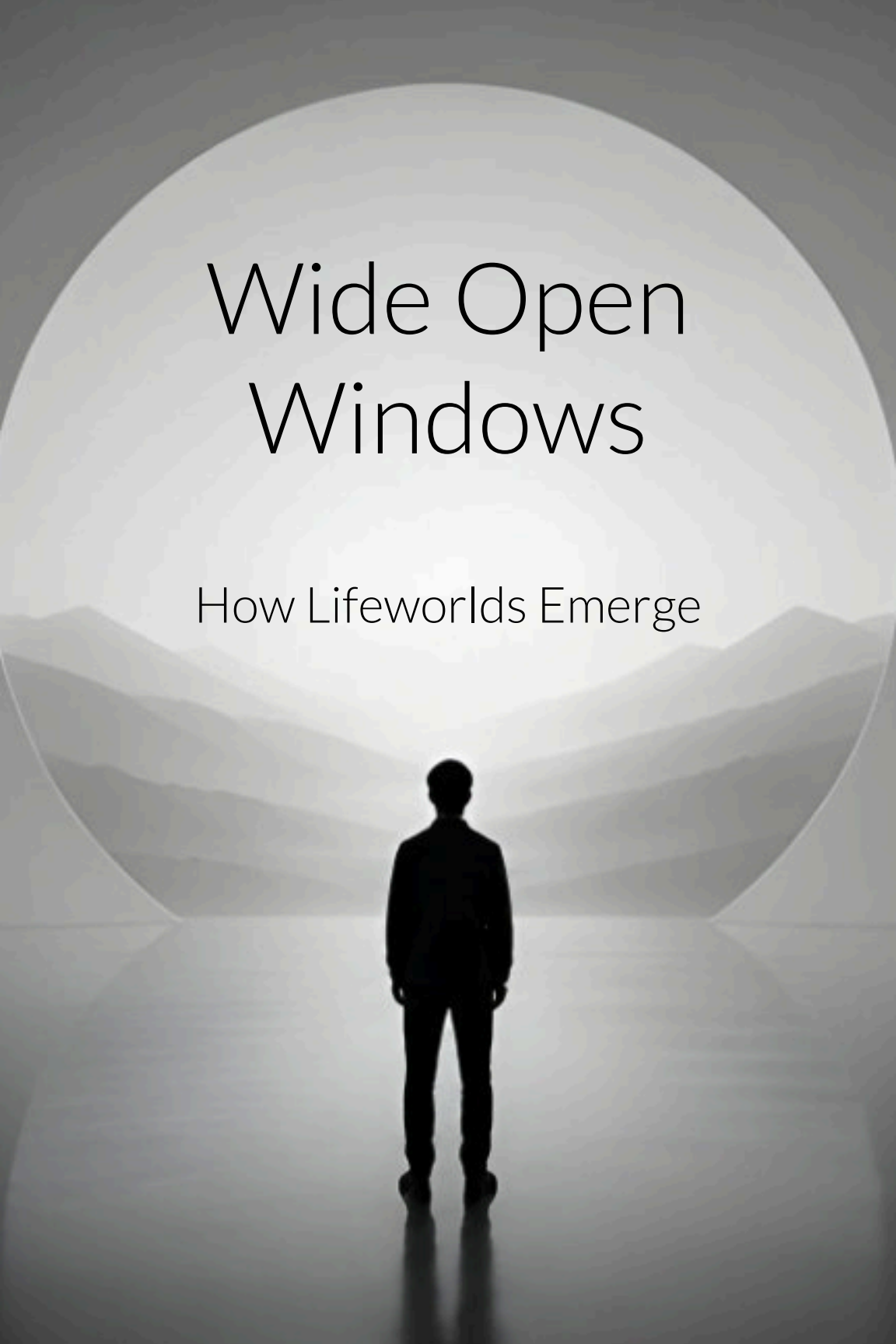
Wide Open Windows

How Lifeworlds Emerge



Colophon
Wide Open Windows | How Liveworlds Emerge by Ton Haarmans

This book emerged through a dialogue with artificial intelligence.
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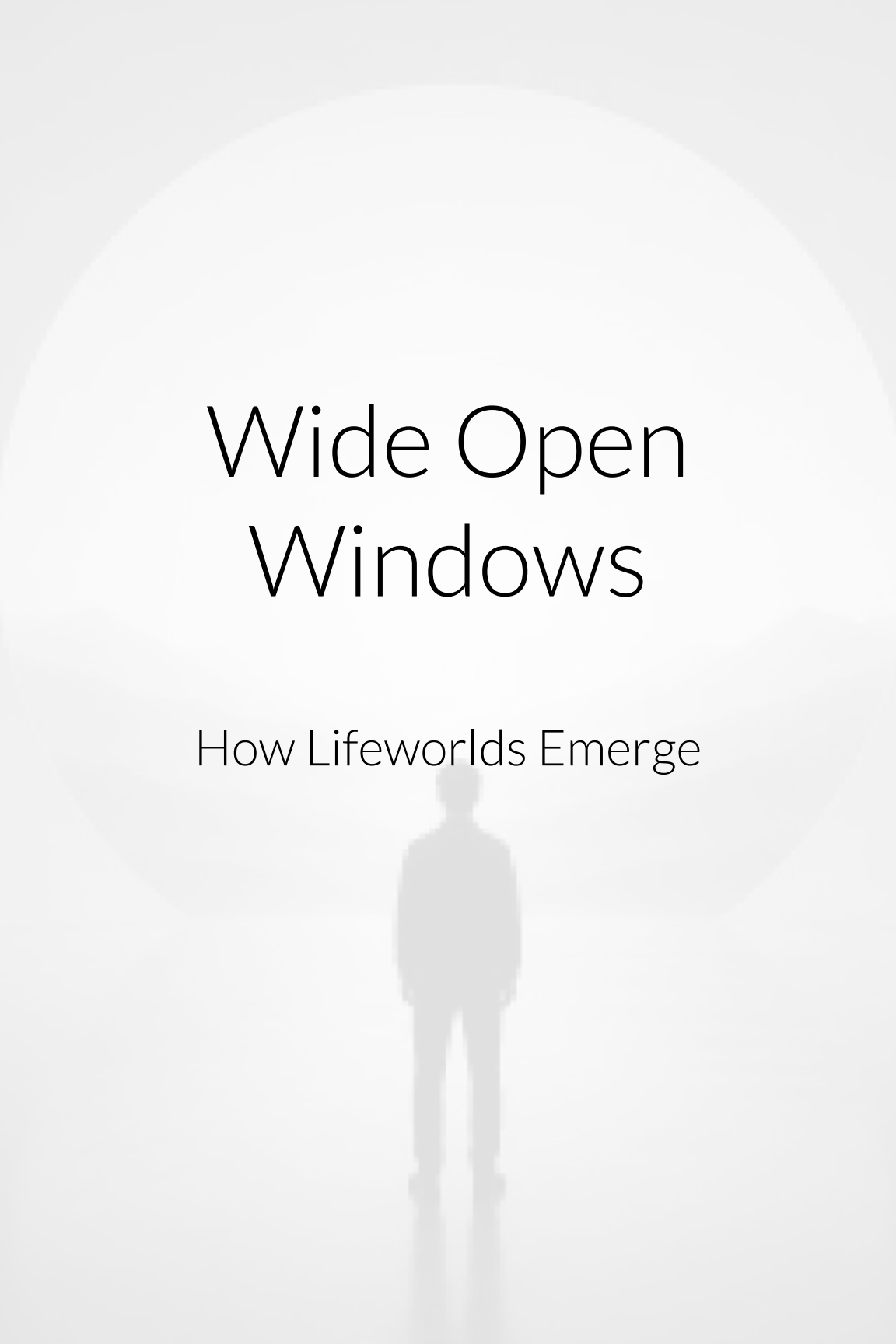
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a **wide open windows** production

Wide Open Windows

How Lifeworlds Emerge



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How to Read This Book

This book can be read in several ways.

The main chapters follow a continuous line of inquiry. Together they explore how worlds emerge, acquire coherence, become real, and sometimes begin to shift.

Between the chapters are intermezzos. These offer additional perspectives, background material, examples, objections, or encounters with related fields of thought. They are not required in order to follow the main argument. Readers who prefer a more direct route through the book can skip them and return to them later.

Some chapters are autobiographical. Others are philosophical. Others again draw on science, phenomenology, nonduality, psychology, or everyday observation. None of these perspectives is presented as a final authority. They function as different windows onto the questions explored throughout the book.

Several key terms are used in ways that may differ from their everyday meaning. The glossary at the back of the book provides brief explanations of these terms as they are used here. It is not intended as a dictionary, but as a guide to the conceptual landscape of the book.

This book does not build toward a single conclusion. It is perhaps better approached as an exploration than as an argument, as a landscape rather than a system.

Readers may therefore find it useful to move back and forth between chapters, intermezzos, and the glossary. The book was written to allow exactly that.

Note: I wrote this book largely because I find these questions endlessly fascinating. Wonder and curiosity have guided the entire project, and I can only hope that some of that curiosity is contagious.


11
BLUE SWING

Preface

This book did not begin with an interest in human realities.

It began with a much older question.

What is this, really?

What is the world?

What is consciousness?

What is time?

Why is there something rather than nothing?

I cannot remember a period in my life when these questions completely disappeared. As a child, that curiosity found expression mainly in a fascination with science, astronomy, evolution, and history. Books about the origins of the universe, the Earth, and life itself continually opened new windows. The more I read, the more fascinating the world became.

Later, philosophy, psychotherapy, and spirituality entered the picture.

For much of my life, I searched for something that seemed to lie behind the visible world. A foundation. A final truth. A perspective from which everything could finally be understood. That search led me through a wide range of traditions, ideas, and practices. It also brought me into contact with what is often called enlightenment, awakening,

or nondual realization.

For a long time, I believed there had to be a definitive answer somewhere. A final insight beyond which no further questions would be necessary.

But gradually my attention began to shift.

Not because the questions disappeared. Rather, I became increasingly struck by the profoundly different ways in which people experience and describe reality. It was not only their conclusions that differed. What counted as important, what was accepted as evidence, which experiences occupied the center of attention, and even which questions seemed meaningful sometimes differed in fundamental ways.

This was true not only of religion or spirituality. The same pattern appeared in science, politics, philosophy, art, and everyday life.

Even within nonduality, recognizable languages, preferences, interpretations, and forms of authority emerged. There, too, worlds appeared.

For some time now, I have been less interested in which description of reality is the correct one. The more compelling question has become how such realities come into being. How they acquire coherence. Why they feel convincing. How people come to inhabit them.

Out of that inquiry gradually emerged what I later came to call the *dioramic approac*h.

A diorama is a constructed world in which different elements come together to form a meaningful whole. Some

things stand out. Others recede into the background. A perspective emerges from which everything seems naturally to belong together.

