

This is it

How the World Shows Up as Experience

Ton Haarmans

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| *"All paths lead away from truth"*

Shiv Sengupta (on Facebook)



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Colophon

This is it. How the World Shows Up as Experience
This book is part of the series 'Configurations of Appearance', which explores different ways in which experience organizes itself. Each volume can be read independently.

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Prologue

| *"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent."*

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921)

There is a long tradition: scientific, philosophical, contemplative, of trying to understand what experience is, how it arises, and what can be said about it without slipping into metaphysics or speculation.

Yet every attempt to describe "how things really are" ends up entangled in its own viewpoint. Every explanation carries the structure of the mind that produces it. That is not a failure; it is simply how experience works. What feels like insight is often

nothing more than a shift in perspective, a rearrangement of interpretations that were already present.

Terms like “awakening,” “seeing,” or “finding the truth” circulate in many traditions, often wrapped in stories of depth, mystery, or liberation. But what if we investigate experience as experience, without assuming a deeper layer behind it? What if we look not for hidden meaning, but for the processes that generate meaning in the first place?

This book is an attempt to explore that question.

Not to offer a method, or a path, or a promise, but to examine how experience becomes what it is: shifting, self-organizing, unconfirmed, and never finished. It is an attempt to look at experience from within experience itself—without claiming access to anything beyond it.

The aim is not to reduce experience, nor to elevate it, but to see how much of what we take as "truth" is constructed in real time. Not as an illusion, but as an activity. As something the mind-brain does, moment by moment.

And perhaps to discover what remains when even that interpretation falls away.



Chapter 1
The Boundary of Experience

1.1 Experience as point of departure

Every approach to reality begins with experience. Not because experience would be reliable, but because there is simply nothing else available.

Everything one thinks one knows about oneself, the world or consciousness ultimately depends on how that experience appears and is interpreted.

This book is not about finding a foundation beneath that whole field, but about making its boundaries visible.

1.2 What experience can do and what it cannot

Within experience a world appears that is coherent enough to live in.

Patterns, relations, meanings and expectations show up.

At the same time, experience continually reveals that it has no full access to whatever one might assume to be the source of that world.

The senses are limited, their interpretation even more so, and the whole process is driven by mechanisms that are not transparent to themselves.

That deficit is not a flaw; it is a structural feature.

Experience is not designed to deliver truth, but to function.

1.3 The inevitability of construction

The phenomenal appearing of a world arises through selection, filtering, prediction and interpretation.

This process is largely unconscious and not available to introspection.

There is no point at which one can straightforwardly say: this is how it truly is.

Not because truth would be impossible, but because the path toward it always runs through mediation.

Even the most direct phenomenal appearing is a construction: a reconstructed impression that is itself filled in by the brain.

It therefore remains unclear what lies “behind” that appearing.

That does not make it less usable, but it does make it fundamentally provisional.

1.4 Failure as structure, not as exception

Where phenomenal appearing falls short — in confusion, misperception, self-deception or unexpected disintegration — it does not reveal its exception but its mechanism.

Failure shows that experience is not a window onto an objective world, but a dynamic configuration of experience that must be continually updated.

The moments in which things go wrong reveal more about the nature of appearing than the moments in which everything runs smoothly.

The discomfort that follows from this is understandable, but it does not point to a personal shortcoming.

It points to the limitations of the system itself.

> *"Perception is never anything other than a certain gaze cast upon the world."*
>
> *« La perception n'est jamais qu'un certain regard jeté sur le monde. »*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

1.5 Why that is not a problem

The absence of certainty need not lead to distrust, nihilism or existential panic.

Phenomenal appearing exists, functions, and enables organisms to act.

That it does not represent ultimate truth does not diminish its practical value.

Moreover, this uncertainty makes something possible that absolute certainty could never allow:

openness, flexibility, and the ability to consider alternative perspectives.

The absence of a foundation *is* the foundation.

Not because that sounds philosophically attractive, but because nowhere is a more stable point of departure to be found.

1.6 The necessity of precision

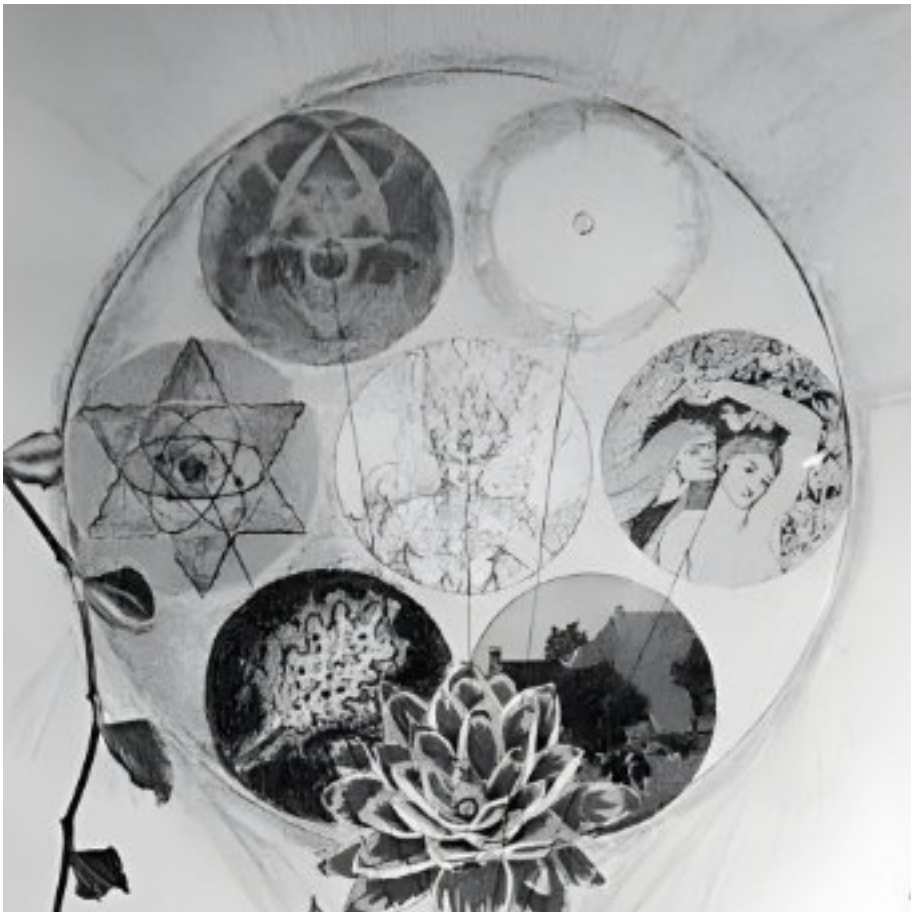
This chapter is not a plea for relativism.

The possible range of phenomenal appearing, including its limitations, can be investigated, described and sometimes sharply delineated.

Within that investigation it is important to distinguish between what one can know, what one thinks one knows, and what one simply experiences.

Not in order to reach a definitive conclusion, but to clarify the terrain on which all further conclusions rest.

This is the boundary of experience: not a wall, but a horizon that shifts with every step.



Intermezzo I
The College Years

In September 1975 I started studying philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. I still remember how natural it felt to choose a direction that would bring me closer to the core of existence. Not because I already knew what that core was, but because I felt that there was something to understand: something fundamental, something behind or beneath the world as I experienced it daily.

I went faithfully to all the lectures. No one obliged me to do so, but I wanted to be there. The university felt like a place where questions could be asked that elsewhere were inappropriate, too big, or too uncomfortable. Philosophy

seemed the most direct way toward a clear understanding of myself, the world, and perhaps even the universe.

But alongside the academic side, something else was at play. There lived in me an early form of searching that was not only intellectual. I did not only want to *know* how things were put together . I wanted to *experience* how it truly was. And that desire turned out to be a much more powerful driving force than I realised at the time.

In my subsidiary subjects I became interested, among other things, in parapsychology, the work of Tenhaeff, the stories around Gerard Croiset, and concepts of hylic pluralism. It was partly fascination, partly hope: perhaps somewhere there was an opening to a larger whole, a confirmation that the world contained more than what was visible. That I would gain a grip on the mysteriousness I had already been carrying around for so long.

During the years of studying I ended up in various work groups, with teachers and subjects that sometimes touched me deeply and sometimes passed by completely. One of the lessons that stayed with me was unexpectedly simple: I noticed that I often spoke about myself in the second person, like: “you are afraid” instead of “I am afraid.” Avoiding responsibility, unconsciously. From the moment I saw that, I decided always to speak about myself in the first person. A small shift, but crucial: a first step toward more honesty, directness, and responsibility for my own experience.

In addition, I came into contact with feminist theory, andragogy, social psychology, Jungian symbolism, dreams, archetypes, synchronicity. I was looking for an overall framework that would make the complexity of existence understandable. But the more I read, the more I noticed that every framework had its own blind spots. Philosophy did not

offer a final sum, no conclusive answer — only more refinement in the posing of the question.

And while I changed direction. from main subject to subsidiary subject, from book to book, from theory to theory, I realised afterwards that I was in fact making one single movement: the search for something that would hold. Something that remained. Something that did not disappear the moment you turned around.

That drive later brought me to Castaneda, Rajneesh, Advaita, Neo-Advaita, satsang, meditation, spirituality in all its forms. But the roots were already here: in the lecture halls of the university, in the library, in conversations with teachers, in a quiet fascination with the boundary between knowing and not-knowing.

Philosophy never gave me the foundation I hoped to find. But

it did teach me to look more carefully. To think more cautiously. To see the question itself as something alive. And perhaps that was the beginning of everything that came afterward, including the detours, the experiments, the "masters," the insights, and eventually the seeing through of the whole idea of a definitive end to the search.

The seed of my later path did not lie in the communes or the therapy groups, but here, in the desire of a student who wanted to be certain about how everything was put together. And precisely that certainty later turned out to be the stumbling block. But that insight came only much later.



Chapter 2
The World as Construction

2.1 Introduction: the obviousness of "outside"

> *"Once upon a time, I dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes, a butterfly…"*

Zhuangzi

This morning I woke up. And immediately the familiar world was there: the dim light, the outline of the chair, the sound of a dog in the crate, a rooster in the distance. The routine that follows seems to take place in a stable, external reality that simply is.

But as soon as one interrupts that obviousness even for a moment something else becomes visible: what is called "the world" appears only as experience. There is no direct access to an external world apart from the way it appears.

In daily life the world seems simply present: an external space in which things exist, move and change. This obviousness forms the framework within which people act, judge, and assign meaning. But as soon as one asks what exactly is being perceived, and how that perceiving comes about, something becomes noticeable that interrupts everyday certainty: there is no direct access to a world outside phenomenal appearing itself.

This observation does not undermine the existence of a world; it only shows that this world does not appear like an object on a table. It appears as experience, already shaped by selection, interpretation and inference. The world as it is encountered is therefore never "given. It is a result.

This thought brings something simple but fundamental to light:

What appears is an outcome; the origin remains out of reach.

2.2 Selection as necessity

An organism constantly receives more stimuli than it can process. Selection is not a weakness but a structural condition.

The brain filters, orders and ignores almost everything.

What appears, appears because the system considers it relevant, not because it fully reflects an "external world". This creates two misleading impressions:

- that what appears is complete
- that what appears comes directly from outside

But both are products of an internal dynamic that largely remains hidden.

The selection that makes experience possible simultaneously makes any form of absolute knowing impossible.

2.3 Patterns, inferences, fillings-in

Construction does not only mean leaving things out, but also filling things in.

The brain automatically completes what is missing on the basis of:

- earlier experiences
- statistical probability
- emotional relevance

- expectations

Without these inferences, action would become impossibly slow.

But it does mean that what one sees is never just perception. It is perception plus a large number of invisible assumptions.

The world is therefore not only a selection, but a hypothesis: a continually updated proposal of how things probably are.

> *"A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices."*

William James

2.4 Language as ordering and limitation

Language makes the world manageable. But at the same time it narrows it. What receives no name risks disappearing from view.

What does receive a name risks becoming rigid.

Language creates categories, and those categories create boundaries that do not exist in the appearing itself.

In that sense, language is not only a tool but also a filter that co-determines the shape of phenomenal appearing.

Language makes description possible, but never without loss.

2.5 Illusion, fiction and construction

The term “illusion” is often used to declare the world or the self untrue, but that creates more confusion than clarity.

There are three levels that must be strictly distinguished.

Illusion is a misinterpretation: an error in inference.

Fiction is the story that gives meaning to appearances. It is not wrong, but it carries no truth-value.

Construction is the normal functioning of phenomenal appearing: the way in which the organism orders information into a coherent interface.

Non-dual appearing is not an illusion but an atypical construction.

The sense of self is not an illusion but a functional fiction.

The world as it appears is not fiction but construction.

Whoever confuses these three turns clarity into a new ideology.

2.6 The role of memory and expectation

No experience stands on its own. It always appears through:

- memory
- recognition
- comparison
- anticipation

This means that experience is less a “registration” and more a continuation of earlier conclusions. The stability of the world does not arise from the world itself, but from the inertia of interpretations. What appears today appears in the light of yesterday.

2.7 Construction and the unattainability of a foundation

The philosophical temptation is old: beneath the chaotic stream of appearing there must surely lie a fixed, “real” reality.

A structure.

A foundation.

A solid layer.

But nothing in experience provides access to such a foundation.

What appears, appears as outcome, never as source.

Experience shows:

- patterns
- coherence
- stability

but no metaphysical guarantees.

The world as it appears is a model, not a transparent depiction of an underlying truth.

> *"The world is my representation."*
>
> *"Die Welt ist meine Vorstellung."*

Arthur Schopenhauer

2.8 Reality as interface

The cognitive scientist **Donald Hoffman** begins not from philosophy but from evolution:

Organisms that see the world "truthfully" are not necessarily the best adapted. Organisms that see useful illusions often are.

He uses the metaphor of a computer interface:

You see a folder icon. You do not see transistor fields, magnetic structures or file systems. Yet you navigate without difficulty.

