

The Third Day

Putting the World Together, Keeping the World Apart[†]

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1 Introduction

It is impossible to see things that are too far away, or that are blocked from view. Seeing requires connection. You cannot afford too much connection, though. A canvas plastered up against your retina would be just as invisible as a sculpture on the far side of Pluto. By the same token, even otherwise apparent figures will disappear, if made to move in exact synchrony with the restless motion of the eyes.

To see something—especially to see it *as* something—requires a balance. On the one hand, there must be causal coupling: the object must be relatively close by, partially illuminated, and visually accessible. At the same time, there must be a degree of decoupling: the object must be a moderate distance away, and remain relatively stable, at least somewhat independent of our ocular and bodily movements. Or so at least we say, in our egocentric language. But we can do a better job of the relativistic metaphysics. Put it this way: in order for “seeing” to happen, viewer and viewed must be *partially connected*, so that light waves can reflect off one and reach the other, but also *partially disconnected*, so that

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the object can be stabilised, separated out from the background, recognised as independent of the viewer, and brought into focus.

Managing appropriate separation, by establishing the right balance of connection and disconnection, is more than a visual metaphor. It spills over into every corner of life. Human relations are an obvious case. Everyone—friend, teacher, employee, lover—has wrestled with the question of when to get connected or engaged, and when to disconnect, to leave well enough alone. Do you tell them they are about to get in trouble? Or do you let them find out on their own?

Politically, the push is to get involved. Emotionally, letting go seems harder. In spite of the apparent opposition, however, the aim is for a common middle ground. Thus detachment and dispassion, appropriate forms of “letting go,” do not entail cutting oneself off entirely, as if with a cleaver.¹ Letting go that completely—to the point of not caring—is a form of pathology. And the other extreme, of complete connection, is equally problematic. It is inspiring to see someone set his or her own concerns aside, and get caught up in a project, an idea, another person, a community. True selflessness, though, is not the same thing as irrevocable fusion—connection that forever dissolves boundaries and identity. We have all met people who wanted that kind of welded relationship—and we have all shied away.

Although we have no word for it, establishing an appropriate degree of “middle connectivity” to the world is such a basic feature of the human condition that doing it successfully has been lifted into the rarefied reaches of sainthood and enlightenment; failing to accomplish it, identified as a cause of paralytic anxiety. The theme arises in diverse cultures, too, including some with very different images of how we start out. Thus it is part of the Western mythos to view infants as starting out too connected and dependent—and so as they grow we strive to instill in them a sense of autonomous individuality. As I understand it, the Eastern mythos runs rather the other way: newborns are viewed as separate and cut off—as living in their own private worlds—with the re-

¹“Passionate dispassion” is what I tell my students we aim for—plus “dispassionate passion.”

sult that child-rearing is viewed as a process of bringing infants into contact and connection with their embedding communities. Yet in spite of these striking differences in perceived starting points, what is even more impressive is their agreement on the ultimate goal: of maintaining a dynamic equilibrium of detachment and separation, on the one hand, and active engagement, on the other.

2 Representation and Reality

Whether discussed in the context of art or more generally, few metaphysical issues cut deeper than that of the relation between representation and reality. Which one, ultimately, holds the cards? Do we read our conceptions onto the world, or does it impress its nature onto our minds? The polar ice cap, capitalism, the strike zone—what warrants these objects' existence? Does the world fight back, giving us things to resist our acts of representation?

As many answers have been proposed to this spate of questions as cups of coffee have been sipped. Ultimately, though, one characteristic shines through: the ineliminable separation between representation and represented—a distance that keeps the two apart. This semantic disconnection is so basic that it is impossible to imagine life without it. Sans representation's separation, the mere thought of an eruption of Mt. St. Helen's would bathe Seattle in ash. We would have to wait another eight years before forming an idea of the twenty-first century. Hypotheticals would be forbidden; every sort of fiction would be metaphysically banned; history would vanish; wondering would cease. Without some degree of separation or room, in fact, there would be no such thing as representation at all—no thought, no symbols, no language. There may be no action at a distance, but there is no representation except at a distance.

