

# The World In View

*Michael Luntley*

## I

In experience the world comes into view. Experience can be a direct experience of the world. On such a view, what we receive in experience is not a facsimile of the world, it is the real thing. This is a direct realist model of experience. It is an attractive model. For the direct realist, what it is to be a conscious subject is to be engaged with the world. Our consciousness does not leave us semidetached from things but, often enough, in direct presence of things. I shall call this the unitary model of experience.

To say that the world is directly present in experience is to challenge the prevailing view, articulated in detail by Kant, but common from earlier philosophers like Locke and Hume. The prevailing view is indirect realism. It embodies a binary model of experience in which experience has two components: the raw given - sense-data, intuitions - plus concepts that organise the given. The given is supplied by the world, concepts are supplied by the mind. It takes two to make an experience.

In this essay I want to examine one aspect of the unitary model of experience. I want to examine the question of the boundary between self and world. The unitary model of experience is attractive and, I suspect, correct. It is, however, problematic, for in jettisoning the binary model it is, *prima facie*, unclear where the world ends and the self begins in experience. The idea of a unitary model of experience has acquired renewed interest in contemporary philosophy. The idea is central to the renewed interest in Sellars' seminal critique of the 'myth of the given',<sup>1</sup> and to contemporary work on singular thoughts.<sup>2</sup> The latter provides a simple illustration of the central idea.

## II

Suppose you have a perceptual demonstrative thought about a piece of chalk. You think, This is white.

How could you have the 'this-ness' part of the thought without the object? How could there be a 'this' way of thinking of an object without the object to which the 'this' way of thinking is orientated? If the answer to these questions is that you cannot make sense of the 'this' way of thinking independently of the object to which the thought is orientated, then the individuation of the thought is object-dependent. This is a way of thinking that is only available if the object is present in experience. Having the experience of thinking

This is white.

is not possible without the object that provides the focus to the experience. This account of perceptual demonstrative thoughts is not uncontentious, although I think it is correct.

Whether or not it is correct is not, however, relevant.<sup>3</sup> This idea illustrates

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the unitary account of experience and what I am interested in is the unitary account of experience. I want to know what it means to say that experience is unitary.

If the world, rather than merely sense-data, can be available in experience, then it is the world that is in view, not the given and what is in view directly engages with thought. The denial of the given means that concepts apply directly to the world. On this unitary model of experience, there is nothing else for concepts to apply to. On a binary model the given is causally produced and then rationally organised by concepts. On the unitary model, the world itself is rationally organised in thought. That is what is meant by saying that, on such a view, the world falls within the space of reasons.<sup>4</sup>

The problem with this view is if the world enters directly into the conceptual content of experience (the world is rationally engaged), what becomes of the idea of receptivity? What becomes of the idea that experience involves something that impinges on us? The attraction of the binary model is that it has a simple story about receptivity. Receptivity is explained by the first component, the causal receipt of the given. Experience also has a spontaneity to it as we organise the given with concepts. On the binary model there is, in principle, a clear divide between self and world. Of course, it is notoriously difficult to pin down precisely where that divide occurs, but the general idea is that there is a point in the causal sequence that produces experience where, as it were, causation leaves off and we take over. That is the point where receptivity ends and spontaneity begins. It is the point where the self meets the world. And it's the existence of this point that appears to make it easy for the binary model to explain error and false thoughts. One attraction of the unitary model is that it does not separate receptivity and spontaneity. In particular, spontaneity is integral to the account of what it is to experience the world. But that attraction is also what makes the model problematic, for if spontaneity is too apparent in experience, what becomes of receptivity, the idea that we are impinged upon? And if that is unclear then, what is missing in the unitary model is a clear account of how to individuate the point where the world ends and the self begins.

