

10 Undermining, Picking Apart, Bolstering, and Emptiness

From Donovan Leitch, from a phrase taken from Zen Buddhism:

'First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is...
Oh, Juanita, I call your name'

The song "My Bucket's Got a Hole in It"

Sung separately by Hank Williams and Rick Nelson

Attributed to Rufus Payne, and sometimes to Clarence Williams

Probably "Traditional" through Rufus Payne to Hank Williams and Nelson, and now Public Domain:

CHORUS:

'Yeah ('Cause) my bucket's got a hole in it
Yeah my bucket's got a hole in it
Yeah my bucket's got a hole in it
I can't buy no beer.

Well, I'm standin' on a corner with a bucket in my hand
I'm waitin' for a woman that aint got no man.

Chorus

Well, I went up on the mountain - I looked down in the sea
I seen the crabs and the fishes doin' the be-bop-bee.

Chorus

Well, there aint no use me workin' so (damn) hard
When I got a woman in the boss man's yard.

Chorus

Well, me and my baby, we just bought a Ford
And now we sit together on the running board.

Chorus'

This chapter and the next three, four in all, defend the common sense view, especially the common sense view of the self. They are needed as defense so we don't fall prey. This material includes puzzles from when you still wondered what makes the sun the sun or makes water wet. Although the chapters do not

use technical language, they are about philosophical issues. I think they are fun. If you have no taste for these issues, go directly to the chapter on badness, about chapter fourteen.

In all that follows, I consider ideas as “things” or as “objects” unless noted. I do not distinguish between things, persons, ideas, sensations, impressions, images, notions, etc. as objects. Sometimes I refer to our evolutionary heritage. I do not imply that whatever evolved is correct and best, or whatever did not evolve is superior to simple biology. We have to use our evolved minds to decide cases. I use the term “thinker” to include any proponent of ideas including philosophers, theologians, and biologists. I include as “thinkers” people in non-theistic religions such as Buddhism and some Taoism.

Deliberate Distortions: Picking Apart and Bolstering.

Thinkers undermine common sense things in two ways. In the first way, they pick apart a thing until there is left only what the thinker wants to remain, sometimes nothing. In the second way, they bolster a thing so that it is realer, stronger, more enduring, and more idealized than in real life.

The two ways are related. Usually thinkers cannot bolster every aspect of a thing, so they pick apart what they don't want and then bolster what remains that they do want. For example, if we wish to use an oak tree as a symbol of eternal life, we abstract away withered leaves, exposed roots, squirrel nests, etcetera until we get what we do want such as very long life, large size, strong wood, ability to withstand storms, and coming to life again in spring after winter. Although the methods go together, some thinkers favor one method more than the other. Some religions, such as Buddhism and Zen, seem to favor one method over the other but all religions use both.

Technically, “picking apart” is called “analysis”, “reduction”, “deconstruction”, “relativizing”, or “sublation” while “bolstering” is called “reifying”, “hypostasizing”, “essentialism”, “holism”, “repackaging”, “process thought”, “reconstruction”, “embedding”, or “contextualizing”. I do not use technical terms here.

Since the 1970s, bolstering, especially essentialism, has been out of favor publicly in academia even while thinkers have become adept at various kinds of picking apart. Even so, thinkers still bolster after they pick apart. The same thinker condemns essentialism while at the same time reifying embedding in a system of relations.

Different thinkers use these methods to argue with each other. The first thinker reduces some aspects and bolsters other aspects of a thing while his-her opponent reduces other aspects of the same thing and bolsters other aspects. Sometimes the first thinker reduces some aspects and bolsters others while his-her opponent reduces what the first thinker bolsters and bolsters what the first thinker reduces. This kind of bickering is common among philosophers, critics of art, literature, and pop culture, and critics of gender roles. In another way, it happens when anthropologists assess fossils in human evolution. Some anthropologists discount some features (this hole for blood vessels, that muscle attachment) and stress other features (these back teeth, this foot bone) while other anthropologists discount the same stressed features and stress the same discounted features.

When “deep” thinkers argue, this kind of battle can be quite confusing, as we will see in arguments about the self in a later chapter. A Buddhist might discount the importance of a comfortable little backwater by

showing how it comes and goes with the rains while a Taoist might see the same backwater as literally heaven on Earth for exactly the same reasons. When deep thinkers argue like this, ordinary objects and ordinary people tend to disappear in the crossfire.

Sometimes it does help to question the common sense ideas of things. We need to think about who we are, what we do, and why we do it. We need to be clear about what things there are, how they work, and how they relate. We need to be clear about natural and moral laws. This is part of science, law, and dealing with everyday life. In the long run, honest questioning strengthens common sense. But common sense things have to survive long enough for the questioning to benefit rather than hurt.

