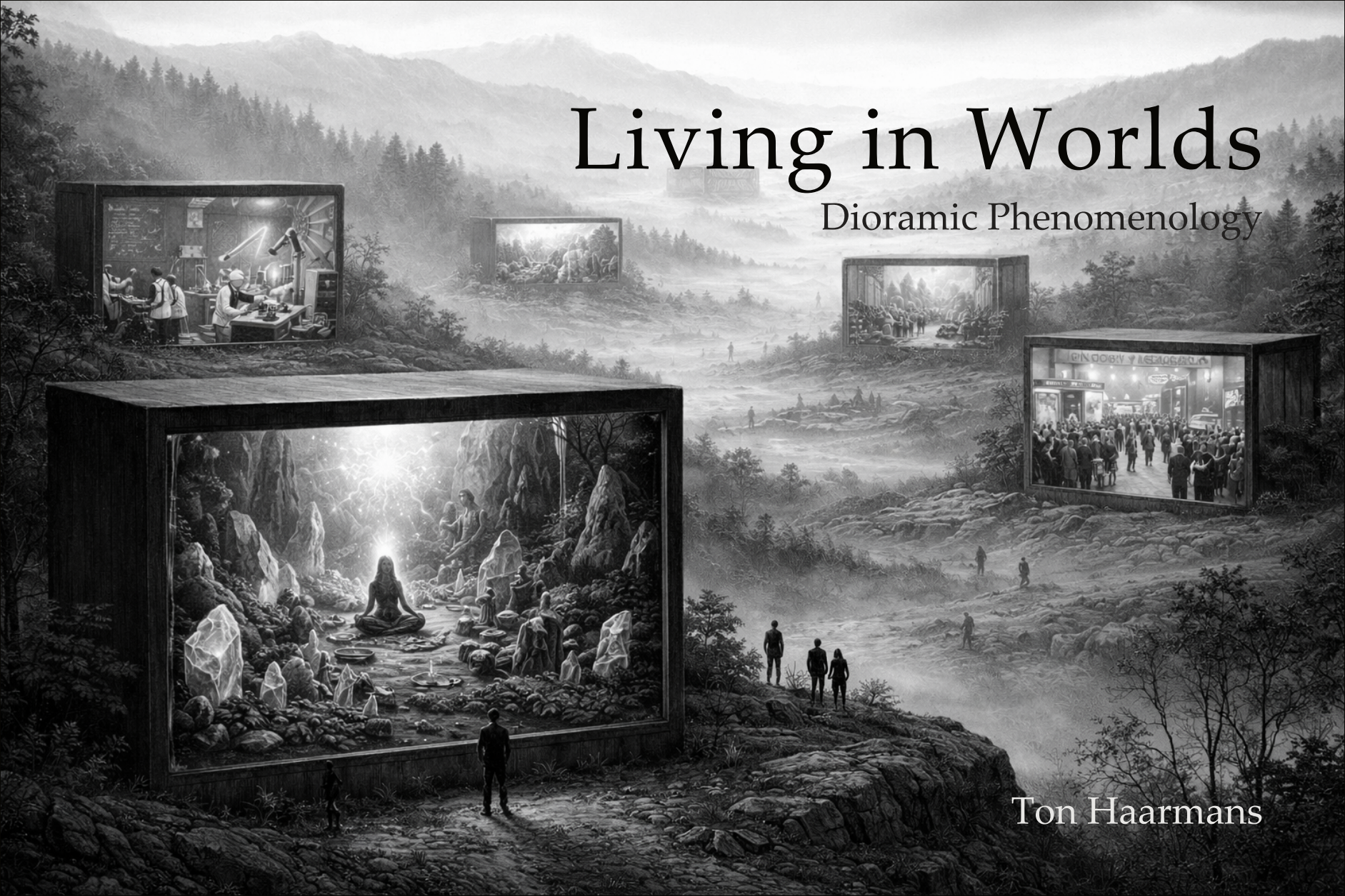
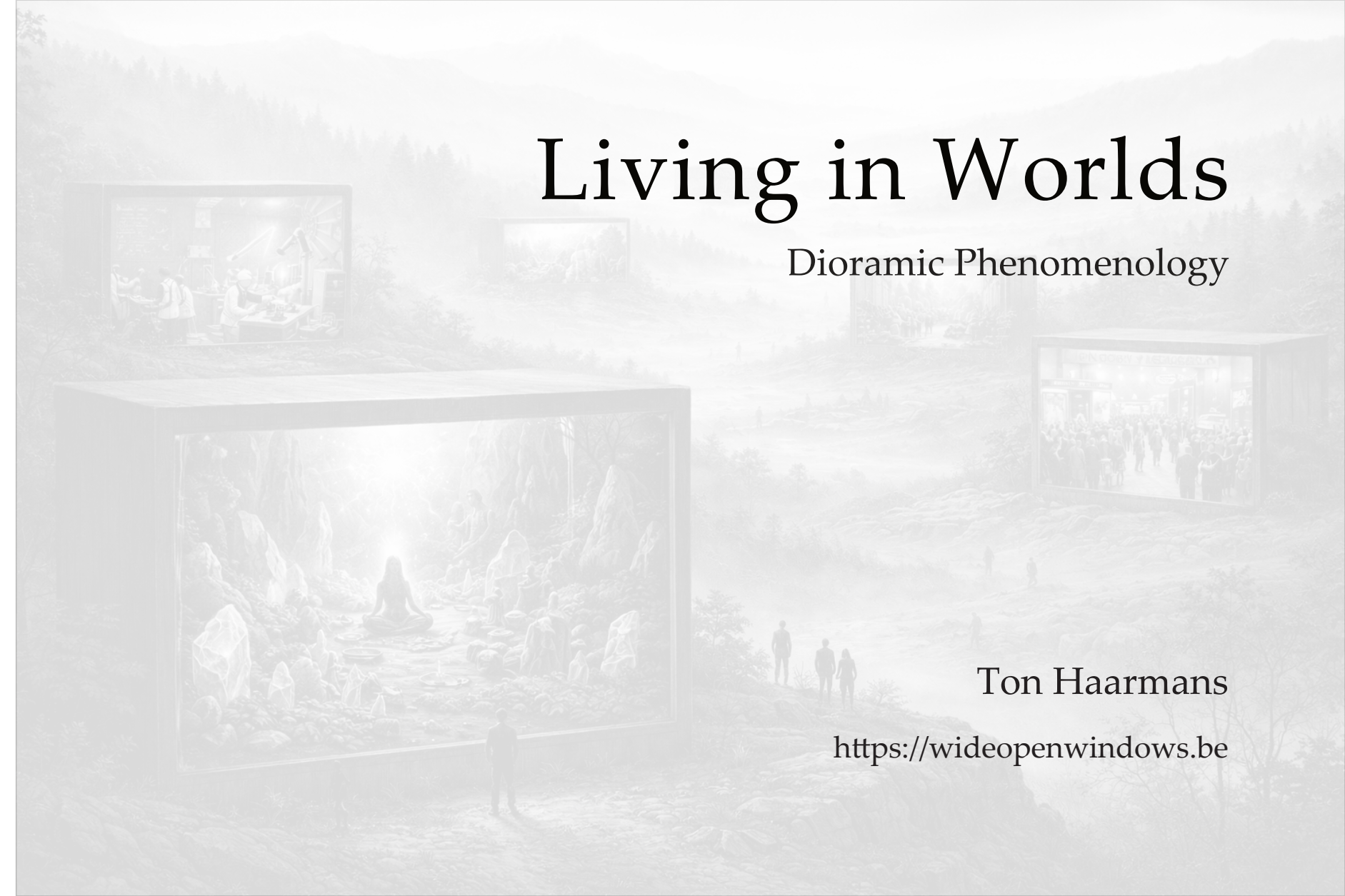

Living in Worlds
Dioramic Phenomenology
Ton Haarmans



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Contemporary text-assistance tools were used during the writing process to maintain clarity and coherence; the content, direction, and all decisions remain entirely the author's own.

This book unfolds in three movements:

1. When Things Make Sense approaches plurality from the side of recognizability. It asks whether the plurality of worlds described here can be encountered without philosophical training, without technical vocabulary, and without theoretical allegiance. Its task is not to explain, but to allow recognition to occur where explanation would already impose a frame.

2. Speaking from Within approaches plurality from within its lived coherence. It allows configurations of experience to speak in their own voice, without immediately subjecting them to reflexive scrutiny. Its risk is involvement. Its strength lies in showing how a world holds together from the inside, without distance and without overview.

3. Worlds Without Ground approaches plurality at the level of the conditions under which such descriptions are possible. It does not seek to correct the previous parts, nor to ground them. Its task is to delimit what can be said without reinstating foundations, hierarchies, or a privileged standpoint.

These projects are not stages in a progression, nor perspectives that complement one another. They are placed side by side because none of them can do what the others do without ceasing to function as intended. Their coexistence does not resolve plurality; it keeps it exposed.

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Movement 1

When Things Make Sense

Different Worlds

Two people can stand in the same room and live in different worlds.

Not because they disagree, or because one is wrong and the other is right, but because different things matter to them, in ways that are not chosen and not easily explained.

One person looks at a situation and immediately asks: *What is going on here? What caused this? How can it be fixed?* Another feels first whether something resonates, whether it feels meaningful, whether it fits into a larger pattern. A third responds almost automatically in terms of obligation: *What is expected of me? What would be appropriate?*

None of these reactions are deliberate. They happen before reflection sets in. By the time we begin to think about what we are doing, a world is already in place.

This becomes visible most clearly when people talk past one another. Not because they refuse to listen, but because what counts as a relevant response is already different. What one person experiences as obvious strikes another as beside the point. What feels decisive to one seems irrelevant to the other.

In such moments, it is tempting to explain the difference in terms of opinions, beliefs, or values. But that explanation often comes too late. The divergence lies deeper than disagreement. It lies in how situations show up in the first place.

Most of the time, we do not notice this. Worlds function best when they are invisible. We only become aware of them when friction appears: when communication falters, when justification fails, when something that makes perfect sense to us no longer seems to land.

This book starts from those moments. Not to resolve them, and not to tell us how to live with them, but to

notice what they reveal about how experience takes shape.

At the Margins

Consider a scientist who prides herself on being rigorous. She trusts data, methods, replication. She dislikes vague claims and becomes impatient when arguments drift away from evidence. In her professional life, this orientation works well. It gives her a sense of clarity and control.

One morning, out of curiosity or boredom, she reads her horoscope.

Not seriously. Not as a source of knowledge. She would never cite it, never defend it, never allow it into her work. And yet she reads it. Perhaps she smiles. Perhaps one sentence sticks. For a moment, it feels oddly fitting.

Nothing has changed. She has not abandoned science. She has not "integrated" astrology into her worldview. The horoscope does not suddenly become true in the way a well-supported hypothesis is true.

What appears, briefly, is something else: a different way in which the day can feel meaningful, without obligation and without consequence. It does not compete. It does not demand justification. It does not ask to be taken seriously.

If someone were to point this out to her, she might dismiss it as harmless, irrational, or irrelevant. And she would be right, according to the standards that normally guide her thinking. Those standards remain intact.

What is interesting here is not the content of the horoscope, but the ease with which two incompatible ways of making sense can coexist without merging. One governs action and decision. The other flickers at the margins, tolerated precisely because it has no authority.

This kind of situation is more common than we like to admit. It does not signal confusion or inconsistency. It shows that worlds are not sealed containers. They function by drawing boundaries around what counts, not by excluding everything else from appearing.

We usually notice this only in retrospect, if at all. Most of the time, life moves on without comment. But these small

moments reveal something important: the world we live in is not the only one that can appear, even if it is the only one that can act.

What Counts

When the word *world* is used here, it does not mean a physical place, a culture, or a group of people. It does not refer to a belief system, a lifestyle, or a personal identity.

A world, in this sense, is not something we step into or out of at will.

It is the way a situation already makes sense before we begin to think about it.

In one world, a question immediately calls for an explanation. Causes matter. Evidence matters. What cannot be tested feels suspicious or beside the point. In another world, what matters first is whether something feels meaningful, whether it resonates, whether it fits into a larger story. In yet another, situations are read in terms of roles, expectations, and obligations.

These are not interpretations added afterward. They are not opinions layered on top of a neutral reality. They are the background against which things show up as relevant or irrelevant, serious or trivial, urgent or negligible.

This is why worlds are usually invisible. We do not experience them as frameworks. We experience them as reality itself.

Only when friction appears do we begin to notice that what feels obvious to us does not feel obvious to someone else. At that point, disagreement is already too late. The difference lies not in what people think, but in what counts as something to think about at all.

Calling this a *world* is not meant to inflate it. It is meant to avoid reducing it to beliefs, preferences, or psychology. A world is simply the coherence within which experience makes sense without needing to be explained.

Talking Past Each Other

Two people discuss the same situation.

One says: *"That doesn't make sense. There's no evidence for it."*
The other replies: *"But it feels right. Can't you see how it fits?"*

They are not talking about different things. They are talking about the same event, the same claim, the same situation. And yet the conversation stalls almost immediately.

The first person is not being stubborn. For her, something that cannot be supported by evidence simply does not register as a serious option. It feels premature, careless, or confused. The request for evidence is not a strategy; it is what relevance looks like.

The second person is not being evasive. For him, asking for evidence at this point misses the point entirely. What matters is whether the situation carries meaning, whether it resonates, whether it connects to a larger pattern. Demanding proof feels cold, reductionist, even disrespectful.

Each experiences the other as unreasonable.

