CHAPTER 1

The Self-Vindication of Difference

Think, as seriously as you can: nothing is different from anything else. No two things differ at all.

Now look at what just happened. You thought something in particular. Your thought ruled out one kind of world and pointed at another. To do that it had to stand apart from the opposite thought, and from thinking nothing at all.

Standing apart from something is a difference. So in denying that differences exist, you made one.

Chapter 1 argues that the denial defeats itself, by a mechanism the existing lists of self-defeat leave unnamed. What this proves is small: at least one difference really exists. The chapter calls it a floor, and says that “everything else in this book is built on that floor”.

Four ways an idea can trip over itself

Self-defeat is old news in philosophy. The chapter wants a tidy list, so it can show its own way is missing.

First, shout the words “I am not shouting”. The sentence could easily be true; you ruined it by yelling. John Passmore called this the pragmatic form: the act wrecks it, and the idea is fine.

Second, think silently “I do not exist”. Whoever holds that thought exists, because holding a thought takes a thinker. J. L. Mackie called this the operational form: the thinker sinks it.

Third, “there are no truths”. If that is true, it is one of the truths it denies. The sentence folds up on its own.

Fourth, Aristotle defended the rule that a thing cannot both be so and not be so. His move was to make the doubter say something with a definite meaning. The moment she does, she has used the rule she attacks. Luca Castagnoli reads old arguments like this as working on the person in the room: beat the doubter, and the idea survives.

Sort those four by what kills the idea and you get three groups. In the first two the killer is something about the person, in the third the sentence’s shape, in the fourth a rule of debate.

That leaves a gap. What if the killer is none of those three, and it makes no difference whether you shout the idea or merely wonder about it? The chapter’s own argument fills that gap, and names it self-vindication.

A word is self-vindicating when denying it, in any mind, has to create the very thing it describes. The clearest case is “contains at least one difference”. The

chapter claims one mechanism, shared by a tight family of words: close relatives such as “contains at least one relation”, and also “occurs”.

The argument runs in three steps. “No difference exists” is a definite thought. Any definite thought can be told apart from some other. Two things you can tell apart are two things. So the thought makes a difference while denying that any exist. Everything hangs on the middle step.

Why every thought has to rule something out

Picture a word in a language you have never learned. It tells you nothing and rules nothing out.

The chapter says this is what having a meaning is. To mean something is to rule something out, and one thing is enough. A thought that ruled out nothing would not be vague or strange. It would be no thought.

That is a claim about meaning in general, and says nothing about whether the world has differences. But point it at this one thought. “No difference exists” has to be tellable apart from its denial, or it says nothing.

Thinkers who otherwise disagree agree here. Robert Brandom says a concept’s meaning lies in what it lets you infer, so a concept with no connections carries nothing.

Does this only tell us about minds?

Some philosophers work out what reality must be like from what thinking requires. In 1968 Barry Stroud found the weak spot. Swap the strong claim, that something must be true, for a weaker one, that we have to believe it. Now the argument tells you about human minds and nothing else.

The chapter answers twice. It never built the bridge Stroud attacks, since thinking a thought is already something happening. And make the swap anyway: a belief is a definite thing with a definite content, so you have made another difference. It beats the swap at the level of what thoughts mean. Whether those differences are out in the world is the next question.

From a thought to the world

That step rests on two claims, and each does the self-defeating trick itself.

The first is that whatever happens is part of what is going on. Suppose someone denies it. Her denial happened, so something happened. Or it never happened, so nothing has been denied. Her escape route is to say the denial happens without really happening. That splits the world in two: things that happen, and things that happen and are also real. Either way the escape is gone.

The second is that holding a thought has two sides that vary on their own: what you hold, and how you hold it. The same thought can be doubted or believed,

and the same frame of mind can take different thoughts. Anyone denying this has to entertain a thought about thoughts, with both parts on show.

Four escape routes are left. A doubter might say a mind can picture what it does not contain, as a brain in a jar pictures space. That fails for this one word, since picturing something definite takes states that really differ. She might agree that every thought is a difference and keep those differences inside the mind. But then the mind is differentiated, by her own concession, and it is part of reality. Her last escape is to put the mind outside reality, and then her denial is no real event. She might instead put the mind inside a world with no differences, which has no room for a mind; that closure leans on a claim Chapter 6 takes up. Or she might call differences an illusion. That splits reality into a blank background and an illusion on top, and the split is a difference.

The conclusion stays modest. Whatever holds the thinking has differences in it. The chapter says nothing about what it is made of, and the result holds whether reality is physical or mental.

The objections the chapter answers

Someone will say this is Aristotle in a new coat. The chapter agrees the objection has real force, and that the requirement it uses is Aristotle’s. Two things change. This argument reaches the doubter who says nothing. It also takes a step Aristotle does not, from a thought to the world.

The strongest objection says all this shows is that our thinking needs differences, while reality outside the mind might be blank. One answer is that the doubter has drawn a line between thinking and reality, and a line is a difference. The chapter offers that only as reinforcement.

Its main reply starts with a worry against itself. Several closures above work by leaving the doubter no place to stand, and Castagnoli’s lesson was that this is the weaker result: the doubter is silenced, and the idea survives. So the chapter supplies a test. Ask of any claim: is there any way, in any world, to hold it and have it be true? Four grades fall out. Some claims only lose debates, and silence saves them. Some cannot be said truly, though they can be thought. Some cannot be believed truly, though they can be supposed. In the last grade, every way of holding the claim makes it false.

“No difference exists” sits in the last grade. Holding it at all means grasping a definite thought, and that is a difference. Thinking it quietly is no escape, and nor is supposing it. So it could be true only where no mind holds it. And it is being held here. The holding is itself an event in the world, so this goes beyond winning a debate. As the chapter puts it, “the sceptic is evidence for what she denies”.

Michael Della Rocca argues that every distinction would need a ground, that no ground ends the regress, and so reality admits no differences at all. The chapter calls him its most direct contemporary opponent, and grants that the position exists on paper. What it denies is narrower: that anyone can

coherently occupy it. His climb is a chain of definite steps, each told apart from what it rejects. A real dispute is left open, about his demand that every distinction be grounded. Chapter 4 takes that up.

What the chapter claims

The two claims about thoughts and events are graded *self-vindicating*, the book's top mark: denying them produces exactly what they say. The conclusion built from them, that at least one difference really exists, gets the same mark.

The new category of self-defeat gets a lower mark, *established*. It leans on a claim that belongs to Chapter 2, that any definite thought can be told apart from another, and nothing is sturdier than the weakest thing holding it up. The reply to Stroud sits at the same level.

The chapter admits a limit. It has not shown that differences had to exist. In a world with no minds and no differences, "no difference exists" would be true, with nobody to think it. Whether such a world is possible is left to later chapters, and the chapter says this costs it nothing.

What is left is a floor: at least one difference really exists. Chapter 2 turns to the claim the three-step argument leaned on, and asks what it takes for a thought to mean one thing and no other.