It should be easy to see how picking apart can undermine common sense ideas about the world. It might seem that bolstering could only help the common sense idea of a self but that is not true. A strong sense of things undermines the common sense idea because it creates expectations that cannot be met. When expectations are not met, people fear all things have been undermined. Usually a strong version of any thing is abstruse, like an idealized heaven or an idealized orange. The real world is not usually abstruse. A strong sense cannot be built out of all the normal parts of things. We have to pick some that we like, reinforce those, pick others we don't like, and let go of those. At the least, that seems odd. When people find they have to let go of something that makes a lot of sense to them so they can keep something abstruse, they get confused, and feel as if they must lose this whole thing and all things.

Much of this chapter is about showing:

-Most normal common everyday things survive picking apart.

-Bolstering a thing usually does not make it better, and bolstered things tend to fall apart.

-We have normal common sense evolved techniques for dealing with the fuzziness in things. We can deal with picking apart and bolstering.

Picking Apart One: General.

By picking adeptly at anything, you can undermine anything. I cannot explain all the ways to pick apart something. I only give examples for some of the ways that are most important for this book.

What is a car? For about 20 years, after 1990, the US imported small vehicles that looked like a car in the front but had a small open compartment in the back like a little tiny truck bed. They often had roll bars, and they were marketed as sports vehicles. Technically they were not cars but tiny trucks. Most of the buyers did not know this. The "cars" were legally labeled as trucks to take advantage of import laws. What if a car has three wheels, two in the front and one in the back? To me, that does not look like a car but like a toy, especially since most don't go fast or far. What if a car has three wheels, one in the front and two in the back? How does that differ from a motorcycle with a sidecar? In Thailand, where three-wheel vehicles are open like carriages, they are used as short range urban taxis. I disliked riding in them, and I never considered them a car. Is an "El Camino" really a car or really a truck? Is an all-electric car really a car? For many years, "car people" refused to accept it as a real car.

How smudged is a shirt before it is dirty? How wet does a t-shirt have to be to qualify for a wet t-shirt contest? How tall is a person before she is tall? How well does a person have to speak a language before he-she speaks the language? At what exact second does a storm begin or end? What is the exact difference between a jar and a bottle? Which version of a song is the real version? Which recipe for a cake is the real recipe? How much can you change a song or a recipe before it is a different song and a different recipe? What is the right process (way) to build a tree house? If we raise a child the wrong way but he-she still turns out OK, is he-she still a person? If a girl acts like a tomboy, is she still a girl? Is there up without down? I dislike those small yippy animals that have a long genetic continuity with dogs, and don't consider them dogs. Dolphins share a long genetic continuity with horses but that doesn't make them horses. People share a long genetic continuity with apes but that doesn't make us exactly the same. People are more like apes than people-and-apes-together are like monkeys but that still does not make people the same as apes.

When is a river a river, and when is a river the same river? What if a drought lowers the water level to a trickle, as with many rivers in 2012? What if the water has been diverted so that some occasional mud remains, as with the Los Angeles River and the Colorado River? What if the river floods; is the overflow flood water part of the river? The river changes from minute to minute. Is it still the same river? Is it still the same river even though every molecule of water in it is different now than it was last week? Is it still the same river if it erodes its bank and makes a major new channel? Is it still the same river if it erodes its bank, merges with another river, and becomes a smaller tributary to the other larger river?

We can pick apart anything but that is not the real point. The real point is that we still have a sense of real things, and we get by anyway, often despite picking apart. When we need to decide what a car is, or when a river is a river, we use known criteria, modify them, or make new criteria. We can deal with fuzziness for most cases for the practical needs of those cases. We do not always agree, but dispute shows as much about human self-interest as it does about innate fuzziness. Below, I hint at how we deal with the problems but I do not here focus on how we deal with them.

If identity depends somewhat on human agreement, does that mean no thing has identity in itself but that all identity is only a matter of arbitrary convention? The simple answer is "no". It would be hard to turn a car into an orange, or a river into a train. It would be hard to turn an ape into a human although we might grant apes some sort of lesser personhood. Scientific method is not superstition even if many scientists follow it like superstitious old folk. Just because all boundaries might be fuzzy does not mean there are no qualitatively distinct things, nothing has integrity, and all identity is a matter of convention. If that were true, then there would not be any convention either.

Picking Apart Two: Particular Weaknesses.

The point of this section is not to master these techniques for picking apart but to recognize them, and to get a sense that a thing can survive them. There is no particular order.

Most things, such as rivers, are composite, made of parts. Not all parts have to be material stuff. Ideas often are composite when they refer to things like rivers that are composites. Even when ideas do not refer to composite objects, they are often composites of several ideas. The idea of fairness requires that

we think of benefit, cost, comparison, distribution, etc. Anything that is composite, including ideas, can be picked apart.

