CHAPTER 2

The Contrastive Structure of Content

Chapter 1 leaned hard on one claim: any definite thought can be told apart from some other. That claim did all the work and was never properly defended. Chapter 2 defends it.

Start with a ladder of three rungs. On the bottom nothing exists. On the middle rung something exists with no internal structure. Nothing can be picked out inside it, because picking out needs a boundary, and a boundary is a difference. On the top rung at least one difference appears. Now two things can be told apart, and knowing becomes possible for the first time.

That jump, from one to two, is where meaning starts. The chapter names the smallest unit of meaning the diff: one of two items that can be told apart.

The smallest piece of meaning

A thought that fits every way the world could be tells you nothing. It says nothing because it denies nothing.

The word “difference” covers two things here. Sometimes two things exist and differ: two rocks, two moments. Sometimes one thing exists and rules out one that does not: a traffic light is red and so is not green.

The chapter also separates two levels. A state can simply be one way and rule out another: the bare structural level. Or it can sit in a web of reasons: the richer level of knowledge. The second always needs the first; the first never needs the second.

Picture the simplest detector you can: a sensor in one physical state when light hits it and another when no light does. It names nothing and believes nothing. Yet its two states really are different states of one bit of matter. The lesson is how easily the condition is met.

A choice with no middle

To rule something out can mean two things. A thought may rule out ways the world could be. Or it may simply stand apart from other thoughts. The chapter uses the second sense throughout. So necessary truths count too. That seven and five make twelve could not be false. It is still a thought apart from seven and five making thirteen, since the two are built from different pieces.

The heart of the chapter is an argument with two branches and no third.

Take anything you call a definite thought. Either it has a definite character, so that its being the case is one way and rules out an alternative, or it does not. Nothing else is available, since the two are opposites.

Take the first branch. If the thought rules something out, it is a contrast already, and what it rules out is what makes it that thought. The chapter admits this branch is almost true by definition. The work is done by the other.

Take the second branch. The thought rules nothing out. It sits happily with everything, including its own absence, so a mind holding it and a mind lacking it are in the same position. It cannot make a thought this thought and no other. Something that tells nothing apart is no thin, faint meaning. It is the absence of one.

One worry gets a careful answer. Perhaps a meaning could just be what it is, owing nothing to what it is not. The chapter does not call such natures impossible. It says they cannot do the job, which is to pick out, and picking out is telling apart. You may keep the natures, and you cannot make meanings of them without contrasts.

There is also a trap for anyone wanting a counterexample. To show a meaning that rules nothing out, you must say which meaning you mean, and saying which tells it apart from the others.

Three families of theory that disagree about almost everything agree here. Robert Brandom says a concept means what it lets you infer. Ferdinand de Saussure says a sound in a language differs from the others. Causal theories say a mental state means what it tracks, which needs different responses to different things. The chapter is clear about what this is worth: support, and no proof. Each theory is cited for what it takes for granted, which its author need not endorse.

Why nothing stands alone

This has a sharp consequence. Some philosophers have hoped for a bedrock: an experience carrying its meaning entirely by itself, on which the rest of knowledge can be built. Wilfrid Sellars attacked that hope in 1956. He argued that knowing this is red means telling red from not-red, which drags in a whole network.

The chapter’s objection sits one level beneath his. Sellars shows such an item cannot justify anything. The chapter shows it cannot be a definite meaning at all, because a diff without a partner is noise. Sellars’s richer condition can arise only where this bare one is met. That matters because he leaves escape routes open. A philosopher can agree that meaning needs sorting while denying that the sorting is built out of reasons. John Campbell says perception puts us in direct contact with things. Robert Hanna says experience carries meaning that is not conceptual.

The chapter grants each their starting point and holds them to one condition. Whatever the item is, they call it definite, and here definite means one of two. So it arrives already told apart from something, and no bedrock stands alone.

The same move reframes an old argument. John McDowell said experience must be shaped by concepts to count as a reason, and his opponents denied it. Before asking whether experience is conceptual, ask whether it involves a contrast at all.

A separate section turns to Jacques Derrida, who also put difference first and refused to treat it as a foundation. The chapter answers that the usual foundation stands on its own, while a diff is always one of two. It grounds by depending on its partner. That answers one version of the refusal.

On another version the worry is any term that governs a whole structure. There the role the term plays is what counts. The chapter concedes the description: the diff is a centre by design, and its role in this book is total. So it invites deconstruction to audit the diff, looking for a dependence a centre hides. The audit comes back empty, it says, since the diff's dependence is declared and its opposite is given half of reality. Whether any audit can come back empty is the dispute that remains. Both answers lean on something unproved, that no third option sits beside difference and blankness. If there is a third, Derrida's refusal regains its force. Chapter 3 argues there is none.

From thoughts to the world

A doubter might accept all this and keep it indoors. Thinking needs differences, she says, while the world outside might still be blank.

For most properties that retreat works. A flat image can picture a deep scene without being deep.

For this one property the retreat collapses, because picturing a difference takes a difference. A mind holding that reality is blank, alongside the thought that the mind supplies the differences, has two states that really differ.

So the doubter faces two roads. Either the world outside minds contains a difference, which settles it, or it does not, and every difference lives in minds. Minds are part of the world, so the differences are in the world anyway.

Chapter 1 reached this conclusion already. It rested on two premises that defeat their own denial, and closed four ways out. This section develops one of those closures.

The objections answered

The first objection is that none of this is new. The chapter agrees the observation is old. What it claims is new is the apparatus: a named smallest unit with the split between the two levels, an explanation of the given that sits beneath Sellars's, and the point that difference belongs inside no category.

Another comes from followers of the later Wittgenstein, who hold that words mean what people do with them, so no contrasts wait around before language arrives. The chapter concedes most of this. Which differences get marked is up to the practice. But the moves in any language game must differ, or the game

has stopped. And the sensor's two states were two states before anyone named them. Saying otherwise means saying that photography and photosynthesis depend on grammar.

What the chapter claims

All three of the chapter's results are graded *established*, the rung below the book's top mark.

The headline result is that meaning depends on contrast, and it is held below the top mark on purpose. Denying it produces an instance of it, as in Chapter 1, but one instance only, while the result is about every meaning. So the forced choice carries it instead. It also comes with a condition: what shows that a meaning stands apart from others is that it is built out of smaller contrasts. That people argue about a word is evidence, and no more. Whether those contrasts must trace back to something registered is left to Chapter 14.

The second explains why nothing can be a meaning on its own. The third is that the differences involved are features of reality, and not only of thought. Chapter 1 and this chapter secure that one together.

The chapter makes one concession in the open. Some philosophers hold that all necessary truths are a single meaning. The argument still works on their view, but one thing is unavailable there: a crowd of distinct necessary truths. Two later chapters need that crowd. Each passage carries the condition and keeps a fallback.

Chapter 3 asks the question this one leaned on: is every state either differentiated or blank, with nothing in between?