The binary model has considerable intuitive appeal. It accommodates familiar Cartesian fantasies about our detachment from things. In the film, *The Matrix*, the central character Neo starts off as a victim of the Matrix - the artificial intelligence that gives people the experience of leading autonomous lives when, in fact, they are biological batteries for the Matrix. The film captures the intuitive appeal of the Cartesian binary model of experience, for it provides for the possibility that what we get in experience is less than the world as conceptualised. What Neo gets is a given (sense-data) that is then conceptually organised to produce an experience as of a real world. The experience is misleading, for the conceptual organisation is not faithful to the real causal source of the given.

It might seem that the intuitive plausibility of the Matrix scenario shows that the unitary model of experience cannot be right. Surely, so the thought might go, we understand the Matrix scenario and that understanding requires the binary model of experience? If so, the unitary model has a real problem in accounting for the intelligibility of that film. My response to this is to argue that, properly understood, the Matrix requires the unitary model. Furthermore, properly understood, the Matrix shows that the unitary model has a powerful account of the subject/world boundary, a

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boundary that, on closer examination, is deeply problematic on the binary model. In other words, much as in the Matrix, things ain't quite what they seem.

### III

The binary model looks attractive. It is, however, deeply flawed. The attraction of the model is, as noted, its ready account of receptivity - the idea that the world impinges on us in experience. Receptivity is explained in terms of the causal receipt of the given. This apparent strength is the model's chief flaw.

The concept of the given has to achieve two things. It has to account for receptivity - experience impinges on us, plus it has to show that receptivity provides that against which we adjust belief. The latter is the idea that experience can give us reason to revise belief, for it can falsify our beliefs. Now, for experience to provide reason to revise belief, the source of this cannot be the second component - the application of concepts to the given. If that were so, we would only ever revise our beliefs (operations of concepts) against other beliefs (operations of concepts). That does not provide the notion of that against which we revise belief, for it only provides a model of revising a belief with respect to another belief. That is why, although we say it is experience that can give us reason to revise belief, it must be the first component - the given - that supplies the force to belief revision.

Note the problem here is not that if we only ever revise belief against another belief we can never know that the revision is correct. That epistemological problem, although real, is not my concern. The problem is that the idea of revising a belief in terms of another belief does not provide an adequate account of what revision consists in. The point against using the second component to achieve this is not an epistemological point, it is a metaphysical point. It is a point about what is constitutive of the idea of revision. The thought is simply that for genuine revision to be possible, belief must be measured against something independent of belief. And that cannot therefore be another belief. This means that the given has to capture both the idea of receptivity as bare impact and also as rational force to belief revision.

But the given cannot discharge both requirements. It captures the idea of impact by virtue of its causal character. The receptivity of the given is the receipt of something prior to the operation of concepts, for on the binary model that comes later. That is why receptivity is construed causally. Thus construed, it readily captures the idea that receptivity is concerned with things without the mind, things that impinge upon us. And it is this that gives us a clear model of the boundary between world and self, for the world is outside the mind because it is beyond the causal boundaries of the self. It gets to be outside because of the way it causally impacts on us.

However, if receptivity is characterised causally it cannot provide the rational force for belief revision. When experience gives us reason to revise our beliefs, the impact is rational, not causal. Having an experience that calls for the revision of belief is not simply a matter of being hit! The given as causal receipt prior to the operation of concepts is a mere bully; it is not the sort of thing that can stand in relations of rational support. But that means that, on the binary model, the rational force of belief revision cannot occur until after the given has been taken up by concepts. But that means that the rational force of belief revision is not an impact at all, for it arises from

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within the operation of concepts – it arises from within the second component. If that is the source of belief revision, then it is, as we have seen, no real source of belief revision at all.

What looks attractive in the binary model is its central flaw. The attraction is a simple account of error, for when experience is mistaken, this is explained as a deviant application of concepts to the given. Veridical and illusory experiences have a common factor - the common way we take sense-data whether or not the data come from the world or from the Matrix. Error consists in taking the wrong interpretation of the given. But, in reality, this means that there is no real notion of error, for error should amount to the idea that one ought to revise belief in the face of recalcitrance. As we have seen, the binary model does not, in truth, have a credible concept of recalcitrance, for the given as such has no right interpretation. The given is just causal given. Rightness or wrongness of interpretation is wholly to do with what happens after concepts have been applied.