We expect a certain amount of consistency in a thing before we can call it a thing. If we drop a rock on the sand and it survives the fall, we expect it to do the same next time. If we drop a rock on the sidewalk and it breaks, we expect the same next time. If a toy helicopter flies this time, we expect it to fly next time. If the Republican Party opposes national health care this time, we expect it to do so next time; or else we want to know why. If an animal likes to eat meat this time, we expect it to like meat next time. On the other hand, if the first time we gave the animal only meat, then this time we give it a choice of meat or fruit, and it picks fruit, that does not lead us to wonder about the consistency of the animal. We can often find conditions that vary enough so that a thing behaves differently but we can't figure out the connection between the conditions and the thing, and this leads us to pick apart.

A river is not just a certain quantity of water; the river is water in a process. The process is a part in the identity of the river as much as the material water. Processes are much easier to pick apart than simple material stuff like water. The relation between material stuff and a process is easy to pick apart as well.

The pool at the bottom of a waterfall not only is made up of water but it also swirls. The swirl is a process like the river but it is also a process with a definite form. The identity of the pool is not just a quantity of water but also a form. Forms can be hard or easy to pick apart depending on the form, but the relation between material stuff and its form is notoriously easy to pick apart.

Things change over time. Things change not only as part of the process that is part of what they are but in other ways too. The water in the river changes completely every week but we don't mind that. The river also dries out, changes course completely, or gets dammed, and we do mind those changes. When a cute bear cub grows into a nasty grizzly, we understand it is both the same thing and something else. We are not sure if it is completely the same thing. Big rocks split into littler rocks but the littler rocks are still rocks. Eventually the little rocks split into sand grains, and then we are not sure if they are still rocks. Almost all living things die, not all living things die. Some microbes, and some slime mold, might be potentially immortal. In that case, when a living thing dies a "natural" death, is it still the same thing or is it now a different thing?

Suppose we magically moved the pool of water at the bottom of a waterfall from the northern hemisphere to the southern, where the water would swirl the other way? Would it still be the same pool of swirling water? Changes in form make a difference. Parts fit together in different ways. Suppose I took a group of Lego blocks and made a little man of them, then took exactly the same blocks and made a little woman of them. Are the man and woman the same?

Two objects can be the same in some ways but different in others, and then we are not sure what they are, how similar they are and how different they are. I have already mentioned cars, trucks, and little three-wheeled vehicles above.

No two things are the same in all ways even if they are supposed to be the same kind of thing. We have to pick the ways that count and the ways that don't count. Sometimes we are not sure. Does the size of

a cat count as to what kind of cat it is? Does the number of wheels count as to whether something is a car or not?

Things change not only every once in a while, as when a chip falls off a rock, but change constantly, as when a river flows. How can something that changes constantly be one thing?

Things are usually bundles of features. Even a rock is a bundle of size, shape, composition, hardness, sharpness, brittleness, etc. In what sense is a bundle of features a thing? This is a stronger way of asking about composite things and about consistency.

Sometimes we can abstract away from a bundle of features until no thing is left. Sometimes we can subtract away until one feature is left in this case but only one other feature is left in another case. For example, we can abstract away the features of a rock until only hardness is left. Or we can abstract away until only brittleness is left – they are not the same. Then what is a rock all about? It seems the most important feature of birds is flying but some birds can't fly. Then what is being a bird all about? We can do the same with mammals and cars. When we do this, it seems that nothing is left at the heart of any bundle of features. It seems like the center of any thing, and all things, is emptiness.

We tend to think people, animals, cars, rivers, trees, and many things have a deep inner self, what they are all about, what lies at the heart of the bundle, what old philosophers used to call “essence”. Suppose they do but we can't get certain access to it, just as we can't know the deepest heart of a person. Does it make sense then to say they have a deepest heart, and the deepest heart is what they are all about? If we can't find the deepest heart, then does it make sense to say the thing still coheres and is one thing?

Animals have behavioral tendencies, which I call here “appetites”, as for example appetites for sex, getting food, and conflict. Even though the appetites are different, we like to explain the appetites by saying they all serve one goal. Americans tend to call that goal “survival of the fittest”, “benefit of the species”, or “the survival instinct”. Yet sometimes conflict the appetites conflict, and sometimes they conflict so much that it is hard to see them all in terms of the same goal. Male adult lions kill all the cubs when they “take over” a pride. Adults fight to the death. Cubs wrangle and spit at each other. Adults fight over sexual access. If it is not obvious how the various appetites can be made to fit together, then how can an animal be one coherent thing?

Since the 1930s, evolutionary biologists have put all the appetites-and-abilities of organisms under one goal, which I have called “evolutionary success” in this book but which they more often call “reproductive success” or “inclusive fitness”. Suppose the appetites can all be bundled together under one goal. Still, they are qualitatively distinct. They are not just expressions of one goal. They are things in themselves. The same ability can play a different role in different animals, as when “running” means “running away” for a gazelle and means “running after” for a lion. “Eating” means “grass” to a gazelle while it means “gazelle” to a lion. If an animal is composed of qualitatively different appetites-abilities that can serve different purposes in different circumstances, how is the animal one coherent thing even if the various appetites cohere in this particular case?