What is striking is that neither is refusing to listen. They are responding appropriately—according to the world they are in. The problem is not disagreement. The problem is that what counts as a response is already different.

Attempts to resolve this usually fail. More arguments do not help. Better explanations do not help. Each new clarification only reinforces the sense that the other "doesn't get it."

This is often where conversations break down, or quietly end. Not with conflict, but with fatigue. A sense that further discussion would go nowhere.

Moments like these reveal what a world is. Not a set of

beliefs, but a way in which situations already call for certain kinds of responses and not others. When those calls differ, communication does not fail because people are irrational, but because they are answering different questions without knowing it.

Ordinary Judgements

A parent picks up a child from school.

The teacher mentions that the child has been unusually quiet in class. Nothing alarming, she says, just something to keep an eye on. The parent nods and listens.

On the way home, the parent asks the child how the day was. *"Fine."* No more details follow.

That evening, the parent keeps thinking about the comment. Something feels off. The child seems distracted, distant. The parent wonders whether something is wrong. Is there stress? Social trouble? A hidden worry?

Later that night, another adult hears the same story. *"Quiet in class?"* she says. *"That sounds good. Maybe the child is finally learning to focus."*

Both responses are sincere. Neither is careless.

For one person, a deviation from the norm immediately raises concern. Silence calls for interpretation. It suggests something beneath the surface that might need attention. For the other, the same behavior registers as improvement. Quietness signals discipline, maturity, or self-control.

Nothing has changed in the child. The difference lies entirely in how the situation is read.

If these two adults were to discuss the matter, they might be surprised by one another. Each would assume that the other is overreacting, or missing something obvious. The disagreement would not be about facts, but about what those facts *mean*.

Most of the time, such differences never become explicit. Decisions are made, actions follow, life continues. Only occasionally does the realization arise that what felt self-evident to one person was never self-evident to the other.

This is another way worlds operate. They quietly shape what feels like concern, improvement, risk, or success.

They guide attention long before reasons are given. And because they usually align with everyday routines, they remain unnoticed—until they don’t.

From Here

Most of the time, we live without noticing the worlds we inhabit.

We wake up, respond to situations, make judgments, take things seriously or dismiss them without hesitation. Life feels continuous. Coherent. It does not present itself as an interpretation among others, but as the way things simply are.

This is why worlds are rarely questioned. As long as they work, they remain invisible. Only when friction appears—when conversations stall, when actions misfire, when something that feels obvious no longer lands—do they begin to show themselves.

What this project has tried to do is nothing more than to slow down at those moments. Not to resolve them, and not to decide which world is right, but to notice what usually goes unnoticed: that experience does not arrive neutral, and that sense is already at work before reflection begins.

Instead of standing back and describing these worlds from a distance, one can remain within them and let them speak in their own voice. Not to justify them, and not to evaluate them, but to see how they hold together from the inside—how they organize relevance, normativity, and meaning without needing to explain themselves.

From here, another move becomes necessary.

Movement 2

Speaking from Within

Prelude

On the Occasion of This Work

The immediate occasion for this work lies in a growing unease with the way non-dual experience is commonly described and situated. Contemporary accounts of awakening frequently present such experience as a decisive shift into a more real, more fundamental, or more authentic mode of being. Ordinary, everyday experience is then implicitly or explicitly relegated to the status of illusion, distortion, or provisional appearance.

For a long time, I accepted this framing. I assumed that non-dual experience disclosed reality as it truly is, and that my ordinary experience of the world was, in some essential sense, secondary or false. What followed was the familiar expectation of transition: a movement from illusion to truth, from apparent reality to real reality, from surface to depth.

This transition was described in many ways: as waking up, as a shift, as the end of seeking. Yet it gradually became clear that such a shift could not be produced by any gradual means. Meditation, inner work, study, or sustained effort did not and could not bring it about. Where non-dual experience occurred, it did not appear as the result of a path completed or a discipline mastered. It happened, or it did not. Nothing could be done to make it happen.

This realization has a decisive consequence. If the non-dual shift cannot be reached through any gradual or cumulative means, then ordinary experience cannot coherently be treated as a provisional stage on the way to something more real. It is not something that fails because a more authentic reality lies elsewhere, nor something that awaits correction through effort or insight. Ordinary experience simply occurs. One finds oneself in it, without having chosen it.

The same holds for non-dual experience itself. Those who encounter it do not do so because they have arrived at a higher level of understanding or completed a necessary sequence of steps. They find themselves there, just as one finds oneself here. In neither case is there an act of transition that could ground a hierarchy between the two.

This symmetry undermines the assumption that non-dual experience establishes a privileged reality. If nothing can be done to reach it, then ordinary experience cannot be faulted for not having reached it. The absence of control applies equally. Neither configuration can claim authority over the other on the basis of effort, insight, or attainment.

What is at issue here is not the significance of non-dual experience. This work does not deny its occurrence, its disruptive force, or its capacity to unsettle deeply held assumptions. What is refused is the inference from experiential disruption to ontological priority. The fact that an experience destabilizes familiar structures does not entail that it reveals a more fundamental layer of reality.

Once this inference is suspended, a more general problem comes into view. The difficulty is not limited to non-dual discourse. Across philosophical, spiritual, and scientific contexts, experience is repeatedly organized in vertical terms: deeper and shallower, primary and derivative, fundamental and secondary. Even approaches that explicitly reject metaphysics often retain these hierarchies at the level of description.

What remained, then, was not the need for a different experience, but the need for a different way of speaking. A way of describing experience that does not rely on ascent or depth, illusion or truth, but attends instead to how different forms of experience function as worlds in their own right.

The question ceased to be how to move from one reality to another. It became a question of how realities take shape at all.

This work begins from that shift in orientation. It does not seek to replace one hierarchy with another, nor to establish a new foundational standpoint. It asks instead whether experiential plurality can be described without presupposing that one mode of experience is more real, more originary, or more fundamental than others.

The chapters that follow pursue this question by examining how experience organizes itself into coherent, livable worlds, and by developing a descriptive approach that resists the recurrent temptation to translate coherence into hierarchy. What is at stake is not the denial of difference, intensity, or transformation, but the refusal to turn these into claims about what ultimately exists.

I

Clarity comes first.

If something is claimed, it must be shown. Not suggested. Not implied. Shown. What cannot be examined cannot guide action. Personal conviction is not enough. Resonance is not evidence.

A question demands explanation. A situation demands analysis. Ambiguity is a temporary state, not a resting place. If something appears unclear, the task is to refine the tools, gather more data, improve the method.

Precision is not a preference. It is a responsibility.

Decisions have consequences. Consequences affect others. To act on insufficient grounds is careless. To rely on what cannot be tested is to invite error. Error is not tragic, but it is preventable. Procedures exist for a reason.

Meaning is not something that hovers above events. It emerges when conditions are understood. When causes are identified. When patterns can be replicated. A claim becomes trustworthy when it survives scrutiny.

This does not deny experience. Experience is the starting point. But experience alone is unstable. It must pass through criteria that are shareable. If something matters, it must matter in a way that can be articulated and examined.

Without that, discourse dissolves into preference.

Seriousness lies in what can be justified. What cannot be justified may be interesting, but it cannot decide.

II

What matters is not explanation, but resonance.

A situation is not exhausted by its causes. It speaks. It carries a tone. Something feels aligned or out of place long before reasons are given. The body knows before the argument forms.

Meaning is not constructed. It is sensed.

When something “clicks,” it does not require proof. It requires recognition. A pattern appears. Connections become visible. Events are not isolated; they belong to a larger unfolding.

Evidence has its place, but it is not primary. What is primary is coherence at the level of lived experience. Does this fit? Does it deepen? Does it open something that was previously closed?

Reduction feels violent. To explain away is to flatten. Not everything that counts can be measured. Not everything that is real can be tested.

Growth is not linear. It is textured. Subtle shifts matter. A sentence, a dream, a coincidence may reorient a life. Not because it is verified, but because it resonates.

Skepticism is welcome, but not when it closes what it has not yet felt.

Seriousness here does not mean detachment. It means attunement. To ignore what calls from beneath the surface is to remain partial.

The world is layered. What appears on the surface is only part of the story.

III

Nothing needs to be added.

Experience is already whole.

What appears, appears as it is. The search for deeper explanation presupposes a lack that is not there. The demand for proof assumes distance where there is none.

Before interpretation, there is immediacy.

Thought divides. It organizes. It names. In doing so, it creates the impression of separation: subject and object, inside and outside, self and world. But this division is secondary. It is a movement within what is already undivided.

Nothing stands behind appearance. There is no hidden layer to uncover. The impulse to ground, to justify, to secure, arises within the same field it tries to explain.

What is sought is already present.

From here, conflict looks different. Disagreement does not threaten reality; it rearranges concepts. Urgency softens. The need to defend dissolves. What remains is simple presence.

This is not indifference. It is the absence of resistance.

Nothing needs to be proven. Nothing needs to be fixed.

What is, is sufficient.

The voices above do not argue for themselves. They do not defend their standards. They do not present themselves as perspectives among others. From within their respective coherences, what counts simply counts. What does not meet their criteria falls away without controversy.

Nothing here has been exaggerated. Nothing has been caricatured. The tones may appear firm, even narrow, but only because each speaks from inside its own demands. Every world sounds decisive when heard from within.

What becomes visible at this point is not the superiority of one register over another, but the structure of coherence itself.

A world does not begin with reflection. It begins with relevance. Certain questions arise naturally. Certain responses feel appropriate. Certain criteria are taken for granted long before they are articulated. From within such a configuration, alternatives do not appear as live options. They appear as confusions, distractions, or category mistakes.

The task of this movement is not to compare these coherences, nor to reconcile them. It is to clarify how they function.

To do that, the descriptive language of the previous movement is no longer sufficient. Description must now give way to articulation. The concern is no longer how worlds appear in friction, but how they hold together in their own terms.

What follows is therefore not a shift away from the voices just heard, but a clarification of their structure.

The aim is simple: to make explicit the conditions under which a configuration of experience can sustain its own coherence without appeal to a deeper foundation.

What must now be clarified is not the content of any one world, but the structure that allows such coherence to persist.

A world does not hold together by accident. It does not require an ultimate ground, but it does require internal articulation. Criteria must operate. Distinctions must function. Normativity must circulate within the configuration itself.

The question is therefore not which world is true, but how truth functions within a world.

Introduction

The Problem of Hierarchy in Experience

Philosophical reflection on experience rarely proceeds without hierarchy. Even where metaphysical claims are explicitly suspended, experience is often described as layered, ordered, or oriented toward a more basic level. Certain modes of appearing are treated as deeper, more originary, or more revealing than others. What appears ordinary, habitual, or taken for granted is then implicitly positioned as secondary, derivative, or distorted.

This vertical organization of experience is remarkably persistent. It appears in classical phenomenology, where analyses of structure are frequently articulated through notions of origin or depth. It appears in spiritual discourse, where ordinary experience is contrasted with awakening, immediacy, or non-dual awareness. It appears in scientific naturalism, where lived experience is redescribed as surface appearance overlaying more fundamental explanatory mechanisms. Across these contexts, experiential plurality is repeatedly ordered toward a privileged level.

Such hierarchies are rarely introduced as explicit metaphysical doctrines. More often, they enter description quietly, through metaphors of depth, priority, or disclosure. As a result, they tend to escape critical scrutiny. Experience is said to be structured, and this structure is then tacitly equated with fundamentality. Coherence is treated as evidence of depth; immediacy as a sign of ontological priority.

The persistence of this move raises a philosophical problem. If experience is always already structured and intelligible from within, why should that structure be interpreted vertically rather than horizontally? Why should differentiation within experience require grounding in a deeper layer? And on what basis is one

experiential configuration granted authority over others?

This work begins from the claim that such authority cannot be justified phenomenologically. No experience appears outside a configuration. Even experiences described as non-conceptual, pre-reflective, or subjectless are encountered within an organized field of relevance, expectation, and sense. Their immediacy does not place them outside experience; it situates them within a particular mode of experiential organization. To infer fundamentality from such features is not a descriptive necessity, but a conceptual choice.

What is at stake here is not the denial of experiential difference. Experiences differ in intensity, stability, scope, and consequence. Some disrupt familiar structures more radically than others. Some support intersubjective coordination, long-term continuity, or explanatory power in ways others do not. These differences are real and describable. The question is whether they warrant hierarchy.

This work argues that they do not. Differences of organization need not be translated into claims of priority. Experiential plurality can be acknowledged without being ordered toward a single ground. Worlds can be described without being ranked according to depth, purity, or proximity to reality.

To pursue this claim requires a shift in descriptive orientation. Instead of asking which experience is most basic, most authentic, or most revealing, this work asks how different experiences function as coherent worlds. A world, in this sense, is not a representation of an underlying reality, nor a perspective on a shared object. It is the way in which experience hangs together as reality at all. Worlds are not adopted or constructed from the outside; they are inhabited.

Describing worlds in this way entails a methodological restraint. The aim is neither to reduce experiential diversity to a common foundation nor to integrate different worlds into a single account. It is to clarify how

experiential configurations organize perception, relevance, temporality, and agency from within, without presupposing that one such configuration provides the standard for all others.

This restraint should not be confused with relativism. To suspend hierarchy is not to deny constraint, coherence, or evaluative distinction. Worlds differ in what they enable, sustain, or foreclose. They can be compared, criticized, and placed in tension with one another. What is refused is only the move by which such comparisons are anchored in an assumed underlying reality.

The question guiding this work can therefore be stated simply:

How can experiential plurality be described without presupposing hierarchy or fundamentality?