#### IV

Can the unitary model do any better? What is required is a model of experience in which what is in experience is both something that impinges on us and carries the rational force needed for belief revision. With the world in view, the unitary model perhaps captures the idea of rational force required for belief revision, but it can appear to do so in a way that makes it inadequate for the same reason as the binary model.

The problem with the binary model was that it had a clear model of receptivity and an inadequate model of belief revision. The unitary model, in having the world in view, claims to have the very thing that impinges on us within the space of reasons. It claims to have that which is outside the mind fully engaged with concepts in belief formation and revision. That being so, it should have a ready and simple model of belief revision. But, of course, what is problematic here is the idea that it really is the world that comes into view. The worry must be that the unitary model collapses to just one half of the binary model, the half represented in the second component. That is to say, the obvious worry with the unitary model is that it accommodates the idea of the rational force of belief revision by treating beliefs as measured only against other beliefs. If so, it fails at the same hurdle that stops the binary model. If that were right, it would turn out that there was no adequate account of a self/world boundary in the unitary model, for there would be no adequate account of the world.

The issue about the nature of the self/world boundary is the issue about being clear that it really is the world that comes into view on the unitary model and not merely a facsimile of the world composed out of our concepts. What is needed then is a concept of the impact characteristic of experience that both captures the intuitive idea of impact and provides something that rationally engages with belief. The unitary model claims to have such an account, for it claims that the world is in view. The world is what impacts on us and, on the unitary model, concepts apply directly to the world. The bit that I am insisting is not quite clear in this model concerns the concept of 'impact'. Without a causal model of impact, with what right can the unitary model of experience genuinely capture the receptivity of experience? That is the problem.

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There is an answer to this and it is simple to state, but what it means offers a shift in the way we have been used to think about experience. The concept of the world that comes into view cannot be characterised causally nor can its impact be characterised causally. If it were characterised causally, it would not be suited to rationally engage with concepts. The problem is to find an alternative to a causal characterisation. The alternative that I suggest is to conceive of the world as that which is independent of will. The concept of receptivity is handled in terms of things independent of will. My experience impacts in so far as it has a content that thwarts my will. Of course, often enough, the normal way in which things thwart my will is due to their causal powers and capacities – tables and chairs get in my way as I move around. But the idea of receptivity is not understood in terms of the causal bumps and bruises such things provide; it is understood in terms of the more primitive idea that these are things independent of will. It is not that such things causally impinge on me that makes them part of the world, it is that their causal impinging is contrary to my will.

With this more abstract account of the impact in experience there is nothing to stand in the way of the thought that what is independent of will can rationally engage with concepts. The problem with the binary model is that receptivity is characterised in a way that makes it unavailable to concepts. The more abstract characterisation does not have this consequence. One way of making this plain is simply to remark that the concept of the world as that which is independent of will is a concept of the world as understood from within the conceptually structured point of view of the subject.

The concept of the world under the binary model is of a place characterised with a privileged set of concepts - those that characterise its causal properties that account for the physics of its interactions with our perceptual systems. A richer characterisation, for example in terms of properties that we find rationally salient, is, at best, a characterisation of the world as conceptualised by us. For the binary model, that richer characterisation is, potentially, a characterisation only of the world as we take it to be after processing through our concepts, rather than a characterisation of how it is.

For the unitary model, there is no principled requirement for a gap between a characterisation of the world in terms of basic concepts that characterise it as it is, and those concepts that characterise it only as we happen to take it to be.<sup>5</sup> We might want to make a distinction between those concepts that reflect how the world really is and others that merely reflect something local about our perspective on it, but there is no requirement to draw such a distinction that flows from the basic account of what is going on in experience.