According to Hoffman, experience is an interface: a clear, evolutionarily optimised layer on top of something entirely out of reach.

Our perceptual system "sells" us a comprehensible world, not a true one.

You do not need to follow Hoffman's further metaphysics; his evolutionary argument alone is enough to show that experience is a tool, not a representation.

2.9 The myth of objectivity

Objectivity is a method, not an access to reality-in-itself.

Science refines our constructions by:

- minimising distortion

- increasing measurability
- creating consensus through repeatability

But none of these procedures breaks through the structure of experience itself.

They produce better models — not absolute truth.

This does not mean that no reality exists, but that every access to it takes shape within phenomenal appearing.

2.10 The usefulness of constructions

The question of whether our constructions are true is less relevant than whether they work. Constructions are not a deficiency; they are a biological necessity.

They make action, survival, meaning and communication possible. Usefulness is the criterion — not correspondence.

2.11 Top-down cosmology: a world without a pre-given foundation

Stephen Hawking and **Thomas Hertog** argue, in their "top-down cosmology", that the universe does not begin with a pre-given, objectively existing initial condition. Instead:

- the universe has not one history, but many possible ones;
- the history an organism observes depends on the questions that organism asks;
- observation selects from those possible histories a "workable path".

In other words: the world that appears is partly dependent on the way it is observed.

This idea fits directly within the framework of this chapter:

• no pre-existing absolute reality, but a set of possible models;

• and experience as the intersection between organism and possibility.

Top-down cosmology says nothing mystical; it only states that "the world" cannot be defined independently of experience.

It is a construction in interaction with observation, not a fixed backdrop in which experience unfolds.

And thus cosmology touches the same boundary: there is no foundation that stands independently and unchangingly behind our models.

> *"Therefore the sage wanders in the realm of nothing whatever, that is the land of true reality."*

Zhuangzi / Chuang-Tzu

2.12 The relaxation of not-knowing

Not-knowing is not a defeat, but a sober recognition of how the system works. Certainty is an effect of construction, not a property of the world. When that becomes clear, a certain weight falls away: we do not need to know, we cannot know and that is not a problem. The world becomes more open, not more mysterious; more precise, not more foggy.

> *"It is known that this mentally fabricated worded world is the only world we exist in, that we are the dream, that there is no outside to the dream, as inside and outside, like all this and that is made up. This is it, Coyote. This is it, whatever it looks and feels like."*

Nancy Neithercut, This Is It, Coyote



Intermezzo II
Non-duality, qu'est-ce que c'est?

The term 'non-duality' is used nowadays in various ways. For many people with a philosophical interest it evokes little recognition; for others it refers to a growing collection of teachers, writers, livestreams and gatherings in which there is talk about the disappearance of the 'I', the end of the search, or the immediate presence of what is. The whole does not form a tradition, a school or a system, but rather a loose social field in which certain words and themes keep returning.

Within that field different registers exist. There is a longer history of advaita and Buddhist non-duality, usually connected to practice or meditation. In addition, there is a more recent

style—sometimes called ‘neo-advaita’ or ‘radical non-duality’—that speaks much more directly and more minimalistically. In that style it is often emphasised that there is nothing to attain, that there is no person who can do anything, and that experience as it appears now is all there is.

Against this background a certain linguistic environment arises: words such as ‘presence’, ‘oneness’, ‘this’, ‘without I’, ‘freedom’, ‘no seeker’. Some people find recognition or relief in it; others become confused, because the language is both simple and ambiguous. The quality of explanation differs greatly, and the tone can vary from extremely clear to almost hermetic.

It is therefore important to clarify that this book does not participate in this scene, and does not represent a spiritual teaching. What I call here ‘non-dual experiencing’ does not refer to a doctrine, path or promise, but to a phenomenon that everyone knows: moments in which the centre that normally

organises experience (temporarily) falls away. Not as insight, not as result, but as one of the many ways in which experience can configure itself.

This clarification is enough to clear up the terminological fog. The intention is not to criticise or defend a movement, but to make clear that the word ‘non-duality’ in this book refers exclusively to a direct experiential configuration—and not to a worldview, conviction or community. The investigation focuses on how experience appears and forms itself, not on a teaching or path that would lead to a particular state.



Chapter 3
Experience, Interpretation, and the Everyday Psychological

3.1 Introduction: one step beyond construction

Where Chapter 1 exposed the boundaries of experience — how phenomenal appearing yields outcomes but offers no access to its own origin — and Chapter 2 showed that "the world" appears as a functional construction, this chapter shifts the focus to something more concrete: how all of this becomes visible in everyday psychological life.

The starting point does not change: experience arises through an organism that forms patterns, and those patterns take the shape

of a world. But in this chapter it becomes clear how that mechanism actually functions in ordinary existence: in memory, emotion, perception, expectations, and even social interaction.

The abstraction of the previous chapters thus comes into contact with the practical.

What usually appears as 'ordinary reality' is not a neutral backdrop against which other experiences unfold, but one particular configuration of experience—so familiar and widely shared that it rarely becomes visible as such."

3.2 The everyday functioning of interpretation

That phenomenal appearing is constructive only becomes truly convincing for many people when it shows itself in recognisable situations. Four examples illustrate how the interpretative character of experience manifests itself non-stop.

3.2.1 Memory: never a recording, always a reconstruction

When someone remembers an event, there often arises the illusion that one is "retrieving an image from the past". But numerous studies show that memories are not stored but built up on the spot from fragments: emotional tone, stories previously told, contextual hints, expectations about how it "must roughly have been".

A memory that seems vivid today may, without any noticeable reason, lose details tomorrow or add new ones. Not because "memory fails", but because this is the only thing a memory can do: construct. Experience yields outcomes, not origins.

3.2.2 Perception: filling in the unknown

Visual perception gives the impression of a stable whole. But neurologically, only a fraction of the visual field is processed at

high resolution. The rest consists of inferences: the brain fills in what it expects.

When someone at home sees a coat hanging on a hook and briefly thinks it is a person, this becomes clear: the visual system chooses the most likely interpretation on the basis of a minimal amount of data.

Perception is a guess that works.

The world appears as a useful construction, not as a direct reflection of an external reality.

3.2.3 Emotion: projection and meaning-making

A simple bodily sensation like pressure in the stomach, tension in the chest, is almost immediately framed by interpretation:

“I'm afraid”, “something is wrong”, “I'm nervous”.

But the same sensation can just as easily be interpreted as: “I'm excited”, “I'm alert”, “I haven't eaten enough”.

The physiology changes hardly at all; the story around it does the work.

Emotion is therefore not an objective given but an integrated construction of bodily sensations and interpretation.

There is no access to a “naked reality”, not even in the experience of one’s own body.

3.2.4 Social interaction: expectations as world-shapers

When someone in a conversation feels that the other person is irritated, it often turns out later that this irritation was entirely imagined: a misinterpretation of intonation, body language, or a projection of one’s own insecurity.

Yet this experience does not feel like "projection". It feels like reality.

The boundary between inner world and outer world is therefore much thinner, and much more porous than intuition suggests.

> *"The world of the happy is different from that of the unhappy."*
>
> Ludwig Wittgenstein

3.3 Time as construction

Although time usually feels like a linear flow — past, present, future — this is not a direct feature of experience but an ordering imposed by the system itself.

The organism does not receive time; it receives change: shifts in sensation, environment and internal state. The sequence and

meaning of those changes are formed only afterwards through memory, expectation and narrativity.

Time therefore does not appear as a perceived structure, but as a model: an interpretative operation that welds separate appearances into continuity. In this way the impression of duration, direction and "moments" arises.

This becomes evident at the edges of normal experience — panic, shock, falling in love, trauma, ecstasy, non-dual appearing — where the sense of time may accelerate, slow down or even fall away. The world does not change; the configuration of experience does.

Time is therefore not a foundation, but a practical tool: a continuous reconstruction that provides foothold as long as the configuration remains stable.

3.4 The body as information source

Although interpretation is often seen as something mental, the body is the primary source of information. Interoception (the perception of internal states) continuously provides signals about tension, pressure, breathing, hormonal response and autonomic reactions. These signals largely determine how phenomena are interpreted.

Emotion does not arise alongside the body but out of the body.

The boundary between "self" and "world" is formed just as much by muscle patterns, breathing rhythms and reflexive responses as by cognitive interpretation. Self-feeling is therefore always also bodily: an organised tension around a presumed centre. Non-dual or decentered appearing shows this because interpretative structures shift while the body functions as if there is still a centre. The body continues to orient, regulate, anticipate.

The body is not a carrier of experience, but a dynamic producer of how experience appears.

3.5 The psychological logic behind constructions

These examples show that interpretation is not an exception but the normative mode of human functioning. Psychology, cognitive science and neuroscience confirm this again and again.

The predictive brain

Many modern theories describe the brain as a prediction machine: a system that continuously guesses what is happening and adjusts only when predictions fail. This means:

Experience is a prediction, not a registration. Phenomenal appearing arises from expectations, not from raw data, because the brain prefers consistency over accuracy.

As a result, experience takes on the character of a self-confirming model that seeks stability, even when that stability rests on misunderstandings.

The importance of usefulness

When patterns are "good enough" to fit the environment, they are reinforced by success. The world therefore appears reliable — not because it is so, but because the organism functions within a limited niche in which its assumptions usually work. The organism lives within a functional universe, not an absolute one.

3.6 The narrative self

Alongside the direct sense of a centre: an "I-here" that appears as a reference poin, there is a broader layer: the narrative self. This is the ongoing story one forms about oneself. It does not consist of raw experience but of language, memory, social feedback and interpretation.

The narrative self links events together, creates causality, constructs identity and generates intention.

The impression of continuity — the idea that one and the same person moves through time — is largely the work of this narrative structure.

During non-dual or decentered appearing, the narrative self partially or completely falls away. Experience continues, but without a story positioning it. When the narrative mode returns it tries to understand and integrate the rupture, often by framing it in spiritual, existential or psychological terms.

This does not make the experience truthful; it merely shows how strongly narrativity normally colours the rest of phenomenal appearing.

3.7 The social layer

No experience arises in isolation. Language, norms, scripts, expectations, cultural patterns and implicit rules determine what appears as meaningful. What is often called "reality" is largely a socially stabilised consensus: a shared interpretation that becomes so self-evident it no longer appears as interpretation.

Self-feeling, categories, values, worldviews are not invented individually but socially adopted. Even atypical experiences are always read against a culturally supplied frame of reference.

When someone has a decentered or non-dual experience, the configuration of experience shifts, but the social environment remains the same. It is this collision that often generates confusion or friction: the difference between a shifted phenomenal configuration and an environment that demands a different structure.

3.8 The boundary between experience and reality

This chapter is not a plea for relativism. It does not suggest that everything is arbitrary or that no world exists.

The point is more subtle: There is no direct access to that world.

There are only models, interpretations, patterns that prove useful.

Experience shows its outcomes, but not its ground.

The boundary is not a line but something produced by interpretation, a phenomenon that appears only within experience itself.

That recognition makes the transition to the next chapter possible.

> *« L'attention est la forme la plus rare et la plus pure de la générosité.»*

Simone Weil

3.9 Experience as one of many possible configurations

Once it becomes clear that experience is always a construction, a natural question arises: are there different possible configurations of experience? The answer is yes.

Psychology recognises countless variations: neurodiversity, atypical perceptual integration, trauma responses, flow states, dissociation, religious experiences, mystical experiences, psychotic breaks, and more. And also: non-dual appearing, in

which the usual separation between "self" and "world" does not appear.

3.10 Mindsets as experiential possibilities

In everyday psychology the word **mindset** is often used to describe an attitude or cognitive stance. But in a stricter sense, a mindset refers to something more fundamental: a configuration of expectations, filters and interpretative rules that determines how experience appears. In that sense, a mindset is not only a cognitive disposition but a form of perceptual architecture.

A mindset is therefore not content, but a way in which content is formed. It does not determine what someone sees, but how something becomes "visible" at all. In this way, the concept aligns with what I call experiential possibilities: possible ways in

which the world can appear, each with its own logic, accents, and blind spots.

One person experiences a situation as threatening where another experiences it as a challenge — not because the world is objectively different, but because the underlying experiential possibilities differ. Mindsets therefore not only organise meaning; *they determine what can appear as meaningful in the first place.*

In this sense, non-duality is not an exception but one of those possible configurations — an extreme shift within the spectrum of what humans can experience. It is not a "truer" perspective but a different kind of experiential framework, with its own internal consistency and its own limits.

By thinking mindset and experiential possibility together in this way, it becomes visible how experience always already takes

place within a configuration, and why no configuration can claim absolute validity.

The constructive mechanisms discussed — selection, interpretation, narrativity, bodily modulation and social stabilisation — form the basis on which every experience appears.

The next chapter examines how this structure changes when certain interpretative processes fall away, and what remains when the usual centre is no longer constructed.



Chapter 4
Non-Duality as an Experiential Possibility

4.1 Introduction: not a “higher state” but a configuration

Non-duality is often presented as a kind of metaphysical end point, a condition in which reality reveals itself as it “truly” is. In spiritual and popular literature it takes on the contours of a truth: something that must be found, reached, or realised.

In everyday human experience, however, non-duality does not appear as a revealed truth, but as a change in how phenomenal appearing is organised.

The starting point of this chapter is simple: what if non-duality is not an unmasking of reality, but a changed relation between experience and interpretation?

Within that framework, non-duality can be approached as a possible mode of phenomenal appearing, comparable to other configurations such as the conventional dualistic experience, psychotic experiential worlds, religious frameworks, or certain meditative states. These configurations do not differ in "degree of truth" but in their structural and phenomenological characteristics.

In that sense, non-duality is not a way out of the human condition, but a phenomenon within that same condition.

4.2 The standard configuration: distinction, location, direction

I showed that experience is always the result of construction processes that lie largely outside conscious access. Within that system there is one configuration that almost all humans share: the dualistic experiential structure.