Sometimes things, especially complicated things, behave erratically. Sometimes a healthy heart skips a few beats for no apparent reason, even to the point of causing serious distress or death. If so, then how are things consistent enough to be integral things?

Even when a thing has some identity of its own, on its own, usually it gets its real full identity only in the proper context. A wolf is only a wolf in the context of a pack as a child is only a child in the context of a family. Even fundamental physical particles such as photons and electrons vary their apparent identity according to context: they travel as waves but arrive and depart as particles; they are one thing when bound with other particles, or when bound in a field, and quite another thing when travelling freely; and now they need other particles (the Higgs boson) even to have mass. We all know the word "red" but it changes meaning according to context: red leaf, pencil that is painted red, pencil with a red lead, an embarrassed person, a Communist, or a state that votes Republican. Politicians complain correctly about their remarks being taken out of context to mean something other than what they intended. If something has to be embedded in a system of relations to be a thing, or to be its true thing, in what sense is anything really an integral thing?

A strong version of the idea of relational identity arises with people and empathy, when we feel that we are just like other people, other things in the world, and like the world itself. See next chapter.

A drill bit depends not only for its use but also for its identity on the drill and on the person who uses the drill. A tree depends for its sustenance on the whole forest, soil, water, the weather, and the sun. We don't think about food until we are a little bit hungry. What food we think about depends on our cultural background and on our personal experience. "You don't miss your water till the well runs dry". The life and death of a car depends on a lot of things. Every physical thing has a life and death, and the life and death depend on a lot of other things. What music is in style now depends on technology, politics, the economy, weather, and particular acts by a lot of particular people. When some thing depends on other things, the identity of the first thing is not distinct and enduring even if the first thing is a simple material thing like the drill bit – and most things are not simple material things. Even ideas such as styles of art, and sensations like hunger, depend on other things, and come and go with other things. Everything that depends on other things, is fuzzy, and can be picked apart easily. If everything depends on everything else, then everything can be picked apart, and nothing has an enduring identity. Hinduism and Buddhism stress this situation.

Scientists deal with problems of fuzzy through statistical coherence. For example, they define a storm by a set of statistical features that come in a bundle, such as windspeed and rainfall. This works in practice but it is not very satisfying. We don't want to know that most tropical storms have winds in excess of 50 miles per hour (I am guessing), we want to know what is a tropical storm for sure. We don't want to know that oak forests can be defined as having at least 50% oak trees; instead, we want to know what gives an oak forest the spirit of an oak forest.

Not only are things fuzzy, but the ways in which they are fuzzy are fuzzy too. Not only are things made fuzzy by situation embedding, but situational embedding is fuzzy in itself. Thinking about the fuzziness of fuzziness leads to some fun mental games. I hope to look at this problem someday in another piece of writing.

Sometimes things disqualify themselves and even negate themselves. The law is supposed to serve justice but sometimes the law creates injustice. Kindness is not supposed to smother. The vegetation that comes in after a fire in the forest creates the conditions that allow other vegetation to come in later to take over from the original pioneering vegetation.

We can pick apart almost any thing but that is not the real point. This is:

- We see things as integral long enough and well enough to get along.
- We allow for variation and still allow that one thing is one thing, at least for a while.
- We allow one thing to become another thing when appropriate.
- We can put things into categories according to situation. Thing "A" can be grouped with "B" sometimes and with "C" at other times.
- Some things naturally have similarity and go into categories, such as all robins or the hammers. We can shuffle the categories for these things when we have to but they tend to go back into their natural categories.
- We know enough to leave sticky cases alone unless we have to deal with them.
- We can deal with cases well enough to get along for now and not to worry about absolute solutions.

Bolstering.

Thinkers have looked a long time for things, including ideas, that are hard to pick apart. Because it is easy to pick apart composite things such as rivers, thinkers search for things that are of one "stuff", that are not composite, to prove there is identity in the world, and to have an example by which to judge the identity of other things such as persons. That is why thinkers want to think of the soul as one simple non-composite "stuff". Thinkers look for simple homogenous stuff to make up real worlds composite things. Real things can borrow absolute identity from the underlying simple homogenous building blocks. That is one reason why physicists search for the basic building blocks of matter-energy-time-space.

I can't give anything that is absolutely proof against being picked apart. Even simple elementary particles such as electrons and photons can be picked apart if we think of their identity in terms of a cloud of virtual particles; and time and space are not what they used to be since the ideas of Mach and Einstein.