The chapters that follow pursue this question in four steps. The first part examines how hierarchical assumptions enter phenomenological description, even where metaphysical commitments are explicitly rejected. The second part develops an alternative descriptive framework in which worlds are understood as experiential configurations rather than as layers of reality. The third part applies this framework to a series of case studies, demonstrating how different worlds function from within without being ranked. The final part consolidates the methodological implications of this approach and articulates what may be called a flat phenomenology.

This work does not propose a new ontology, nor does it offer a synthesis of existing positions. It advances no claim about what ultimately exists beneath experience. Its ambition is more modest and more demanding: to remain with experience as it appears, without translating coherence into hierarchy or disruption into ground. What is sought is not a final account of reality, but a disciplined way of living with worlds.

Chapter 1

Phenomenology and Its Hidden Hierarchies

Phenomenology presents itself, from its inception, as a return to experience as it appears [1)]. Its ambition is explicitly descriptive rather than explanatory: to suspend metaphysical speculation and attend to phenomena in their givenness. Against naïve realism and theoretical abstraction, phenomenology seeks to clarify how experience is structured from within.

Yet this descriptive ambition is accompanied by a recurrent tension. While phenomenology rejects external metaphysical foundations, it frequently introduces internal distinctions that function as hierarchies. Certain modes of appearing are treated as more originary, more revealing, or more fundamental than others. What is presented as structure is subtly transformed into priority.

This chapter examines how such hierarchies enter phenomenological description, not as explicit ontological claims, but through methodological distinctions and organizing metaphors. The aim is not to collapse the differences between phenomenological projects, but to identify a shared structural gesture: the tendency to equate intelligibility with depth.

1.1 Husserl: Constitution and Functional Asymmetry

In Edmund Husserl's early work, phenomenology is framed as a rigorous science of experience grounded in intentionality. Consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, and objects are understood through the intentional acts by which they are given meaning. This move decisively breaks with naïve realism. Objects are no longer treated as self-subsistent entities encountered by a

detached subject, but as phenomena constituted within experience.

Husserl consistently emphasizes that phenomenology is descriptive rather than metaphysical. The transcendental reduction is not meant to posit a hidden realm of reality, but to clarify the conditions under which objects appear as meaningful at all. Nevertheless, the language of constitution introduces a functional asymmetry within experience. Certain structures are treated as conditions of possibility for others [2].

Even where constitution is not understood causally, the notion of grounding remains operative. Intentional acts, horizons, and pre-reflective structures come to function as more basic than the contents they organize. Experience is stratified, not ontologically but methodologically. Yet this stratification easily slides into hierarchy. What organizes experience is tacitly granted explanatory priority over what is organized.

This move has been widely discussed in phenomenological scholarship. While defenders of Husserl emphasize the non-metaphysical intent of the transcendental turn, critics have noted that the appeal to conditions of possibility risks reintroducing a foundational structure under a descriptive guise. The difficulty does not lie in recognizing structure, but in allowing structure to assume the role of origin [3].

1.2 Merleau-Ponty: Embodiment and the Metaphor of Depth

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment [4] is often read as a corrective to transcendental abstraction. By situating perception in the lived body, Merleau-Ponty dissolves the sharp opposition between subject and object and restores thickness to experience. Meaning is encountered in bodily engagement before it is articulated in reflection.

This shift has considerable descriptive force. Perception

is no longer anchored in a constituting consciousness, but in a body already situated in the world. Experience is not assembled from discrete acts, but unfolds as a field of practical involvement.

At the same time, Merleau-Ponty introduces a new organizing metaphor: depth [5]. Beneath reflective thought lies a pre-reflective layer of bodily attunement described as more originary. While intended to resist intellectualism, this appeal to depth reinstates a vertical ordering of experience. The pre-reflective is treated as grounding; the reflective as derivative.

The hierarchy here is not ontological in a traditional sense. It is phenomenological. Certain modes of appearing are granted greater descriptive authority. The bodily, the tacit, the pre-reflective are treated as closer to experience "as it really is." Once again, structure is translated into priority.

The present analysis does not deny the importance of embodiment. It questions only the inference from descriptive immediacy to foundational status. To describe bodily engagement as primary is already to rank experiential configurations, even when metaphysical claims are explicitly disavowed.

1.3 Heidegger: Disclosure and Ontological Privilege

Martin Heidegger radicalizes phenomenology by shifting its focus from experience to being. In *Being and Time*, phenomenological description is taken to disclose the meaning of Being itself. Experience is interpreted through structures of disclosure, and understanding is rooted in existential openness rather than in conscious acts.

Heidegger's critique of subjectivism and representationalism profoundly reshapes phenomenological inquiry. Everyday involvement is no longer understood as a deficient mode of access, but as the site where meaning is already at work. Nevertheless,

Heidegger introduces a decisive evaluative distinction between modes of being-in-the-world [6].

The contrast between everydayness and authenticity, however interpreted, establishes a hierarchy of disclosure. Certain ways of encountering the world are treated as more revealing of Being than others. Ontological weight is unevenly distributed [7]. What appears as a descriptive analysis of existence becomes a ranking of modes of access to reality.

As with Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, this hierarchy is rarely presented as a metaphysical claim. It emerges through the logic of the analysis itself. Disclosure is treated as a criterion of priority. What reveals Being more fully is granted greater philosophical authority.

1.4 Structure Without Foundation

Across these phenomenological projects, differences of vocabulary, method, and intent are substantial. Husserl's transcendental analysis, Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology, and Heidegger's existential ontology cannot be assimilated to a single position. Yet they share a structural tendency: the organization of experience is articulated through metaphors of origin, depth, or disclosure.

These hierarchies are not imposed from outside phenomenology. They arise from within its descriptive practice. The effort to avoid naïve empiricism and to account for the intelligibility of experience leads to the identification of organizing structures. The problem arises when these structures are treated as more fundamental than the experiences they organize.

This chapter aligns with critical strands in contemporary phenomenology that resist foundationalist readings without abandoning descriptive rigor [8]. Experience can be structured without being ordered toward a single origin. Differentiation does not require derivation. Organization does not entail fundamentality.

Rather than asking which layer of experience is primary, the following chapters pursue a different question: how different experiential configurations function as coherent worlds in their own right. What phenomenology gains thereby is not explanatory depth, but descriptive breadth. The search for foundations is suspended in favor of an attention to configuration.

This suspension does not weaken phenomenological description. It frees it from a vertical ordering that it cannot ultimately justify. The task becomes not to ground experience, but to describe how experience holds together wherever it appears as world.

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1) Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay (London: Routledge, 2001); Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Book I*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983). For a contemporary overview of phenomenology's descriptive self-understanding, see Dan Zahavi, *Phenomenology: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2019).

2) Husserl's notion of constitution is developed most explicitly in *Ideas I*, where objects are described as constituted within intentional life without thereby being reduced to subjective constructs. See Husserl, *Ideas I*, §§27–33.

3) This tension has been widely discussed in phenomenological scholarship. See, for example, Dan Zahavi, "Husserl's Noema and the Internalism–Externalism Debate," *Inquiry* 48, no. 1 (2005): 1–19; Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), esp. ch. 1.

4) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. D. A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), esp. Part I.

5) On the centrality of depth and pre-reflective life in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, see Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, and Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). The present reading emphasizes the methodological consequences of this metaphor rather than its ontological intent.

6) Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), esp. §§29–31.

7) For discussions of authenticity, everydayness, and ontological disclosure in Heidegger, see Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), and Charles Guignon, *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983).

8) For non-foundational or post-transcendental approaches within phenomenology, see James Dodd, *Phenomenology and the Problem of Meaning* (New York: Springer, 2014), and Dan Zahavi, "Phenomenology and the Question of Relativism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Chapter 2

Against Fundamental Experience

Across philosophical, spiritual, and scientific discourses, the appeal to fundamental experience recurs with striking regularity [9]. Despite differences in vocabulary and intent, these approaches converge on a shared assumption: that beneath the plurality of lived experience lies a more basic, originary, or primary level from which other experiences are derived or against which they are to be measured.

Within phenomenology, this assumption often takes the form of a search for pre-reflective givenness or originary disclosure. In spiritual discourse, it appears as the contrast between ordinary experience and awakening, immediacy, or non-dual awareness. In scientific naturalism, it re-emerges as the claim that lived experience is ultimately explained, corrected, or superseded by more fundamental physical or cognitive processes. In each case, experiential plurality is ordered vertically.

This chapter argues that such appeals to fundamentality are not merely contentious. They are conceptually misguided. They mistake features of experiential organization for indicators of ontological priority. What is treated as most immediate, most coherent, or most disruptive within a given configuration is elevated to the status of ground.

2.1 The Appeal to Fundamentality

The gesture toward a fundamental level of experience is often presented as a corrective. Ordinary experience is said to be shaped by habit, concept, projection, or illusion. A more basic mode of awareness is then invoked to explain, diagnose, or overcome these distortions. The promise is one of clarification: by descending to what is primary, confusion is resolved.

This gesture is rhetorically powerful. It offers orientation

where plurality threatens disarray. Yet phenomenologically, it rests on an unexamined assumption: that immediacy implies priority. Experiences that appear less mediated, less reflective, or less structured are taken to reveal how experience truly is [10].

From within any experiential configuration, such claims feel compelling. What appears as most direct is taken to be most real. What disrupts familiar organization is interpreted as access to something deeper. But this inference does not follow. Immediacy describes how an experience is lived from within a configuration. It does not license claims about how experience must be for all configurations.

The appeal to fundamentality thus performs a conceptual slide. Coherence is mistaken for ground. Disruption is mistaken for disclosure [11].

2.2 Non-Dual Experience and Experiential Authority

Non-dual discourse provides a particularly instructive case [12]. Contemporary accounts often present non-dual awareness as the dissolution of subject–object distinction and the collapse of conceptual mediation. Ordinary experience is then characterized as structured by ignorance, illusion, or overlay, while non-dual experience is said to reveal reality as it truly is.

These accounts frequently emphasize that non-duality is not a theory, but the absence of all conceptual positions. Yet phenomenologically, they introduce a hierarchy of experience. One configuration is granted authority over others, not by argument, but by virtue of its supposed immediacy.

The difficulty here is not experiential. Non-dual experience may indeed involve a profound reorganization of experience, including the suspension of familiar structures of agency, ownership, and interpretation. The difficulty lies in the inference drawn from this disruption. To claim that non-dual experience is more real, more

fundamental, or ontologically privileged is already to reintroduce a conceptual framework that the experience itself does not provide.

From within non-dual experience, no claim to ultimacy is made. There is no standpoint from which to declare priority. Such claims arise only retrospectively, when the experience is interpreted from within another configuration that reintroduces structure in order to speak about what lacks it [13].

To treat non-dual experience as foundational is therefore not faithful to the experience itself. It is an interpretive inflation. Disruption is transformed into ground.

2.3 Scientific Explanation and Ontological Overreach

A structurally similar move occurs in scientific naturalism [14]. Methodologically, science restricts itself to operational definitions, measurement, and model-based explanation. Ontologically, however, this restraint is often abandoned. Experiences are treated as meaningful only insofar as they can be correlated with underlying mechanisms. What cannot be captured in such terms is dismissed as secondary or illusory.

Here, too, the appeal to fundamentality rests on a category mistake. Explanatory success is mistaken for ontological authority. Models are treated as reality rather than as instruments that reorganize experience in specific ways [15].

This move has been widely criticized in the philosophy of science. The distinction between methodological adequacy and ontological commitment is well established. Yet the temptation persists to treat the most explanatory level as the most real. Lived experience is redescribed as surface appearance overlaying a deeper, more fundamental domain.

Phenomenologically, this is unwarranted. Scientific explanation reorganizes experience into a coherent world.

It does not ground all experiential worlds. To elevate explanatory power to ontological privilege is to confuse function with foundation.

2.4 The Criterion of Shared Location

When appeals to immediacy or explanation fail to secure fundamentality, a subtler criterion often enters: shared location [16]. Waking experience is assumed to unfold against a stable, continuous physical world that is publicly accessible and intersubjectively shared. Experiences that lack this stability are treated as marginal or unreal.

Dreaming presents a challenge to this assumption [17]. Dream experience can be coherent, meaningful, temporally articulated, and affectively intense, while lacking any stable external location. Dream worlds may unfold in impossible spaces, discontinuous environments, or shifting settings that bear no relation to the shared physical decor of waking life.

For this reason, dreams are often dismissed as illusory or merely subjective. Yet phenomenologically, they function as worlds while they occur. Within the dream, doubt about reality rarely arises. Urgency, consequence, and involvement are fully present.

To deny the reality of dream experience on the basis of shared location is therefore to elevate one configuration's conditions of stability into a universal standard. The waking world's persistence explains its reliability, not its ontological privilege.

The asymmetry between waking and dreaming is real, but it is functional rather than ontological [18]. Waking configurations support coordination, accountability, and continuity in ways dreams do not. These differences concern what configurations enable, not what ultimately exists.

2.5 Coherence Without Ground

The recurring appeal to fundamental experience rests on a shared error. Features that belong to the functioning of

experience within a configuration are treated as indicators of ontological priority. Immediacy, explanatory power, stability, or disruption are transformed into credentials of fundamentality.

This is a category mistake [19]. Such features describe how experience holds together. They do not establish what experience must be in all cases.

Experience may be internally articulated without being hierarchically ordered. Differentiation does not require derivation. Organization does not imply origin.

By suspending the appeal to fundamental experience, phenomenology is freed from a vertical ordering it cannot ultimately justify. What remains is not relativism, but a descriptive field in which multiple experiential configurations can be examined without being ranked according to depth, purity, or proximity to reality.