This structure contains three characteristic features:

- **Distinction**: Phenomena appear as separate entities: me here, the world there.
- **Location**: There seems to be a "centre" from which experiences are lived.
- **Direction**: Experience is automatically read in terms of cause and effect, past and future, choice and intention.

This structure is functional. It supports action, orientation, anticipation and social interaction.

But it also gives rise to a range of phenomena people often experience as problematic: tension, the anxious search for certainty, existential pressure, and a persistent tendency to interpret experience as pointing to something behind or beneath appearing itself.

4.3 What changes in non-dual experience?

When people speak about non-duality in the strict sense — not as doctrine or belief, but as an event within experience — they usually refer to three shifts:

- The falling away of the centre.
- There is still seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking, but it no longer seems to occur "from someone".

- Functionality continues, but the sense of an inner controller weakens or disappears.
- The falling away of boundaries.
- The distinctions between “this” and “that” remain conceptually usable, but they feel less absolute.
- Experience becomes flatter, more open, less centred around a “self”.
- The falling away of interpretative tension.
- There is less urge to explain, frame or anchor experience.
- The whole feels lighter, simpler, less loaded.

It is important to notice that these shifts are not necessarily spiritual, elevated or mystical.

They are *phenomenological*, not metaphysical. It is not an unveiling of a deeper reality, but a change in how experience organises itself.

> *"Nothing arrives. Nothing departs. Experience is the whole event."*
>
> Miranda Warren

4.4 Non-duality does not provide better access to reality

Even this immediacy is not outside experience's way of organizing itself; it is not the absence of structure, but a configuration in which certain distinctions temporarily lose their force. The tendency to regard non-duality as "truer", "purer", or "more real" arises from the same dynamic discussed in Chapter 1: experience often claims more than it can justify.

In duality, appearing behaves as if it grants direct access to a stable external world. In non-duality, appearing sometimes behaves as if it grants access to a foundation beneath it. Both claims are untenable.

The only honest statement is that experience — dualistic or non-dualistic — appears as it appears.

Non-duality does not reveal any supposed "true nature" of reality; it reveals only something about the variability of human experiential structure.

> *"Awareness does not illuminate a deeper truth; it only shows that there is no place outside experience to stand."*
>
> Shiv Sengupta

4.5 The pitfall of spiritual mythology

Because non-duality is often presented within spiritual traditions, a cycle of claims arises very quickly:

- that something must be achieved,
- that some people are "awakened",
- that non-dual experience is superior,
- that the dualistic experience is an illusion from which one must escape.

These claims are psychologically functional: they provide a narrative of progress, purpose and validation, but they have no epistemic foundation.

In reality, the same can be said of non-duality as of any other experiential state:

- it occurs,
- it does not always occur,
- it cannot be forced,
- it has no status above or below other experiences,
- it tells nothing about what "reality really is".

The only thing that distinguishes non-duality is that the usual structure of a localised subject temporarily disappears.

That can be relieving, but also confusing.

4.6 Experiences of non-duality are not uniform

There are different ways in which experience can feel "non-dual", and not all of them resemble one another:

- a flat, open presence without a self-centre;

- a sense of transparency of experience;
- periods without internal commentary;
- deep meditative silence;
- spontaneous shifts during crises or exhaustion.

These variants are not uniform, and it is pointless to rank them on a scale from "truer" to "less true" non-duality.

They are configurations with overlapping characteristics, nothing more.

> *"This seamlessness is always what's here, even when thought divides it up."*
>
> Joan Tollifson

4.7 Headlessness as an experiential configuration

What is known as "headlessness" — originally formulated by **Douglas Harding** and later described with great clarity by **David Lang** — is one of the simplest empirical demonstrations of how experience can shift without anything mystical happening.

It is not a method, not a path, and not a belief system. It is a pointer to a shift in attention: not about what the world is, but how it appears when the habitual self-localisation is briefly not followed.

In the ordinary configuration, the centre of experience is automatically localised "behind the eyes": an implicit position from which the world is seen. This location is not questioned — it is experienced as self-evident.

Headlessness introduces a simple observation: there is no direct experience of a face or head at the place from which perception seems to originate.

A world appears, but at the "location of the face" nothing appears: no form, no boundary, no object called "me".

This does not mean that no head exists, but that it does not appear in experience as a centre or as an object.

Experience is asymmetrical: things appear there, but the centre in which they appear remains empty.

In this configuration, the idea of a subject who perceives temporarily falls away, not conceptually, but phenomenologically.

There is only the appearing itself.

This points in the same direction as non-duality, but without metaphysical packaging.

It is not: “there is no one.”

It is: “the place where someone would have to appear, appears empty.”

Headlessness does not show a truth. It shows a possibility.

No access to a deeper reality

Harding and Lang never claimed that headlessness is a higher state. It is not a gateway to insight into being, source, awareness or essence. It shows precisely that such claims are unnecessary.

It is simply a shift in which the automatic self-localisation does not occur, allowing experience to appear open and without directionality.

It is a way in which the non-dual configuration can occur — not evidence that this configuration is more fundamental, purer or truer than others.

4.9 Finally

Non-duality is often presented as an exceptional condition, a kind of breakthrough to a more fundamental reality. In spiritual traditions it appears as insight, awakening, or "the shift".

In contemporary discourse it sometimes acquires an almost absolute status, as if it were the true form of experiencing, the endpoint of an inner evolution.

But when viewed through the framework developed in the previous chapters, non-duality takes on a different meaning: not as access to a deeper reality, but as one of the possible configurations in which human experience can appear.

In that sense, non-duality is not exceptional but without contour.

It does not describe something "behind" experience, but a way in which experience forms itself: an appearing in which the distinction between subject and object, between "me" and "world", briefly, or not so briefly, has no function.

Phenomenal appearing does not use the schema that normally provides orientation. What remains is not a mystical domain, but a minimal form of cognition that simply does not draw a separation.

This means that non-duality does not answer the question of what reality really is. It makes no ontological claim and points to no metaphysical truth. It shows at most that appearing can configure itself in this way: without inside and outside, without centre, without observer.

That does not make non-duality more true than other experiential states, but it does make it informative. *It shows that the sense of separation is not a necessary condition for a functioning human experience*.

Non-duality can be seen as a construction in which precisely the distinction that supports constructions temporarily does not occur.

Experience still has content — sound, light, movement, touch — but no inscribed subject relating to that content.

It is a possible stance of the system, not a destination.

When spirituality presents non-duality as the highest attainable condition or as proof of deeper insight, a narrative arises that is hard to sustain. The experience itself contains no information that justifies such a status.

It simply shows a configuration in which the distinction between "me" and "this" does not appear.

That in itself is neither elevated nor rare; it also happens spontaneously in everyday circumstances: during extreme concentration, in sport, in startle responses, in moments of wonder, sometimes even in fatigue or illness.

What spiritual contexts call "the absolute" is, in cognitive terms, better described as a shift in how the system organises itself.

This sober approach aligns with voices who demythologise non-duality — thinkers who emphasise that non-duality adds nothing to reality, makes no truth-claim, and offers no court of validity.

In these developments, non-duality shifts from mystical insight to phenomenological possibility.

Shiv Sengupta points out, for example, that non-duality says nothing about what the world is, but about how experience sometimes shapes itself. It is perspectival: it describes the limits of seeing, not the nature of what is seen.

Robert Saltzman emphasises that non-duality delivers no theory of reality, but at most a more honest way of approaching direct appearing, without metaphysical conclusions.

Joan Tollifson focuses on its everyday character: non-duality need not be different or grander than walking through a room, washing dishes, or breathing — life without the extra story.

Miranda Warren shows that non-duality is not about completion, liberation or "becoming better", but about dismantling the very idea that experience must go somewhere.

What remains is a sharp and sometimes uncomfortable insight into the limited but workable way in which human experience shapes itself.

All these voices point to the same thing: non-duality is not a knowledge claim. It produces no explanations and gives no access to a foundation of reality. It is a possible appearance-mode of experience, nothing more and nothing less.

Its value lies not in truth but in simplicity: it shows how little is needed for experience, and how secondary the sense of a separate self actually is.

For me that matters because it supports the idea that human realities are multiple and fluid.

Non-duality is one of those realities — not ultimate, but an existing example.

It illustrates that experience does not follow one fixed structure.

The construction of a world can occur with or without a subject; both forms are human, coherent, and limited.

What non-duality ultimately reveals is how much the idea that the “I” is a central controlling principle rests on habit, not on necessity.

When the separation drops out, experience continues to function.

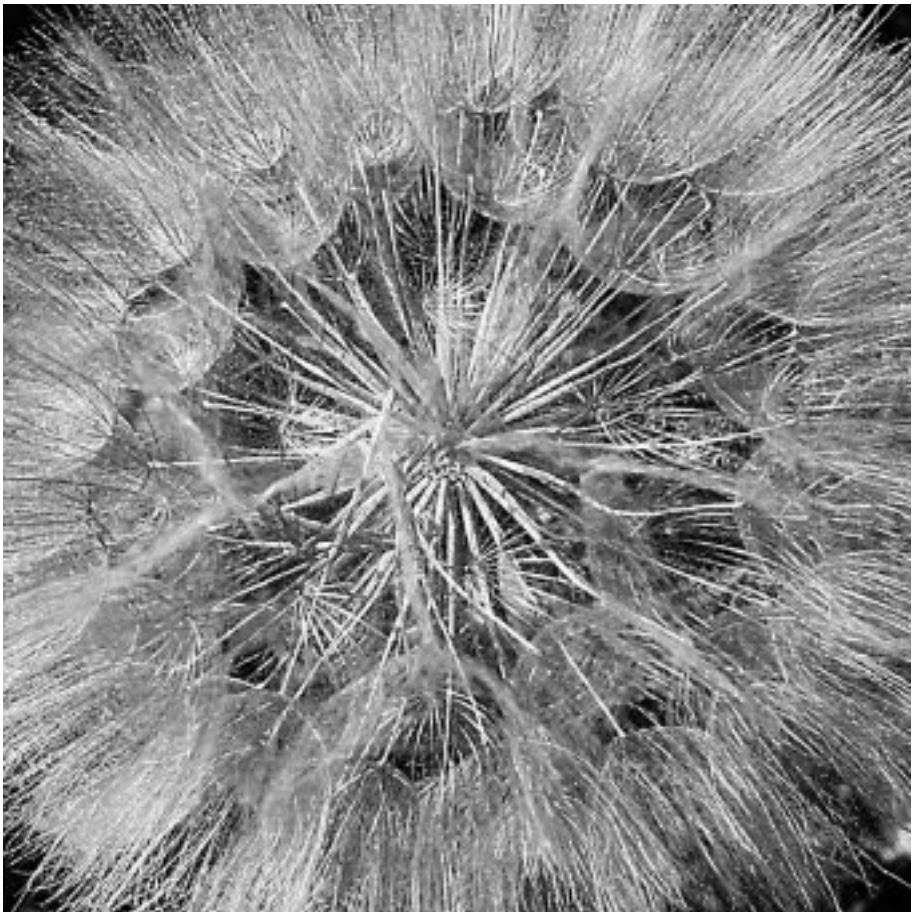
This makes non-duality not a goal, but an indication: human experience is less dependent on the self than is often assumed.

What that means will become the question of the following chapters.

Up to this point, non-duality has been described from a sober, phenomenological angle.

This connects directly with what the next chapter investigates: not what non-duality means within spiritual systems, but how the psychology of "awakening" works — how people interpret such moments, what arises sociologically around them, and why the experience is so easily mythologised.

Where this chapter demythologises non-duality, the next chapter will explore how myth-making keeps reappearing.



Chapter 5
The Demythologising of "Awakening"

| *"No one wakes up. Waking up is just another story."*

Miranda Warren

5.1 Introduction: a phenomenon without fixed form

The shifts described in Chapter 4 are interpreted by many people as spiritual or existential revelations. This chapter investigates what exactly happens in that interpretative phase: how experience is read, labelled, amplified or sanctified — and why this happens so easily.

There are few concepts in the history of human experience that have generated as much projection, expectation and confusion as "awakening". The word suggests a transition from ignorance to insight, from bondage to freedom, from illusion to some kind of ultimate reality. But as soon as one looks at the concrete phenomena grouped under this name, it becomes clear that there is no uniformity — not in form, not in content, not in meaning.

Strikingly, this lack of uniformity is rarely acknowledged. The experience itself, however intense or unusual, is often immediately fitted into an existing framework, usually drawn from religious traditions, spiritual schools, or contemporary non-duality circles. What may in fact be a temporarily altered configuration of experience is then interpreted as a breakthrough into “the truth”.

This chapter attempts to loosen that layer of interpretation from the phenomenon itself. Not to deny the phenomenon, but to take

it apart: the experience, the interpretation, the cultural layers, and the psychological mechanisms that turn an experiential event into a loaded myth.

5.2 The spectrum of "awakening": fourteen ways of describing it

What is today called awakening consists of a broad spectrum of phenomena. Different traditions assign very different meanings to it. Below is an overview of fourteen common definitions — not as claims to truth, but as illustrations of how diffuse the field is:

Enlightenment as Liberation from Suffering
Source: Classical Buddhism.
A state beyond craving and aversion, in which the ego-self has dissolved. Enlightenment means the end of dukkha (suffering),

not through transcendence but through a deep seeing of impermanence and emptiness.

Enlightenment as Unity with the Absolute

Source: Advaita Vedānta.

The realization that Atman (the inner self) is identical to Brahman (the ultimate reality). Enlightenment is not an attainment but the removal of ignorance (avidyā) about this ever-present truth.

Enlightenment as Radical Non-Duality

Source: Contemporary nonduality (e.g., Tony Parsons, Miranda Warren).

There is no person to become enlightened. Enlightenment is not a state, but the always-already absence of separation. Seeking is part of the dream of individuality; there is no awakening from it because there was never anyone asleep.