By stressing things that are simple and eternal, bolstering undermines real world things because real world things are not homogenous and eternal. It is hard to go from simple eternal things to real world things, even when simple eternal things are the building blocks. Bolstering undermines real world things by stressing some aspects over others and leading to disappointment. To show the weaknesses of bolstering and how it undermines things takes a long time. So here I present the usual suspects for simple basic building blocks of thing-ness, and request that you use your imagination to see how it leads to undermining.

For millenia, thinkers took mathematics as the paradigm example of something that was absolutely clear and identical. “1” is “1”. “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” certainly means something clear in the right mathematical system, the one we are used to. There are systems in which “ $2 + 2$ ” does not equal “4”. If you know music, think of how to count intervals: “ $2 + 2 = 3$ ” or “ $3 + 3 = 5$ ”. Two thousand years ago, there was no number “0” but now there is. Two hundred years ago there was no square root of a negative number but now there is. Not even numbers are necessarily simple and have a foolproof identity. Mathematics is not as good an example of strong coherent identical stuff as it used to be only 200 years ago but it is still a good enough example. The problem is we can’t generalize from mathematics to cases that are important to people. We can’t use mathematics as a general pattern for identity and for selves. We can’t treat court cases, or cases of being a decent person, as if they were like “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ”.

Thinkers have used ideas such as decency, honor, justice, goodness, and love as something that can be nibbled at but can’t be undermined. We can quibble about cases of honor but we can’t say there is no honor at all. Even if some horrible dictatorship eliminates all honorable people from this world, honor will have existed at some time, might exist on other planets, and is part of the universe. I think this is all true but cannot alone be used as the basis to make integral people. People are not composed of one integral idea, not even an idea like goodness.

Thinkers offer some experiences as things that cannot be undermined. We can bicker about the exact shade of red of my jump drive but we cannot say I do not see red or that there is no color red that I could see. We might argue whether people have the same subjective experience as I do when they look at my jump drive (what they see I might call “blue”) but we cannot normally argue whether they do have some experience and that the experience involves some object and some color. Again, this is true, but we are not sure what to make of it. It is hard to build consistent unified persons of the kind we want out of these experiences.

Thinkers look for persistence through change as a way to show at least some coherence and identity, and to use that as the basis for arguments. The river certainly persists despite the total change in water every month, and that is one kind of identity. The planet Earth changes a bit every day but not much. Each orbit is nearly identical to the previous orbit. The tiger in her forest does not change so much from day to day that we are willing to go tease her, and that is enough persistence to make identity. Individual tigers come and go but the species “tiger” persists. The species “tiger” persists through several generations even though natural selection is always at work in the wild. None of this achieves absolute persistence but it is enough persistence to argue for using identity as an idea. Even persistence through one change is enough to make us think about identity.

The use of persistence as a criterion of identity has an interesting history in biology and social science. It is the basis for classical ideas of society being more powerful than individuals (false) – people come and go but particular societies and cultures live on - and for the systems theory that underlies most ecological analysis (mostly true).

A real physical mountain or river is not impervious to change and not absolutely identical all the time but an ideal mountain is. Even though real things might not have absolute identity, ideas can have absolute identity, even ideas about physical things. The idea of a mountain is one coherent whole that persists

through time even though no real mountain does. So is the idea of “straight” or “circular”. Sometimes a painting teacher tells students not to paint any real tree but to paint the idea of a tree. Asian artists paint ideas of dragons not “real” dragons. When using ideas as the examples of absolute identity, you can always think of the idea in a way which is not composite, even when it is an idea of a composite real thing such as a mountain. With ideas as the example of identity, philosophers can think of the soul-person as like an idea, and can think of any valuable aspects of the world that they wish to keep as like an idea. They also discard aspects that they wish to discard as not like ideas. If philosophers think sex is not worth holding on to, then sex is not like an idea. This method lends itself well to keeping personal qualities such as tendencies to justice and giving.

While any particular instance of a type, such as a particular tiger, might not be integral, enduring, and real, the type might be. “Tiger” might be enduring and real. In that case, a particular individual thing does have status by being part of an enduring type (being a “token” of a “type”). No particular real triangle is fully a triangle but idea triangles are one thing and do endure, so particular real triangles borrow some of that status.

While any particular thing might not be integrated and real, the interdependent net within which it “lives” might be enduring, integrated, and real. A particular tree might not be integrated and enduring but the forest, ecosystem, biosystem, and world in which it participates might be. The particular speaker of a language might not endure, and his-her sentences spoken over a lifetime pass away, but the language endures. Thinkers after World War Two especially stress this kind of bolstering.