The next chapter therefore shifts orientation. Instead of asking which experience is primary, it examines how experiences function as coherent worlds. Rather than tracing experience back to an origin, it attends to how experience organizes itself wherever it appears as world.

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9) The recurrence of foundational gestures across otherwise divergent discourses has been widely noted. See, for example, Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1963), and John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

10) The inference from experiential immediacy to epistemic or ontological priority has long been criticized in both phenomenology and philosophy of mind. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, and Dan Zahavi, *Self-Awareness and Alterity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), ch. 1.

11) Similar confusions between explanatory coherence and ontological grounding are discussed in Bas C. van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), esp. ch. 1.

12) For contemporary presentations of non-dual experience emphasizing immediacy and the collapse of subject–object

distinction, see Rupert Spira, *Being Aware of Being Aware* (Salisbury: Non-Duality Press, 2017), and Tony Parsons, *The Open Secret* (Boulder: Inner Directions, 1999).

13) On the distinction between immediate experience and its retrospective conceptual framing, see Michel Bitbol, *Now Is the Only Time* (New York: Routledge, 2016), esp. ch. 3.

14) For critiques of scientism and the conflation of explanatory success with ontological authority, see Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation* (London: Routledge, 1992), and Markus Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), ch. 2.

15) On the instrumental role of models in science, see Nancy Cartwright, *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), and Ronald Giere, *Explaining Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

16) The privileging of shared spatial location as a criterion of reality is discussed critically in phenomenological analyses of perception and imagination. See Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, trans. J. S. Churchill and K. Ameriks (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), §§7–9.

17) Dreaming has long served as a philosophical test case for assumptions about reality, coherence, and shared worldhood. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2004), and Owen Flanagan, *Dreaming Souls* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

18) The distinction between functional difference and ontological hierarchy is central to contemporary phenomenological approaches to experience. See Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), ch. 6.

19) The notion of category mistake originates with Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), and remains influential in critiques of misplaced ontological inference.

Chapter 3

Worlds as Configurations of Experience

The previous chapters have suspended the appeal to fundamental experience. What has been set aside is not structure, differentiation, or coherence, but the assumption that such features require grounding in a deeper or more originary level. Once this assumption is removed, a different descriptive task comes into view. Instead of asking which experience is primary, the question becomes how experience functions wherever it appears as reality at all.

This chapter introduces the notion of *experiential configuration* as a way of addressing that task. The concept does not name an underlying structure, a psychological state, or a metaphysical layer. It designates the way in which experience is already organized such that a world takes shape and becomes livable.

3.1 Experience as Already Organized

Experience does not first appear as neutral material awaiting interpretation [20]. It arrives already structured, oriented, and meaningful. Certain aspects stand out as relevant, others recede into the background. Expectations are in place before reflection begins. Action is possible without deliberation.

This organization is not added to experience from the outside. It is not imposed by belief, theory, or conscious interpretation. Nor is it the result of an underlying mechanism that could be isolated or explained independently. It is the way experience functions from within.

To describe experience as already organized is not to deny its variability. Different situations, practices, and contexts give rise to different modes of organization. What remains constant is that experience never appears unconfigured.

There is no raw experiential given beneath organization. Wherever something appears as real, it does so within a field of sense that renders it intelligible, relevant, and consequential.

The notion of an experiential configuration names this field.

3.2 Experiential Configurations

An experiential configuration is a coherent arrangement of perception, relevance, expectation, and involvement through which a world takes shape [21]. It is not a representation of an underlying reality, nor a perspective on a shared object. It is the mode in which reality appears at all.

Configurations are not adopted or constructed from the outside. One does not choose a world in the way one chooses a theory or a belief. One finds oneself already inside a configuration that orients attention, establishes norms of relevance, and makes certain forms of action possible while foreclosing others.

For this reason, experiential configurations are not reducible to belief systems, ideologies, or cognitive frameworks [22]. Beliefs operate *within* configurations. They presuppose a world in which they can function as beliefs at all.

Nor should configurations be understood as subjective states. They are not private or idiosyncratic, even though they are lived from within. Configurations can be shared, stabilized, transmitted, and disrupted. They sustain practices, institutions, and forms of life.

What distinguishes one configuration from another is not primarily content, but organization. Different configurations establish different criteria of relevance, evidence, coherence, and reality. What counts as meaningful in one world may appear irrelevant or unintelligible in another.

3.3 Worlds, Not Perspectives

It is tempting to describe this plurality in perspectival terms. Different configurations might be taken as alternative viewpoints on the same underlying reality. Disagreement would then concern access, interpretation, or representation.

This work rejects that framing [23]. Perspectivism presupposes a stable object or world that remains identical across different viewpoints. Experiential configurations do not relate to one another in this way. They do not offer competing perspectives on the same world. They constitute distinct worlds.

Within each configuration, the world does not appear as an interpretation [24]. It appears as reality itself. The configuration does not present itself as a filter through which reality is seen, but as the way things are.

This is why conflicts between configurations cannot always be resolved by argument. What is at stake is not primarily disagreement about propositions, but divergence in conditions of appearance. What counts as evidence, explanation, or relevance is already configured before any claim is formulated.

To speak of worlds, rather than perspectives, is therefore not a rhetorical exaggeration. It is a descriptive necessity. Wherever experience functions as reality, it does so as world.

3.4 Configuration Without Hierarchy

If experiential configurations function as worlds, they cannot be ordered according to depth or fundamentality without reintroducing the very hierarchy that has been suspended. No configuration provides the standpoint from which others can be grounded, reduced, or corrected as such.

This does not entail that all configurations are equivalent in every respect [25]. They differ in stability, scope, consequences, and the kinds of coordination they support.

Some enable long-term continuity and intersubjective correction; others do not. These differences are real and describable.

What they do not justify is ontological priority. To say that one world is more reliable, more stable, or more enabling is not to say that it is more real. Functional asymmetry does not amount to metaphysical hierarchy.

Configurations may overlap, interact, or conflict. Individuals may move between them without transition or decision. Such movement does not establish a path or progression. It indicates only that worldhood is not fixed.

3.5 From Foundation to Configuration

Describing experience in terms of configuration marks a shift in phenomenological attention. The question is no longer what underlies experience, but how experience holds together wherever it appears as world. Instead of tracing appearances back to an origin, description proceeds laterally, from one configuration to another [26].

This shift does not abolish phenomenological rigor. It redefines it. Rigor no longer consists in identifying the most basic layer of experience, but in remaining faithful to the internal organization of each world without translating coherence into hierarchy.

The chapters that follow develop this approach further. First, a methodological instrument is introduced that allows experiential configurations to be held in view as configurations, without collapsing them into a common framework. Subsequently, a series of case studies demonstrates how different worlds function from within, without being ranked or integrated into a single account.

What is at stake is not a new theory of reality, but a disciplined way of describing experiential plurality without appealing to foundation.

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20) Phenomenological accounts have long emphasized that experience is not given as raw data subsequently structured by interpretation. See Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure*

Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Book I, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), §§27–28, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. D. A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), Introduction.

21) The term "configuration" is used here descriptively rather than ontologically. It does not designate an underlying structure or explanatory mechanism, but names the internal coherence through which experience functions as world.

22) On the distinction between lived world-constitution and belief-based frameworks, see Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), Introduction. The present use of "world" concerns experiential organization rather than social theory.

23) For critiques of perspectivism that do not presuppose a single underlying reality, see Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), esp. chs. 1–2.

24) This emphasis on reality as lived from within a world aligns with phenomenological accounts of worldhood as prior to reflective interpretation. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), §18.

25) Suspending ontological hierarchy does not entail relativism. For a phenomenological discussion of non-hierarchical plurality, see Dan Zahavi, "Phenomenology and the Question of Relativism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

26) The notion of lateral or non-foundational description resonates with post-transcendental approaches in contemporary phenomenology. See Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), Conclusion.

Chapter 4

The Diorama as Philosophical Instrument

If experiential configurations function as worlds, a corresponding descriptive stance is required. Traditional philosophical tools prove insufficient here. Concepts such as perspective, interpretation, or representation all presuppose a shared underlying reality viewed from different positions. As argued in the previous chapter, this presupposition is precisely what must be suspended.

What is needed is not a deeper theory, but a way of holding worlds in view *as worlds* [27]. The diorama serves this purpose. It is not introduced as a metaphor for reality, nor as a model of how experience is constructed. It functions as a philosophical instrument: a means of rendering experiential configurations visible in their internal coherence without reducing them to a common ground.

4.1 Why Perspective Language Fails

The language of perspective suggests that different viewpoints converge on the same object [28]. Disagreement, on such accounts, concerns access, interpretation, or distortion. This framework is adequate where a shared world is already secured. It becomes misleading when applied to experiential configurations as such.

Configurations do not appear as perspectives on a world. They appear *as* worlds. Within a given configuration, reality does not present itself as filtered or interpreted. It presents itself as self-evident. To redescribe this immediacy as perspective is already to impose an external standpoint that the experience itself does not supply.

Perspective language therefore smuggles unity back into description. It presupposes what is at issue: a single reality underlying experiential plurality. The diorama is

introduced as a corrective to this presupposition.

4.2 The Diorama: Bounded Worldhood

A diorama presents a bounded world [29]. What defines it is not what lies beyond its frame, but how elements within the frame relate to one another. The coherence of a diorama is internal. Meaning arises from relations, constraints, and organization within the scene, not from reference to an external reality.

Applied philosophically, the diorama makes it possible to describe experiential configurations without appealing to what lies beneath or beyond them. The frame marks a methodological boundary. It does not deny that other worlds exist. It simply refuses to invoke them as explanatory resources.

This refusal is decisive. It prevents the slide from description to grounding. The diorama does not ask what ultimately exists. It asks how a given world holds together.

4.3 Instrument, Not Theory

The diorama should not be mistaken for a theory of experience. It explains nothing. It grounds nothing. It introduces no entities, levels, or mechanisms. Its function is strictly methodological.

As an instrument, the diorama serves three purposes:

1. **Isolation**
   It allows a configuration to be examined on its own terms, without immediate comparison or reduction.

2. **Visibility**
   It renders internal organization explicit: what counts as relevant, meaningful, or real within a world.

3. **Symmetry**
   It prevents silent privileging. No world is exempt from description on the basis of familiarity,

usefulness, or apparent self-evidence.

Used in this way, the diorama supports comparison without hierarchy. Worlds can be placed side by side without being measured against a common standard.

4.4 Against Relativism

The diorama does not entail that anything goes. Dioramas are not arbitrary constructions. Each exhibits internal constraints, regularities, and limits. Certain events make sense within a given world; others do not. Certain explanations function; others fail.

Validity, in this context, is internal rather than absolute. A description succeeds insofar as it renders the organization of a world intelligible from within. Failure occurs when internal relations are distorted or ignored.

This internal criterion does not collapse into relativism [30]. It does not claim that all worlds are equally enabling, stable, or consequential. It claims only that such differences do not derive their significance from proximity to an underlying reality. Evaluation proceeds laterally, not vertically.

4.5 Applying the Instrument

If the diorama is to function as an instrument rather than a metaphor, it must be applied without exception. No world may be exempted from description on the grounds that it appears obvious, natural, or self-evident [31]. To exempt a world is to grant it silent privilege and to reintroduce hierarchy by omission.

For this reason, the analyses that follow do not begin with the most reflective or contested configurations, but with the one that most readily escapes notice: the conventional world. Its apparent neutrality makes it the most difficult to see as a configuration at all.

The chapters that follow examine several experiential configurations as dioramas: the conventional world, the scientific world, the spiritual or New Age world, and the non-dual world. Each is approached on its own terms,

without reduction to a deeper ground and without elevation to a privileged status.

An intermezzo on dreaming interrupts this sequence. Dreaming cuts across waking configurations and exposes the ease with which worldhood arises wherever coherence arises. Its inclusion is methodological rather than illustrative [32]. It tests the discipline of flat description at the point where foundational temptation is strongest.

4.6 From Instrument to Description

The diorama does not replace phenomenological description. It disciplines it. It restricts what may be appealed to and clarifies what must be shown. Instead of explaining why a world appears as it does, description attends to how it functions.

This restraint is not a limitation. It is what allows experiential plurality to be described without being resolved. Worlds are not integrated into a higher-order account. They are allowed to stand.

With this instrument in place, the task shifts from methodological clarification to descriptive application. The following part therefore turns to a series of case studies. Their aim is not to classify experience, but to demonstrate how different worlds hold together when described without hierarchy or foundation

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27) The distinction between theoretical explanation and methodological instrument is crucial here. The diorama is introduced as a heuristic device for description, not as a model that explains the genesis or ontology of experience.

28) For critiques of perspectivism that question the presupposition of a single underlying reality, see Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), chs. 1–2.

29) The notion of bounded worldhood emphasizes internal coherence rather than external reference. The frame marks a methodological boundary, not an ontological claim about what exists beyond it.

30) Suspending external foundations does not entail relativism. Validity is assessed internally to a configuration, in terms of

coherence and constraint, rather than by appeal to an absolute standard. See Dan Zahavi, “Phenomenology and the Question of Relativism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

31) Methodological symmetry requires that even the most familiar configurations be rendered explicit. Exemption by familiarity would reintroduce hierarchy by omission.

32) Dreaming functions here as a methodological stress test for flat description, not as a psychological theory. It exposes how readily worldhood arises wherever experiential coherence arises.

Chapter 5

Worlds at Work: Case Studies

The preceding chapters have established a descriptive framework in which experiential plurality can be approached without appeal to fundamentality or hierarchy. What remains is to demonstrate that this framework does not collapse under application. The present chapter therefore examines a series of experiential configurations as distinct worlds, each approached on its own terms and described without reduction or elevation.