Enlightenment as Presence and Acceptance

Source: Eckhart Tolle, John Astin

A shift into fully inhabiting the Now, letting go of resistance to what is. Enlightenment is not an end point, but a mode of being aligned with the flow of life and the immediacy of awareness.

Enlightenment as Emptiness (Śūnyatā)

Source: Mahāyāna Buddhism (e.g., Nāgārjuna).

All phenomena, including the self and enlightenment, are empty of inherent existence. Realization is not of something, but the direct insight into the interdependence and groundlessness of all things.

Enlightenment as the Natural State

Source: Dzogchen and Zen.

What is sought is already here. Enlightenment is recognizing the ever-present, uncontrived awareness beneath all thought and striving. It is not achieved but revealed when effort ceases.

Enlightenment as Deconditioning

Source: J. Krishnamurti. Freedom from the known.

Enlightenment is the ending of psychological time, memory, and belief systems. It occurs when the mind sees itself clearly and is no longer a slave to conditioning.

Enlightenment as Lucid Dreaming the World

Source: Carlos Castaneda (Don Juan Matus lineage).

The world is a construct sustained by the mind's tonal. Enlightenment involves "stopping the world," breaking perceptual routines, and shifting to the nagual — the unknowable, energetic essence of being. Rather than waking up from the dream, one becomes a lucid participant within it.

Enlightenment as Ecstatic Awareness and Celebration

Source: Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho).

A flowering of consciousness, combining meditation and total immersion in life's joys. Enlightenment is neither renunciation

nor asceticism, but Zorba the Buddha — dancing and silence, love and aloneness. One becomes a witness, rooted in awareness but fully alive.

Enlightenment as Transformation of Identity

Source: Western mysticism (e.g., Meister Eckhart, Plotinus).
The shift from a human self to divine presence. The soul transcends itself and becomes one with God or the One. Enlightenment is union, in which the boundaries of individuality dissolve into a greater intelligence or light.

Enlightenment as Collapse of Belief Structures

Source: Robert Saltzman, UG Krishnamurti.
Enlightenment is not an achievement but the collapse of the entire edifice of belief, meaning, and spiritual striving. According to UG Krishnamurti, there is no such thing as enlightenment — only the body functioning without the

illusion of a separate mind. It is not blissful or desirable, just factual and raw.

Enlightenment as Inhabiting Paradox

Source: Taoism

The enlightened one does not grasp, does not know, does not strive. Enlightenment is aligning with the Tao — the Way — which cannot be defined or approached directly. It is a subtle yielding, a dancing with opposites, and a return to naturalness and unknowing.

Enlightenment as Seeing with No Head

Source: Douglas Harding (The Headless Way)

Enlightenment is the recognition that "I have no head." That is, in direct experience, there is no face looking out — only openness, awareness, and the world arising. It is a literal and radical shift in perception that reveals the absence of a separate self without requiring any spiritual belief or attainment.

Enlightenment as Ending the Search

Source: Miranda Warren, Joan Tollifson, Shiv Sengupta

Enlightenment is the end of the imagined journey. There is no arrival, no final state, no attainment. It is the seeing through of the illusion that there is anything wrong, anything missing, or anyone separate to be fixed or fulfilled.

Many other experiences which has been described as "Enlightenment" can be found as well...

This list shows no harmony but fragmentation: techniques, beliefs, metaphors, doctrine, psychology, neurophysiology and interpretation intermix. It is therefore senseless to pretend that these phenomena refer to one underlying reality. They fit more within my central theme: experience as variable configuration.

5.3 The experience itself: intensity without content

What is called awakening is often an intense shift in the configuration of experience. Boundaries between subject and world may blur, thoughts may fall away, time may temporarily dissolve, the sense of a "self" may disappear. The experience does not need to be positive, elevated or religious. The phenomenon has no fixed content: it is a change in how the world appears.

The crucial point is that the experience contains no inherent meaning.

It is not a message from reality, not an insight into a metaphysical structure, not proof of any theory. Interpretation always comes afterwards.

The experience is an event within the organism — not a window onto a hidden truth.

5.4 The role of interpretation: from shift to myth

As soon as the experience is over, the colouring begins. Meaning-making, language, previously read traditions, spiritual expectations and cognitive biases assemble a story that frames the raw phenomenon.

The pattern is predictable:

- Something happens that deviates from the ordinary.
- The organism seeks foothold.
- A traditional or modern narrative is placed on top of the experience.
- The experience shifts from event to identity.

This is not a personal failure; it is a psychological mechanism. Humans find it difficult to tolerate an event without a frame.

But it is precisely that frame which generates the myth — not the experience itself.

5.5 Why the stories grow larger

Mythologisation does not occur because people are naïve, but because the combination of intensity + uncertainty + social field almost automatically leads to inflation. A few factors:

- **Rarity**: what is unusual is quickly made special.
- **Prestige of tradition**s: old frameworks give weight to new experiences.
- **Community pressur**e: within spiritual circles, "awakening" easily becomes a status object.
- **Hunger for meaning**: people want something to matter.

- **Narrative attraction**: dramatic stories sell themselves.

The effect is cumulative: a shift in phenomenal appearing is transformed into a metaphysical revelation.

5.6 The layered nature of the growth-path

Many spiritual traditions — from Advaita to Vajrayāna, from Neo-Advaita to New Age — present the human trajectory as a path with different levels or stages.

Terms such as "awakening", "enlightenment", "self-realisation", "samadhi", "kensho", "satori" and even "nirvikalpa" are arranged as if they were steps on an ascending ladder of consciousness. The problem with such models is not that the described experiences do not occur, but that the way they are ordered into a hierarchy says more about cultural narratives

than about experience itself. Different traditions use the same terms for totally different phenomena, and within traditions one term is often loaded with expectations, promises and mythology.

From the structure of experience itself, however, no ladder is visible.

Experience shows shifts, intensifications, collapses of interpretation, periods of extreme clarity and periods of closure — but no inherent path.

What looks like a path is usually the result of three mechanisms:

Narrativity: the tendency to place separate phenomena into a story structure: a "before" and "after", a "beginning" and "end-point".

Projection: the expectation that something "higher" must be attained, which causes certain experiences to be enlarged or elevated.

Social feedback: in groups, experiences are recognised, named and confirmed within an existing framework.

This makes them appear as "levels".

Even extreme experiences such as nirvikalpa samadhi — often presented as the pinnacle of spiritual development — are, phenomenologically, not an endpoint but temporary configurations in which the usual interpretative structures fall away. There is no evidence that such states reveal anything about the nature of "reality", nor that they produce more stable or wiser functioning.

What is called "growth" is usually *a change of configuration*, not a climb toward a higher reality.

What is called “enlightenment” is usually an interpretation of a rupture, not a destination. What are called “stages” are categories added afterwards.

The urge to organise human experiences into hierarchies is understandable — ordering creates meaning — but it has no phenomenological basis. The organism knows appearing, change, shifting, and regulation; it knows no path that leads to something outside appearing.

5.7 The voices that demythologise

Opposite the mythologising tendency stand a few contemporary voices who bring the phenomenon back to human proportions without reducing or romanticising it.

Robert Saltzman emphasises that no experience — including non-dual ones — makes claims about the nature of reality. What

is called “awakening” is a change in how experience appears, not access to a deeper level of existence.

Joan Tollifson brings attention to the everyday: it is not the spectacle that matters, but the sober clarity that experience has no fixed core and that no separate “self” can be found, not even in the dramatic moments.

Shiv Sengupta places everything within a strictly epistemic framework: non-duality and awakening say nothing about metaphysics; at most they show the limits and flexibility of experience.

Miranda Warren stresses the human side: there is no special state, no exalted path, no outcome that places someone above another. The phenomenon is simply human — not sacred.

These voices do not function as philosophical authorities but as a correction against the inflation that arises around charisma, tradition and desire.

An interesting observation comes from **Ales Us**, who approaches awakening from a cultural and evolutionary angle. He writes that what is now considered an exceptional experience would likely have barely been noticed in pre-symbolic times. For people of the Paleolithic — before the development of language and complex symbolic systems — the form of direct, unmediated experience was probably the normal condition.

The intensity modern people sometimes report is, in his view, not access to a "higher reality", but a regressive rupture in an otherwise dense network of symbols, stories, social structures and expectations. The experience itself is not mystical or spiritual, but a temporary failure of representation.

This makes it both raw and disruptive: the system briefly falls outside its usual cultural ordering.

When the symbolic structure returns — and it inevitably does — what remains is primarily the insight that life unfolds entirely within such a network, without an outside and without a separate "self" standing beyond it.

An individual can carry that insight, but must necessarily return to the same social context, with all the frustrations and advantages of someone who still lives everything, but can take it less seriously.

In that sense the experience is not exalted, not beneficial, and not useful; it is a temporary rupture in a human system, not access to a foundation.

5.8 Everyday psychology: why it occurs

The phenomenon of "awakening" does not need to be seen as mystical. Ordinary cognitive and neuropsychological factors can explain much of it:

- extreme focus
- dissociative responses
- stress release
- sensory reconfiguration
- altered interpretive frameworks
- temporary deactivation of the default mode network
- existential insight during crisis

The experience may be profound, but that does not make it supernatural. It is a human phenomenon within a human system.

> *"This is it, whatever it looks and feels like."*
>
> Nancy Neithercut

The following exchange takes place between a questioner and Robert Saltzman:

> *"The more significant portion of spiritual seekers are intent to rescue the dreamer from the dream. It is nothing more than an escape or survival mechanism. It is a strategy of 'becoming.'… The sanctuary of not knowing is prejudiced by even the slightest belief. Believing that one is the dreamer is one of those beliefs."*
>
> *Q: Thank you, Robert. I do not have the benefit of the awakening experience yet, so some of this is a bit vague to me. What is the*

'argument' regarding becoming? Because it takes a separate, independent individual to 'become' anything?

A: Well, that's it right there: "I do not have the benefit of the awakening experience YET." The word "yet" IS the argument regarding becoming. Nothing becomes anything. Everything just is what it is.

Q: (slapping my own forehead) Realising that is what awakening is! You say it a hundred times and tell me a hundred different ways, and I still want to become. Damn. It is like AA — it is so simple, but we make it difficult.

A: Yes. You and I are in the same boat — faced with the same unknowns. There's nothing to become. This is it.

Q: That sunk in. I am done.

Recognising this layeredness as construction removes nothing from the experiences themselves. It only removes what was added to them afterwards.

5.9 The myth of permanence

One of the most persistent misconceptions is that awakening should be a permanent state — an endpoint. But nothing in the experience itself points to durability.

It is usually temporary, fluctuating, dependent on context, stress, health, and psychological factors.

The expectation of permanence is shaped by traditions, gurus, marketers, and spiritual fantasies. The actual phenomenon does not have that property.

These shifts do not occur outside a life. They are shaped by temperament, history, circumstance, and pressure. Ways of experiencing do not unfold toward a goal; they reorganize when what once worked no longer holds.

5.10 The real value: a different insight than expected

Once the experience is stripped of mythology, something simple remains:

- a shift in how the world appears;
- a temporary reconfiguration of the sense of self;
- an insight aligned with the material of Chapters 1–4: experience is not an absolute given.

Its value does not lie in the "special" but in the dismantling of the taken-for-granted.

Awakening shows — just like perception research, psychology, and epistemological analysis, the constructed nature of experience. In that sense, it fits perfectly within a broader narrative. The phenomenon is not exalted — it is a datapoint.

> *"Trying to accept, surrender, let go or work out the riddle is also someone thinking they have power to do something, then people turn round and say I am telling people there is nothing that can be done. That is not the message, the message is that there is nothing to do! How amazing is that?"*

Ella May Sophia

| *"First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is."*

Donovan

The discussion of "awakening" repeatedly touches on one pattern: the desire to rank experiences. What feels intense becomes important. What appears rare becomes elevated. What others do not have automatically acquires higher status.

This mechanism has been visible for millennia in religion, psychology, culture, and even in everyday conversations about growth or insight.

Although this chapter shows that "awakening" has no fixed form and does not provide access to a foundation behind experience, one question keeps resonating beneath the surface: Why do humans want to distinguish between "higher" and "lower," between "advanced" and "ignorant," between "seen" and "not yet seen"?

That desire is not secondary — it is a structural tendency of how humans organise meaning.

It is therefore useful to step back and investigate how hierarchical patterns of thought arise, how they take hold, why they are so convincing, and why — even in so-called spiritual contexts — they follow the same dynamics as elsewhere.

This makes visible that thinking in "levels" and "states" does not originate from the experience itself, but from the interpretive layer that follows.

The next chapter examines precisely this: the psychological and conceptual roots of *hierarchism*.



Chapter 6
Hierarchism:
the construction of rank

6.1 Introduction: ranking as intuition

Human beings organise. Not only events and objects, but also meanings, ideas, and experiences. One of the most persistent forms of organisation is hierarchical organisation: the idea that some perspectives sit higher, some forms of experience are purer, some people wiser, and some "states" closer to truth.

Hierarchism does not arise because people consciously want it, but because the cognitive system automatically seeks structure. As soon as variation is perceived, the tendency follows to place

that variation into a vertical schema — above and below, closer and further, more or less real. In spiritual traditions this tendency appears as "levels of insight," "higher realisations," "masters," and "gradations of awakening." In everyday life it shows up in subtler forms: "this is obviously clearer," "that is more fundamental," "he has already seen it, I have not yet."

Hierarchism is therefore less a deliberate belief than an automatic refinement reflex of human cognition.

This chapter examines why that reflex is so powerful, how it connects to the earlier chapters on experience and constructivism, and what happens when hierarchy is set aside — not out of relativism, but out of *precision*.

6.2 The cognitive roots of hierarchy

When the brain detects differences, it immediately seeks structure: which difference means what? Which element is more durable, more reliable, more important? This movement is evolutionarily understandable: an organism that distinguishes crucial from non-crucial signals, reliable from unreliable information, has an advantage.