Something very similar is happening continuously within human experience.

Language, memory, attention, the body, culture, expectations, emotions, and stories all participate in shaping the worlds we inhabit. This applies to scientific worlds, religious worlds, political worlds, spiritual worlds, and personal worlds alike. Even what seems entirely self-evident turns out, upon closer examination, to depend on countless factors that usually remain invisible as long as they continue to function.

Along the way, this book explores subjects that at first glance seem to have little in common: perception, language, identity, science, love, illness, belief, death, dreams, other forms of intelligence, and spirituality. Yet they all return to the same fascination: how does a world come to appear as a world?

This book does not attempt to offer a new foundation. Nor does it seek to formulate a definitive theory of reality. It is, rather, an invitation to look again at what usually seems so self-evident that it is hardly noticed at all.

Perhaps that will not lead to less mystery.

Perhaps it will lead to more.

And perhaps that is not a shortcoming.

It Is Always There

Before there were questions, there was already a world.

Before there were theories, there were birds, clouds, rain, trees, voices, and stars.

Before there were answers, there was wonder.

This book explores how worlds emerge, how they take shape, how they change, and how they meet one another.

But nothing in these pages is meant to replace the world with a theory about the world.

For sometimes, in the midst of thinking, something appears that seems older than every thought.

The song of a bird.

Light falling on a wall.

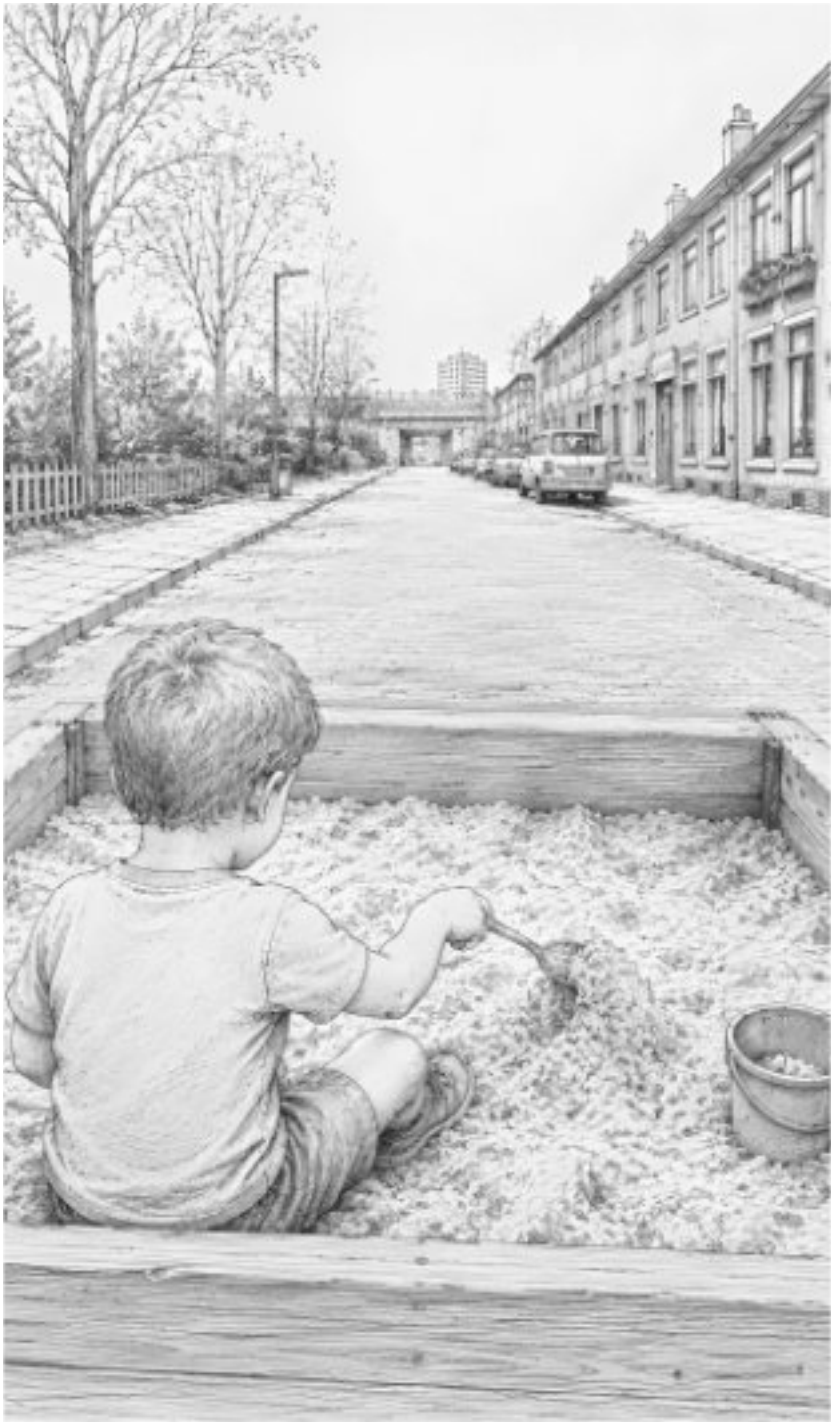
The scent of rain.

A sudden feeling of familiarity.

As though nothing is missing.

As though the world, despite all its mysteries, is already being held.

Perhaps everything begins there.



Part I

The World That Speaks for Itself

At the end of the street there is a sandbox.

I am three or four years old.

I don't have a shovel. Only a spoon.

And with that spoon I scoop up sand.

That is enough.

1. The First World

I had no shovel. No toys like other children may have had. What I did have was a small bucket and a spoon. An ordinary spoon from home. With it I scooped sand into my bucket. Nothing more happened.

And yet everything happened.

I sat there, content. Not because I had achieved something. Not because anyone was watching me. Not because I compared what I had with what others had. There was no sense of lack. No idea that anything was missing. The spoon was not a substitute for a shovel. In that world, the spoon was simply what there was, and that was enough.

When I look back on that moment today, I see more than a child in a sandbox. I see something more fundamental. I see how a world comes into being.

The street stretched away into the distance. Houses, sidewalks, trees, parked cars. Behind me was home, although I may not yet have known that word in the way adults use it. Before me there was no "objective reality," no neutral space filled with things that simply existed. Before me lay a world already filled with meaning.

The sand was not merely sand. It was material. Possibility. Something that could be shaped. The spoon was not a metal object with a particular chemical composition. It was something you could scoop with. My hands were not anatomical structures of bones, muscles, and nerves. They

were hands that already knew what to do.

Everything already had its place. Everything already belonged together.

Perhaps this is the first mistake of adult thinking: the idea that there is first a world, and only afterward meaning. As though a child first encounters separate objects and then gradually adds names, functions, and feelings to them.

But that does not seem to be how it happens.

What appears almost never appears as something neutral. It appears *as* something. As useful, safe, strange, warm, nearby, mine, not mine. Long before a child has theories, it already lives within coherence.

Perhaps that is the first world.

Not the world of science. Not the world of philosophy. Not the world of religion. Not even the world of language in its full sense.

But a world in which body, attention, touch, sound, nearness, and expectation already form a whole.

A world without a foundation, yet completely real.

If someone had asked me then what I was doing, I probably could not have given an answer that adults would have found satisfying. I was not engaged in creativity. Nor in development. Nor in identity. Nor in play theory or neurological growth.

I was simply there.

And perhaps that is precisely what is so often lost later in

life.

Not because the world disappears, but because we gradually place more and more on top of it. Names. Roles. Goals. Comparisons. Self-images. Beliefs. Stories about who we are and what matters.

The sandbox does not disappear.

But it becomes covered over.

And yet that first world remains present somewhere.

Not only as a memory.

But as a structure.



2. Everything That Appears, Appears as Something

I knew that a spoon was used for eating.

I had asked for one myself.

And I had been given that spoon.

That is precisely what makes the moment in the sandbox so interesting.

For what happened there was not that the spoon suddenly stopped being a spoon. It remained something used for eating, something from home, something that did not really belong in a sandbox.

But at that moment, it was above all something I could dig with.

I had not forgotten what a spoon was normally for. It was simply that, at that moment, this hardly mattered. What mattered was what became possible with it.

The same was true of the sand. It did not appear as "material," but as something that could be moved, lifted, compressed, and let go again. The spoon and the sand suddenly belonged together. In that experience, they naturally formed a single whole.

This may seem like a small shift, but it points to something more fundamental.

We usually assume that things simply are what they are, and that only afterward do we do something with them. As though the world consisted of fixed objects with fixed meanings.

But experience is far less orderly.

What appears almost always appears within a particular situation. Something appears as useful, troublesome, familiar, strange, fitting, or out of place. Most of the time, we do not even notice this because everything seems to speak for itself.

A spoon may be a piece of cutlery. But it can also be something to dig with. A chair may be for sitting, but just as easily for standing on to reach something. A room may simply be a room, but it may also be the place where an argument took place, where someone died, or where you fell in love.

All of these meanings coexist.

They simply do not carry the same weight.

What comes to the foreground at any given moment depends on the situation in which something appears.

In the sandbox, there was no philosophical choice between "this is a spoon" and "this is a shovel." There was simply a situation in which the spoon functioned as what I needed.

This is happening all the time.

Most of the time, we notice it only when something stops working. When an object fails to do what we expect. When a room suddenly feels different. When something becomes

stranger, heavier, or less self-evident than it was only moments before.

Only then do we begin to notice how deeply meaning depends on context.

Things become what, at that moment, they can be within a particular world.

3. When Something Becomes Real

I still remember sitting in that sandbox with a spoon. Not every detail has been preserved. I no longer remember what I was wearing, whether the sun was shining, or whether other children were playing farther down the street. What has remained is something else: a sense that, at that moment, everything simply belonged together.

Perhaps reality begins there more often than we realize.

Much of what shapes us most deeply comes into being long before we have words such as *truth*, *evidence*, or *fact*. It grows through repetition, closeness, bodily experience, and small patterns that gradually become familiar.

A child does not need to understand gravity to experience that things fall. It does not need to know psychology to sense tension in a room. And it does not need a theory of language to notice that some words bring warmth while others cause something in the body to tighten.

Something can already feel completely real long before it is understood.

This sometimes clashes with the way adults talk about reality, as though something becomes real only when it can be measured, demonstrated, or objectively verified.

Facts, of course, have their place. But human reality often

takes shape long before it can be analyzed.

What keeps returning acquires weight. What continues to repeat itself without constantly being questioned begins to feel familiar. The voice you hear every day. The smell of a house. A particular silence during dinner. The table where everyone gathers. What is considered normal at home. What people laugh about. What creates tension without anyone ever mentioning it.

Taken separately, these may seem like isolated things.

But they are rarely lived that way.