These case studies are not intended to exhaust the range of possible worlds, nor to establish a typology of experience[33]. Their function is methodological. Each case is selected because it exemplifies a coherent way in which experience organizes itself as world. Together, they form a field of adjacent possibilities rather than a sequence or progression.

The descriptions proceed symmetrically. No world is treated as baseline, culmination, or exception. Familiarity does not confer privilege; strangeness does not invite diagnosis. The aim throughout is to render visible how each world holds together from within.

5.1 The Conventional World

The conventional world is the world that does not appear as a worldview [34]. It presents itself simply as reality.

In this configuration, objects endure, persons persist, actions have consequences, and time unfolds as a continuous sequence from past to future. Events occur within a shared environment that is taken for granted as public, stable, and self-evident. Others are assumed to inhabit the same world, oriented toward the same objects and governed by similar expectations.

Meaning here is primarily practical. A chair is for sitting, a road for walking, a clock for telling time. Objects solicit use before reflection [35]. Understanding precedes

explanation. The world is navigated rather than interpreted.

Causality is immediate and functional. Actions lead to outcomes. Effort produces results. Failure is attributed to error, obstacle, or chance. There is no need to search for hidden mechanisms or symbolic significance. What happens happens.

The coherence of this world lies in habit and continuity. Identity is stabilized through memory and social recognition. Time is linear and irreversible. Responsibility presupposes persistence of persons and consequences of actions.

This world does not deny interpretation or explanation, but it does not require them to function. Its assumptions are enacted rather than articulated. Precisely for that reason, it is easily mistaken for reality as such. Its invisibility as configuration is the source of its authority.

Describing the conventional world as a configuration does not undermine its legitimacy. It places it alongside other worlds, not above them. It is one way reality appears, not the measure of all appearance.

5.2 The Scientific World

The scientific world reorganizes experience around explanation rather than use [36]. Its defining feature is abstraction.

Within this configuration, objects appear as measurable, divisible, and formally describable. Qualitative immediacy recedes in favor of variables, models, and relations. The observer withdraws. What remains is structure.

The strength of this world lies in methodological restraint. Hypotheses are provisional. Explanations are conditional. Knowledge advances through correction rather than certainty. Predictive success and reproducibility function as criteria of adequacy.

This configuration becomes unstable when its restraint is forgotten. When models are treated not as instruments but as disclosures of what reality ultimately is, explanation hardens into ontology.

At that point, the lived world appears thin. A stone

becomes mass and density. Light becomes wavelength. Warmth becomes energy transfer. What is given is treated with suspicion. The real story is assumed to lie beneath appearance, in hidden mechanisms and deeper structures. Within the scientific world, this move feels natural. Explanatory depth appears as progress. Reduction promises clarity. Yet phenomenologically, this is a reorganization of relevance, not a revelation of fundamentality [37].

The scientific world functions as a coherent world with its own norms of evidence, relevance, and success. Its power is undeniable. Its authority, however, is internal to its mode of organization. It does not ground other worlds. It stands alongside them.

5.3 The Spiritual or New Age World

Where the scientific world seeks causes, the spiritual or New Age world seeks meaning.

Reality here appears as layered and responsive [38]. Events are rarely accidental. Experiences are read as signals, lessons, or expressions of hidden order. Coincidence carries significance. Feeling functions as orientation.

The self appears as an evolving center of awareness. Identity is fluid, defined less by continuity than by potential. Life unfolds as a path of growth, healing, and attunement.

Suffering is interpreted rather than resisted. Difficulty becomes opportunity. Disruption signals transformation. Time appears as developmental movement toward greater awareness.

Truth is experiential and personal. What resonates, expands awareness, or feels aligned carries authority. External validation matters less than inner confirmation. Doubt tends to be absorbed by reinterpretation rather than directed at the framework itself.

This world often borrows vocabulary from non-dual traditions, but its organization remains teleological. Experience is structured as journey [39]. Meaning accumulates. Insight develops.

The spiritual world functions as a complete experiential

configuration. Its coherence does not depend on verification from outside. It does not require reduction to psychology or dismissal as illusion. It is one way reality holds together.

5.4 The Non-Dual World

The non-dual world is not organized around meaning, explanation, or development. It does not present itself as a path or framework.

What characterizes this configuration is the collapse of subject–object organization [40]. Experience no longer appears as something happening to someone. Seeing, hearing, and sensing occur without being owned or interpreted from a center.

This absence is not experienced as lack or fullness. It is not felt as gain. It is experienced, if at all, as subtraction. What falls away is not the world, but the structure that ordinarily binds experience into narrative and agency.

Time loses its directional character. There is no progression toward greater awareness, no accumulation of insight. Language of growth and integration becomes irrelevant.

Crucially, this world does not present itself as more real or more fundamental than others. Claims of ultimacy arise only when the experience is retrospectively framed from within another configuration that reintroduces structure in order to speak about what lacks it [41].

For this reason, the non-dual world resists stabilization as a worldview. Any attempt to present it as doctrine already transforms it into something else.

Within the logic of this work, the non-dual world occupies an unusual position. It does not compete with other worlds, nor does it complete them. It interrupts them. To include it alongside other configurations is not to elevate it, but to refuse its elevation.

Intermezzo: Dreaming Worlds

Dreaming cuts across all waking configurations [42]. The conventional actor, the scientist, the spiritual seeker, and

the non-dualist alike dream.

In dreaming, a world appears.

This world is not vague or partial. It has places, objects, others, and events. Situations unfold with urgency and consequence. Within the dream, doubt about reality rarely arises. The dream-world functions.

Identity in dreaming is unstable. One may appear as oneself, as another, or as no one in particular. Yet this instability does not undermine coherence. The world holds together regardless.

Time is equally fluid. Sequences may loop, fragment, or collapse, yet what happens matters. Causality operates without explanation. Things happen because they happen.

Dreaming is philosophically decisive because it demonstrates that worldhood does not depend on belief, explanation, or metaphysical commitment. No theory precedes the dream [43]. No interpretation is required for it to function as world.

Dreaming also undermines the association between experiential configurations and persons. Worlds are not owned. They are entered [44]. The same individual may inhabit radically different worlds without transition or decision.

By placing dreaming alongside waking configurations, the expectation of a privileged baseline loses its grip. Worldhood appears not as achievement, but as recurring phenomenon. Worlds happen.

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33) The selection of cases is methodological rather than classificatory. The aim is to demonstrate the applicability of flat description across distinct experiential configurations, not to construct a comprehensive taxonomy.

34) The taken-for-granted character of the everyday world has been a recurring theme in phenomenology. See Alfred Schutz, “On Multiple Realities,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 5, no. 4 (1945): 533–576.

35) On practical engagement as prior to reflective interpretation, see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), §§15–18.

36) For analyses of abstraction and model-based explanation in science, see Bas C. van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), and Ronald Giere, *Explaining Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

37) The distinction between explanatory adequacy and ontological commitment is a central theme in philosophy of science. See Nancy Cartwright, *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

38) Contemporary spiritual and New Age discourses frequently emphasize resonance, synchronicity, and layered meaning rather than causal explanation. See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

39) On teleological interpretations of experience in spiritual contexts, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), ch. 9.

40) For phenomenological descriptions of non-dual or non-subject–object experience, see Michel Bitbol, *Now Is the Only Time* (New York: Routledge, 2016), ch. 2.

41) On the retroactive conceptualization of non-dual experience, see Evan Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), ch. 7.

42) Dreaming has long functioned as a philosophical counterexample to assumptions about shared worldhood and stable location. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2004).

43) On dreaming as an experiential world not grounded in belief or interpretation, see Owen Flanagan, *Dreaming Souls* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

44) The idea that worlds are inhabited rather than constructed resonates with phenomenological accounts of worldhood as prior to subjectivity. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Introduction.

Chapter 6

A Flat Phenomenology

The preceding chapters have developed a descriptive approach to experience that suspends the appeal to fundamentality. What has been examined are not layers of reality, but ways in which experience organizes itself as world [45]. The case studies have shown that such worlds can be described symmetrically, without ranking them according to depth, purity, or proximity to an assumed ground.

This chapter consolidates the methodological implications of that approach. It articulates what may be called a *flat phenomenology*: a way of describing experience that refuses hierarchical ordering without collapsing into relativism or indifference.

6.1 What Flatness Denies

Flat phenomenology denies that experiential plurality must be ordered vertically [46]. It rejects the assumption that some configurations are more real, more originary, or more fundamental than others. It refuses the inference from immediacy, disruption, explanatory power, or stability to ontological priority.

Flatness does not deny difference. Experiences differ in intensity, coherence, scope, and consequence. Some worlds enable long-term coordination and accountability; others do not. Some sustain explanatory practices; others interrupt them. These differences remain fully describable.

What flat phenomenology denies is that such differences establish a hierarchy of reality. Functional asymmetry does not entail metaphysical priority. Coherence does not confer fundamentality. Disruption does not generate ground.

6.2 Flatness as Method, Not Doctrine

Flat phenomenology is not a theory of reality. It does not posit entities, levels, or structures beneath experience. It advances no claims about what ultimately exists. Its commitment is methodological rather than ontological [47].

As a method, flat phenomenology imposes a discipline on description. It restricts what may be appealed to and clarifies what must be shown. Descriptions must remain internal to the configuration being examined. External standards of truth, depth, or ultimacy are suspended.

This discipline does not weaken phenomenological rigor. It redirects it. Rigor consists not in tracing experience back to an origin, but in remaining faithful to how experience holds together wherever it appears as world.

6.3 Comparison Without Hierarchy

One of the persistent objections to non-hierarchical approaches is that they preclude comparison or critique. Flat phenomenology addresses this objection by relocating comparison from the level of foundation to the level of function.

Worlds can be compared in terms of what they enable, constrain, or foreclose [48]. They differ in stability, scope, and the forms of coordination they support. These differences matter. They shape lives, practices, and institutions.

What flat phenomenology resists is the move from such differences to claims of ontological superiority [49]. Comparison remains possible without reduction. Critique remains possible without appeal to a deeper ground.

Evaluation, on this view, is always situated. It operates within and between worlds, not from a standpoint outside all configurations.

6.4 The Place of the Non-Dual World

The non-dual world occupies a decisive position within this framework. It is often treated as an exception: either

as the ground beneath all worlds or as the point at which worldhood dissolves altogether. Flat phenomenology rejects both interpretations.

Within non-dual experience, familiar structures of subject–object organization are suspended. Experience no longer coheres around agency, narrative, or explanation. This absence, however, does not constitute a foundation. What lacks organization cannot ground what is organized.

To treat non-dual experience as ultimate reality is therefore to reintroduce hierarchy through reinterpretation. Such elevation does not arise from the experience itself, but from its retrospective framing within another configuration.

Flat phenomenology includes non-dual experience without privileging it [50]. Its significance lies in disruption, not in disclosure of a deeper layer. Intensity does not imply fundamentality. Subtraction does not entail supremacy.

6.5 Consistency of the Method

The inclusion of non-dual experience serves as a consistency test for flat phenomenology. If any configuration were to be granted exceptional status, this would be the obvious candidate. Its refusal is therefore decisive.

The same consistency applies to other cases. The conventional world is not treated as baseline. The scientific world is not granted explanatory authority beyond its domain. The spiritual world is not dismissed as projection. Dreaming is not relegated to illusion.

Flat phenomenology holds wherever experience functions as world. It does not exempt what is familiar, useful, disruptive, or unsettling. This refusal of exemption is what secures its coherence as method [51].

6.6 From Ground to Adjacency

By suspending hierarchy, flat phenomenology reorients philosophical attention. Instead of seeking foundations, it

attends to adjacency [52]. Worlds are not steps in a progression. They are neighboring possibilities.

This reorientation does not yield synthesis. It yields coexistence. It does not resolve plurality into unity. It remains with difference without arranging it.

What emerges is not a final account of experience, but a discipline of description. A refusal to translate coherence into hierarchy, and a refusal to translate disruption into ground.

Flat phenomenology does not culminate in a privileged world. It leaves experience where it appears: as a plurality of worlds, each complete enough to be lived, none entitled to rule the rest.

Conclusion

This work has deliberately resisted the temptation to secure experience by grounding it. It has not sought to identify a fundamental structure beneath experiential plurality, nor to privilege one configuration as more real, more originary, or more authoritative than others. What has been pursued instead is a disciplined attention to how experience organizes itself wherever it functions as world.

The analyses presented here have made several moves impossible. First, they have suspended the appeal to fundamental experience. No configuration has been allowed to function as ground, whether on the basis of immediacy, explanatory power, disruption, or stability. Claims to priority have been shown to rest on conceptual slides rather than descriptive necessity.

Second, the expectation that experiential plurality must be ordered hierarchically has been undermined. Worlds differ, but difference does not entail ranking. Functional asymmetries remain describable without being translated into ontological hierarchy. Coherence does not require foundation.

Third, the assumption that philosophy must ultimately converge on a single account of reality has been set aside. What emerges from description is not unity beneath plurality, but plurality as a persistent feature of experience itself.

What remains is a field of worlds. Each world holds together according to its own organization. Each sustains a sense of reality from within. None requires validation by reference to a deeper ground. Worlds are not perspectives on a shared substrate, nor stages in a progression. They are places one finds oneself already inhabiting.

This does not entail indifference, relativism, or

withdrawal from critique. To describe worlds as configurations is not to deny responsibility, evaluation, or choice. It relocates them. Evaluation no longer proceeds by appeal to a privileged reality, but by attending to how worlds function, intersect, and sometimes exclude one another. Responsibility is exercised within worlds, not from outside them.