We pay a price for this separation—in error, misunderstanding, and partiality of knowledge. It is an inevitable price, though, since the entire *raison d'être* of representation is to span the distances and separations that are a consequence of the inherent locality of the world's underlying physical or causal structure. What other kind of relation could we bear to our friend on a trek in Tibet, after all, if not a semantic one, given the extent of the physical

separation? How else could we retain a grip on our history or our future, if it were not a referential grip, since the direct causal link has so largely dissipated, in the one case, and not even arrived, in the other?

Semantic separation—a distance or gap between word and world—is a mainstay of reality as we know it. Nor are symbols and language the only things dependent on this disconnection; without it, there would also be no people—nor even, I will argue in a moment, any objects. Furthermore, semantic separation is only one species of disconnection—just one of several that hold the world...apart. On a more mundane level, there is also what we might think of as *ontological* separation, between and among ordinary objects. This is the separation that allows us to separate your parking space from mine, Mars from Jupiter, the surface of the writing desk from the desk itself. Ontological separation is, or is constituted by, the so-called “joints” in terms of which we find the world coherent. Somehow, to wrest an object out of the fog (or paint), and label or constitute it as a discrete, stable, unity, requires identifying or imposing a separation between that object and its background, and between that object and any others.

As well as this ontological variety, there is also *conceptual* separation, at one level of remove, between and among kinds, types, concepts, or properties. Thus to classify something as a chair, or as fennel, or as a Lotus Elan, means not classifying it as a footstool, or radicchio, or a TVR Griffith. Somehow chair and footstool, fennel and radicchio, Elan and Griffith, are different kinds or types of things, not separated by inches or gaps in causal flow, but separated nonetheless, in whatever metric is appropriate to conceptual schemes.

Finally, there is what we might call *abstractive* separation, between the objects themselves and their kinds or types (between, as the philosophers would say, the particulars and the universals), so that we can say that although your toaster has an all-too finite lifespan, the type *toaster* reigns eternal.

In and of itself, labeling separations does not answer any metaphysical questions. But it does help them to be asked. What is the origin of all these boundaries—semantic boundaries between subjects and objects, ontological boundaries in the world, conceptual boundaries in our theorising, abstractive boundaries between

our concepts and the things we apply them to? Are they all merely imposed by us representers—leading to a spate of idealist, solipsist, sceptical, nominalist, and other positions? Or, as the realists would argue, do we only discover what is already there—a pre-ordained structure that God separated out long ago, on her last free weekend before the beginning of the world?

3 Metaphysical discreteness

It is a curious fact that in most metaphysical debates, numerous otherwise disparate (even diametrically opposed) positions share a common if rather abstract presupposition. They all assume that the various constitutive forms of separation—semantic, ontological, conceptual, abstractive—must be *all-or-nothing affairs*. As a result, critical inquiry is reduced to a series of yes/no questions. In any given case, there is either taken to be a complete separation, implying that the two ends are not only disconnected but also independent, or it is assumed that there is no separation at all, implying that the two ends should be fused, or that one end should be eliminated or reanalysed as the other end in masquerade.

This metaphysical discreteness is easiest to see in the case of naive realism. To start with, the semantic separation between representation and represented is assumed to be logically complete, in the sense that the ontological structure of reality is assumed to derive or originate from some source (God, nature, physics, or some other bedrock deity) that is independent of the representer, reasoner, or “observer.” Pure, detached, context-free reasoning—the activity in which this semantic separation is phenomenologically greatest—is then idealised as the highest form of cognitive achievement. The completeness of the separation, and the assumption that the realm of reason and the realm of reality are not only independently justified, but also carry on independently, are epitomised in formal logic’s catechism of syntax independent of semantics.