This sequence goes back to Aristotle, and it is important for the next chapter: A rock is integral in that it is mostly one kind of stuff, all in one place, and does not change much over time. A card from a deck of cards is one thing. A deck of cards is together in that all its parts, the individual cards, are clear, and we can use the identity of parts to make clear arrangements as in a poker hand. A model of a suspension bridge is one thing, in which the parts depend on each other. A car is one thing in that its parts depend on each other and the parts have to stay together in one particular arrangement for the car to be able to move around. An airplane is the same as a car, and it controls itself while on autopilot. A plant is like an airplane but it also recreates itself. An animal is like a plant but it also can move itself. Some animals also have intentions such as tigers and orangutans.

We tend to think of animals with intentions as integral selves, although this classification is in dispute. We think of people as selves. To be a self, it seems as if you have to be one integral thing. It is not clear that we think of people as selves because they are integral in the ways listed above plus they have intentions. We would like to think that people are selves because not only are they integral in the ways listed above but they also have a kind of coherence-identity that none of those other ways have. It is not clear what part having intentions plays in this extra integration that selves have. It is not clear that the other kinds of integration are needed for the particular integration of a self.

Whatever this particular integration of self is, if we could think of selves entirely in terms of this integration, then we would have the one homogenous strong “self stuff” that philosophers seek. Most philosophers in the West have thought of this special self stuff as rationality-and-goodness although Romantics think of it as creativity-beauty-emotion.

It is good to see that selves use some of the ways of coherence noted above, and to see that selves are distinct in their coherence from any of the ways listed above. It is misleading to seek a special self stuff to explain their coherence. It is better to say we usually recognize a self when we have to interact with it, and that other ways of coherence contribute to selfness. We can use other ways of coherence to decide selfness in particular cases.

I go further than some philosophers. I think there are such things as trees, rivers, species, selves, good people, and bad people; they are real; they are real despite being composite and fuzzy; and their reality does not depend primarily on convention. I think not only ideas about them are real. The things are real. Ideas and qualities such as the color red are real. I understand we can pick apart most of these things but I do not require absolute proof against picking apart. If I allow that “dog” is one integral thing then I do not have nearly as much trouble allowing that human beings are persons.

Appropriate Technique; the Middle Way.

This section simply asserts that we handle issues of integrity and self, and illustrates. We can overcome picking apart and bolstering. This section does not offer a foolproof argument. It does not list all the ways that we use to overcome undermining. You can get a sense of the ways by looking above at how we undermine and then thinking how you would reverse that way.

You get up in the morning, and you find your favorite cereal for breakfast, granola, is out, empty, and nothing. Luckily, like Seinfeld, you have a dozen alternatives. You compare corn flakes to bran flakes and decide you like corn flakes better. You compare corn flakes to wheat flakes, and decide you like wheat flakes better. You compare wheat flakes to shredded wheat, decide you like shredded wheat better, and eat that. None of this means granola is empty, unreal, has no identity, and cannot be relied upon in spiritual matters. All this does not mean that shredded wheat is more integral, realer, and better than other kinds of cereal.

You get up on Saturday to go to the store only to discover that your car has a flat tire (empty, nothing). You do have a full sized spare kept in the garage, from an old car, but it is not quite exactly the same as the tire in your new car. It will do in a pinch, like this situation, but you don't like it. You do have one of those little spare “doughnuts” in the trunk but you don't like to that either. Eventually you decide to use the old full-sized tire until you can get to the tire store. None of this means that the original tire has no identity and is unreal. None of this means tires in general have no identity and are unreal. The doughnut replacement is not more real than the flat original.

You find yourself on the “Antiques Road Show” with a vintage Rolex that you picked up in a pawn shop in Asia. The appraiser has a real Rolex of the same model and year, and, point for point, shows you how yours is not a genuine Rolex but a fake. It is a great fake. The quality is as good as a Rolex (if that is possible). But it is still a fake. It is not “real”. That does not mean it is about to drift apart like the imagined dragon in a cloud. It means we have a particular idea of identity and reality for this case, and we use it. Here the opposite of “real” is not “unreal” but “fake”, “not from the authorised maker”, or “of bad quality”.

An old oak tree has stood in place for about 200 years. It has been surrounded by original oak forest, farms, secondary beech forest, mixed hardwood forest, a vineyard, a housing project, and a school. Its identity has depended on each of those neighbors. Does that mean the oak has never had an identity, it is not real, there is no such thing as oak trees, there is no such thing as trees, and there is no such thing as anything? Does it mean the oak tree is not real but the forests, farms, and suburbs within which it has been embedded have an identity and are real?

Ordinarily we do not seek an absolute bolstered standard of identity and reality. We have provisional standards. We compare the players in this situation with our provisional standards. We modify our standards if we have to. We decide the case according to what we want. We decide abstractly and ideally if we want to do that for fun. What follows in this section is restatement of this idea.