The inclusion of non-dual experience has been decisive in this regard. By refusing to elevate disruption into ground, this work has shown that even the most radical suspension of structure does not license claims of ultimacy. Intensity does not confer authority. Absence does not generate foundation. What non-dual experience offers is not a final truth beneath all worlds, but a disruption that exposes the contingency of worldhood itself.

Dreaming has served a similar function. By demonstrating that worldhood can arise without belief, explanation, or shared location, it has further weakened the expectation of a privileged baseline. Worldhood appears not as metaphysical achievement, but as recurring phenomenon. Worlds happen.

What this work ultimately proposes is not a doctrine, but a discipline. A way of describing experience that refuses to turn coherence into hierarchy, and refuses to turn disruption into ground. A way of remaining with experiential plurality without resolving it into stages, paths, or levels of reality.

To live with worlds, in this sense, is not to choose among them from a superior vantage point. It is to acknowledge that one is always already within a world, and that other worlds are always already possible. Philosophy, on this view, does not secure reality. It remains attentive to how realities take shape.

The work ends here, not with a synthesis or a final account, but with an opening. What follows from flat phenomenology is not conclusion, but continued description. Worlds persist. The task of philosophy is to

stay with them.

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45) For phenomenological approaches that emphasize organization without appeal to ontological layers, see Dan Zahavi, “Phenomenology and the Question of Relativism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

46) Critiques of vertical or foundational ordering within phenomenology are developed in Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), Conclusion.

47) On the distinction between methodological restraint and ontological commitment, see Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Book I*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), §§31–33.

48) For accounts of comparison and critique without appeal to foundational standards, see Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), chs. 3–4.

49) Suspending ontological hierarchy does not entail relativism. See Dan Zahavi, “Phenomenology and the Question of Relativism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

50) On non-dual experience interpreted without ontological elevation, see Michel Bitbol, *Now Is the Only Time* (New York: Routledge, 2016), chs. 2–3.

51) Methodological consistency through non-exemption is a recurrent requirement in non-foundational phenomenology. See James Dodd, *Phenomenology and the Problem of Meaning* (New York: Springer, 2014), Conclusion.

52) Lateral or adjacency-based approaches to experience resonate with post-transcendental phenomenology. See Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), Conclusion.

Afterword

On Method and Position

This work has proceeded without appeal to foundations. It has neither sought an ultimate structure beneath experience nor claimed access to a privileged standpoint from which experiential plurality could be adjudicated. This refusal is not motivated by skepticism, relativism, or theoretical modesty [53]. It follows from a methodological decision: to take experience seriously as it appears, without translating coherence into hierarchy.

Within phenomenology, this decision places the present work in a critical but continuous relation to its tradition. Phenomenology has long insisted that experience is not raw, immediate, or self-evident in a naïve sense, but internally structured and intelligible from within. At the same time, phenomenological description has repeatedly relied on metaphors of depth, origin, or disclosure that quietly reintroduce priority. Certain modes of appearing come to function as more basic, more authentic, or more revealing than others.

The present work suspends that gesture. It does not deny structure, differentiation, or articulation within experience. It denies only that such structure requires grounding in a deeper layer. Organization does not imply origin. Coherence does not entail fundamentality.

This methodological stance also bears on contemporary discussions at the intersection of philosophy, science, and spirituality. Scientific naturalism frequently emphasizes the constructed character of perception while retaining an ontological hierarchy in which models are ultimately anchored in an underlying physical reality. Non-dual discourse often dissolves conceptual structure while simultaneously elevating a particular experiential configuration to the status of ultimate truth. In both cases, the appeal to fundamentality returns, even where it is

explicitly disavowed [54)].

Flat phenomenology resists this return. It neither seeks to reconcile scientific explanation with lived experience nor to adjudicate between spiritual insight and empirical method. It shifts the question altogether. Instead of asking which experience reveals reality as it truly is, it asks how different realities are lived. Instead of searching for what underlies experience, it attends to how experience organizes itself into worlds.

The inclusion of non-dual experience within this framework is therefore not a concession, but a test. Non-dual experience is often treated as an exception: either as the ground beneath all worlds or as the point at which worldhood dissolves altogether. To grant either status would undermine the methodological claim of flat phenomenology. The present work treats non-dual experience as an experiential configuration among others, distinguished not by what it reveals, but by what it lacks. Its force lies in disruption, not in grounding.

Similarly, the inclusion of dreaming is not intended to relativize waking life or to collapse distinctions between illusion and reality. Dreaming is included because it demonstrates, with particular clarity, that worldhood does not depend on belief, explanation, or metaphysical commitment. Worlds form wherever coherence forms. This observation does not reduce waking experience to illusion. It clarifies the conditions under which anything appears as real at all.

By adopting this stance, flat phenomenology does not abandon critique. It relocates it. Critique no longer operates by appeal to a deeper truth, a more authentic mode of experience, or a privileged explanatory level. It operates through comparison, contrast, and careful description. Worlds can be evaluated in terms of their internal coherence, their limits, and their consequences, without being measured against an assumed foundation.

If this work can be said to take a position, it is this: philosophy need not secure reality in order to describe it.

It need only remain faithful to how realities take shape. What flat phenomenology offers is not a new metaphysics, nor a final account of experience, but a discipline of attention [55]. A refusal to turn coherence into hierarchy, and a refusal to turn disruption into ground.

The work ends, therefore, without closure. Not because it is incomplete, but because its method precludes culmination. Worlds persist. New configurations arise. Philosophy remains with them, not above them.

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53) On methodological restraint without skeptical or relativist commitments in phenomenology, see Dan Zahavi, "Phenomenology and the Question of Relativism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

54) For parallel critiques of foundational gestures in scientific naturalism and spiritual discourse, see Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation* (London: Routledge, 1992), and Michel Bitbol, *Now Is the Only Time* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

55) For phenomenological approaches emphasizing description and attentiveness over metaphysical closure, see Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Book I*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), Introduction.

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Movement 3

Worlds Without Ground

At the Limits of Description

Coherence does not eliminate tension.

It only redistributes it.

When no configuration is granted priority, a new temptation arises: the desire for overview. The impulse to step back once more, to reconcile what remains divergent, to secure a vantage point from which plurality can be held together.

But what would such a position amount to?

The refusal of hierarchy does not dissolve the longing for ground. It merely displaces it. Even a flat phenomenology can harden into a subtle elevation, a claim to see without being seen.

At this point, another difficulty emerges.

If every world functions from within its own coherence, what authorizes the description of that functioning? What allows articulation itself to proceed without reinstalling the very hierarchy it refuses?

The question is no longer how worlds hold together.

It is how description avoids becoming another world that claims to stand above the rest.

Chapter 7

From Description to Showing

Up to this point, the discussion has concerned worlds as configurations of experience. These worlds were approached descriptively: not as representations of an underlying reality, but as functioning coherences in which relevance, normativity, and evidence are already aligned. That analysis was deliberately constrained. No foundation was introduced, no overview assumed, no synthesis pursued.

Those constraints, however, do not apply only to worlds. They apply equally to description itself.

Description is not a neutral act. To describe is always to speak from somewhere, under conditions that shape what can appear and what remains invisible. If this book were to continue simply by extending analysis, it would risk reinstating precisely what it has rejected: a position that operates as if it were unmarked, unplaced, and therefore entitled to overview.

At this point, analysis alone is no longer sufficient. What is required is not a deeper account of worlds, but a way of making visible how description itself can proceed without elevating its own position. The task shifts from explaining to showing.

The term *diorama* is introduced to mark this shift. It does not name a theory, a model, or a methodological framework. It names a way of situating description such that a world can be held in view as functioning, without being grounded, ordered, or integrated into a higher perspective.

What follows does not offer a new account of what worlds are. It offers a way of positioning description so that

worlds can appear without overview, without synthesis, and without appeal to foundations.

Why the Diorama Is Not a Metaphor

The term *diorama* is not introduced here as a metaphor, nor as an illustrative image meant to make an abstract argument more accessible. It is introduced as a philosophical instrument. Treating it as a metaphor would miss its function and neutralize its critical force.

A metaphor substitutes one thing for another. It translates an unfamiliar domain into a familiar one in order to clarify meaning. In doing so, it presupposes a stable relation between what is represented and what represents it. The metaphor stands in for something else. Its value lies in correspondence.

The diorama does not operate in this way.

A diorama does not stand in for a world. It does not represent a world from the outside, nor does it translate one domain of experience into another. It does not point beyond itself to a more fundamental structure. What it does is situate. It arranges visibility without claiming correspondence or exhaustiveness.

This distinction is decisive. If the diorama were a metaphor, it would invite interpretation in terms of accuracy: Does it represent the world correctly? Does it distort? What does it leave out? These questions immediately reintroduce hierarchy. They presuppose a world independent of the diorama against which the diorama could be measured.

The diorama refuses this relation.

A diorama makes something visible by positioning it, not by explaining it. It offers no privileged vantage point, no optimal angle, no overview. One does not look *through* a diorama in order to reach a deeper reality. One looks *at* a diorama and thereby becomes aware of how a world is configured to appear.

This is why the diorama cannot be treated as a model. Models abstract, simplify, and generalize. They aim at reusability and prediction. A diorama does none of these things. It does not generalize beyond the situation it renders visible. It cannot be detached from its positioning without losing its function.

Nor is the diorama a perspective. A perspective presupposes a fixed object seen from different viewpoints. The diorama does not presuppose such an object. It does not offer alternative views of the same thing. It makes visible a world as a whole, including the conditions under which something can appear as an object at all.

What the diorama renders visible is not content, but functioning. It shows how distinctions, norms, and relevances are arranged such that a world holds together. This showing is not neutral. It always involves a position. But that position is not elevated to a standard. It remains situated.

Calling the diorama a metaphor would therefore misplace its philosophical role. It would suggest that the diorama is merely a pedagogical aid, a heuristic device that could be discarded once the “real” argument is understood. In fact, the opposite is the case. The diorama is not an aid to the argument; it *is* the mode in which the argument proceeds.

The refusal of metaphor here is deliberate. Metaphors tend to smooth over tensions by translating them into familiar terms. The diorama does not smooth. It exposes. It makes visible the fact that description always occurs from somewhere, without pretending that this somewhere can be neutralized.

For this reason, the diorama must be understood as an instrument rather than an image. It does not tell us what a world is. It makes visible how a world appears when approached without the ambition to ground, integrate, or oversee it. Its philosophical value lies precisely in this restraint.

The consequences of this restraint will become clearer once the diorama is considered not as an isolated device, but as a way of positioning description itself. That is the task of the next section.

The Diorama as a Positioning Instrument

If the diorama is not a metaphor, its function must be understood in terms of positioning rather than representation. A diorama does not explain a world, nor does it reconstruct it from first principles. It positions description in such a way that a world can become visible as functioning.

Positioning here does not mean adopting a viewpoint in the ordinary sense. A viewpoint presupposes an object that remains invariant while perspectives change. The diorama does not presuppose such invariance. It does not offer alternative angles on the same world. It situates description within a world, allowing that world to show itself from within its own coherence.

This is a crucial distinction. To position description is not to elevate it. The diorama does not claim neutrality, objectivity, or authority. It makes explicit that description always occurs somewhere, under specific conditions, with particular constraints. What the diorama does is refuse to conceal this situatedness behind methodological abstraction.

As an instrument, the diorama makes visible how a world organizes relevance. It does so by arranging what can be seen, noticed, and articulated without collapsing that arrangement into explanation. It does not ask why a world functions as it does. It shows how it functions by holding its elements in view without reorganizing them.

This holding-in-view is selective, but not reductive. The diorama does not attempt completeness. It does not aim to capture everything that belongs to a world. Its function is not to exhaust, but to disclose. What it discloses is the alignment of distinctions, norms, and practices that allows experience to appear as coherent.

Because the diorama positions rather than explains, it resists the pressure to generalize. It does not abstract away from the specificity of a world in order to derive principles that apply elsewhere. Each diorama is bound to the world it renders visible. Its scope is local, not universal.

This locality is not a weakness. It is what prevents the instrument from becoming a meta-framework. The diorama does not hover above worlds. It remains embedded in the act of description itself. It offers no external standpoint from which worlds could be compared, ordered, or unified.

At the same time, the diorama does not collapse into mere impressionism. Positioning is disciplined by the requirement to remain faithful to functioning. A diorama that distorts a world's internal coherence fails as an instrument. Its adequacy is not measured by correspondence to an external reality, but by whether it allows the world's norms and distinctions to appear as operative.

This criterion is internal and immanent. It does not confer authority beyond the situated act of description. The diorama positions without legitimating. It makes visible without adjudicating.

In this sense, the diorama replaces foundation with situating. Where foundational approaches seek to secure description by anchoring it in what is most basic, the diorama secures description by acknowledging where it stands. It accepts partiality without converting it into limitation, and situatedness without converting it into bias.

The diorama thus functions as a restraint on philosophical ambition. It prevents description from sliding into overview, synthesis, or hidden hierarchy. By making position explicit, it blocks the temptation to treat that position as privileged.

What remains to be clarified is how this positioned description relates to plurality. If multiple worlds require multiple dioramas, then the instrument itself must accommodate multiplicity without accumulating into a higher order. That clarification follows in the next section.

No Overview, No Synthesis

The diorama excludes overview by design. This exclusion is not a limitation to be overcome, but a condition of its philosophical integrity. Overview implies elevation. It presupposes a position from which multiple worlds can be seen at once, ordered, compared, and ultimately integrated. Such a position cannot be assumed without reintroducing hierarchy.