Together they gradually form an atmosphere, a rhythm, a way of seeing and expecting. Without anyone consciously choosing it, something emerges that feels less and less like an interpretation and more and more like simply the way the world is.

Perhaps this is also why people, despite sharing so much, can nevertheless live in different realities, while each of those realities feels entirely self-evident.

What seems perfectly normal to one person may strike another as strange, exaggerated, or incomprehensible. Not necessarily because one of them is wrong, but because every reality carries its own history.

A world rarely comes into being in one dramatic moment. More often, it grows slowly through small repetitions and subtle shifts that hardly attract attention. What was once accidental or provisional can, over time, become so familiar that it no longer feels like one possibility among many.

It simply becomes the way things are.

After a while, it becomes difficult to see clearly where experience ends and meaning begins. What has settled into the body, memory, expectation, language, and surroundings acquires a solidity that feels almost self-evident.

No absolute foundation ever appeared.

What did emerge was coherence.

Perhaps that is ultimately how realities become most deeply established.

Not in theories, but in what is lived.



Intermezzo

Phenomenology, Perception, and Lived Experience

When we speak about reality in everyday life, we usually do so as though the world simply lies before us. The chair is there. The table is there. The street stretches to the end of the neighborhood. The dog barks. The wind moves through the trees. It seems self-evident that the world exists first, and that we then perceive it.

Phenomenology placed precisely this self-evidence into question.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Edmund Husserl asked a seemingly simple yet philosophically far-reaching question: what actually appears in experience before we add theories, explanations, or scientific models? Not: what is the world in itself, independent of us? But: how does a world appear and organize itself in lived experience? In doing so, he shifted attention from objects to experience.

A tree was no longer approached merely as a biological organism composed of cells, fibers, and chemical processes. Of course, a tree can be studied in that way. But long before such analysis begins, the tree already appears in experience. Perhaps as shade on a warm day. Perhaps as something that recalls a particular place. Perhaps as shelter from the rain. Perhaps as beauty. Perhaps as a threat in the dark.

Phenomenology does not deny the world.

Nor does it deny science.

What it does is draw attention to something that seems to come before both: the world as it appears in lived experience.

This last point is important.

Experience, in this sense, is not a collection of separate impressions. It is not a database of sensory stimuli. It is not a camera storing recordings. What we experience almost never appears as neutral or

meaningless. It already appears within a field of body, orientation, mood, expectation, memory, attention, and context.

That is why a staircase feels different when you look down from the top than when you climb it. That is why an empty school corridor feels different when you walk through it alone as a child than when you return to it thirty years later. That is why the same room may evoke a sense of safety in one person and tension in another.

The physical space itself may not have changed.

What has changed is how that space appears.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty later developed this insight further by emphasizing that perception can never be separated from the body. We do not look at the world from some abstract consciousness. We perceive as bodies that move, reach, hesitate, startle, remember, long for, and orient themselves. The body is not merely *in* the world. It is one of the ways in which the world appears at all.

This has far-reaching consequences.

For if experience is always already embodied, directed, and situated, it becomes increasingly difficult to speak of completely neutral perception. Not because everything is relative, or because there is no reality, but because whatever appears as real for us is always carried by a particular perspective, a particular history, and a particular involvement.

In contemporary phenomenology, this is often summarized by the term *lived experience*. Not as an abstract concept, but as experience as it is actually lived, felt, and inhabited.

This book begins from the world as it appears, acquires coherence, becomes real, and is ultimately lived. In that respect, it clearly aligns itself with the phenomenological tradition. At the same time, it also shifts the emphasis slightly. Whereas classical phenomenology primarily investigates how things appear within experience, this book increasingly asks how entire worlds become organized, stabilized, and, for a time, come to feel completely self-evident.

Objects never appear independently of the world within which they acquire their meaning.

Furter reading

Edmund Husserl — *Ideas I*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty — *Phenomenology of Perception*

Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch — *The Embodied Mind*



Part II

The World Takes Shape

The front door closes behind me.

A piece of string hangs through the letterbox.

I can always get back inside.

4. Home Exists Before You Understand It

Long before a child understands what a family is, it is already living within one. It knows nothing yet of words such as safety, tension, security, or distance. It knows nothing about parenting, communication, or family dynamics. And yet it is already learning something that may reach deeper than any explanation ever could. It is learning, not primarily what a house is, but how a house feels.

This rarely happens in a single moment. It develops gradually, through small repetitions that scarcely stand out on their own, but together begin to form something. The smell that fills the kitchen in the morning. The sound of cutlery against plates. A radio playing somewhere in the background. Footsteps on the stairs. A familiar voice. A door closing a little harder than usual. Laughter that suddenly stops. Or, just as easily, a silence that has become so ordinary that no one notices it anymore.

For a child, these are not separate events. Nor are they impressions that first arrive neutrally and only later acquire meaning. From the very beginning, they already form a whole. A rhythm. An atmosphere. An invisible order within which the body begins to move without having to think about it.

What will later be called *home* is often already present long

before that word acquires its meaning.

A child does not need to understand what tension is in order to feel it. It does not need to know anything about human relationships to notice that some voices bring relaxation while others cause something in the body to tighten. It needs no explanation of hierarchy, sensitivity, or caution to notice who has the final word, who preserves the silence, who breaks the atmosphere, or which subjects are better left untouched.

Much of what will later be described as intuition, character, or sensitivity may already begin to take shape here.

This learning does not happen through instruction. No one has to explain when it is better to remain silent, when it is safe to ask a question, or when it is wiser first to sense the mood. The body often seems to understand such things before thought does. Without analysis, it gradually develops a sensitivity to tone, rhythm, distance, closeness, and everything that seems self-evident within a home.

What continues to repeat itself naturally begins to acquire weight.

What feels familiar acquires weight.

And whatever acquires enough weight gradually comes to be experienced less and less as one possibility among many. It begins to feel like simply the way things are.

Only much later does it sometimes become apparent that other houses smell different. That other families speak differently. That other silences carry different meanings. That warmth can express itself in other ways. That tension does not sound the same everywhere.

In my own case, this sometimes revealed itself in a curious way.

For years I had dreams, and occasionally I still do, in which I was trying to find my way home but could no longer find the route. Sometimes the surroundings seemed familiar at first, but then a street would suddenly come to a dead end. Sometimes I had to pass buildings I had never seen before, walk through alleys that led nowhere, or cross obstacles without knowing how to get beyond them. The farther I went, the less certain I became of where I actually was.

And yet the feeling remained that home had to be nearby.

What strikes me now is that, in those dreams, it did not merely feel as though I was lost. It felt as though something more fundamental had momentarily stopped working. As though the world still existed, but no longer knew how to hold itself together. Perhaps such a dream touches something that began much earlier.

For if home is built not only as a place, but also as rhythm, scent, voices, routes, expectations, silences, and familiar transitions, then perhaps being lost touches more than location alone.

Perhaps sometimes you do not lose your way. Perhaps, for a moment, you lose the structure within which the world once spoke for itself. And perhaps that is also why home never completely disappears when you leave the house behind.

Sometimes you carry it with you for many years.

What once happened does not simply disappear.

It becomes part of how a world takes shape.


Tob nooit!

5. Words Find Their Way In

A small wooden plaque hung on the wall with the image of a little dog. *Never worry*, it said beneath it. As a child, I hardly gave it a thought. It simply hung there, among all the other things that seemed entirely self-evident. Only much later did I begin to realize that even words like these were part of the world in which I grew up.

Long before I understood what language actually was, I was already living within it. At home, we did not speak the way people spoke at school, and certainly not the way they spoke in books or on television. We spoke as many people in Utrecht spoke at that time, mixed with words, sounds, and expressions whose origins I would discover only much later. Some turned out to have Yiddish roots, others came from Malay, still others from Rotterdam, where my mother had been born, from Leiden, or from a family history that no one could fully reconstruct anymore. And there were also words that perhaps existed nowhere else, or at least nowhere else in quite the way they sounded in our home.

As a child, I never gave this a second thought. It was not a dialect. It was not folk speech. It was not cultural heritage.

It was simply how people talked at home.

My mother had an endless stream of distorted words, puns, and unexpected expressions. She delighted in twisting familiar words into absurd new forms. I heard them, laughed along, and absorbed them without realizing that

language was doing far more here than conveying information. The words themselves seemed alive. They played, teased, deflated, exaggerated, comforted, corrected, and sometimes combined humor and menace in a single sentence.

Some expressions were playful. Others were sharp. Some were affectionate, while others were clearly less innocent. "Your will is in your backside." "Wishing won't bake cookies." "Children who ask don't get." "Just wait until your father gets home." As a child, I did not hear these as educational messages or social norms. I heard them the way you hear changes in the weather, or footsteps on the stairs. They belonged to the atmosphere in which life unfolded.

And perhaps that is precisely what makes the language of home so powerful.

Words rarely enter as words alone. They arrive together with faces, voices, glances, the scrape of a chair across the floor, cutlery on the table, the tap of a knife against a plate, laughter, irritation, warmth, or tiredness. An expression is therefore remembered not merely as language, but as an entire situation.

Only much later did I begin to notice that not everyone spoke this way. At school, the language sounded different. More polished, perhaps. More precise. Words were pronounced more completely, sentences seemed less winding, less playful, less rough around the edges. Certain expressions that had been perfectly ordinary at home were never heard there. Without anyone explicitly explaining it, I began to sense that language did more than communicate. From the way you spoke, people could often tell where you came from, what kind of family you had grown up in, or

which neighborhood you belonged to.

Without consciously deciding to do so, I began to adapt. Not always in what I said, but in how I said it. In which words I still used and which I preferred to keep for home. In which sounds came naturally and which I gradually learned to swallow along the way.

Speaking broad Utrecht dialect was frowned upon. That was how the "rough kids" from what we called the poorer neighborhoods spoke. People there sat outside on the sidewalks, and the children looked different too. Less well cared for, and the atmosphere felt threatening whenever I happened to walk through those streets.

And yet I knew exactly how to speak that dialect. It sounded much tougher.

Around the dinner table I gradually discovered that words carry much more than meaning. They also carry emotions, memories, fears, and entire ways of seeing the world.

I vividly remember how present the Second World War still was for my parents. Not as a history lesson, but as something that still lived within everyday conversation. There was distrust of Germans, bitterness toward those who had been "on the wrong side" during the war, and at the same time a difficult sense of guilt about what had been done to the Jews.

All of this lived not only in major statements, but especially in small things that seemed completely ordinary. In remarks made around the dinner table. In the way food had to be eaten. *You don't know what hunger is. You eat what is put in front of you.* Taking too long over your meal was simply not done.

The war lived on in reflexes, moods, and habits. Even humor still carried that world. Whenever a German asked for directions, the standard joking reply was: "Immer gerade aus."