Over time this real mountain wears down. No real mountain lasts forever. We cannot bolster a real mountain, and would be misled if we tried. A million years from now, we can argue whether this mountain is a hill or still a mountain. Yet today the mountain is still there, and I still have to climb it to see the view from the top. There are other mountains besides this one, and they are much like this mountain. The river does not cohere in the same way as the mountain, but that is where I go if I want to go fishing rather than climbing, and, almost all the time, the river is still there. There are real fish in this real river. Except in quantum mechanics, real mountains do not turn into turnips and real fish do not turn into toads; for a fun version, see "Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy". When the real morning bus does not show up on schedule one day, I still know what to do. I can walk, hire a taxi, wait for the next bus, or call in late. We understand integrity. We know different kinds of integrity. Integrity varies with different things. . We can handle both persistence and variability most of the time. Sometimes we even have fun doing it.

Heraclitus (about 535 to 475 BCE) said we can't step in the same river twice because it changes all the time, so the river cannot be any one integral thing, and so there is no real river or any real thing. Cratylus (400s BCE) said we can't step in the same river even once because of constant change. Heraclitus meant to discredit this normal world so that he could advance an unchanging world of ideas, and Cratylus pushed his argument to the limit. They got it wrong.

Whatever a river is, it has to be river enough to step in once or we could have no idea of a river at all, we could have no rivers at all, and we could not have any ideas of anything either. We would have nothing in the real world that we could call real and that would make any world a real world. This river is this river, and remains this river, long enough to step in it once. That is what it means to be a real river. If we grant that an ever-changing river is the same river right now this time when we step in it once, then we have some working idea of identity despite change. Then we can understand what it means to be a river for more than an instant, and we can indeed step in the same river twice and many more times too. We can extend this idea of identity to the river at other times until common sense tells us it is no longer the same river. We can correctly use this idea in other cases such as mountains, cities, persons, and natural laws.

If we could not think like this with real objects like rivers, then likely we could not come up with the ideas that make up the ideal world that Heraclitus and Cratylus wished to live in. Without the ability to sustain real objects, we could not have ideal objects. If ideal objects depend on the same abilities that allow us to make real objects, we might as well live with the real objects.

David Hume in the late 1700s pioneered modern critiques of the self. Despite his usual logical rigor, he once contradicted himself, and his mistake is relevant. To pick apart the self, he wanted to show that the integral self was only a bundle of sensations; to do that, Hume said we cannot imagine anything of which we have had no prior experience. We can recombine elements from experience into new combinations but, strictly speaking, that is not something really new. We can imagine a unicorn only because we have seen a horse and have seen other animals with horns, and can put them together. Yet, then he pointed out that we can imagine shades of color that we have never seen, and we can locate them in our scheme of colors. Suppose we look at two cards that are colored sky blue and cobalt blue. We can imagine shades that lie between these two shades, and still think of the imagined shades as blue, even though we have never seen these shades and we do not have an ideal vision of blue. What shade of blue is the one single master shade of blue that we could use as a standard for all blue? We do not think of color in that way, and do not think of other things in that way either. The human self has imagination. With it, among other mental tools, we can extend ideas of belonging to cases that we have not experienced. We can extend coherent identity as appropriate to circumstances. We can do this without mistakenly thinking identity is only social convention. We have ways to recognize and use identity of things. So, we also have ways to recognize selves and interact with selves. We can imagine a person we have never met, and still think of that as a person. We can accept new people as selves until we have compelling reason to think they might not be selves such as that they cast no reflection in a mirror. We use similar criteria for a self that we use for color or for a river. This way avoids the pitfalls both of picking apart and making too strong, and it is enough. Keep this in mind for the next chapter.

Adapted to Deal.

Tactics to undermine the common sense world so as to influence other people are not just from priests, academics, and connivers over the last 5000 years. I would be stunned if these issues had not appeared in the human mind during the formative years of our evolution, at least 100,000 years ago, and as early as 5,000,000 years ago. We have had people trying to undermine our common sense idea of the world so as to manipulate us for as long as we have had a common sense view. We have had techniques to deal with them and to keep us on the right track just as long too. That is part of why we have these questions and why they are so much fun sometimes. We start out at birth with some naturally evolved abilities such as “grouping and ungrouping”, “pointing at (ostending)”, “isolating”, “comparing”, “finding similar and different”, and “finding features”. We start out with some naturally given categories such as “category”, “isolated thing”, “group of things”, “individual in a category”, “solid thing”, “plant”, “animal”, “sentient being”, “over time”, and “up and down”. I think about all this when I think about the evolution of people.

Personal Historical Note.

When I was young, in the 1950s through 1970s, smart progressive thinkers revolted against analytic type thought (picking apart) in favor of holism and process-based thought (bolstering). I loved picking apart. Without picking apart, there is no science and there are no fictional detectives such as Sherlock Holmes. There is no exploring the environment, no learning, no putting back together, and no stories. There is no holism. I got hammered a lot for enjoying science and analysis. When I went to graduate school in the 1970s and 1980s, picking apart (scientific style analysis) was worse than voting Republican. You could only do it if you called it “deconstruction”.