Synthesis depends on this assumption. To synthesize is to bring different elements together under a unifying principle. Even when presented as provisional or pluralistic, synthesis requires a criterion of integration. Something must decide what belongs together, how differences are reconciled, and what is excluded. That criterion inevitably privileges one way of functioning over others.

The diorama refuses this move.

Because the diorama positions description within a world, it cannot provide a view across worlds. It does not allow for comparison from above, nor does it generate a meta-language in which different configurations could be translated without loss. Worlds remain visible only from within their own coherence. This restriction is not accidental. It is what prevents the instrument from becoming a covert foundation.

The absence of overview often provokes discomfort. Philosophical habit encourages the expectation that understanding culminates in synthesis. Without synthesis, plurality can appear unresolved, even chaotic. The diorama challenges this expectation by showing that plurality does not need to be resolved in order to be

intelligible. What it resists is not understanding, but domination through unification.

This resistance also blocks a familiar escape route. When integration proves difficult, philosophy often retreats to higher-order abstraction. Differences are reclassified as instances of a broader pattern, variations of a deeper structure, or moments within a larger process. The diorama does not permit this retreat. It remains with the specificity of worlds, even when that specificity resists assimilation.

By refusing overview, the diorama also refuses finality. There is no last perspective from which all worlds could be gathered. There is no synthesis toward which descriptions converge. Each diorama remains local, provisional, and bounded by the world it renders visible. The accumulation of dioramas does not produce a system.

This refusal has methodological consequences. Description can no longer aim at completeness. It must accept partiality without compensating for it through abstraction. What is gained is not totality, but fidelity. Fidelity to functioning takes precedence over the ambition to integrate.

The absence of synthesis does not entail fragmentation. Worlds are not isolated monads. They intersect, overlap, and influence one another. Yet these relations do not amount to a higher unity. They remain relations between worlds, not expressions of a single order. The diorama allows these relations to be described without forcing them into a narrative of convergence.

In this way, the diorama enforces a discipline of restraint. It prevents philosophy from substituting explanation for description, and unity for plurality. What is lost is the comfort of resolution. What is preserved is the visibility of difference without rank.

This restraint prepares the next step. If overview and synthesis are excluded, description itself must be

reconsidered. How can description remain precise, responsible, and critical without appealing to neutrality or totality? That question concerns the practice of description itself, and it is taken up in the following section.

Diorama and Description

If overview and synthesis are excluded, description can no longer rely on neutrality or completeness as its guiding ideals. Description must instead be understood as a situated practice, disciplined not by objectivity in the classical sense, but by fidelity to functioning. The diorama makes this shift explicit.

Description within a diorama does not aim to capture a world exhaustively. It does not seek to enumerate elements, trace origins, or provide explanations. Its task is more modest and more demanding: to make visible how a world holds together from within its own coherence. Description shows rather than grounds.

This showing is inseparable from positioning. To describe a world is to enter it, to let its distinctions and norms guide what can be articulated. Description is not imposed from outside, nor is it extracted from a neutral standpoint. It is oriented by the world it describes. The diorama formalizes this orientation without elevating it to a rule.

Because description is positioned, it is necessarily selective. Certain aspects of a world come into focus, while others remain implicit. This selectivity is not a flaw to be corrected through abstraction. It is the condition under which description can remain faithful to functioning. Attempts to compensate for selectivity by widening the frame reintroduce overview and hierarchy.

The diorama disciplines description by keeping it local. What is described must be shown to function within the world it belongs to.Claims that exceed this scope no longer do the work they were introduced to do. Description cannot appeal to what lies beneath or beyond the world in order to justify itself. Its adequacy is tested

internally: does it allow the world's coherence to appear without distortion?

This internal test distinguishes dioramic description from mere narration or impressionism. Description is not free play. It is constrained by the requirement to remain answerable to the world's own norms. A description that misrepresents these norms, or that imposes foreign criteria, fails not because it is untrue in an absolute sense, but because it does not fit the world it seeks to show.

At the same time, description does not claim authority beyond its situated act. It does not legislate how a world must be understood, nor does it invalidate other descriptions situated elsewhere. The diorama does not produce doctrine. It produces visibility.

This visibility has a critical dimension. By making a world's functioning explicit, description can reveal tensions, exclusions, and instabilities that remain implicit in everyday participation. Critique arises not from external judgment, but from internal exposure. What is shown may unsettle the world it describes, but it does so by remaining within its terms.

In this way, dioramic description avoids two opposing temptations. It avoids the illusion of neutrality, which conceals position behind method. And it avoids relativistic withdrawal, which abandons responsibility under the guise of plurality. Description remains accountable without claiming finality.

The consequence is a form of philosophical practice that neither explains nor resolves, but attends. It attends to how worlds function, how they sustain coherence, and how that coherence can fray. The diorama does not instruct description what to say. It situates description so that saying can remain faithful without becoming authoritative.

What remains to be addressed is how multiple dioramas relate to one another. If description is always situated,

then no single diorama can be sufficient. The plurality of worlds entails a plurality of dioramas. The implications of this multiplicity must be made explicit, lest the instrument itself become singular and privileged.

That task follows.

The Plurality of Dioramas

If description is necessarily situated, then no single diorama can claim sufficiency. The diorama must itself be pluralizable. Otherwise, it risks becoming what it was meant to prevent: a privileged instrument that silently governs how worlds may be described.

The plurality of dioramas follows directly from the plurality of worlds. Different worlds require different modes of positioning. A diorama that renders one world visible cannot be expected to do the same for another. Its selectivity, which is a condition of fidelity, also limits its reach. This limitation is not a defect. It is what preserves the instrument's integrity.

Multiple dioramas do not accumulate into a higher-order framework. They do not form a system, nor do they converge toward a comprehensive view. Each diorama remains bound to the world it situates. Their plurality is lateral, not hierarchical. No diorama subsumes the others, and none provides a standpoint from which all worlds could be surveyed.

This has an important methodological consequence. Philosophical work cannot consist in refining a single instrument until it achieves maximal generality. It must consist in deploying different dioramas, each responsive to the world it renders visible. The work is distributive rather than cumulative. Progress is not measured by unification, but by the capacity to remain with difference without ordering it.

The plurality of dioramas also prevents the reintroduction of authority through repetition. Reusing the same diorama across different worlds risks imposing a single configuration of relevance where it no longer fits. What

initially functioned as an instrument of visibility becomes an instrument of distortion. Fidelity requires variation.

This does not imply arbitrariness. Dioramas are constrained by the worlds they situate. Not every positioning is adequate. A diorama fails when it obscures a world's internal coherence, when it imports foreign norms, or when it forces alignment where none exists. Adequacy remains an internal matter, even as plurality persists.

By insisting on the plurality of dioramas, this approach resists the temptation to canonize a method. There is no definitive dioramic stance, no optimal configuration of description. What exists instead is an ongoing practice of situating, revising, and abandoning instruments as worlds demand.

The diorama thus remains a means, not an end. Its plurality ensures that it does not harden into doctrine. It stays responsive to the diversity of worlds rather than aspiring to master them.

The Limits of the Instrument

The diorama is not a solution to philosophical problems. It does not resolve plurality, eliminate conflict, or guarantee understanding. Its value lies in what it refuses as much as in what it enables. Recognizing its limits is therefore essential.

The diorama cannot adjudicate between worlds. It provides no criteria for deciding which world should prevail, which norms should govern, or which configuration is preferable. Any attempt to use the diorama in this way would exceed its function and convert it into a covert authority.

Nor can the diorama secure description against error. Situated description remains fallible. It can misjudge relevance, misread norms, or fail to register what matters

within a world. The diorama does not protect against such failures. It only makes their conditions visible.

The diorama also cannot overcome conflict. When worlds collide, the instrument does not offer reconciliation. It does not translate one world into another, nor does it mediate between incompatible norms. It allows conflicts to be described as conflicts between worlds, rather than as failures to access a shared ground. What follows from such description is contingent and cannot be prescribed in advance.

These limits are not shortcomings to be corrected. They are consequences of refusing foundation. An instrument that promised resolution, certainty, or integration would do so by reinstating hierarchy. The diorama avoids this by remaining deliberately insufficient.

This insufficiency places responsibility back where it belongs. Description cannot absolve itself by appealing to method. It must answer to the world it situates and to the consequences of making that world visible. The diorama does not remove responsibility; it concentrates it.

In this sense, the diorama marks a shift in philosophical ambition. Philosophy is no longer tasked with securing ultimate grounds or delivering final syntheses. It is tasked with attending to functioning without pretending to mastery. The diorama supports this task by constraining what philosophy can legitimately claim.

With these limits acknowledged, the instrument can be used without illusion. It neither replaces philosophy with technique nor dissolves philosophy into relativism. It provides a disciplined way of remaining with plurality without ordering it.

What remains unresolved is not a methodological gap, but a normative question. If worlds function without foundation, and if description can only situate without adjudicating, then what follows for how one lives among

worlds? That question cannot be answered instrumentally.
It requires a different kind of reflection.

That reflection is taken up next.

Chapter 8

Why This Is Not Relativism

The rejection of foundations and hierarchy is often taken to entail relativism. If no world can claim priority, if no external criterion can adjudicate between configurations, then it seems to follow that all claims are equally valid. This inference is common, but it rests on a misunderstanding of both relativism and plurality.

Relativism is not simply the acknowledgment of difference. It is a meta-position. It presupposes a standpoint from which multiple positions can be surveyed, compared, and declared equivalent in their lack of ultimate validity. To say that “everything is relative” is already to occupy a position that stands above what it relativizes.

This position is unavailable here.

The account developed in this book explicitly excludes overview. There is no standpoint from which worlds could be gathered into a single comparative frame. Without such a frame, the claim that all worlds are “equally valid” cannot even be formulated. Equality requires a measure. Relativism requires a scale. Both presuppose precisely the kind of hierarchy that has been refused.

Plurality, as understood here, is not a collection of views arranged along a dimension of correctness. It is the coexistence of distinct worlds, each internally normative, each functioning through its own configuration of experience. Worlds do not differ by degree of truth with respect to a shared reality. They differ by how reality appears and operates within them.

This difference matters.

Within a world, not everything goes. Claims can fail, practices can misfire, and norms can be violated. Experiences are not self-justifying. They are answerable to the coherence of the world in which they occur. To deny foundation is not to deny discipline. It is to locate discipline where it actually functions.

Relativism dissolves normativity by flattening it. This account preserves normativity by situating it. What is rejected is not the distinction between right and wrong, but the assumption that such distinctions must be grounded in something universal in order to be real. Worlds sustain their own criteria without borrowing legitimacy from elsewhere.

The accusation of relativism often arises from a misplaced demand. When philosophy refuses to decide between worlds, it is assumed to be evading responsibility. Yet deciding between worlds would require importing criteria from within one world and elevating them to universal status. That move would not resolve plurality; it would suppress it.

Refusal, in this context, is not indifference. It is restraint.

This restraint does not imply that conflicts between worlds are inconsequential. On the contrary. Conflicts are real precisely because worlds are normatively thick. What is denied is that such conflicts can be settled by appeal to a deeper level of correctness. There is no higher court to which worlds can appeal. The absence of such a court does not trivialize conflict; it exposes its stakes.

Relativism treats plurality as a problem of equivalence. The account offered here treats plurality as a condition of functioning without equivalence. Worlds are not interchangeable. They are not commensurable. Their differences cannot be collapsed into sameness, but neither can they be ranked.

To call this relativism is therefore inaccurate. Relativism presupposes the very overview it claims to deny. What is

at stake here is not the leveling of claims, but the refusal to elevate any claim to the status of arbiter.

Plurality without foundation is not the absence of normativity. It is the absence of final authority.

That absence does not leave everything undecided. It leaves decisions where they occur: within worlds, under conditions that cannot be transcended without distortion.

Internal Normativity Revisited

The claim that worlds are internally normative has already been introduced earlier. Here it must be taken seriously in its full consequence. Internal normativity is not a descriptive add-on. It is what prevents plurality from dissolving into arbitrariness once foundations are refused.

A world functions only insofar as distinctions hold. Some moves count as correct, others as mistaken; some interpretations are sustained, others rejected; some practices endure, others fail. These distinctions are not imposed from outside, nor are they optional conventions. They arise from the way a world maintains coherence through use.

This coherence is practical before it is theoretical. Norms are enacted long before they are articulated. They guide attention, regulate response, and stabilize expectation. One learns them not by explicit instruction alone, but by participation. To inhabit a world is to be subject to its norms, whether or not one endorses them reflectively.

Internal normativity is therefore not weak. It binds. It constrains. It makes failure possible. A scientific experiment can fail, not because it violates a universal criterion of truth, but because it does not meet the standards operative within the scientific world. A therapeutic interpretation can miss its mark, not because it contradicts an external reality, but because it fails to function within the therapeutic configuration.

These failures matter. They have consequences. Practices are abandoned, revised, or excluded on their basis. Worlds

do not float freely. They discipline themselves through the very norms that allow them to function.

This self-disciplining character is what distinguishes internal normativity from relativism. Relativism treats norms as arbitrary preferences, interchangeable across contexts. Internal normativity treats norms as constitutive constraints. They are not chosen at will, nor can they be ignored without cost. A world without operative norms would not merely be permissive; it would be incoherent.

At the same time, internal normativity does not extend beyond the world in which it operates. The standards that bind within one world do not automatically bind in another. When they are projected outward, they lose their footing. What functioned as norm becomes instrument of imposition.

This limitation is not a deficiency. It reflects the fact that normativity is world-bound. Its authority derives from functioning, not from universality. To demand that norms apply everywhere is to misunderstand how they arise.