Naturally, connections between the two realms are admitted: action, from word to world, and perception, from world to word. But action and perception remain intellectual orphans in the logical tradition. True to form, the foster parents have tried to recast them in an inferential mould. Since the beginning this has been

an inauspicious project, though, at best a force fit. Even worse, the underlying notions of action and perception are unable to capture the complex ways in which word and world are actually related. Thus remember waiting anxiously for your friends to turn up from the airport: you imagine them now retrieving their baggage, now getting into their car, now pulling onto the freeway, now turning off at your exit, now coming around the corner at the end of the street. This is neither reasoning, nor perception, nor action. It is awkward to accommodate in logic because it involves a (temporal) coordination between the realms of word and world that flies in the face of the complete separation assumed in the traditional model.

This awkwardness is an inevitable consequence of the attempt to rejoin, after the fact, idealised realms of representation and represented, that have been totally split apart in advance. We have just seen it in the philosophical idea that perception and action are appropriate adjuncts to reasoning, but one finds it in more technical fields as well. Thus cognitive science relies on an unexplained notion of a *transducer*, an odd panacea thought to bridge in a single miraculous leap from the messy, external, concrete world of stuff itself, to a neat, inner, abstract world of symbols. Similar difficulties are manifest in computer science's thematisation of input and output as conceptually coherent categories, thought to be easily grafted onto an internal black-box notion of pure calculation. All this machinery is based on the assumption of an *a priori* and discrete separation between symbol and symbolized.

If naive realism assumes complete semantic separation, idealism and various brands of social constructivism hold down the other end of the spectrum. Rejecting the idea that mind and world are wholly separate, they adopt the opposite extreme, and assume that there is no disconnection between the two at all. If naive realism places the viewer on earth and the world on Pluto, in other words, the image of idealism and social constructivism is like that of the canvas plastered on the eyeball. Its advocates do not claim that the two ends are completely connected, of course; rather, they take the position to its logical outcome, and deny that the two realms are distinct. "What do you mean, an atom is a physical object? Atoms are social, historical, political, con-

structs—instruments of the long cultural project of subjugating nature. There were no atoms before Democritus, or Dalton, or Bohr.” Since only one (welded) realm remains, truth can no longer be treated as a matter of correspondence between word and world, but is instead recast in terms of internal consistency or intersubjective agreement. Pluralism is easily licensed—there are many such worlds, not one—satisfying various political and cultural mandates. It is a Pyrrhic victory, however, based on a fragmented and ultimately shallow conception. Of many problems, two loom largest: the lack of humility, since no distance is allowed between what we think and what is the case; and the parochiality, since there is no way to acknowledge a common ground in terms of which to establish communion or collaboration across the cultural diversity. The situation is actually rather ironic: by assuming no separation between word and world, the separation between communities becomes complete and unbridgeable.

One final example will illustrate the reach of this stubborn metaphysical discreteness. This is the familiar, though rather fatalist, view that even if there is a world “out there,” it is a world “lost beyond a veil of words.” All is text or writing, it is said—or at least that is all we have access to. Even if there is a transcendent world, in other words, enjoying a pure noumenal existence, it must remain forever beyond our phenomenal grasp. “We cannot know it because our only connection to reality is through our words and thoughts. There is no such thing as contact with the world in pure, unregistered form.”

There is much that is right in this argument, especially the claim that we have no conscious access to the world independent of historical, cultural, and personal interpretation. But from the fact that we have no access *independent* of such interpretation, it does not follow that we have no access to it at all, or that the access we have is entirely determined by those interpretive schemes. That conclusion would only follow if, as in the other cases, a background discreteness were presumed: an assumption that the two realms, of mind and/or language, on the one hand, and the pure noumenal world, on the other, were wholly and irretrievably severed.

4 Registration

What would it be to recognise, finally, that the various constitutive forms of metaphysical separation—semantic, between representation and represented; ontological, between and among the parts of divvied-up reality; conceptual, between and among concepts, types, or properties; and abstractive, between those properties or types and the ontological world they classify—what would it be to recognise that these forms of separation, like the separations we maintain in our political and emotional lives, are all *partial*: negotiated, gradual, welling up and subsiding, dynamically maintained, in a kind of on-going dance? What would it be to see the world as partially pulled apart, that is, making room for pluralism, error, autonomy, individuality, and heterogeneity, and as partially put together, making room for normativity, communion, humility, and transcendence? It is not so difficult an image. Think of a potter pulling apart a particular sticky kind of clay, pushing globs of it away, stretching and squishing and clumping it together, forming shapes and drawing out spaces between and around it—except that we potters are just more clay.

