapter’s results are graded *established*, the rung below the book’s top mark. That grade means a result follows from premises the book defends, so a challenger has to reject one of those premises. The four are the classification of the three names with its asymmetry, the explanation of why the terminus cannot be pictured, the cut between the two infinities, and the taking apart of the old question why there is anything at all. That last result restates work Chapters 4 and 5 had already done. The chapter adds the observation that the slip on the word is the illusion at work.

Two results are graded *proposed*, the lowest of the book’s four marks, which means each is offered as revisable. One is the claim that unity-language causes the dot picture, and nothing later in the book rests on it. The other is a structural reading of the cosmological singularity, on which the equations give

out because the state lacks the distinctions they work on. It is offered as a suggestion about structure and no claim about physics. The chapter records two debts. One is a refutation condition: a cosmology describing an earlier state in the same terms. The other concerns singularities that stay well behaved by every measure. They are singular only because nothing extends past them. If all that is missing there is the point itself, the reading unifies nothing beneath the physics.

Five of the six results carry a condition inherited from Chapter 4. They hold only if the hierarchy of grounding terminates, and they leave open whether equality is possible at all. The two-infinities cut is free of that one. A second condition runs under every result here. Chapter 3 holds that a lack confers no inner articulation. Reject that premise and equality gains a feature, and the equality cell empties.

The chapter concedes much. Its two applications support no later result. And the something-from-nothing question yields disambiguation and nothing more, with one cost named: on one branch, the obtaining of a bounded series of moments stays a brute fact.

Chapter 9 turns to the tradition this error feeds, and argues that creation from nothing is structurally incoherent.