Looking back, I can see that words had settled into me long before I could understand what they were doing. Whatever is spoken in the same tone for years, whatever keeps returning in jokes, warnings, irritations, nicknames, and familiar expressions, does not remain outside you. It gradually settles into the way you listen, the way you respond, the way you speak, and sometimes even the way you begin to think about yourself.

Perhaps that is also why the language of home never completely disappears.

Even when the words change, even when your pronunciation becomes softer, more polished, or adapts to new surroundings, somewhere the rhythm remains. Sometimes you suddenly hear it again in a single word, a particular intonation, a joke no one else understands, or an expression you thought you had forgotten long ago. And in such moments, it almost seems as though you are not the one speaking.

As though the world you grew up in is still speaking through you.

"Look what you've done, clumsy!"

For an overview of what the language of home meant to me, see:

https://wideopenwindows.be/rest/extra/thuistaal.php



6. What Others Begin to See in You

At some point in the early years, a child begins to notice that the world is becoming larger than home. Until then, it moves mainly within surroundings that feel familiar. The voices are familiar, the smells return, the words sound as they always have, and the people around you belong to the setting in which everything takes place. Without giving it any thought, that world simply feels self-evident.

That changes as soon as other places begin to appear. Other children. Other adults. Other spaces with which you have no history.

My first memory of this begins in the street.

My mother is taking me to kindergarten for the first time, although *taking* hardly seems the right word in retrospect. I did not want to go. I resisted with everything I had. She pulled me forward while I struggled against her. I no longer remember how long it lasted or how many people saw it. What has remained is that overwhelming feeling of being torn away from something familiar and taken somewhere where everything felt strange.

I remember almost nothing of the school itself that day.

I remember everything about that feeling.

Only much later did I begin to notice how often the same

pattern returned. Until then, I had lived mostly within my own world. From that moment on, I slowly began to experience that I also appeared in a world where other people were already looking at me, responding to me, expecting something from me.

Sometimes this happened in moments that, in themselves, seemed almost meaningless.

It was my first day at a new school. Everything was unfamiliar. New faces, new voices, new rules that everyone else seemed to know except me. At one point, bottles of school milk were handed out. The other children automatically picked up their bottles, so I did the same.

Then it turned out there wasn't one for me.

I heard that my name was not yet on the list.

No one had taken me into account.

Objectively, it may have been a trivial matter. An administrative detail. A misunderstanding that was probably forgotten almost immediately.

But that is not how it felt at the time.

What I felt was injustice.

And shame.

The sudden realization that the group already existed, that its routines were already in place, that everyone else apparently knew how things worked, while I stood there as someone who was present but did not yet seem to count.

Looking back, it is often precisely such small moments that

seem to mark the beginning of identity. Not major events, but the sudden realization that you are not automatically part of what already seems self-evident to everyone else.

I also remember standing at the top of the staircase in the apartment building where we lived. Another little boy was standing below. He looked at my bare feet, pointed at them, and started laughing. It probably meant very little. For him, it may already have been forgotten before he reached the bottom of the stairs.

For me, it remained.

Something seemed to shift in that moment. What until then had simply been part of me suddenly acquired another meaning. My feet were no longer just my feet. Apparently, they could also evoke something in someone else. A reaction. A laugh. A judgment. Perhaps even without the other child realizing it.

Later, something of that same feeling returned during swimming lessons. In the communal changing room, known as the "sheep pen," everyone else seemed to move around effortlessly. The boys walked around naked, joked with one another, challenged one another, laughed loudly.

They laughed at me because I was shy.

What I felt most strongly was discomfort. A powerful wish to become invisible. To be finished as quickly as possible. To get out of there.

Only much later did I begin to understand what all these moments had in common.

A second layer slowly emerged in the way I experienced

myself. Not only living what was happening, but at the same time sensing how I appeared to others. How I looked. How I came across. Whether I stood out. Whether I seemed to fall outside. Whether I belonged to what apparently counted as normal.

From that moment on, identity seems to develop differently.

No longer only from within, through feeling, curiosity, or spontaneous movement, but also through the countless small mirrors that other people unknowingly hold up to you.

Sometimes very little is needed.

A glance that lingers just a little too long.

A laugh whose meaning you cannot quite read.

A silence that suddenly seems to carry significance.

A comparison that quietly settles into place.

A reaction that may have disappeared from the other person's mind long ago, but that can continue to shape you for years.

Intermezzo

Constructivism and How Worlds Take Shape

When we look back on our childhood, it is easy to assume that the world in which we grew up simply already existed. Home was home. The street was the street. The people around us were who they were. The words that were spoken, the rules that applied, the way people ate, laughed, remained silent, worked, or related to one another all seemed to be nothing more than part of the way reality itself was.

Only much later do we begin to realize that other people grew up within entirely different worlds of self-evidence.

During the twentieth century, a number of philosophical, psychological, educational, and sociological traditions sought to understand how human beings construct their reality. Although they differed in emphasis, many of these approaches shared one fundamental insight: the world in which people live does not simply appear as a ready-made given. What we experience as reality continually takes shape through the ways we perceive, interpret, name, repeat, anticipate, and live together with others.

Under the broad heading of *constructivism*, a variety of important perspectives emerged.

The Swiss developmental psychologist **Jean Piaget** showed that a child does not simply absorb knowledge like a sponge absorbs water. A child actively constructs structures of understanding. It tries to make sense of experience, adapts existing mental frameworks, and gradually develops increasingly sophisticated ways of organizing the world. What is initially only felt or perceived slowly takes shape within patterns of thought that become more complex over time.

The Russian psychologist **Lev Vygotsky** placed greater emphasis on the social environment. According to him, thinking never develops in complete isolation. Words, conversations, gestures, expectations, education, and culture all participate in shaping how a child learns to perceive, understand, and make meaning.

Sociology developed these ideas further. In their influential book *The Social Construction of Reality*, **Peter L. Berger** and **Thomas Luckmann** described how human realities gradually become socially stabilized. What people do together often enough eventually acquires a stable form. Habits become patterns. Patterns become expectations. Expectations become institutions. And institutions eventually come to feel so self-evident that almost no one still asks how they came into being.

An important concept here is *habitualization*: the process by which repetition leads to familiarity.

When something happens in the same way often enough, no one needs to think about it consciously anymore. How you greet someone. Who has the final word at the dinner table. What is considered polite. Which words are acceptable and which are better avoided. What is funny. What is embarrassing. What is normal.

Repetition creates predictability.

And predictability brings a sense of security.

But that same predictability has a deeper effect.

What once began as human behavior, as a practical solution, as a cultural habit, or as an accidental agreement may, over time, come to feel as though it had always been there. For the next generation, it no longer appears as something constructed by people, but as reality itself.

As a result, a child rarely grows up in a neutral world. It grows up in a world already saturated with meanings. A world full of language, rhythm, expectations, sensitivities, humor, shame, silences, rules, and forms of self-evidence that long predate the child's own ability to understand them.

Perhaps this is also one reason why people later find it so difficult to see that their world might have been otherwise. This does not mean they are inattentive. Whatever has been lived together, confirmed, and repeated for long enough eventually becomes almost indistinguishable from reality itself.

Further reading

Jean Piaget — *The Construction of Reality in the Child*

Lev Vygotsky — *Mind in Society*

Peter L. Berger & Thomas Luckmann — *The Social Construction of Reality*

Ernst von Glasersfeld — *Radical Constructivism: A Way of Knowing and Learning*



Part III

When the World Shifts

The stage remained.

Only the seriousness disappeared.

So simple.

7. Cracks in the Stage

I am attending a gathering known as a satsang. At the front sits someone people have come to listen to, someone who sets the rhythm of the meeting. I am sitting directly in front of her.

While she is speaking, something unexpected happens. It is as though a warm, loving atmosphere suddenly becomes palpable in my experience, something that had apparently been there all along. Not something new. Rather, something that had long been covered over.

Most of our lives, we move through worlds that have become so familiar that we hardly notice how much repetition sustains them. We follow the same routes, use the same words, respond to situations as though their meanings were fixed. That is what makes the world feel stable.

Most of the time, we never think about it.

Until something begins to shift.

Sometimes the shift is physical. A tiredness that no longer goes away. Nights that become increasingly restless. An unease for which no words yet exist. Sometimes there is a loss, an illness, a divorce, or a diagnosis. Sometimes outwardly almost nothing changes, and yet the world begins to feel different.

Such shifts can arise anywhere. During meditation. In a hospital bed. Under the influence of psychedelics. In the midst of falling in love. Or simply on a morning that looks

exactly like every other morning.

At such moments, it is not only what someone thinks about reality that changes.

Reality itself seems to appear differently.

Rooms feel different. Time behaves strangely. Thoughts lose their self-evidence. What once seemed solid suddenly reveals itself as far more fluid.

In my younger years, long before the satsang experience, I had an experience during an evening at the Kosmos in Amsterdam that has stayed with me ever since.

What began as an ordinary evening gradually changed. At first, I became increasingly anxious. More self-conscious. More suspicious. It felt as though I could no longer move through the world naturally. Everything I did seemed forced. The more I observed myself, the more trapped I became within my own thoughts.

Then something unexpected happened.

The fear disappeared.

Not gradually, but all at once.

What replaced it was not a vision, not a great insight, and not a spectacular revelation. It was something much simpler. For the first time, there no longer seemed to be any distance between what I was doing and the doing itself. Walking happened by itself. Sitting happened by itself. Breathing happened by itself. My body and my attention were no longer moving separately.

I wandered through the building for a while. Everything

looked exactly the same, and yet everything appeared differently. The people around me seemed completely absorbed in their own thoughts. They talked, laughed, moved from one group to another, but it felt as though no one was truly listening. It was more as if everyone were following a pattern that simply kept repeating itself.

At one point, I exchanged a smile with someone on the other side of the room. Nothing was said. Yet it felt as though something had been recognized.

What struck me most was not what I saw in other people, but what was absent in myself. Much of my life had been lived under the silent gaze of an imaginary audience. What will other people think of me? How do I come across? What should I do, or avoid doing?

Now that was gone.

The world felt extraordinarily light.

But the experience did not last.

Later, as I was going home, the thought arose of how I was supposed to relate to the people I lived with while in this state. Would they notice? Would they understand what had happened? As soon as those questions gained weight, the doubt returned. The openness closed again. Before long, I found myself back in what I then regarded as ordinary reality.

For a brief time, something had seemed more real than my everyday world.

Yet at the same time, I felt I could not truly live there. It was as though such a way of experiencing would gradually place

me outside ordinary human life.

The experience evoked both longing and fear. One part of me wanted to move closer to it, while another immediately sensed how disruptive such a way of experiencing might become.

For years, I tried to find that state again.

I never succeeded.

And yet it has never quite stopped following me.

What remained was not so much the experience itself as the realization that the same world can reveal itself in radically different ways. The building was the same. The people were the same. And yet everything had appeared differently. What I had taken to be self-evident reality turned out to be far more fluid than I had ever imagined.