The suggestion makes sense of common experience. In our on-going life processes, including but not limited to our mental representation of the world we live in, we *register* the world—find it coherent; push it around, to make our way; “carve it up,” not just metaphorically, but also literally, as for example when we mark out a path, make dinner, or adopt a political system. Registration is an indissoluble activity that constitutes conceived differentiation. It is indissoluble not because it is atomic or homogenous, but because it cannot be legitimately separated into two independent parts: the part we do, and the part the world does. The point is that we neither impose nor discover the texture of the world; we participate in it. And yet this participation is not fusion. We neither dissolve into our surroundings, nor do we create them, nor are we ripped entirely out of them. We pull apart somewhat—to varying extents, at varying times, for varying purposes.

There are both negative and positive consequences to this ultimately gradualist view. On the negative side, it is immediate that the notions of representation and ontology must both be set aside. Representation is the projection of registration onto an al-

legedly distinct agent. Ontology is the projection of registration onto the allegedly distinct world. Both are mistakes. Neither concept on its own, nor the two in combination, can capture the integral nature of our registrational practices any more than a shadow can capture the breath and sweat of a live human being.

It is not enough, to capture this thick unity of registration, to do as some have suggested, and merely expand our conception of the mental from disconnected thought to a fuller-blooded notion of experience. For one thing, chopping down trees, getting older, and being in someone's game plan are no more experiences than they are thoughts, but they nonetheless underwrite our semantic and representational capacities. But the moral goes deeper. Strictly speaking, we do not, in the first instance, *do* these things at all, let alone experience them; rather, we are constituted by their characteristic texture of separation and engagement. We do not have an independently warranted existence as entities, that is, apart from our participation in these patterns of activity. Rather, we sediment out as individuals and communities in virtue of the blends of connection and disconnection that endlessly well up and subside.

This leads directly to the positive consequence. It turns out, on this story, that all objects and entities—including the most ordinary, material, classifiable things—are constituted by these patterns of separation and engagement. The separation is necessary, as in the perceptual case, in order to coalesce into a unity what in unregistered form is more like a seething, riotous, differentiable landscape—something of a primordial cacophony (except that even to say that is to register it). An object is an abstraction, in the literal sense that what varies across its numerous dimensions—spatial, temporal, categorical—is thrown or set aside, while the rest is gathered into a stable, predicable, whole. Stability is required, stability that eventually settles into the object as object, like dew into arid ground, but that arises, first, as a stability of interaction between object and objectifying subject. This interactive stability (what is right about the notion of perceptual invariants) is an extraordinary intentional achievement. Except, it should immediately be noted, that this entire way of putting things presumes a distinct subject and object, which is wrong. The point, rather, is that these stabilities—which, crucially, are

stabilities of separation—arise as bridges across the flux, allowing parts of it to pull away from other parts, thereby escaping the constant buffeting of complete physical coupling, and yet to remain coordinated, so that all connection is not lost.

Objects, that is to say, must be *held*—and at a respectful distance. If gripped too tightly, they will vibrate with every nuance of objectifying agent, so that neither subject nor object sediments out as a partially autonomous individual. There just won't be enough quiet or separation to quell the underlying boiling flux. If, on the other hand, the stuff of the object is so separated from the objectifying agent that the appropriate interactive stabilities cannot be established, then the object will again subside into disintegrated oblivion, at least in any sense of being a stable, delineated, unit entity. In this way a simple overall picture emerges: that all things that exist—people, governments, traffic, paintings, friendship—are mutually sustained inhabitants in the *middle distance* of each other's world view.