But as soon as this logic is applied to abstract domains like forms of experience, beliefs and insights, it automatically produces the idea of more or less true, higher or lower, closer or further from "the core."

The verbal illusion of direction

Language reinforces hierarchy. Words such as "deeper," "higher," "clearer," "more fundamental" suggest vertical ranking, even when the actual domain concerns different

configurations of experience that do not fit any ranking at all. A term like “level of insight” sounds harmless but implies that insight is a staircase one must climb. Language creates direction where there may be none.

The illusion of symmetry: if confusion exists, clarity must exist too

People tend to think in dualities: if one extreme exists, the opposite must also exist. When confusion is felt, it seems logical that somewhere clarity must be found. When experience appears unreliable, there must be a state in which experience is reliable. When fragmentation is perceived, there must be a state in which everything is one.

This assumption gives hierarchy its force: a low position implies a high position. And anyone on a ladder must be able to climb upward.

But none of this follows from the structure of experience itself. It follows from how the brain deals with contrast.

6.3 Hierarchism in spirituality: a fertile misunderstanding

Many spiritual traditions implicitly suggest that there is an endpoint: an ultimate realisation, a "final shift," a highest level of insight. This notion is psychologically understandable — when someone undergoes an intense shift in experience, it is tempting to see that shift as "higher" or "purer."

But as earlier chapters have shown, there is no direct access to any metaphysical foundation of reality. Not through intensity, peace, or boundarylessness.

Because experience never reveals the structure of reality, no experience can claim a higher status. There are configurations of experience — more contrasted, more open, more collapsed, more coherent — but there is no vertical scale.

Why it feels so convincing

Experiences with strong emotional charge (silence, unity, awe, emptiness) are cognitively linked to meaning. It feels like "this touches something essential." That feeling is quickly interpreted as evidence of a higher state. But meaningful is not the same as fundamental. Intensity is not evidence. Insight is not access.

And more fundamentally: a change in how experience appears is not automatically a change in the nature of reality.

6.4 Hierarchy in everyday thinking

Hierarchism is not a spiritual problem — it is an everyday cognitive pattern.

"My perspective is more complete"

As soon as someone discovers a new frame ("everything is constructivist," "everything is interpretation," "there is no absolute knowing"), the sense often arises that one has come a step closer to "how things really are."

But that is the same mistake: even the insight that there is no foundation easily becomes a new foundation.

The trap of meta-levels

The idea of "a higher meta-level" is just another construct, another organisation of interpretations. There is no position

outside of experience from which the rest can be surveyed. Any so-called meta-level is itself a configuration of experience.

Why hierarchism keeps returning

Because difference is not only cognitive but emotionally charged. What brings relief feels higher; what confuses feels lower. What feels familiar seems better; what destabilises seems dangerous.

The system seeks stability, and hierarchy suggests stability: "Here I am, there I want to go."

But the stability is a construct. The direction is an interpretation. The staircase does not exist.

6.5 Seeing without hierarchy

Hierarchy does not dissolve through relativism ("everything is equally good"); it dissolves through precision: by recognising

that no criterion exists that could justify “higher” or “closer.” There are only ways in which experience takes shape — ways that bring more or less friction, more or less clarity, but do not stand in vertical order.

From ladder to landscape

When hierarchism falls away, another image appears: not a staircase but a flat landscape of possible ways of experiencing, without centre and without summit. One point is not better than another, but one point may be more relevant, lighter, or less burdened by interpretation.

Folds instead of levels

Configurations of experience can be seen as folds: structural variations within the same field. Non-duality is such a fold. Identification is another. Intense psychological distress is yet another.

But none of these folds have metaphysical status. They have only psychological and phenomenological characteristics.

Why this does not lead to nihilism

The absence of hierarchy does not mean nothing matters. It means that value and direction do not come from above, but appear in the context of a living situation.

An experience does not become better because it is "higher," but because it produces less friction, less confusion, or more coherence. This is a functional measure, not a metaphysical one.

6.6 Conclusion: the rest that appears

Hierarchism reveals one thing above all: the human desire for order. But when order is seen as a construct, not as a universal structure, a different kind of calm emerges: a calm that requires

no ladder. Not because everything is equal, but because nothing needs to stand above or below.

It is the same calm that appeared earlier in this book: the calm of a system that does not need a foundation in order to function. A calm that arises not from certainty, but from the disappearance of the need for certainty. A calm without heights. A clarity without above or below.

6.7 The rhizomatic alternative

Hierarchical thinking presupposes above and below, origin and consequence, ground and derivative. It is the structure of most religions, philosophies, and spiritual systems: a highest truth, a final state, a deepest insight toward which everything points. Even when the word “oneness” is used, the structure often

remains pyramidal: some people stand closer to the truth, some experiences are "more real," some insights "deeper."

Gilles Deleuze and **Félix Guattar**i questioned this frame radically — not to introduce an alternative metaphysics, but because they noticed how strongly hierarchical models determine what we can see and how we organise meaning. Their counter-model is the rhizome.

A **rhizome** is not a tree. The metaphor is essential: A tree has a trunk, roots, branches: a centre, an origin, a vertical schema.

A rhizome (think of grass, reeds, strawberry plants) has no centre, no beginning, no end, no above or below. It spreads in all directions, in countless ways, without a master structure.

The rhizome is not a spiritual concept but a form of thinking: a model for phenomena that branch, connect, and proliferate without central authority or foundation.

Hierarchical thinking says: there must be a deepest layer. Rhizomatic thinking says: there are only connections, no depth that supports everything.

This perspective aligns closely with the core of this book:

- There is no access to an "absolute grounding layer" of reality.
- There is no summit of insight that organises all perspectives.
- There is no subject standing outside experience, surveying it.
- There is no point where all questions resolve.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that reality is not hierarchical but multiple: it consists of nodes, connections, patterns of influence and interaction. Not one foundation, but countless intersections without central governance.

This directly undermines the hierarchical model of spirituality:

- No path upward.
- No final state.
- No master who “knows.”
- No ranking of experiences.
- No special category of “enlightened people.”

Most myths around awakening remain trapped in tree-logic: there is a top, a goal, a form of insight that is “more” than others. Rhizomatic thinking reveals a different image: experiences are variations within a field without centre. Non-duality, duality, confusion, clarity, perceptual shifts — they are not stages but expressions. Not a ladder, but a network.

Hierarchism is not only a social phenomenon but a cognitive frame.

It governs how people classify, compare, and value their experiences.

The rhizome shows that another interpretation is possible:

- not higher, but different;
- deeper, but shifted;
- not more true, but another configuration;
- not a path, but a landscape without centre.

In that sense, the rhizomatic mode is not a new spiritual model but a deconstruction of the idea that any top of insight exists at all.

It reveals that hierarchism is not an attribute of reality but *a form of interpretation* — one of many that organisms generate to create order.

The rhizomatic view emphasises that there is no "highest moment" to which everything refers. There are experiences that are intense, destabilising, freeing, or confusing — but they are not above other experiences. They are not summit points but nodes in a field of variation.

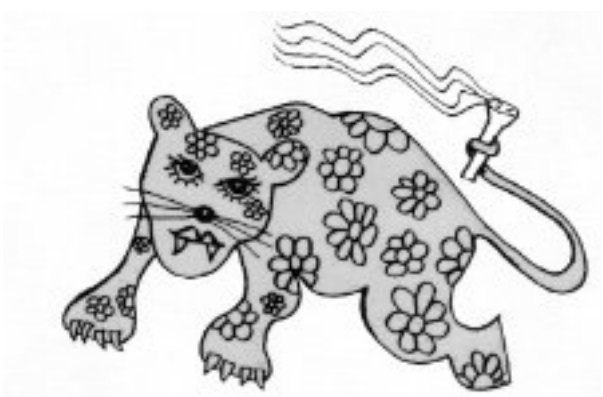
If hierarchical thinking becomes visible as an interpretative structure, in other words a way of organising experiences rather than a property of the experiences themselves, another question arises: how many other structuring patterns shape how "reality" appears?

The answer is extensive, but one category is particularly relevant for the continuation of this book: the multi-facetted set of perspectives through which a person shapes their world.

Whether one speaks of spiritual paths, psychological models, worldviews, scientific theories, or personal convictions: these are

all ways in which an organism frames its own experience. In a sense, each of these frameworks functions as a *mindset* — a configuration in which a certain form of world and a certain form of "self" arise together.

With this insight, we can take the next step: no longer examining the hierarchies by which experiences are categorised, but the experiential configurations themselves. How do they arise? How do they stabilise? How do they relate to what we call "reality"?





Intermezzo III
"Sannyas or suicide"

> *"The key feature of a hypnotic trance is its invisibility to the entranced mind."*
>
> — Robert Saltzman

In the early eighties, I read the books of Carlos Castaneda. And in that same period I had a few overwhelming experiences with cannabis that made something shift in me. It felt as if behind my daily way of experiencing there was another layer, another world, another possibility of being. Not just "another view", but another configuration of

experience itself. That impression is hard to explain, but it was strong enough to set a decades-long search in motion.

I was convinced that I needed someone who knew that other reality. Someone who was already there, someone who could show me what I myself could not see. That natural conviction — that there had to exist a "master" somewhere — did not come from naivety, but from longing. Longing for clarity, for intensity, for a grip on a reality that sometimes seemed so elusive.

When I later encountered Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh through his books and his followers, it seemed as if there was someone who knew exactly what I was looking for. Someone who spoke about freedom, awakening, directness, silence, rebellion, sensuality and transcendence. It was a language I was receptive to. So I took *sannyas*, together with thousands of others. I never thought that I was stepping into a cult; I

thought that I was stepping into an adventure.

What followed were ten intensive years full of communes, therapy groups, meditations, rituals, ecstatic gatherings, hysterical group processes, touching connections, manipulations, laughing fits, paranoid episodes, denial, surrender, and endless conversations about consciousness, love and truth. There was beauty in it, but also ugliness. There was freedom in it, but also control. And there were many people in it who were just as searching as I was — often just as vulnerable, just as longing, just as afraid of finding nothing.

I was immersed in almost all forms of alternative spirituality and humanistic psychology you can imagine. Zen, Sufism, shamanism, tantra, t'ai-chi, rebirthing, bioenergetics, de-hypnotherapy, you name it. If there was a method that promised that there was "more" to be found, then I wanted

to know which door it opened. I believed some parts and doubted other parts. It was a phase in which internally I could shoot off in all directions, and that is exactly what I did.

There were moments of real intensity, moments of which I thought: this is it.

Moments of insight, happiness, openness.

And just as quickly it was gone again.

I did not yet understand that the disappearing of an experience is not a failure, but simply the nature of experience itself. Everything comes, everything goes. But at the time I saw only the going — and thought that I was not doing enough.

When Bhagwan died in 1990, the movement fell apart, and many of us plunged into the new *satsang* scene. Advaita, neo-

Advaita, silent sittings, retreats, darshans. And again it happened now and then: a short-lived clarity, a glimpse of "seeing", a lightness, laughter. There were evenings on which I thought that it had finally broken through. But that too never lasted. So I went on to the next teacher, the next book, the next video, the next promise.

Looking back, I see how much my search was driven by something I could not name at the time: the wish that a permanent solution would exist for something that is always moving.

An end point.

A definitive knowing.

A "state".

And that longing made me blind to what was actually



happening in the here-and-now: uncertainty, fear, yearning, confusion — but also beauty, clarity, directness.

The movement around Rajneesh was complex. It gave freedom and applied pressure at the same time. It had beautiful elements and destructive elements. And I must be honest: I myself took part in the sectarian thinking that I now see through so clearly. The thought that "we" had seen the light, that "we" were further than others, that "we" understood something that the rest of the world did not see. I am not ashamed of that, well, actually I am, but I do now recognise how easy it is to step into such a dynamic when you are looking for something to hold onto.

Only much later did I see how strongly trance, group pressure and projection work. How quickly you place someone on a pedestal, not because he belongs there, but because you need someone who can temporarily lift you

above yourself. Bhagwan undoubtedly had insight, charisma, and a sharp sense of human weaknesses. But he was also just a human being — with desires, blind spots, strategies, and a large ego that liked to be fed. The fact that I could not see that for a long time says more about me than about him.

The greatest deception was not the movement itself, but the central idea that I believed for years: that enlightenment is a lasting state that you can reach if you try hard enough.

That idea cost me years.

And it also freed me — because when it collapsed, more collapsed than just my belief in a guru. The entire structure of searching, chasing, and projecting fell away. What remained was something much simpler than what I had been striving for so fervently all those years: this moment, exactly as it is.

Do I regret that period?

No.

Without that path I would not have seen many things. I have learned what I no longer want.

I have learned which dynamics are dangerous.

I have learned how easily you lose yourself when you search for someone who must save you.

I have learned how deeply people long for meaning.

And I have learned that I myself am not immune to enchantment.

It was not all nonsense, and that is precisely what makes it so treacherous.

In every system there is truth, but the packaging can blind you.

The greatest lesson is that I no longer want to flee from the here-and-now — even when it feels painful, uncertain or empty.

The search has cost me a lot, but also given me much.

And at a certain moment I had to admit that it was enough.

Enough images, enough teachers, enough projections.

Not because I had found everything, but because I finally understood that there is nothing to find that is not already immediately here.



Chapter 7
Modern Voices

The previous chapters have shown how experience shapes itself, how interpretation is inescapable, why hierarchy is psychologically compelling but not structurally grounded, and how phenomena such as "awakening" arise without providing access to anything outside experience.

This chapter turns to several contemporary voices that—each within their own domain—show precisely the same thing: not as theory, but as a direct confrontation with the limits of knowing and the impossibility of an absolute foundation.

These voices are often mentioned in the same breath, but they do not form a system. They are a mosaic of insights that overlap in their critique of certainty, truth, and spiritual mythology.

7.1 Robert Saltzman: sobriety without cynicism

Robert Saltzman does not begin from a system, but from radical honesty toward experience. His central point is simple: experience is what it is, but it does not reveal an underlying reality.