To this day, I still do not know entirely what to make of that experience at the Kosmos.

Part of me wants to describe it as an alternative configuration of experience, without turning it into a higher truth.

But another part of me still remembers how overwhelmingly *real* it felt.

Intermezzo

The Sense of Reality

Not every world feels equally real.

That may sound strange, because we are accustomed to treating reality as though it were simply there: fixed, neutral, and the same for everyone. Yet lived experience suggests otherwise. Reality comes in degrees. Some moments pass almost unnoticed. Others impress themselves upon us with such intensity that they continue to shape us for years.

Dreams can feel completely real while they last. A panic attack can suddenly turn an ordinary room into a place of mortal danger. Falling in love changes not only how someone feels, but how the entire world appears. Depression, grief, psychedelic experiences, meditation, and religious ecstasy can likewise transform one's sense of reality in profound ways.

Some experiences do not merely feel different.

They feel *more real* than ordinary everyday life.

Perhaps this is precisely one of the most difficult aspects of human experience.

For as soon as a particular world presents itself as more real, clearer, or more fundamental than other worlds, there is an almost inevitable tendency to grant it metaphysical privilege. *This* is the real reality. *This* is awakening. *This* is the truth behind appearances.

Many spiritual traditions are built upon precisely this sense of reality.

And yet a stronger sense of reality does not necessarily mean that an experience is therefore objectively more ultimate or more absolute. Perhaps it tells us, first and foremost, something about the intensity with which a particular world appears and the weight with which it is lived.

That does not make such experiences any less significant.

Quite the contrary.

Some experiences exert such a powerful reality-effect that they continue to press themselves upon us for years, even when we try to maintain intellectual distance. Perhaps this helps explain why certain spiritual, religious, or psychedelic experiences can have such a profound influence. Not merely because they introduce new ideas, but because the world itself seems to acquire a different density during such moments.

Perhaps the sense of reality is therefore not a secondary feature of experience, but one of its most fundamental characteristics.

Worlds differ not only in what they contain.

They also differ in how real they feel.



8. When the Center Cannot Be Found

One of the strangest things about experience is how self-evident the sense of *I* usually seems, while on closer inspection it proves far more difficult to grasp than language suggests.

We constantly speak about ourselves. About what we think, feel, want, fear, remember, or hope. We say: *I'm going for a walk. I'm tired. I regret that. I want to understand this.* Most of the time, this raises no doubt at all. It seems perfectly obvious who or what these words refer to.

And yet the center to which the word *I* points turned out to be much harder to find than I had expected.

Meditation, nonduality, and self-inquiry all played a role in this, though not in the spectacular way spiritual books sometimes suggest. There was no great awakening, no life-changing explosion of insight. Rather, there were small moments in which something that had felt self-evident for years suddenly became much more difficult to point to directly.

There is walking, seeing, writing, listening, eating, and talking. Thoughts come and go. Memories arise. Irritations appear and dissolve again. Attention continually shifts from one thing to another. Life seems largely capable of carrying on by itself.

And it is precisely there that a curious question sometimes arises: where, exactly, is the center from which all this seems to happen?

When attention genuinely remains with that question, the answer turns out to be less straightforward than expected. There is experience. There are thoughts, feelings, memories, preferences, reactions, and inner commentary. Everything that normally seems to belong to a personal life is still present. Only the fixed center around which everything appears to revolve proves much harder to find directly than language continually suggests.

Perhaps it is precisely the ordinariness of this that makes it so strange. The story of *I* continues to function for the most part. People still have names, hold conversations, make plans, argue, fall in love, buy groceries, and fill out tax forms. Outwardly, almost nothing changes. And yet, at the same time, a subtle shift can occur in which that familiar center begins to feel less solid than it once did.

Sometimes the shift is barely noticeable.

Sometimes it is unmistakable.

But there are also moments when that same sense of *I* suddenly organizes itself with tremendous force.

Shame is one example. When someone says something that unexpectedly strikes home. When I notice other people looking at me in a way I had not anticipated. When I feel excluded, misunderstood, ridiculed, or suddenly have the feeling that something has become visible that I would rather have kept hidden.

The experience changes immediately.

What only moments before had felt open or difficult to grasp contracts within seconds into a single, intense point of vulnerability, defensiveness, or self-consciousness. Then it no longer feels as though experience is simply unfolding.

It feels as though it is happening *to me*.

There are moments when the sense of being a separate self seems barely present at all, and other moments when that very same self suddenly organizes itself with full force around pain, desire, fear, humiliation, or defense.

What we usually call *I* therefore seems less like a fixed object and more like a continually shifting configuration of attention, memory, body, language, and social sensitivity. Sometimes it hardly seems present at all, while at other times it colors almost the whole of experience.

Thoughts, too, begin to feel different. Sometimes they seem to arise before there is anyone who consciously chooses them. A reaction is often there before the story that later explains why it made sense. Anger can arise suddenly. So can shame. Even words sometimes seem to appear before *I* believes it is producing them.

At the same time, there are countless accounts of people for whom this shift appears to go much further than anything described here. People who speak of a break, an awakening, a sudden realization in which the ordinary sense of being a separate center seems to disappear permanently.

Some of these accounts sound deeply liberating.

Others sound profoundly unsettling.

Sometimes they follow years of meditation or self-inquiry.

Sometimes they seem to arise entirely unexpectedly, in the middle of ordinary life.

Steven Norquist (2006) describes such a shift through a simple thought experiment:

> *Imagine as vividly as you can that you enter a large house you have never been in before.*
>
> *You feel strange and slightly uneasy. There is furniture, there are curtains, but there are no people. You wander from room to room. The house feels empty. Silent. Perhaps even a little eerie.*
>
> *As time passes, the size and emptiness of the house begin to weigh more and more heavily on you. You wonder how long it has stood abandoned.*
>
> *Finally, when the tension has become almost unbearable, a shocking realization dawns:*
>
> ***you are not there either.***
>
> *Only the experience of the house remains.*

Whether such experiences truly point to the permanent disappearance of a personal center, or rather to a radically different organization of experience, is difficult to judge from the outside.

In some spiritual traditions, the disappearance of the sense of being a separate self is described as liberation. At the same time, some of these descriptions bear striking similarities to what, in other contexts, would be called depersonalization or derealization.

Looking back, one thing seems especially important: the sense of *I* is far less stable, far less uniform, and far less self-evident than everyday language usually suggests.

Perhaps genuine inquiry begins precisely there, where that familiar center sometimes cannot be found at all, while at other moments it immediately reorganizes itself with full force.

And when that familiar center begins to feel less self-evident, another question almost inevitably presents itself.

If the self is not as stable or as clearly present as it always seemed, then who is actually choosing?

Who decides?

Who wants?

Who is in control?

Here, too, something remarkable seems to happen. For just like the sense of a fixed center, free will usually appears completely self-evident, until we begin to examine it more closely.



9. Who Chooses?

Few things seem more self-evident than the feeling that we make our own choices.

Someone decides to make coffee. To cross the street. To end a relationship. To buy a book. To pour a glass of wine. To send a message. To raise a hand. Even now, while reading this sentence, there seems to be a center somewhere directing attention, interpreting these words, and deciding whether to continue reading or to stop.

Most of the time, we hardly think about it. The sense of acting seems inseparably woven into the sense of being a person. There is an *I* that thinks, considers, decides, and acts. It appears so fundamental that many human worlds are built entirely around it. Legal systems. Morality. Guilt. Merit. Punishment. Pride. Regret. Responsibility. Education. Religion. Politics. Almost everywhere, it is assumed that human beings are, in some sense, the origin of their own actions.

Yet experience itself often proves less straightforward.

A thought suddenly appears without it being clear where it came from. An emotion takes hold of the body before there seems to be any time to choose. Someone says something hurtful and hears the words already leaving their mouth while another part of them would rather have remained silent. Habits continue to repeat themselves despite sincere resolutions to stop. An impulse turns out to be faster than

reflection. Only afterward does the curious feeling arise that the action was already underway before it was consciously noticed.

Scientific research has also placed this feeling under increasing pressure. Experiments on decision-making and brain activity appear to suggest that certain processes are initiated before a person becomes consciously aware of making a choice. Thoughts, preferences, and impulses also seem to depend heavily on factors over which we appear to have little control: genetics, upbringing, mood, hormones, fatigue, environment, trauma, language, memory, social pressure, and bodily condition.

The traditional image of a fully autonomous decision-maker therefore seems less solid than it once did.

And yet the feeling of choice does not disappear.

Even people who become intellectually convinced of determinism usually continue to speak as though they choose, hesitate, decide, and bear responsibility. Everyday life remains organized around expectations, intentions, and actions. No one says to a waiter, "The universe ordered a coffee through this body." No one tells a child, "Your neural configuration produced undesirable behavior." Even those who deny free will generally continue to live within a world in which choices remain meaningful.

This makes the subject more complicated than a simple opposition between *free will exists* and *free will does not exist*.

Perhaps it is more fruitful first to examine more carefully what is actually experienced when people say that they choose.

A choice rarely appears as a clear moment in which an independent self surveys different possibilities from a position of complete freedom. More often, it emerges within a much larger stream of circumstances, preferences, memories, expectations, moods, and shifting attention. Hunger influences decisions. Fatigue influences interpretation. Fear narrows possibilities. Falling in love opens other worlds. Music changes mood. A room feels inviting or threatening. Childhood leaves traces in what later comes to feel self-evident.

Even the thought *I want this* usually appears spontaneously within experience.

It is not first consciously produced by a separate center that itself stands apart from it.

This does not mean that human beings are puppets, or that action becomes meaningless. It suggests, rather, that the feeling of authorship is less straightforward than it initially appears.

Perhaps the feeling *I am doing this* arises only afterward, as part of a narrative that gives coherence to experience.

The world organizes itself in such a way that it feels self-evident.

Perhaps agency does as well.

> *Without the idea of a fork in the road, there is only the appearance of movement.*
>
> Miranda Warren

Human beings continually tell stories about themselves. Not only to others, but inwardly as well. *I am someone who... I*

decided... I wanted... I had no choice... Such formulations organize memories into a relatively stable image of a person acting and making choices through time. Without such narratives, experience would probably feel much more fragmented.

This does not mean that these stories are false. They function. They create coherence. They make social worlds possible. But they may be less transparent than they appear.

Contemplative traditions have noticed something similar. During meditation or self-inquiry, it may suddenly become apparent that thoughts simply arise by themselves. A decision seems to unfold rather than to be actively produced. Some people describe a weakening of the sense of being a separate doer. Actions continue to occur, but the familiar center of authorship feels less substantial.

For some, this is deeply liberating.

Guilt and shame lose their absolute character.

For others, it is profoundly unsettling.