One of the great achievements of civilisation has been the gradual extension of this holding over longer and longer distances. This is what is right about social construction: to hold and sustain an individual electron, or the rotation of a distant galaxy, or the survival strategies of *Australopithecus africanus*, requires a monumental and historical effort of collective stabilisation. At the same time, however, what it is that is held, abstracted out from the background, and thus registered, is a collaborative enterprise of the entire world, not merely the local product of our own embodied intentional activity.

Think, to make this vivid, of how dancers construct, play with, and are sustained by a mutually constituted blend of separation and coupling.

The world is such a dance.

5 Painting

What happens when a painter paints a picture of a pipe? How, on this emergent picture, do we understand an ordinary "figural" picture of an everyday object? This much can be said: a painter so arranges paint on canvas that, in the indissoluble event that arises when we hold ourselves an appropriate distance apart from the picture—an event in which we are essential participants, and that

among other things involves processes that well up, largely unconsciously, within us (processes that constitute us, in fact)—we register a pipe.

Registration is what Adam Lowe captures in his painting. He does not do that by painting registration, whatever that rather intellectual thing would be to do. Rather, he so arranges paint that our bodies well up and inexorably start to register. Just as the act of registration begins to take hold, however, so too it slows to a gradual stop, held in a state of animated suspension. It does not halt completely, in the sense of aborting or failing, only to run on unchecked to some other activity. Rather, the act itself is held in quiescence.



Adam Lowe — Verso 1

Think of how, when you leap into glacial water, your heart races, but the muscles in your chest freeze, immobilized. With a sufficient act of will, it is possible to slow your heart and ease your lungs, and thus to start, even if hesitantly, to breathe. Crucially, the act of will has to be sustained; the moment it is relinquished, the body reverts to its previous panicked state. What Lowe offers us is the chance, in collaboration with him, to engage in an analogous act of will: to temporarily quieten the registrational urge, and thus to stop the registration mid-stream. The net result is that the act of registration is itself held, as a gift, at the edge of consciousness.

What enables the registration to be “stilled” in this sense—without being damaged—is the care with which Lowe manages

the separations. As an arranger of paint, he starts with ontological separation—of colour, texture, placement. The result is not just splattered, so as to dissolve into the background cacophony; that would defeat the urge to establish interactive stability. Neither is it thoroughly assembled, leading to the automatic categorisation of a series of discrete, stabilised unities. Rather, it occupies a crucial middle ground. Uneasy suggestions of regions, shades of proto-objects, flashes of patterns and perspective—these things entice the viewer's registrational capacities to start the inexorable process of pulling away, grouping, even characterising (though



Adam Lowe — Verso ■■

not yet in anything like a conceptual way). What Lowe provides, that is, is just the right minimal raw material so that the viewer begins to establish inchoate semantic and conceptual separations.

It is a measure of the success with which registration is thus held open that we do not, on first encounter with these pictures, see paint. That would only happen if, instead of being sustained in partial form, the (fragile) semantic disconnection were defeated: either by being sundered, or by being fused. In both cases, we would have no recourse except to lapse into the reflective position of conceptualising the painting as painting. And note how Lowe achieves this suspended registration. Unlike this text, which points at it by extrinsic suggestion, he gives us an actual, intrinsic tug. A viewer in front a Lowe painting is not *about* the emergence of separation; it

is the emergence of separation.

This is why Lowe's paintings are the opposite of abstract. On the contrary, it is pictures of pipes that are abstract. Pipes themselves are abstracted entities, for one thing, sedimented out of the



Adam Lowe — Verso ■■

flux, and held in a kind of social middle distance, through a maze of cultural and personal habits. Pictures of pipes—arrangements of paint that lead the partially separated viewer to register pipes—unleash even more complex acts of abstraction, in part because of the indirectness of the registration, and in part because of the essential classification. Lowe paints much closer to the ground, which is why his canvases remind us of the preorganic world—of rock and ice and lichen, of Creation on the third day. Not that they engage us with fully-coupled concreteness, in the face of which we would merely separate ourselves from the painting *qua* painting, and register random splotches of paint. That would be easy, and concomitantly boring. Instead, they stop and hold us in our tracks, catching us red-handed in the initial stages of holding up the world.