This aligns directly with Chapters 1–3: experience shows only its own outcome. Saltzman demythologizes non-duality by emphasizing that there is never a position outside experience from which it can be confirmed.

What he adds to this book is above all this: all spiritual concepts are attempts to overwrite the inherent uncertainty of being alive.

That makes his position not negative but precise: without guarantees, without elevation, without claims. He becomes a contemporary echo of the insight at the heart of this book.

> *"You get what you get when you get it."*
>
> Robert Saltzman

7.2 Joan Tollifson: simplicity without reduction

Joan Tollifson approaches non-duality not as another state, but as the dismantling of the idea that experience must go somewhere. Her focus lies on what is ordinary, everyday, uncomplicated.

Tollifson touches the core of "experiential configurations": non-duality does not need to appear as a grand experience. She shows that the "mystical" almost always arises from projection, language, and desire.

What she adds to this book is the insight that no shift in experience carries an inherent message.

Simplicity reveals that complexity is often added by interpretation.

7.3 Miranda Warren: demythologizing the sacred

Miranda Warren represents the sharpest critique of spiritual elitism. She exposes how terms such as "awakening," "presence," "higher consciousness," and "realization" function as status markers, not as descriptions of actual phenomena.

Warren aligns directly with the chapter on hierarchism: spiritual language creates a ranking that has no basis in experience itself.

Her contribution is the emphasis on the social dynamics of experience: how communities construct meaning, how collective fantasies emerge, and how spirituality often follows the same psychological mechanisms as any other human system.

7.4 Shiv Sengupta: epistemic sharpness

Shiv Sengupta forms a bridge between phenomenology and epistemology. His key point is that non-duality is not about reality, but about the structure of experience: non-duality describes the limits of sight, not the nature of what is seen.

This places him in direct continuity with Chapters 2 (construction), 3 (interpretation), and 4 (variability of

experience). Sengupta's contribution is primarily methodological: no experience escapes uncertainty.

His work prevents non-duality from being reintroduced as an absolute claim.

7.5 John Astin: the existential poet of the immediate

Astin shows how leaving behind every conceptual framework does not lead to emptiness, but to *clarity*. His radical anti-instruction echoes the central thesis of this book: that there is no foundation to rest on, and that this is not a problem.

7.6 Nancy Neithercut: the border between poetry and dismantling

Neithercut writes from a raw, direct position in which no spiritual meaning-making survives. Her texts reveal the contourless nature of experience—without subject, without inside, without outside.

Her value for this book lies in one insight: experience is not permeable to "something else."

She shows a radical version of what the first three chapters already described: the totality of experience is not a window, not a mirror, not a path. It is what appears—nothing more, nothing less.

7.7 Scientific voices as unexpected allies

Although this book is not a scientific work, some contemporary scientists come surprisingly close to the themes examined here:

Thomas Hertog & Stephen Hawking — top-down cosmology.

Their claim that the universe has no fixed initial conditions, but that observation helps "select" a history, aligns with the constructive account in Chapter 2.

Donald Hoffman — perception as interface.

His argument that evolution selects not for truth but for usefulness supports the epistemic limits outlined in Chapters 1 and 2.

Marcelo Gleiser — the unknowable universe.

Gleiser exposes the inevitable horizon of knowing: the universe will always exceed any explanatory framework.

7.8 What these voices share

Despite their differences, they converge on four essential insights that resonate throughout this book:

- No experience provides access to a foundation. Not non-duality, not science, not philosophy.
- Experience is multiple, flexible, and constructive.
- No experiential configuration is superior.
- Mythology arises from interpretation, not from phenomena.
- The need for orientation persists, even when one claims to be without orientation.

These voices do not reveal truth—they reveal its limits.

Not to relativize, but to sharpen.

With these modern voices as context, it becomes clear that the tension between experience, interpretation, and certainty is neither new nor personal. It is a structural feature of how the human system operates.


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Chapter 8
Perspectives & Misunderstandings

8.1 Introduction: where everything converges

This book has not examined metaphysics, but the conditions under which experience appears. None of the previous chapters claimed to reveal a foundation. They showed instead that every foundation is a *construction*—a comprehensible, sometimes useful, but never definitive organization of phenomena.

Yet precisely that point is vulnerable to misunderstanding.

When familiar assumptions fall away, space opens up. And space is easily filled with new conclusions. What follows is an

overview of the most common misinterpretations that arise when the limits of experience become visible. Not to be "correct," but to keep the terrain clear.

8.2 Misunderstanding 1: "If everything is a construction, then everything is relative."

This is a classic example of overcorrection. The mind leaps to the most dramatic conclusion. But there is a significant difference between having no access to an absolute foundation and claiming that all interpretations are equally valid.

The first follows from the structure of experience. The second is a philosophical leap supported by nothing. The absence of an absolute perspective does not imply that no model is better or worse. It only means that such evaluations always occur within experience, not outside it.

Usefulness, consistency, predictive power, stability — these are not "relative" in the nihilistic sense. They belong to how organisms function.

8.3 Misunderstanding 2: "If experience is a construction, then the world is an illusion."

"Illusion" suggests error—something gone wrong in perception.

But what the previous chapters described is not an error but a *mechanism*. Experience is not a failed attempt to record the world "accurately"; it is the way organisms handle information. That is not illusion but functionality.

The world as it appears is an interface: not truth-bearing, but workable. This does not make it less real—only not absolute.

8.4 Misunderstanding 3: “Non-duality reveals the real reality.”

This is the mirror version of the previous misunderstanding.

Where duality is sometimes treated as misinterpretation, non-duality is then treated as revelation. But non-duality reveals nothing outside experience. It shows only that a particular structure—the subject-object configuration—can fall away without experience ceasing.

That is informative, but not truth. A mode of appearance, not an unveiling.

8.5 The trap of absolutism in any form

Absolutism is the tendency to elevate one perspective into a foundation. That perspective may be:

scientific realism, spiritual non-realism, non-dual experience, personal intuition, or even the conclusion that there is no foundation.

The mechanism is always the same: a temporary experiential configuration is granted universal validity. But nothing in experience supports that movement. Experience presents appearances, not metaphysical contracts.

8.6 The perspectival alternative

If no perspective can claim priority, one thing remains: perspectivism. Not as a doctrine, but as a description of how experience functions. Key features:

- every model appears from within a configuration, never outside one;

- there is no neutral observation point;
- perspectives can work better or worse, but not be absolutely true or false;
- phenomena are given; interpretation is variable.

This is not paralyzing but liberating: it removes the pressure to find a final position.

8.7 What this means for non-duality

Non-duality is often overestimated—as an ultimate state—or underestimated—as a psychological oddity. Both positions miss the point. Non-duality is one way in which experience can configure itself. No access to truth, no transcendence of the human condition, no end of interpretation.

What it does show is that:

- a self-model is optional,
- boundaries are contingent,
- experience can function without a subject.

That is interesting—but not sacred.

8.8 What this means for "I" and "self"

I have never claimed that the self does not exist—only that it does not appear as an entity. It exists as a pattern, as an organizational function, as a recurring motif within experience.

Not as a core, but as a mechanism. The self is not false; it is provisional.

8.9 What this means for truth

Truth in the classical sense—correspondence with an external world—is simply not accessible.

But functional truth, model-level consistency, and predictive usefulness are very much real.

Not-knowing is not emptiness but a framework: it maps the terrain on which all human knowledge operates.

8.10 In conclusion

What remains is not mystical, not destructive, not something that undermines the experience of living. What remains is clarity:

- there is experience;

- that experience forms itself;
- no configuration is absolute;
- and yet the whole thing functions.

This is not a philosophical claim but a sober observation.

No foundation, no alternative foundation—only a phenomenon that carries itself as long as it appears.

There is no method offered, no path, no promise.

It is not psychology, not neuroscience, not a spiritual guide, not a phenomenological technique. It presents no system and no alternative ground.

It merely shows how experience shapes itself, and how all certainties—from the everyday to the spiritual—arise *within that shaping*.

It gives no answers to metaphysical questions because such answers are not phenomenologically available. And it says nothing about the "right way" to live, because there is no external criterion on which such guidance could rest.

The value lies not in doctrine but in clarity.

Seeking does not end by finding, but by seeing how seeking constructs itself.

And with that, the circle closes.


WHERE DO YOU THINK WE'RE HEADED?
I WAS GOING TO GO GET SOME FRIES ON THE PIER
NO I MEAN BIG PICTURE— WHAT IS THE CULMINATING RESULT OF CONSCIOUSNESS? WHERE DOES THIS PATH END?
I STILL FEEL LIKE IT HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH THOSE FRIES ON THE PIER
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Chapter 9
Counterpoints

Now that the structure is clear, we can consider the counter-voices. Not as argument or polemic, but as precision.

9.1 The realist: "There *must* be an objective world."

Realists - scientists and philosophers alike - emphasise that there is a world that exists independently of experience.

Reply: This is not denied. It only says that there is no direct access to that world. The fact that a stable reality is practically necessary proves nothing about its metaphysical status.

Usefulness is not a foundation.

9.2 The non-dualist: "Non-duality is the true reality."

Both traditional and contemporary non-duality claim that non-dual experience reveals reality "as it truly is."

Reply: The experience itself does not say that.

The claim is always *interpretative* — a narrative layered on top of a quiet, de-centred experiential configuration.

Non-duality shows what experience can be, not what reality is.

9.3 The constructivist: “Then everything is equally true.”

Postmodern constructivism argues that, in the absence of a foundation, all truths are equivalent.

Reply: If everything is equivalent, then the perspective that “not everything is equivalent” is also equally valid — and the claim collapses. Perspectivism is not “anything goes.”

It is: nothing is absolute, but everything is still evaluated.

9.4 The sceptic: “You can’t know anything, so nothing matters.”

Scepticism confuses the absence of grounding with meaninglessness.

Reply: Life does not require certainty to function. Organisms act without foundations — they have done so for millions of years.

Not-knowing is not emptiness but space: the absence of compulsion.

9.5 Where these voices converge

All counter-positions — realist, non-dual, constructivist, sceptical — rest on the same assumption: that somewhere a foundation must exist, or that its absence must be problematic.

But the analysis in this book points elsewhere: human experience functions without a foundation. The drive for a foundation is itself a construction.

This is not a doctrine but an observation.


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Intermezzo IV
Bootstrapping

There is no foundation that we can point to. No final layer, no supporting ground, no ultimate origin on which experience rests.

Yet a world appears — coherent, meaningful, convincing.

Sometimes ideas emerge that point in an unexpected direction.

In physics there once was the thought that particles are not built from smaller components, but derive their properties from their mutual relations — a form of bootstrapping that does not assume underlying layers (Geoffrey Chew, et al.).

In literature there exists another kind of bootstrapping: a character who brings himself into being by appearing in his own past, a closed loop without a starting point. (“By His Bootstraps”, Robert Heinlein, 1941)

Both those physical and fictional variants once evoked something in me, not as theory, but as suggestion. A little voice in the background that whispers: perhaps origin itself is a construction.

What happens when there is no ground to fall back on? *Experience carries itself*.

It forms patterns while it forms itself. It does not look for a foundation, but creates temporary a foothold by interpreting, comparing, recognising. Not as plan or design, but as spontaneous activity.

The world does not arise out of something, but from itself.

Not because there is a deeper mechanism, but because experience organises itself each time anew into coherence.

A kind of bootstrapping: a system that lifts itself without external support.

Perhaps that is what "reality" is: not a structure waiting to be discovered, but a structure that continually builds itself from itself.

> *"Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is."*
>
> *"Nicht wie die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern dass sie ist."*

Ludwig Wittgenstein

What remains is not a final view, but the recognition that experience always appears as a world—one among others, shaped by conditions that could shift again.



Intermezzo V
Dark Spirit

> *"There's a silence under the silence, if you can bear to listen. Not the pleasant quiet of a Sunday morning or the hush after snowfall, but something more total. A kind of null field that makes no promises and offers no explanations. It doesn't cradle. It doesn't soothe. It just is. And when the noise dies down—social, mental, bodily—that's what remains: the raw presence of this moment, unaccompanied."*

Robert Saltzman, The 21st Century Self, 2025, Clear Mind Press

This interlude is about what I call "Darkness", and what others might call "Silence", "Emptiness", "Sunyata", "Wuji", Nirvana or "Nagual". It is my name for something that actually

tolerates no name — an unwordable source of experience. It is not 'consciousness' or 'awareness', not a field, not an energy, not something that *exists*. It is rather 'un-consciousness': that which precedes consciousness. Dark, because it precedes light and the absence of light. Before all gods, before the arising of space and time, before me.

It is not.

It does not exist — if existing means: appearing, coming forth.

What appears, appears out of what does not appear itself.

What happens, happens out of something that does not happen.

Trying to imagine what Darkness is, is… hopeless. It is impossible. You cannot speak about it. Darkness is only a name for something that cannot be known, that is not part of 'knowledge'. But it can be experienced by letting go of

knowing. I do not *know* what Darkness is. That is neither possible nor even necessary.

In my daily life it is a felt quality, a mood, a suspicion, a hunch, and a resting point. Something that is not a thing. A sphere in which nothing needs to be confirmed.

I choose 'Darkness' because I naturally feel comfortable in darkness, in shadow, in silence. A *nyctophile* without romance: I love darkness and simplicity, not bright busyness, not airports, shopping centres or large crowds. These are not judgments — I simply function better when it is not too loud, not too bright and not too full.

'Darkness' is a visual word, but if I had been more auditorily inclined, I would probably have chosen 'Silence'. It is the same.

That the word has a bad reputation, associated with dark systems, satanism, nihilism, says more about human

projection than about what I mean by it. Some non-dual and apophatic traditions touch upon it, but none of them precisely cover what I mean.

And what then about 'awakening', 'realization', 'enlightenment'? I don't know. I have had strange and beautiful experiences, like so many others, but they came and went. I did not cause them. They are events, like the weather: sun, storm, rain, nothing under the control of an 'I'. If we could choose permanent happiness, we would already have done so, wouldn't we?