For if no one is ultimately the author of their own thoughts, what becomes of responsibility, morality, or meaning?

Yet the disappearance of an absolute center does not automatically mean that human worlds collapse.

Here again, experience proves to depend strongly on scale and context.

Within a legal system, responsibility continues to function as a necessity. Within human relationships, intentions remain important. Within education, choices continue to matter. At

another level, however, it becomes apparent that no action stands completely apart from history, the body, culture, and circumstances.

These perspectives can coexist without either one having to become the final word.

This happens more often in human experience.

A rainbow does not exist as a fixed object in the sky, yet it nevertheless appears as something real. Music does not exist as a tangible thing, yet it can move us profoundly. Money ultimately rests upon collective agreement, yet that does not make it any less powerful. Perhaps free will belongs to the same category of human realities: not simply an illusion, yet neither a fully independent object somewhere within the universe.

Perhaps the sense of choice is one of the ways in which human experience organizes itself.

That might also explain why the subject carries such emotional weight. Behind discussions of free will lies more than a theoretical problem. There is fear beneath it. Pride. Guilt. Hope. Grief. The desire that someone should ultimately be responsible. Or, conversely, the longing no longer to have to carry everything as though one were completely autonomous.

At the same time, it can feel as though both sides are true. People long for freedom, yet they also long for causes. They want to be the authors of their lives, while also searching for explanations of why they became who they are. They want responsibility, but also understanding. They want recognition for their choices, while hoping that their mistakes do not arise entirely from themselves.

Perhaps this shows that free will is not simply a philosophical object, but a point where identity, time, morality, memory, culture, and experience converge.

And perhaps the more interesting question is no longer, *Does free will exist?*

Perhaps it is:

How do human worlds become organized in such a way that there seems to be someone who chooses at all?



10. Other Worlds

As life unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that the world in which we live is not the same world for everyone. Of course, people share the same streets, houses, conversations, memories, political events, technological changes, and ultimately even the same physical space. And yet the differences in experience can sometimes be so great that it almost seems as though people inhabit entirely different realities.

This realization rarely arrives as a single dramatic insight. More often, it develops gradually through encounters with people who experience reality in ways that at first seem almost unimaginable. Someone who speaks with deep conviction about God, grace, or divine guidance, while another, within that very same physical world, sees above all the laws of nature, chemical processes, and evolutionary mechanisms. An artist who perceives something in color, rhythm, form, or silence that completely escapes others. A scientist who ultimately sees, behind the table, the tree, the human body, or the night sky, elementary particles, forces, fields, or mathematical structures that most people never seem to encounter directly.

Sometimes these differences become visible in conversation.

Sometimes through books.

Sometimes through encounters with people from entirely different cultures, religions, or life histories.

And sometimes the realization arises from within, when experiences begin to challenge the familiar world itself.

Mystical experiences can do this. Sudden moments of openness in which the usual boundaries between self and world seem less self-evident than before. Trauma can do it as well. For someone who has been deeply wounded or threatened, the very same environment that feels safe and familiar to others may become permeated by vigilance, tension, and a constant search for possible danger.

Love can produce a similar shift, though in an entirely different way. When someone falls in love, the same street, the same room, the same music, the same scent, or the same voice can suddenly acquire an intensity that simply did not exist before. It is as though an existing world takes on a different color without the objects themselves having changed.

Art, too, can bring about such shifts. A painting, a novel, a piece of music, or a film can sometimes open the door to a way of experiencing that scarcely existed before. Objectively, nothing new has been added to the world. Yet one's relationship to that world changes.

Visits to museums of modern art have evoked this in me more than once.

While looking, nothing particularly remarkable may seem to happen. You walk. You look. You read. You compare. You may even wonder whether what hangs on the wall or stands on the floor really deserves so much attention.

But once outside again, something curious may have taken place.

The stone beside the doorway no longer seems to be merely a stone.

Even a concrete wall beneath a bridge, covered with old graffiti and patches of light and shadow, can suddenly appear as something that is no longer simply infrastructure, but image.

A formation of clouds acquires an unexpected composition.

The face of a passerby suddenly reveals line, shadow, rhythm, and expression.

Even a crack in a wall, a traffic sign, an empty chair on a café terrace, or a forgotten piece of cardboard lying in the street can suddenly possess the same intensity as the works that, only minutes before, had been hanging in the museum.

It is as though attention has been tuned differently.

As though the world no longer presents objects, but forms, relationships, textures, tension, light, and rhythm.

As though, for a brief moment, everything becomes *art*.

It becomes increasingly difficult, then, to believe that there is only one self-evident way of experiencing reality.

Even systems that seek to understand or classify people can open up entire worlds. Psychological models, archetypes, personality types, spiritual maps, or symbolic systems such as astrology or the Enneagram provide some people with a language for experiences that might otherwise remain difficult to articulate. For others, those same systems appear instead as projection, oversimplification, or the human tendency to find patterns in something that remains

fundamentally fluid.

The same is true of religious belief. For some, the world appears as creation, permeated by meaning, presence, or a deeper purpose. For others, that very same world presents itself as an open, impersonal universe in which the laws of nature, evolution, chance, and emergence seem sufficient to account for everything. And between these positions lie countless intermediate forms, doubts, shifts, and temporary convictions.

What all these worlds seem to share is how real they can feel from within.

Perhaps that is also one of the most unsettling insights.

Intermezzo

Nonduality, Predictive Processing, and an Experiential Ontology

How does a world come to feel so naturally real?

Why does whatever appears usually seem immediately real? Why do people ordinarily experience a clear distinction between *I* and *world*, between observer and observed, between inside and outside? And why do precisely these self-evident distinctions sometimes begin to shift?

At first glance, nonduality, cognitive neuroscience, and philosophy appear to belong to entirely different domains. The first speaks of awakening, presence, and the disappearance of separation. The second investigates the brain, prediction, perception, and information processing. The third asks questions about experience, reality, and the conditions under which a world appears as real in the first place.

And yet these fields sometimes meet in unexpected ways.

Many nondual traditions describe how the ordinary sense of being a separate self turns out to be far less stable than everyday language suggests. What is normally experienced as *I here* versus *world there* can begin to shift. Sometimes temporarily. Sometimes more profoundly.

A related idea has emerged within contemporary cognitive science, although expressed in entirely different terms. In models of **Predictive Processing**, perception is no longer understood as the passive registration of a fully given external world. Instead, what is experienced arises from an ongoing interaction between sensory input and the predictions that the nervous system continuously generates on the basis of previous experience, memory, context, bodily signals, and learned patterns.

Perception therefore appears, in this model, not as a neutral mirror of the world but as an active process of organization.

This helps explain why people recognize faces in clouds, hear words

in noise, discover patterns in random signals, or why fear can suddenly make an otherwise neutral situation feel threatening. It also makes it easier to understand why trauma can permanently color perception and why familiar environments can literally feel different from unfamiliar places.

What appears as a world therefore never seems entirely independent of expectation, memory, the body, history, and context.

An experiential ontology shifts attention in a similar direction. Here the central question is not *what reality ultimately is*, but *how a world becomes organized into something that feels coherent, stable, and self-evidently real*.

This does not mean that all these approaches are saying the same thing.

Nonduality usually begins with direct experience.

Predictive Processing begins with models, experiments, and computational hypotheses.

An experiential ontology seeks instead to investigate how reality becomes structured within experience without immediately drawing metaphysical conclusions.

This is where an interesting point of convergence appears.

Within meditation, nonduality, and certain forms of self-inquiry, people often describe moments in which experience seems strikingly immediate. As though thinking temporarily becomes less dominant. As though sound, color, movement, breathing, and bodily presence suddenly reveal themselves with an intensity that almost seems to precede words or interpretation.

At such moments, it can feel as though experience is finally appearing unfiltered.

But perhaps the situation is more complicated.

If Predictive Processing is correct, there may never be such a thing as

completely unfiltered experience. Even what seems immediate and pure could still be the result of extraordinarily refined predictions functioning so smoothly that they are no longer recognizable as interpretations.

What has become transparent has not necessarily disappeared.

But the opposite possibility is at least as interesting.

Perhaps such experiences do not show that prediction comes to an end, but rather that identification with certain predictive models temporarily becomes less self-evident. Perhaps it is not reality itself that shifts, but the way in which reality is organized, interpreted, and lived.

Perhaps this is precisely where cognitive science, nonduality, and an experiential philosophy genuinely meet.

Each, in its own way, is trying to understand how a world becomes organized into something that feels naturally and unquestionably real.

Perhaps, then, the most interesting question is not *what the world ultimately is*, but *how it comes to feel so real*.

Because it does.

Astonishingly real.

It is easy to call the world a dream, as one often encounters in nondual writings, as long as nobody kicks you hard in the shins.

And if pain, fear, and bodily existence are all called *dream* as well, then the word *dream* begins to function as little more than another name for **reality**.

Further reading

Douglas Harding — *On Having No Head*

Suzanne Segal — *Collision with the Infinite*

Andy Clark — *Surfing Uncertainty*

Anil Seth — *Being You*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty — *Phenomenology of Perception*

Thomas Metzinger — *The Ego Tunnel*

Quantum Fields, Emergence, and Lived Reality

When people speak about the world in everyday life, they usually do so in terms of things. A table stands in the room. A dog walks through the garden. A body grows older. The sun warms the stone wall. The world appears to consist of objects occupying definite places, perceived by the senses just as they are.

For centuries, this was largely how reality was understood. Objects could move, change, come into being, or disappear, but beneath these changes there seemed to be a world ultimately composed of separate things with more or less stable properties.

Modern science has shifted this picture in fundamental ways. What appears, on the human scale, as solid objects turns out, upon closer investigation, to be far less substantial than everyday experience suggests. Atoms, once thought to be the smallest indivisible building blocks of reality, were themselves found to consist of still smaller structures. Protons and neutrons are made of quarks. Electrons behave in ways that no longer fit the intuitive worldview with which most people grow up. And at the deepest level at which contemporary physics attempts to describe reality, even the idea of separate particles gives way to something that appears more fundamental still: fields.

Within ***Quantum Field Theory****, particles are no longer understood as tiny solid objects moving through empty space. What ordinarily appears as a particle is instead understood as a local excitation within an underlying field. Electrons, quarks, photons, and other elementary entities are, in this view, not so much independent things as events occurring within fields that are always present.*

This is difficult to imagine precisely because nothing in everyday experience appears directly as a quantum field.

No one walks into a room and directly experiences electron fields,

gluon fields, or the mathematical structures physicists use to describe these processes. What appears are chairs, faces, trees, sounds, warmth, textures, colors, memories, and meanings. The world as it is lived and the world as it is modeled by physics therefore seem to operate on different levels.

None of this diminishes science.

Quite the opposite.