That is one respect in which a unitary model of experience challenges fundamental ideas about experience, ideas that have their roots in traditional empiricism. The challenge, however, runs much deeper. If we think of the world as, in the first instance, that which is independent of will, that can only make sense if we acknowledge that the subject of experience is a self-as-will.<sup>6</sup> The concept of the world is not given independently of the concept of the subject of experience. Our concepts of both items are mutually dependent. This has a number of consequences. I shall remark here on just one.

Traditional empiricism conceived of experience fundamentally as a given. The role of the subject is passive - the subject receives inputs. It is because of this passivity that it looks easy for the binary model to account for the boundary between self and world in causal terms. If the account of the unitary model that I have suggested is correct, we have to consider a much more dynamic model of experience. Experience is not a receipt of items from the world, it is a tussle, an ongoing tension between will and non-will. Experience is a dynamic engagement in which the will is variously satisfied and thwarted. The traditional empiricist model is often conceived in terms of a display in the Cartesian inner theatre. It is like watching a private slide show, or movie film. That, of course, is the image suggested by the Matrix. On the unitary model, that cannot be right. Experience is not fundamentally an inner display, it is an ongoing tussle between will and that which can thwart it as we strive to bring our will into a stable relation with the world. In experience, we do not receive 'things' from the world at all; we adjust the tensions in the balance between will and non-will. In experience we are in the world.

But what about the Matrix? Surely that film illustrates clearly the empiricist binary model in which experience is the receipt of an inner movie? Although that thought is tempting, I think it is wrong. Indeed, the Matrix endorses the unitary model of experience that I have been describing. On the unitary model, the boundary between self and world is marked by the infringements to will. The distinction between reality and appearance is the distinction between that which is independent of will and that which is not. And that is precisely the account of the boundary between self and world that we get in the Matrix. The account of experience illustrated by that film is the unitary model. Neo learns the difference between reality and the Matrix because the latter is subject to will. When he is in the Matrix he learns that how things go can be determined by will. It is a difficult lesson, but he learns how to dodge bullets. He comes to know that, in karate, as Morpheus tells him 'you are faster than that', even though he is already moving at impossible speeds. In the end, in the Matrix Neo learns that a man can fly. In reality, he cannot fly. It is only when plugged into the Matrix that how things are becomes subject to will so that eventually, even when hit by a hail of bullets, he does not die. The message is all about the self-as-will. It is a message that requires that the self/world boundary in experience is not the fine line where receptivity ends and spontaneity begins. The self/world boundary in experience is itself a negotiation between receptivity and spontaneity, the negotiation between will and non-will. And this is the unitary model of experience in which we have the world in view.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf W. Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* reprinted with an introduction by R. Rorty and a study-guide by R. Brandom (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). See also McDowell's Woodbridge Lectures 1997: Having the world in View: Sellars, Kant and Intentionality', *Journal of Philosophy* vol **95**, No. 9: 431-91.

<sup>2</sup> G. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1982), cf M. Luntley, *Contemporary Philosophy of Thought: truth, world, content* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), especially Chapters 11, 12.

<sup>3</sup> The contentious bit concerns the scope for false thoughts. How is error possible if the thought is object-dependent? This turns out not to be a problem, cf. Luntley op. cit Ch.12. Rather than explain that issue, let me instead approach the same point from a different angle. The World In View *Richmond Journal of Philosophy* 3 (Spring 2003) Michael Luntley Page 7 of 7

<sup>4</sup> This phrase is due to Sellars *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> The privileged account is often thought of as an absolute conception of the world. See Bernard Williams, *Descartes* (London: Penguin, 1978), Chapter 2 for a detailed study of the idea of the absolute conception of the world primary/secondary qualities distinction.

<sup>6</sup> This move is central to my reading of Wittgenstein. See my *Wittgenstein: the conditions for the possibility of judgement* (Oxford: Blackwell, *in press, forthcoming* 2003).