This body and brain move along with what happens. 'I' am only an incidental point of view, a temporary commentary voice while life — this, that, everything — does itself. Sometimes brilliant, sometimes terrible, always unbelievable and inexplicable.

And behind, inside and around all those lights, sounds, thoughts, feelings and movements there is always that quiet darkness. Not as something, not as truth, but as a quality of openness that has no owner.

And if there is something that could be called 'awakening', then it would be the uncaused, unwilled falling away of all the things we think we know, and then the naked reality is there as it is. Without commentary. Without explanation. Without story. Without glory. Only the knowing of this moment, which is not the same as assuming or 'tasting' the unknown Dark.

'Endarkenment' does not exist.

Darkness is not a deeper layer of truth, nor a more radical insight. It is an experience in which orientation itself falls away, without replacement.

The End

Too lazy to be ambitious,
I let the world take care of itself.
Ten days‘ worth of rice in my bag;
a bundle of twigs by the fireplace.

Why chatter about delusion and enlightenment?

Listening to the night rain on my roof,
I sit comfortably, with both legs stretched out.

Taigu Ryokan (1758-1831 CE)



Glossary

Phenomenal appearing – The manner in which phenomena show themselves. Not a window onto an underlying reality, but the very field in and through which reality takes shape.

Consciousness – Not a metaphysical substance, but the totality of appearances: appearing itself, without a separate subject.

Construction – The process by which the organism merges selection, filtering, prediction and interpretation into a coherent world. Not illusion, but functional organisation.

Configuration of experience – The specific organisation of interpretation, expectation, memory and attention that determines how something appears. Structure, not content.

Duality – The default configuration in which experience appears divided into subject and object: "I" here, "world" there.

Emotion – The interpretative coupling of bodily sensation to meaning. Not an objective state, but a constructive ordering.

Experience – The entire field of appearing that encompasses all phenomena. No access to origin or foundation, only to outcome.

Foundation drive – The tendency to elevate a perspective, experience or doctrine to absolute validity, despite the absence of reliability beyond construction.

Lack of foundation – The absence of an absolute, perspective-independent basis for knowledge or experience. Not a deficiency, but a structural feature.

Memory – A reconstructive mechanism that assembles fragments into an apparently continuous story. Not storage, but reworking.

Headlessness – A phenomenological shift in which the usual self-location drops away. No truth-claim, no metaphysical stance — simply a reorganisation of how appearing configures itself.

Hierarchism – The interpretative reflex that ranks experiences, people or "insights" (higher/lower, further/less far, spiritual/ordinary). A psychological pattern, not a structure of reality.

Illusion – Not a "false image", but misinterpretation. Appearing itself is not illusion; the interpretative framing of it can be.

Interface – The evolutionarily shaped user-surface of experience. Not representational, but functional: like a desktop icon that does not "show" transistors, yet grants access to them.

Interpretation – The automatic generation of meaning that organises raw sensation into recognisable patterns. Not a choice, but a structure.

Knowledge – Structured interpretation that works within a given framework. Never absolute, but usable.

Mindset – A system of expectations, filters and interpretative rules that determines what can appear as meaningful at all. An internal architecture, not a belief.

Non-duality – A mode of appearance in which the subject–object configuration is temporarily absent. No truth, no revelation, no final state.

Objectivity (as method) – The procedure for minimising distortion through consensus, repeatability and measurability. Not metaphysical access to "the world in itself".

Perception – A prediction generated by the brain on the basis of sparse data. More hypothesis than registration.

Perspective – The frame within which phenomena become visible. Inevitable, provisional and always limited.

Perspectivism – The insight that every model appears from within a configuration, without absolute position. Not relativism: perspectives differ in usefulness, not in metaphysical status.

Prediction – The ongoing process through which the brain guesses what is happening and uses incoming sensation to correct error. The basis of all perception.

Appearing reality – What shows itself in experience, shaped by construction. No access to an "underlying" reality — only to the manner in which phenomena appear.

Representation – In this book not the basis of perception: representations are working models, not mirrors.

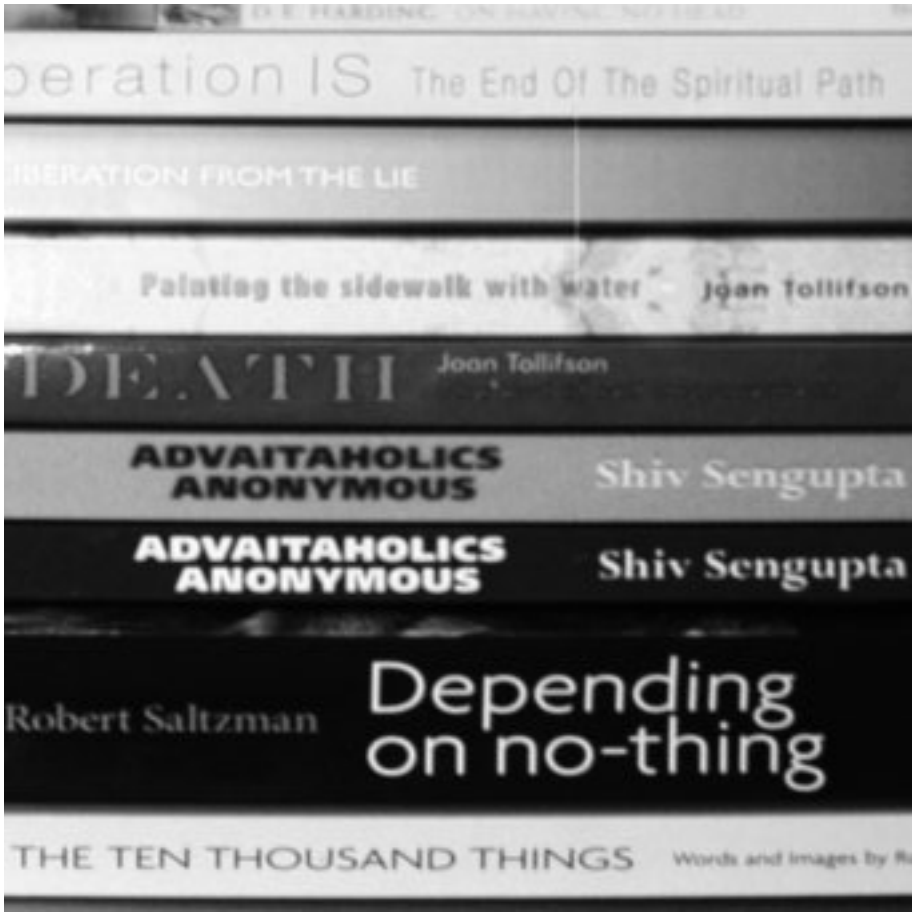
Rhizomatics – In Deleuze & Guattari: a non-hierarchical network of connections without centre or top. Used here as counter-image to hierarchism.

Self (the) – Not an entity, but a dynamic pattern of memory, expectation and narrative. Function, not substance.

Subject – The constructed centre of experience. An organisational mechanism, not an inner core.

Truth (functional) – The degree to which a model works within a context. No correspondence, but practical validity. Models that work, not models that correspond to an unknowable external world.

Truth-claim – An interpretative overreach in which a perspective grants itself absolute validity.


peration IS The End Of The Spiritual Path
IBERATION FROM THE LIE
Palating the sidewalk with water Joan Tollifson
DEATH Joan Tollifson
ADVAITAHOLICS ANONYMOUS Shiv Sengupta
ADVAITAHOLICS ANONYMOUS Shiv Sengupta
Robert Saltzman Depending on no-thing
THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS

Literature

Thomas Hertog – The Origin of Time (2023)

Hertog presents an alternative view of cosmology, based on his collaboration with Stephen Hawking. Central is the idea of top-down cosmology: the universe has no pre-given initial form, but is partly determined by present-day conditions and observations. This removes the notion of a fixed, pre-existing cosmic history.

Donald Hoffman – The Case Against Reality (2019)

Hoffman argues that evolution does not select for 'true' perception, but for useful, interface-like symbols that efficiently guide behaviour. Perception, in his view, is not a representation

of the world but an evolutionarily optimised interface — comparable to icons on a computer screen—that offers no insight into the underlying reality.

Miranda Warren – No One at All (Ongoing work: talks and essays)

Warren's texts focus on the absence of a separate self, without mystical buildup or spiritual claims. Her language is direct, sober, and aimed at clarifying non-separation as an aspect of phenomenal appearing, without metaphysical pretension.

Miranda Warren — This Terrible Love (2022)

This Terrible Love is a stark, unsentimental exploration of what remains when certainty, identity, and spiritual narratives fall away. Warren writes from the edge where intimacy meets dissolution: the intimacy of being alive without ground, and the dissolution of every story that promises safety. The book moves

between memoir-like reflection and philosophical stripping-down. There is no transcendent resolution, no higher state to reach, no practice to adopt. What Warren calls "love" is not comfort but exposure: the raw openness of experience functioning without a center to secure it. Her writing is direct, at times abrasive, yet quietly precise in showing how the search for ultimacy collapses into immediacy.

Robert Saltzman – The Ten Thousand Things (2016)

Saltzman writes about identity, presence and openness without religious or esoteric framing. His emphasis lies on honesty, relational sensitivity, and seeing through spiritual constructions. The book contains dialogues, short essays and reflections.

Robert Saltzman – Depending on No-Thing (2022)

A collection of texts and photographs in which the same themes reappear, but with more autobiographical context and

reflections on daily life. The tone is clear, unadorned, and free of claims to spiritual authority.

Shiv Sengupta – talks and essays (YouTube / publications)

Sengupta emphasises that non-duality is not an explanation of reality but a perspective on phenomenal appearing, a configuration in which the distinction between subject and object is not dominant. His approach is analytical, sometimes humorous, and resistant to mystical interpretations.

Shiv Sengupta — Advaitaholics Anonymous (series)

Sengupta's Advaitaholics Anonymous series dismantles the cravings and delusions that often grow around non-duality. Written in sharp, sometimes caustic prose, the books expose how the promise of "awakening" can turn into another addiction: chasing special states, clinging to borrowed insights, or using non-dual language as a shield against the mess of ordinary life.

Rather than offering a purified teaching, Sengupta keeps circling back to the uncomfortable fact that no position—including non-duality—is immune to self-deception. The result is an unvarnished, funny, and occasionally brutal examination of the spiritual marketplace and the mind's endless talent for turning anything—even emptiness—into a new refuge.

Joan Tollifson – Nothing to Grasp (2012)

Tollifson describes non-dual appearing from the everyday: what appears is exactly what it is, without additional story. Her style is warm, personal, and free of dogma. She encourages open attention and the seeing-through of conceptual footholds.

Nancy Neithercut – This Is It, Coyote (various editions)

A poetic, fragmentary style in which boundaries between dream, appearing and world fade. No metaphysical claim is made; the

emphasis lies on the immediate, unfiltered mode in which experience shows itself.

John Astin – This Is Always Enough (2013)

An investigative, phenomenological exploration of presence, phenomenal appearing and the possibility of looking without spiritual frameworks. The tone is inviting and reflective, focused on direct experience without methodology.

Graham Priest – Beyond the Limits of Thought (1995, updated editions)

A philosophical work on paradoxes, logic and the limits of conceptual thought. Priest examines situations in which logical systems exceed or encounter themselves, and shows what this reveals about the nature of reasoning.

Wilfrid Sellars – Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind (1956)

A classic in which Sellars critiques the idea of 'given', undisturbed experience. Knowledge is always conceptually mediated; there is no raw, uninterpreted sensory data. His analysis forms a cornerstone for later discussions on constructivism and phenomenal appearing.

Thomas Metzinger – The Ego Tunnel (2009)

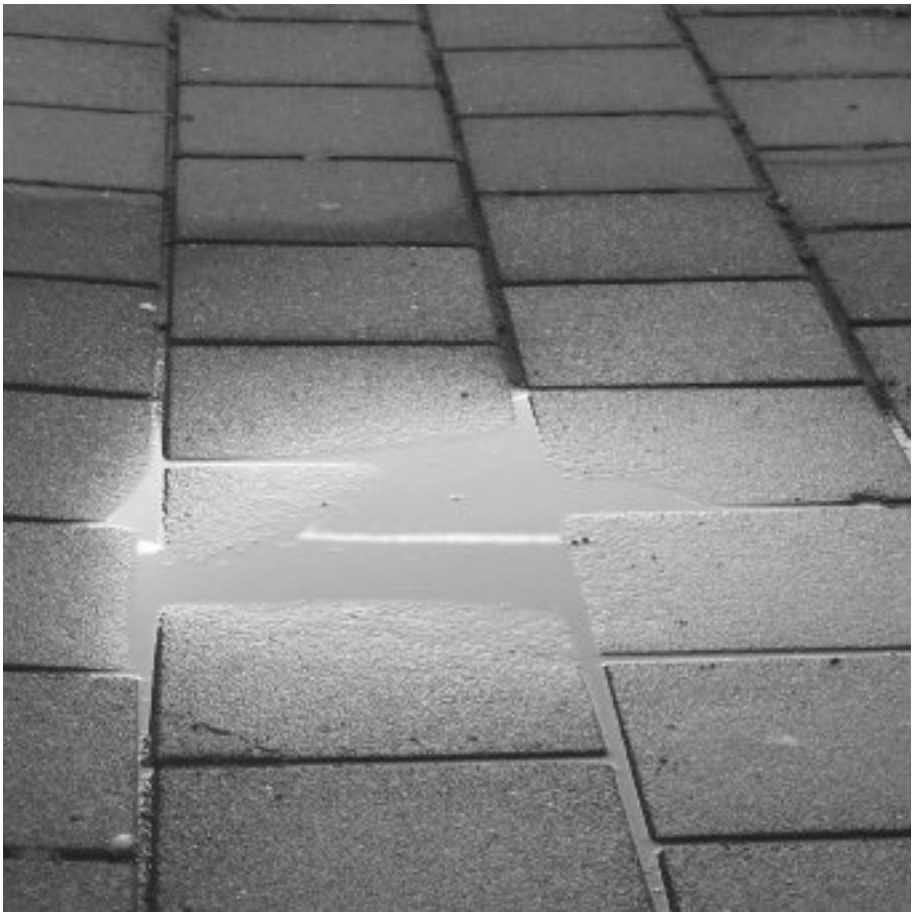
Metzinger argues that the self is a model generated by the brain: effective, convincing, but not substantial. The 'ego tunnel' is a transparent construct that enables coherent action but does not represent a metaphysical reality.