The strength of modern physics lies precisely in its ability to describe and predict phenomena at a level completely beyond the reach of direct experience. Technology, medicine, electronics, space exploration, and materials science would scarcely be conceivable without these models.

And yet the tension never completely disappears.

Even if science were ultimately correct in describing reality as composed of fields, interactions, symmetries, and probabilistic processes, one question would still remain:

How does a lived world emerge from such a description?

How do vibrating fields become a voice that offers comfort?

How do fundamental interactions become a room in which someone feels at home?

How do physical processes become a memory that can still be felt bodily decades later?

Within science, this transition is often approached through the concept of **emergence**. Properties that appear at a higher level of organization need not literally exist at a lower one. Wetness cannot be found in a single water molecule. Life is not visible in an isolated protein. Consciousness cannot simply be pointed to within a single neuron.

What appears at one level often arises from the organization of many

underlying processes.

Not only objects, but also feelings of home, identity, shame, love, beauty, and meaning seem not to exist in isolation. They emerge within relationships. Within configurations. Within patterns that become visible only when multiple layers begin to work together.

A brief aside.

The concept of emergence ultimately explains surprisingly little. It mainly tells us that something new appears at a certain level of organization. But why it appears, or how experience itself could arise from matter, remains largely an open question.

Science may not even be describing a different world.

It may be describing the same reality from a different level of organization.

This does not suddenly make science less valuable.

Nor does direct experience become more important than scientific models.

But descriptions of the world never seem entirely independent of the way in which the world is approached.

What appears to the physicist as field, interaction, or symmetry appears to a human being as touch, color, loss, longing, presence, or meaning.

And perhaps genuine inquiry therefore asks not only *what the world is made of*... but also *how it appears as a world on different levels of organization*.



Part IV

The World Opens

I walk downstairs. It is still dark.

Could there be something in my sock?

The smell of the room seems to say:

Perhaps.

11. When Words Become Reality

There are moments when language hardly attracts any attention. Words simply seem to do their job. Someone says something. Someone else responds. Things are explained, named, remembered, or discussed. Most of the time, this feels so natural that hardly anyone stops to wonder how much of reality is quietly being organized through language.

For words do not merely describe what exists.

They also help determine what becomes visible, what acquires meaning, what seems normal, what feels threatening, what appears to be true, and even who someone believes themselves to be.

This becomes especially clear within human systems that develop their own vocabulary. Religions, political movements, scientific disciplines, psychological models, and spiritual traditions all create words that do far more than convey information.

They organize entire ways of seeing.

Science speaks of disorders, diagnoses, classifications, cognitive processes, and neural mechanisms.

Politics speaks of freedom, security, identity, crisis, or progress.

Spirituality speaks of consciousness, presence, ego, awakening, love, or surrender.

Such words rarely function neutrally.

They often carry entire systems of values without anyone noticing.

I gradually began to recognize this mechanism within the sannyas community where I lived for many years. There, too, an entire reality was created through particular ways of speaking.

People no longer died.

They *passed over*.

The word *God* was usually replaced by terms such as *Existence*. It sounded more open, more modern, and less religious, yet in many cases it ultimately referred to much the same thing.

Human reactions, too, immediately acquired spiritual value through language. *Resistance* sounded heavy, negative, and unconscious. *Surrender*, on the other hand, almost automatically came to suggest something deep, true, and spiritually mature.

Gradually, I also began to see the shadow side of this.

For such words do not merely describe.

They can also be used to correct people subtly, to guide them, or to place them under pressure. When someone was critical, doubtful, or resistant, this could easily be dismissed as *ego*, *resistance*, or *unconsciousness*. In this way, a substantive discussion quietly shifted into a spiritual judgment.

Language was organizing not only a way of experiencing,

but also a form of power.

Only later did it become increasingly clear to me how difficult it is to separate direct experience completely from the words through which that experience is continually interpreted.

When I look at a tree, do I simply see a tree?

Or am I simultaneously looking through layers of language, memory, culture, upbringing, science, and previous experience?

When I say *I*, am I referring to something immediately present?

Or am I speaking at the same time from thousands of earlier words, stories, and interpretations that have accumulated over the course of a lifetime?

Perhaps this is precisely one of the most underestimated powers of language.

Language does not merely help us describe a world.

It also helps determine how that world appears.



12. Time and the Body

There are moments when it seems as though the world lies outside us, as something that can simply be perceived, named, or understood. We look at a tree, a street, a face, a sky filled with clouds, and it seems as though the world is simply there, waiting to be seen.

But the longer I investigate experience, the harder it becomes to regard the body as some kind of neutral vehicle.

The body does not merely look at the world.

It also participates in organizing how that world appears.

This usually becomes visible only when something changes.

A sleepless night, for example.

The same room. The same sounds. The same partner, the same dogs, the same coffee, the same morning sunlight.

And yet the world is different.

What seemed manageable yesterday may today feel too bright, too fast, or too close. Sounds penetrate more forcefully. Small problems acquire greater weight. Patience grows shorter. Concentration becomes more fragile. It is not only thought that has changed. The entire field within which experience appears has shifted.

The same happens with pain.

Anyone in pain notices how space itself can contract. Attention repeatedly returns to a single focal point. The world continues to exist, but it loses its breadth. Things that would normally remain effortlessly in the background have less room. It is as though the body draws the boundaries of lived reality closer around itself.

But the opposite also occurs.

I remember moments of being in love when time seemed to lose its ordinary rhythm. Hours could disappear without feeling like hours. A conversation, a touch, a walk, a glance, and something in experience seemed to free itself from ordinary clock time. Not because objective time had ceased to exist, but because lived time had acquired a different structure.

Growing older changes that rhythm as well.

When I am young, time seems to stretch endlessly ahead. Years feel immense. Holidays seem almost like worlds of their own. Waiting takes forever. The future feels far away.

Later, this changes.

The body itself begins to stand differently in time. Memories accumulate, but so do changes in pace, vulnerability, and the presence of time itself. Recovery takes longer. Fatigue arrives more quickly. Certain possibilities quietly close. Others become more important. Time becomes less abstract and more bodily.

Fear reveals this as well.

Anyone waiting for medical test results, for an important consultation, or for news that may change their life knows

how minutes can stretch into something almost tangible. Time is no longer a neutral succession of seconds.

Time becomes tension.

Expectation.

Body.

I remember a meeting many years ago in which the intensity of the conversation gradually became so great that something strange began to happen. No one said anything unusual about the room itself. The walls remained the same. The table remained the same. The voices were still familiar. And yet the atmosphere slowly seemed to change in quality. At one point, I had the very concrete feeling that the air itself had become thicker, as though the room had grown denser, heavier, and less permeable.

Of course, I knew that the physical composition of the air had not actually changed.

And yet that was precisely how the situation was experienced.

Looking back, what fascinates me is not only the intensity of that moment, but how completely natural it felt at the time.

It was as though the whole room had begun to contract.

Experiences commonly described as out-of-body experiences point in the same direction.

People who undergo such experiences sometimes describe the strange feeling of perceiving their own body from a position outside it. Whether such experiences should ultimately be explained neurologically, psychologically,

spiritually, or in some other way is not the most important question here.

What interests me is the phenomenological fact that the ordinary sense of location can apparently shift.

Most of the time, it feels completely self-evident that *I* am located somewhere behind my eyes, looking out at the world from within my body. That experience feels so natural that it is rarely questioned.

Yet descriptions of out-of-body experiences suggest that this sense of location is less fixed than it appears. Under certain circumstances, the experienced center of awareness can shift. The body remains present, but no longer functions as the obvious point from which the rest of the world is perceived.

Whether such experiences reveal something fundamental about what we usually call *consciousness*, or instead reveal something remarkable about the functioning of the brain, is another matter.

What matters here is that they demonstrate that even the seemingly self-evident relationship between self, body, and world may be far less stable than we ordinarily assume.

It becomes increasingly clear that experience never unfolds only within a world of objects, ideas, or words.

It unfolds in rhythms, in breathing, in tension, in recovery, in anticipation, in aging, in hormonal changes, and in attention that narrows or opens.

Perhaps there is therefore no completely timeless perception.

No purely disembodied experience.

Even when we believe we are simply looking at the world, we are always looking from within a body that lives in rhythm, memory, expectation, and finitude.

Here, too, lie the first traces of what would later become the dioramic approach.

Not only *what* appears.

But *when* it appears.

And from what kind of sensitivity the world appears at all.

Intermezzo

Time, the Body, and Lived Experience

When I look back on my own search, one thing stands out. The most fundamental shifts in experience rarely began with theory. They began in the body. In fatigue, falling in love, shame, loss, silence, growing older, confusion, or sudden clarity.

The books came later.

There have been thinkers who came remarkably close to what is being explored here.

For **Henri Bergso**n, time is not something that can simply be measured by clocks or calendars. What fascinated him was *durée*—lived duration—the inner flow of experience in which past, present, and anticipation continually merge into one another. For Bergson, time is not a collection of separate moments, but a living continuity.

In the work of **Martin Heidegger**, human experience acquires yet another dimension. Time is not merely lived; it is inseparable from existence itself. We do not simply live *in* time. We continually live from possibilities, memories, choices, finitude, and the awareness that our lives are limited. Even the future is not merely something that arrives later. It already participates in how the world appears now.

With **Maurice Merleau-Ponty**, attention shifts even more explicitly to the body. Perception does not take place from a detached consciousness observing objects, but from a living body already embedded in the world. The body is not something we *have*. It is the way in which we encounter the world at all.

Later, researchers such as **Francisco Varel**a likewise showed that cognition does not occur solely in the brain, but emerges through the continuous interaction of body, environment, history, and meaning.

Despite their many differences, these thinkers share a remarkably simple yet far-reaching intuition.

Experience never appears from nowhere.

It always appears somewhere.

In time.

In a body.

In a life that is already underway.

Further reading

Henri Bergson — *Time and Free Will*

Henri Bergson — *Matter and Memory*

Martin Heidegger — *Being and Time*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty — *Phenomenology of Perception*

Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson & Eleanor Rosch — *The Embodied Mind*

Francisco Varela — *Ethical Know-How*

Evan Thompson — *Waking, Dreaming, Being*

Alva Noë — *Action in Perception*



13. The Dioramic Approach

The preceding chapters have gradually developed an approach that does not fit comfortably within any single existing discipline. Childhood memories, the language of home, shame, loss, falling in love, meditation, psychedelic experiences, art, science, social expectations, identity, and self-inquiry all seem, at first sight, to concern entirely different subjects.

And yet something keeps returning throughout them all.

What people call reality rarely stands alone.

Again and again, a world appears in which body, attention, memory, language, emotion, history, expectation, and social sensitivity are already intertwined. A voice is never heard merely as sound. A house is never experienced merely as architecture. A memory is rarely confined to something that once happened. Even a passing glance from another person can become lodged in us in a way that remains physically tangible years later.