Revisiting internal normativity at this point clarifies an important consequence. Responsibility cannot be deferred upward to principles or foundations. Nor can it be dissolved into personal preference. Responsibility is exercised immanently, through participation in worlds whose norms one sustains, modifies, or resists.

There is no neutral position from which to accept or reject normativity as such. One is always already inside a world in which norms operate. Even refusal takes shape within a normative field. The absence of foundation does not create freedom from norms; it removes the illusion that norms are anchored elsewhere.

This insight shifts the burden of philosophical clarity. Instead of asking which norms are ultimately correct, the question becomes how norms function, how they hold, and how they fail within worlds. Evaluation becomes

descriptive before it becomes critical. What matters is not alignment with an external standard, but coherence within a configuration.

With this clarification, the path to the next step is open. If normativity is always internal, then no external criterion can adjudicate between worlds without distortion. The temptation to introduce such a criterion must be examined and refused explicitly. That task belongs to the next section.

Why No External Criterion Is Possible

The demand for an external criterion arises whenever plurality becomes uncomfortable. Faced with multiple worlds, each internally coherent and normatively thick, philosophy is tempted to seek a higher standpoint from which these worlds could be evaluated, compared, or ranked. This demand is understandable. It promises clarity, resolution, and authority. It is also incoherent.

An external criterion would have to stand outside all worlds in order to adjudicate between them. It would need to be neutral with respect to their norms, distinctions, and forms of relevance. Only from such a position could it claim legitimacy across configurations. Yet no such position is available.

Every criterion is world-bound.

Criteria do not float freely. They emerge from practices, distinctions, and expectations that are already operative within a world. What counts as evidence, justification, rationality, or coherence is not discovered from nowhere. It is sustained through participation in a normative order. To invoke a criterion is to invoke a world in which that criterion functions.

This applies equally to criteria presented as universal. Appeals to reason, objectivity, coherence, or even human flourishing do not escape this condition. Each of these terms acquires its force within particular configurations.

When they are abstracted from those configurations and projected outward, they lose their anchoring and gain authority only by concealment.

The illusion of externality is maintained by forgetting this origin.

Philosophy often sustains this illusion by redescribing world-specific criteria as neutral or foundational. What is in fact operative within a scientific, moral, or metaphysical world is presented as standing above all worlds. The resulting hierarchy is not argued for; it is installed by elevation. What appears as adjudication is annexation.

This move is not corrected by multiplying criteria. A plurality of external standards does not resolve the problem. It reproduces it at a higher level. Each criterion still requires a standpoint from which it is applied. Without such a standpoint, criteria cannot be coordinated. With such a standpoint, hierarchy returns.

Nor is the problem solved by proceduralism. The idea that fair procedures could replace substantive criteria presupposes agreement on what counts as fair, relevant, or binding. These agreements are themselves world-bound. Procedure does not escape normativity; it codifies it.

The impossibility of an external criterion is therefore not a temporary obstacle. It follows directly from the refusal of foundation. If no world can ground the others, then no criterion can operate independently of world-specific norms. The desire for such a criterion is a residual form of foundational thinking.

This does not entail paralysis. Worlds do not require external adjudication in order to function. They regulate themselves internally. Conflicts between worlds are not failures awaiting resolution by a higher standard. They are encounters between normative orders that cannot be harmonized without loss.

Attempts to resolve such conflicts by appeal to an external criterion typically misdescribe what is at stake. They transform differences in functioning into disagreements about correctness. In doing so, they obscure the fact that the conflict concerns what counts as correct in the first place.

Recognizing the impossibility of external criteria shifts the meaning of responsibility. Responsibility no longer consists in aligning one's actions with universal standards. It consists in acknowledging the situated nature of one's judgments and the consequences of extending them beyond the world in which they function.

This acknowledgment does not make judgment arbitrary. It makes it accountable. One must answer not to an abstract standard, but to the worlds one inhabits and affects. The refusal of external criteria thus does not abolish judgment. It localizes it.

At this point, the normative terrain is clear. Normativity is internal, criteria are world-bound, and no higher court is available. What remains to be articulated is how responsibility operates under these conditions. If one cannot appeal upward, how does one act, decide, and respond among worlds?

That question is taken up next.

Responsibility Without Foundation

When foundations are refused and external criteria are unavailable, responsibility cannot be derived from rules, principles, or universal obligations. It does not disappear for that reason. It changes its locus.

Responsibility arises from situatedness.

To act, judge, or speak is always to do so from within a world. One cannot step outside all worlds in order to decide neutrally how to act. Every decision presupposes a configuration of relevance in which some consequences matter and others do not. Responsibility is inseparable

from this condition. It is not something added to action after the fact; it is inherent in acting at all.

This does not mean that responsibility is subjective or arbitrary. Situatedness is not a matter of personal choice. One finds oneself already embedded in worlds whose norms operate prior to reflection. These norms shape what can be recognized as a consequence, what counts as harm or success, and what demands response. Responsibility begins with acknowledgment of this embedding.

Without foundation, responsibility cannot be justified by appeal to ultimate grounds. There is no rule that guarantees correctness, no principle that absolves decision. This absence does not weaken responsibility; it intensifies it. One cannot offload the weight of judgment onto a higher authority. What one does remains one's own, bound to the world in which it takes effect.

Responsibility under these conditions is therefore non-transferable. It cannot be delegated upward to theory, method, or morality. Nor can it be dissolved into circumstance. To say that one is situated is not to excuse oneself. It is to recognize the conditions under which one's actions matter.

This recognition also alters the meaning of accountability. One is accountable not to universal standards, but to the worlds one sustains or disrupts through action. Responsibility involves attentiveness to how one's judgments extend, where they are imposed, and what they displace. Acting responsibly requires sensitivity to the limits of one's norms and to the worlds in which those norms do not hold.

Such sensitivity does not provide instructions. It does not tell one what to do. It tells one where one stands. From that standing, decisions must still be made. The absence of foundation does not suspend decision-making; it removes guarantees.

This removal is often experienced as loss. Yet it also clarifies what responsibility actually consists in. Responsibility is not obedience to rules, nor alignment with values secured elsewhere. It is responsiveness to the consequences of situated action in a plural field of worlds.

This responsiveness includes the possibility of error. Without foundations, mistakes cannot be explained away as deviations from a correct path. They are failures of judgment that must be answered for within the worlds they affect. Responsibility includes the willingness to bear such failures without appeal to absolution.

At the same time, responsibility without foundation does not require paralysis. Action does not await certainty. Worlds function precisely because action proceeds without ultimate justification. Responsibility lies not in securing correctness in advance, but in remaining answerable afterward.

In this sense, responsibility is neither heroic nor tragic. It is ordinary. It is what remains once appeals to foundation have been exhausted. To live responsibly among worlds is not to resolve plurality, but to act within it without denying its consequences.

This understanding prepares the final steps. If responsibility is situated and unavoidable, then living among worlds entails sustained exposure to tension, conflict, and transition. That exposure has an existential dimension that cannot be reduced to theory. It must be acknowledged without being romanticized.

That acknowledgment follows next.

Living Between Worlds

Living among worlds is rarely a matter of inhabiting one world exclusively. Most lives unfold in the space between configurations. Different worlds make competing demands, sustain incompatible norms, and organize

relevance in divergent ways. This condition is not exceptional. It is structural.

To live between worlds is not to occupy a neutral midpoint. There is no such place. It is to move between configurations whose norms cannot be harmonized without loss. What counts as responsible, meaningful, or appropriate in one world may be unintelligible or even objectionable in another. These tensions do not arise from misunderstanding alone. They arise from the fact that worlds function differently.

Such tensions are often misinterpreted as transitional phases. One world is treated as provisional, another as the destination. Conflict is framed as temporary, to be resolved through growth, insight, or deeper understanding. This narrative reassures, but it distorts. In many cases, there is no resolution to be had. The worlds involved do not converge.

Living between worlds therefore involves sustained exposure to incompatibility. Decisions must be made without the possibility of full coherence. One cannot satisfy all norms simultaneously. Choices that sustain one world may weaken another. Loss is not accidental. It is built in.

This condition is frequently pathologized. Ambivalence is treated as indecision, tension as immaturity, conflict as failure. The demand for integration presses hard. Yet integration would require subordinating one world to another, or dissolving their differences under a higher scheme. For those who refuse hierarchy, such integration is not an option.

What remains is endurance.

Endurance here does not mean passive tolerance. It means remaining with tension without converting it into a problem to be solved. It involves recognizing that some

conflicts are not resolvable because they are not misunderstandings. They are expressions of plurality.

This recognition alters the meaning of stability. Stability is no longer equated with consistency across worlds. It becomes the capacity to sustain action under conditions of partial coherence. One does not seek harmony. One seeks viability.

Living between worlds also makes visible the limits of justification. Decisions cannot be fully justified to all worlds at once. Any explanation will be legible within some configurations and opaque within others. The desire to be universally intelligible must be relinquished. What remains is situated accountability.

This is not a call for resignation. It is a refusal of false resolution. Living between worlds is demanding precisely because it offers no synthesis to lean on. Its difficulty lies not in uncertainty, but in the absence of closure.

This condition does not yield a way of life. It describes one that is already in place, even when denied. Philosophy can clarify it, but it cannot redeem it. What it can do is prevent its misdescription as a temporary disorder in need of cure.

Critique Without Elevation

If no external criterion is available and if responsibility is situated, then critique cannot proceed by appeal to higher standards. This does not render critique impossible. It redefines its scope.

Critique operates immanently.

To criticize a world is not to judge it from outside, but to expose tensions, failures, or exclusions that arise within its own functioning. Critique shows how a world fails by its own lights, how its norms conflict, or how its coherence is sustained at unacceptable cost. Such critique does not deny the world’s legitimacy. It takes that legitimacy seriously.

Immanent critique is therefore demanding. It requires familiarity with the norms it addresses. One cannot criticize what one does not understand. Critique without elevation must be patient, specific, and situated. It cannot rely on universal denunciation or abstract condemnation.

This form of critique is often mistaken for complicity. Because it does not invoke external standards, it may appear insufficiently radical. Yet external critique typically achieves its force by simplification. It reduces worlds to what they violate rather than attending to how they function. What it gains in moral clarity, it loses in precision.

Critique without elevation does not enjoy this clarity. It operates under conditions of risk. Because it speaks from within or alongside a world, it can fail. It can be ignored, absorbed, or resisted. There is no guarantee of effect.

At the same time, critique without elevation avoids domination. It does not impose norms that do not belong. It does not declare deficiency on the basis of foreign criteria. Its authority, such as it is, arises from exposure rather than judgment.

This exposure can be unsettling. By making a world's functioning explicit, critique may destabilize what had appeared self-evident. It may render visible exclusions that had gone unnoticed or contradictions that had been managed tacitly. Such destabilization is not corrective in the sense of repair. It opens space without prescribing outcome.

Importantly, critique without elevation does not claim innocence. It recognizes that critique itself is situated. It affects worlds and is affected by them. It cannot pretend to stand outside the consequences it generates. Responsibility does not end with critique; it intensifies.

This understanding of critique completes the normative arc of the book. Normativity remains, responsibility

persists, critique is possible. What has been relinquished is the fantasy of final authority.

Living in Worlds

There is no final position from which this can be said once and for all.

Everything written in these pages has unfolded from within a world. From within language. From within a configuration that renders certain distinctions visible and leaves others in shadow. This text is no exception. It does not stand outside the plurality it describes.

To live in worlds is not to hover above them. It is to find oneself already situated, already oriented, already responsive to criteria that feel natural until they no longer do. What shifts is not the fact of inhabiting a world, but the recognition that it is one among others.

Earlier works traced fragments of this terrain under different names. They approached it from immediacy, from mindset, from exposure. What has emerged here is not a departure from those gestures, but a clarification of their shared condition: plurality without ground.

Nothing in this book removes that condition. It articulates it more explicitly.

Plurality does not disappear when it is understood. It becomes more intimate. The desire for overview remains tempting. The wish to reconcile, to secure, to decide from above does not dissolve easily. It reappears in subtle forms — even in the attempt to describe plurality itself.

What can be refused is not plurality, but elevation.

Dioramic phenomenology is not a system that resolves worlds. It is a way of situating them without granting any the authority of a final frame. It names an instrument rather than a doctrine. A way of showing rather than concluding.

To live in worlds is to remain without ultimate synthesis, without external criterion, without the reassurance of a vantage point that closes the matter. It is to accept that coherence is local, that critique has limits, that responsibility does not require foundation.

No diorama completes the whole.

There is no last word.

There is only continuation.

About the Author

Ton Haarmans is an independent philosopher and writer whose work explores plurality, experience, and the limits of foundational thinking. His books investigate how different configurations of experience function as self-contained worlds without appealing to ultimate ground or hierarchy.

Earlier works approached this terrain from different angles — immediacy, mindset, exposure. Living in Worlds articulates the systematic core of what he calls dioramic phenomenology: a method for describing worlds without elevating any single one to a final frame.

He lives and works between languages, disciplines, and traditions.

Living in Worlds

We do not inhabit one reality. We inhabit worlds: coherent configurations of experience that shape what counts as true, meaningful, or relevant. Scientific reasoning, spiritual resonance, non-dual immediacy: each functions as a complete world from within its own terms.

Living in Worlds develops a systematic account of this plurality without granting any world ultimate authority. Through what the author calls dioramic phenomenology, the book articulates how worlds hold together, how critique can proceed without elevation, and how responsibility is possible without foundation.

This is not a theory that resolves plurality. It is a way of inhabiting it.