It was impossible to get across the idea that we have to do both, both are natural, and that neither alone fully gets at what is going on. Both together don't fully get at what is going on either but both together are better than one alone. You have to be able to do both at the same time without going crazy and without believing either one alone gets at the full truth. This is what Douglas Hofstadter called "reductoholism" in his popular book "Godel, Escher, Bach". You also have to be able to do both together without believing that both together get at the full truth although both together are better than either alone. You have to go beyond analysis, holism, and both analysis and holism, to the simple truth of reality, which includes some qualitative realities that are not always best described either analytically or holistically. That is a lesson of Taoism and Zen. To rest in picking apart, and in process thought, are both instances of what Hindus call "Maia". To rest in both together can also be an instance of Maia although I do not want to push the point here. I do not need to define the term "Maia" here other than as "illusion". Bolstering, holism, process-thought, post structuralism, and post modernism, are as much illusions as the hardest most mechanical of mechanistic analytic reductionism. We should learn to enjoy our illusions, and use them wisely, but not live in them.

Emptiness.

The idea of "emptiness" is important in Buddhism and Hinduism. The term does not mean "not a thing", a vacuum, nothing is there, nothing, or nothing done. Instead, the term intends to get across something positive. (A) The usual way of getting across what is positive is the image of the wheel with a hub, axle, spokes, and rim. To do something useful, the wheel has to turn. The wheel turns on the axle. The axle is mounted into a hole in the center of the wheel. If the hole was not there, the axle could not enter the wheel and the wheel could not turn around the axle. The hole in the center of the wheel is the emptiness at the center of the wheel that allows the wheel to be what it is, get things done, and be useful. (B) It is possible to make a wheel as a solid piece from hole-in-the-center to rim. Likely, wheels started that way. Children still build wheels that way; I did as a child. It is more efficient not to build a wheel that way but instead to cut out some of the material from the center to the rim. The wheel does not need all that material to be strong enough. The material adds dead weight that makes the wheel harder to turn and defeats the purpose of the wheel. Heavy wheels get stuck in ruts even if the wagon carries no cargo. The stuff that gets cut out leaves spaces. The spaces are the emptiness that lets the wheel work even better than before. The stuff that is left over eventually became spokes. (C) Along the same lines, the Eiffel Tower was not built just to be beautiful, although it is. The Tower was built to prove a point that was contentious in architecture at the time, in the late 1800s. Not all the material in a wall, pillar, or post carries weight. The weight runs along lines. A wall, pillar, or post is just as strong if you have strong material only along the lines of force. The other material adds useless weight to the wall, pillar, or post, and so actually makes them even weaker than if the other material is cut out. When you cut out enough, leaving only the load-bearing skeleton, you have the Eiffel Tower. What is taken out is the emptiness that lets the Tower do a better job and also makes it beautiful. (D) A spider's web would not be as effective if it was all filled in. Insects need to feel the air move through the web and need to feel they can fly through the web. The space in between the threads is the emptiness that makes the web stronger and more effective.

Emptiness is not nothing but instead emptiness is something positive that allows other things to develop and allows beauty to flourish. I like to understand the idea this way. (I am aware of research about how

we use mental images, paradigms, etc. but that is not important here.) Think of the term “tree”. The term does not stand for any particular tree or any type of tree such as oak, elm, spruce, pine, fir, etc. The term stands for a class of things none of which in particular is “tree-ness” in itself but all of which are somehow trees. If we find that something we once thought is a tree is not really a tree, such as, maybe, Manzanita, then we can take it out of the tree category and we can still use the tree category well. If we discover a new species of tree in a rain forest, we can include it in the group of trees without shaking up all the other trees. Sometimes we do have to revise our categories but that is another issue. The term “tree” is empty but it is also full. By being none-specific, the term is more useful than if we have a particular separate term for every species of tree. At the same time, we know a tree is not an elephant. The term is empty but not totally empty. Its mostly-but-not-entirely emptiness is what allows the term to be so useful and productive. Think of the terms “dog” or “dwelling” in the same way. That is the sense of emptiness. It fills our minds and it fills the universe.

We get to emptiness most easily by picking apart. Try picking apart the idea of a car or a motor vehicle to see. Getting at emptiness is a big part of the job of picking apart in Buddhism and Hinduism. Sadly, it is easy to abuse picking apart when picking apart is used to lead us to emptiness, and, paradoxically, easy to use picking apart to bolster a false idea of emptiness. Buddhism and Hinduism both do this much too strongly. I do not here explain how and I do not explain it in later chapters on Buddhism and Hinduism. I merely offer the warning here so that, when the times come, you will be warned and perhaps inoculated.