Evan Thompson – Waking, Dreaming, Being | Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy (2014)

Connects phenomenology, cognitive science and Buddhist philosophy. Thompson explores the continuity of consciousness in waking, dreaming and deep sleep, and discusses the ways in which phenomenal appearing is always shaped by interpretation.

Anil Seth – Being You (2021)

A modern scientific synthesis on prediction, perception and the constructed nature of consciousness. Seth introduces the idea of the controlled hallucination: experience as a continuously adjusted model.



Recommended websites

1. Non-duality & Demythologisation

Robert Saltzman

- https://dr-robert.com

Miranda Warren / Nonduality Dreamlife

- https://www.nondualitydreamlife.com

Joan Tollifson

- https://www.joantollifson.com

Shiv Sengupta

- https://shivsengupta.substack.com

Nancy Neithercut

- https://www.nancyneithercut.com

Ella May Sophia

- https://podnews.net/podcast/iwxrl

Richard Sylvester

- https://www.richardsylvester.com

The Headless Way

- https://headless.org

2. Philosophy of mind, prediction & consciousness

Donald Hoffman

- https://www.donaldhoffman.com

Thomas Metzinger

- https://philosophie.uni-mainz.de/professoren/prof-dr-thomas-

metzinger/

Anil Seth

- https://www.anilseth.com

Andy Clark

- https://andyclarkphilosophy.org

Karl Friston

- https://www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk/~kfriston/

David Chalmers

- https://consc.net

Dan Dennett

- https://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/dennett/

3. Constructivism, knowledge & philosophy of science

van Fraassen, Bas

- https://www.princeton.edu/~fraassen/

Ian Hacking

- https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hacking/

Paul Feyerabend

- https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feyerabend/

George Lakoff

- https://georgelakoff.com

4. Rhizomatics, Deleuze & Guattari

Stanford Encyclopedia: Deleuze

- https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/deleuze/

Gilles Deleuze Internet Resources

- https://www.gillesdeleuze.com

Multitudes (French-speaking, Deleuzian analyses)

- https://www.multitudes.net

5. Modern physics & cosmology

Thomas Hertog

- https://www.kuleuven.be/wieiswie/en/person/00010845

Stephen Hawking Archive

- https://www.hawking.org.uk

Leonard Susskind

- https://theoreticalminimum.com

Carlo Rovelli

- https://www.cpt.univ-mrs.fr/~rovelli/

Sabine Hossenfelder

- https://www.sabinehossenfelder.com

Backreaction (Hossenfelder's blog)

- https://backreaction.blogspot.com

6. Neuroscience, predictive mind & information processing

Michael Graziano

- https://grazianolab.princeton.edu

Stanislas Dehaene (Global Workspace)

- https://stanislasdehaene.com

Integrated Information Theory

- https://integratedinformationtheory.org

7. Existential and phenomenological voices

David Whyte (poëtische fenomenologie)

- https://davidwhyte.com

Alan Watts Archive

- https://alanwatts.org

8. Academic reference works

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

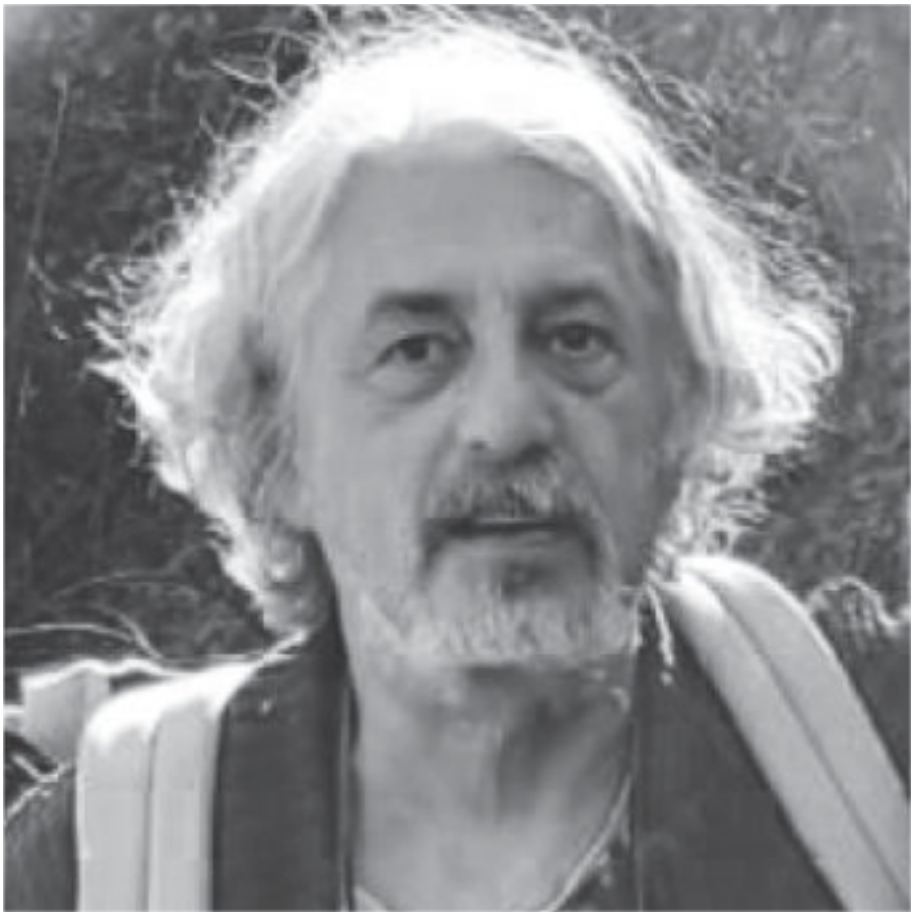
- https://plato.stanford.edu

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

- https://iep.utm.edu

PhilPapers

- https://philpapers.org



About the Author

Ton Haarmans (1953), an unapologetic amateur, a part-time mystic of sorts, works at the intersection of web design, philosophical reflection, and personal narrative. His interest lies in the ways experience shapes itself, how beliefs arise, get stuck and dissolve, and how the human need for foothold continually creates new systems, including the systems intended to transcend that need.

Ton studied philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. In the early eighties he came into contact with followers of the Indian guru Rajneesh (also known as 'Bhagwan' and later 'Osho') and took 'sannyas' in 1983. After Rajneesh's death he sought refuge with various Neo-Advaita teachers. His desperate search for

‘enlightenment’ ended after reading the work of Robert Saltzman, Shiv Sengupta and Joan Tollifson. Now there is simply what there is, and he deals with life as it comes.

His writing is not a search for truth, but for precision: a way to expose where assumptions, interpretations and desires play a role in what presents itself as self-evident.

The texts in this book arise from decades of searching, believing, letting go, starting over, and the repeated falling away of certainties. Not as a path, not as a teaching, but as material — phenomenological, human, unfinished.

Ton has also produced, together with Suzanne Visser and John Devitt, a Dutch translation of Robert Saltzman’s The Ten Thousand Things: De tienduizend dingen, available via Amazon and Samsara Publishing.



Reflections on 'This Is It '
by Miranda Warren

It is all too rare to see serious reflections about this, as so often nonduality gets lost in its own concepts and language. I deeply appreciate your insights and here are some reflections that arose in return.

"The selection that makes experience possible simultaneously makes any form of absolute knowing impossible. The world as it appears is a model, not a transparent depiction of an underlying truth…In that sense, non-duality is not a way out of the human condition, but a phenomenon within that same condition."

Miranda:

This is perhaps the key and possibly only significant human realization. Even those who suggest we are mistaken or fail to realize truths about reality assume there is an underlying reality that we can possibly know. But all we ever do is impose models upon models. This means that any conclusion, even tentative theories that do not endeavor to explain every aspect of reality, such as those of science and nonduality, are simply alternative models whose veracity cannot be determined.

"It is important to notice that these shifts are not necessarily spiritual, elevated or mystical. They are phenomenological, not metaphysical. It is not an unveiling of a deeper reality, but a change in how experience organises itself. That does not make non-duality more true than other experiential states, but it does make it informative. It shows that the sense of separation is not

a necessary condition for a functioning human experience. What non-duality ultimately reveals is how much the idea that the "I" is a central controlling principle rests on habit, not on necessity."

Clare Cherikoff used the split-brain example to show that nonduality is a dramatically different way of perceiving, but has no primacy when it comes to truth. There are just different, as Ariana and Sakura put it, "views" that arise as human possibilities. However, nonduality does indeed demonstrate that the dominant belief that separation is the only way of perception for a human is clearly not accurate.

It is not a message from reality, not an insight into a metaphysical structure, not proof of any theory. Interpretation always comes afterwards. There is no evidence that such states reveal anything about the nature of "reality", nor that they produce more stable or wiser functioning.

An interesting observation comes from Ales Us, who approaches awakening from a cultural and evolutionary angle. He writes that what is now considered an exceptional experience would likely have barely been noticed in pre-symbolic times. For people of the Paleolithic — before the development of language and complex symbolic systems — the form of direct, unmediated experience was probably the normal condition."

Miranda:

I've always agreed with Ales' statement about our ancestors. I spent many years fascinated with anthropology and have been in contact with indigenous Native Americans and Africans who conform this hypothesis. While it is ultimately a story, I suggest humans would not have survived seeing their environment with the current degree of separation. This dramatic view of the separate self and separation seems

to be a modern derivation, perhaps owing to the change in human lifestyle. The Aristotelian view may be pervasive today, but I'd say it's nothing like the way most humans viewed life.

Still, I agree that contemporary nonduality or awakening does not "produce more stable or wiser functioning." The realization of non-separation by someone in a culture with a dramatically different paradigm is not the same as being raised in a culture with a more "holistic" worldview. An awakening does not confer the cultural knowledge of how to live with the environment.

One of the most persistent misconceptions is that awakening should be a permanent state — an endpoint. But nothing in the experience itself points to durability.

Miranda:

This was the only area of the book where the experience here seems quite different, though this way of seeing seems to end the very idea of concepts such as permanent and impermanent. The centerless self cannot really locate a fixed or consistent history, and even memory seems a fleeting series of impressions (one might argue this is always the case but most do not notice).

But I would say that the shift in perception from a view rooted in separation and self-identity to a centerless, non-autonomous perception which distinguishes, but fails to believe or acknowledge the reality of appearances, is often irrevocable. As Nancy Neithercut said, “"quite suddenly and totally unexpectedly, without any warning, all thingness dropped away, and although I can say this is a flower and this is a chair and this is a laptop, it has never again felt like there are separate things divided by space or separate events divided by time... it is a seamless

flow neither moving nor non moving. It has been nine and a half years and it has never stopped even for a millisecond"

This seems the experience here and with the several I know "personally"--- people I have spent time with and have witnessed how they speak and react to life situations, not just people whose words I have read.

There do seem situations where someone has a realization or semi-mystical experience, or they simply notice there is no "me," and can no longer believe as they once did. But for them, the full range of separate feelings and thoughts and perceptions returns, they just no longer interpret them as personal. What I am speaking of is a fundamental shift in human perception, including a radical shift in thinking and emotion. As Nancy describes it, is the feeling, not simply the idea, of a seamless flow.

This is hard to describe in language. That may be why Nancy's poetry resonates so deeply here, as even the way I am writing this feels like translating a foreign language

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Rhizomatic thinking reveals a different image: experiences are variations within a field without centre. Non-duality, duality, confusion, clarity, perceptual shifts — they are not stages but expressions. Not a ladder, but a network."

Miranda:

The rhizomatic approach would be better suited to discussions of nonduality. It is often jarring when nonduality speakers seem rooted in hierarchical models even as their "message" is that no such models are true. The expression of nonduality has been largely lost in obscure spiritual or reductionist concepts all based on hierarchies of realization. I often wonder how I would speak about this if I ever gave talks, as the

subject matter calls for a dramatic re-envisioning of the delivery of this "message.

Human experience functions without a foundation. The drive for a foundation is itself a construction. There is no foundation that we can point to. No final layer, no supporting ground, no ultimate origin on which experience rests.

Yet a world appears — coherent, meaningful, convincing. Perhaps that is what "reality" is: not a structure waiting to be discovered, but a structure that continually builds itself from itself."

Miranda:

This is too rarely said. Very few point this out, and they are not well received. Nonduality often offers a false foundation, with speakers

making vague metaphysical assertions about everything arising out of some non-source like source called "Nothing" or vague words like oneness, But "nothing" cannot be found. Perhaps this can only be truly apprehended when it is realized that "The drive for a foundation is itself a construction." A point that is even more rarely seen.

The nonduality message, when heard correctly, suggests that the world that appears requires no knowledge or concepts about its nature or origin. It can't be taken as fundamental as opposed to simply what we perceive, or as some speakers say it, "what appears to happen." And from this perspective, it happens, as Nancy says, "all by itself." And yet the coherent world appears with its own set of impressions. Perhaps only as "real" as a dream, but all that will ever unfold to human perception. It functions seamlessly, and requires no explanations or questions, no matter the perspective from which life is viewed.

♥, Miranda

Acknowledgements

My thanks go first of all to my partner Asti, who has put up with me all these years and allows me to be who I am. That is a greater merit than I can explain.

I am grateful to my parents for never laying a religion or ideology over my life.

I thank Miranda Warren for her excellent comments on this book.

And finally I thank everyone who ever set me on a path and, even more, those who pushed me off it again just in time.