The longer I explored this, the harder it became to understand experience as something that simply unfolds within a neutral, fully given reality.

The stone beside the door remains hard when I kick it. The sun continues to give warmth whether I think about it or not. A body grows older. Animals become ill. People die. The physical world does not disappear.

And yet even that same world never appears independently of the way it is lived, remembered, named, and inhabited. The same street may acquire an aesthetic intensity after a visit to a museum that previously seemed absent. The same room may carry a sense of emptiness after a loss that no one else experiences in exactly the same way. The same remark may mean almost nothing to one person, while becoming something another carries for years. What changes often lies less in the object itself than in the coherence within which that object appears.

Meanwhile, my own way of looking had also changed.

For years, I had the feeling that some people stood closer to reality than others.

Some people do indeed seem to experience:

- less self-monitoring,
- less inner fragmentation,
- less social performativity,
- more directness,
- more openness,
- more presence.

Later, however, I saw how easily such experiences can grow into spiritual hierarchies. Gurus and Masters on one side, followers and disciples on the other.

Robert Saltzman, Shiv Sengupta, and Joan Tollifson had already loosened much of this for me. Robert's critique of absolute knowledge made it clear how easily people turn

spiritual experience into yet another kind of foundation.

Even so, part of me still felt that others might somehow be further along than I was.

It was only while reading Miranda Warren that this truly began to change.

She did not offer a new theory. There was hardly any teaching in the traditional sense. She simply spoke from her own experience, from her own way of living and perceiving, without constantly elevating it into a universal truth.

That made a great deal clear.

What she described was not my world.

My experience organized itself differently. My sensitivities were different. My way of seeing, thinking, and living differed from hers in many respects. Yet at the same time, it became clear that this difference did not mean her experience was more fundamental, better, or somehow *more real* than mine.

Suddenly, the idea that certain people truly possessed **Truth**, with a capital T, lost all of its persuasive power.

Not dramatically.

Not as some great spiritual breakthrough.

Rather, as something that quietly fell into place.

The search did not end because all questions had been answered.

It simply lost its former foundation.

In recent years, I have increasingly come to use a single term for this way of looking:

the dioramic approach.

A diorama is, originally, a carefully constructed scene in which light, scale, background, perspective, placement, and relationships come together to create a world that feels convincing. Everything supports everything else. Whatever appears within such a scene naturally acquires meaning because it belongs to a larger whole.

Human worlds seem to organize themselves in much the same way.

Body, memory, language, culture, history, relationships, expectations, emotions, values, and attention continually influence one another. From this interweaving emerges a reality that may feel familiar, self-evident, threatening, meaningful, painful, or liberating, often without it remaining visible how that coherence originally came into being.

Just as dioramas can differ in coherence, richness of detail, and convincingness, so too can human worlds.

Some feel more stable, more real, or more compelling than others.

Some offer greater explanatory power or more practical orientation.

Others remain fragile, conflicted, or difficult to inhabit.

One point is especially important.

Within the dioramic approach, there is no absolutely privileged position from which all other worlds can be

judged once and for all.

There is no final, more fundamental reality that stands completely outside every other perspective.

Perhaps this also means that complete, absolute knowledge ultimately remains beyond our reach.

Intermezzo

Other Models of Reality

Science continues to exert a tremendous attraction on me. Not only because of its explanatory power, but also because of its beauty. The idea that deeper structures lie beneath the visible world, that stars, bodies, time, and matter all belong to an immense and coherent whole, evokes something that borders on awe.

I also find that certain scientific ideas resonate remarkably well with the way experience has always presented itself to me.

In the work of Thomas Hertog, I encounter, for the first time, the feeling that even the cosmos itself may be less like a fixed stage than is usually assumed. In his work on **top-down cosmology**, developed together with Stephen Hawking, observation plays a far more active role. The universe no longer appears as a single, fully determined history waiting to be discovered, but as a landscape of possible histories, some of which acquire meaning only from the present perspective of observation itself.

What fascinates me is not merely the theory itself, but how closely it resonates with something I have intuitively sensed for much longer. Not because I fully understand the physics, let alone the mathematics behind it, but because the idea that reality does not simply exist as a fixed backdrop lies surprisingly close to the way human experience continually seems to organize itself.

I experience something similar when reading Donald Hoffman. His proposal that perception may be designed less to reveal truth than to make adaptive behavior possible does not strike me as an attack on what we call reality, but as an unexpectedly illuminating perspective. Human beings do not necessarily experience the world as it is in *itself*. They experience it through an interface that continually selects, simplifies, and organizes.

For me, this makes it much easier to understand why different people sometimes seem to inhabit entirely different worlds while nevertheless sharing the same physical reality.

Why fear literally perceives different signals than safety.

Why art can temporarily change what attention notices.

Why words, memories, and expectations can so profoundly shape what feels real.

At the same time, I notice that many models eventually tend to introduce a new foundation.

In the work of Bernardo Kastrup and Rupert Spira, for example, matter is no longer treated as fundamental. Instead, **consciousness** becomes the ultimate ground of reality. For many people, this is an attractive move, especially when a purely materialistic worldview begins to feel too empty or too mechanical.

I find myself resonating with it less and less.

Partly through writers such as Robert Saltzman, it had already become clear to me how difficult it is to make definitive statements about what reality ultimately *is*. Whenever someone begins to speak of consciousness as **the** fundamental ground of everything, I recognize once again the same movement that characterizes religion, metaphysics, and certain spiritual systems: the search for a final certainty.

That does not make such approaches worthless.

But to me they feel closer to belief than to knowledge.

Far more interesting is the question of how realities come into being at all. How body, memory, attention, language, emotion, history, and social context together give rise to a world that feels completely real from within.

- Physicists investigate the structure of the universe.
- Cognitive scientists investigate perception.
- Mystics turns toward direct experience.
- Philosophers question what is taken for granted.

Beneath all these approaches, however, I now recognize a common movement:

What first appeared completely self-evident turns out to be far more fluid than anyone had imagined.

This insight eventually developed into what I call the **dioramic approach**.

The dioramic approach seeks to understand how worlds appear, acquire coherence, find stability, and sometimes reorganize themselves in unexpected ways.

Difference Comes Before Identity

One of the most persistent assumptions in everyday life is that identity is something relatively stable. People speak about themselves as though somewhere there exists a more or less fixed core. We say, *This is just who I am*. Or, *That's my character*. Or, *I've always been this way*. Even when we acknowledge that people change, we often continue to assume that there is an underlying person who remains the same throughout all those changes.

As self-evident as this may sound, the longer I investigate human experience, the less self-evident it becomes.

Memories shift. Roles change. Values turn. Relationships reveal sides of ourselves we did not know were there. Trauma can shape a personality for years. Parenthood, illness, loss, aging, meditation, art, social context, or unexpected encounters can all bring forth layers that previously scarcely seemed to exist.

What, then, actually remains the same?

At this point, I found myself, somewhat unexpectedly, encountering the work of Gilles Deleuze.

Deleuze belongs to that rare group of thinkers who do not begin with fixed forms, stable identities, or timeless essences. His thinking starts instead from movement, difference, intensity, becoming, and relation. What we later recognize as identity often appears in his work only afterward, as the temporary stabilization of something that is continually in motion.

That may sound abstract until you begin to apply it to experience.

A child is not first a fully formed self that subsequently has experiences. A human being is shaped through language, touch, social roles, conflict, desire, loss, imitation, resistance, love, and memory. What is later called character, personality, or identity seems to emerge only gradually from thousands of small shifts that become embodied and sedimented over the years.

Even everyday life makes this visible.

Someone may regard themselves for years as shy, rational, rebellious, spiritual, activist, caring, or independent, until a new context suddenly brings something entirely different to the foreground. What had long felt like identity turns out to be surprisingly context-dependent.

The experience was never unreal.

But neither was it ever entirely independent of the world in which it took shape.

Perhaps identity does not come first.

Perhaps what comes first is a field of relationships, experiences, tensions, language, expectations, possibilities, bodily sensitivities, and cultural influences. Perhaps certain patterns gradually emerge from this moving field and acquire enough stability to be recognized, both by ourselves and by others, as *me*.

That does not make identity unreal.

It makes it alive.

And perhaps this also explains why certain encounters, books, loves, traumas, spiritual insights, or aesthetic experiences can shift so much. They do not simply add something to an already fixed self.

Sometimes they reorganize the entire field from which that self had been eerging all along.

When identity is approached in this way, something becomes visible that everyday life easily conceals.

What feels so personal, so familiar, and so self-evident turns out to resemble not a fixed core, but an ongoing process of organization, stabilization, and reconfiguration.

And perhaps this is where a different kind of freedom begins.

Not the freedom to finally be *yourself*,

but the freedom to discover how fluid that self may always have been.

Further reading

Donald Hoffman, *The Case Against Reality*

Bernardo Kastrup, *The Idea of the World*

Tony Parsons, *The Open Secret*

Thomas Hertog, *On the Origin of Time*

Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*

Robert Saltzman — *The Ten Thousand Things*

Miranda Warren — *This Terrible Love*

Joan Tollifson — *Painting the Sidewalk with Water*


LELIES
EXTRA
LANG
FRIS

Part V

The Boundaries of Reality

14. Neurodiversity and the Formation of Worlds

We are driving home, and in my mind the day is already over. Then she casually suggests that we stop for groceries on the way. To her it is hardly worth mentioning, just a small change of plan. To me, it feels as though the entire structure of the evening has suddenly come apart.

Another memory. I am taking my daughter to the airport. Everywhere there is movement: rolling suitcases, loud-speaker announcements, people crossing each other's paths without any discernible rhythm. I notice that I have to keep my eyes fixed on the floor. If I look up for too long, there is simply too much happening at once.

Or I walk into the living room and immediately notice the smell of lilies. The whole room seems saturated with it. Doesn't anyone else think these flowers smell like wet diapers? *Apparently not.*

People often speak about the world as though, in broad outline, it is the same for everyone. A supermarket is simply a supermarket. A birthday party is a social occasion. A classroom is a place for learning. A conversation is an exchange of information. Noise is just background noise. Light is simply light. Another person's glance hardly seems worth noticing.

Yet everyday experience suggests something quite different.

The very same situation can feel completely different depending on who is living it. What one person experiences as pleasantly lively may overwhelm someone else. What

seems like effortless social intuition to one person may feel to another like the constant decoding of hidden signals. Some people move through social situations with relative ease, while others come home after a few hours feeling as though every moment has required sustained concentration.

This difference is not merely psychological.

It touches the very way in which worlds appear.

The term *neurodiversity* has gradually come to include a wide range of ways in which human experience can be organized: autism, ADHD, dyslexia, heightened sensory sensitivity, and other variations in attention, perception, or information processing. Not everyone defines the term in the same way, but the broader shift is unmistakable. There is growing recognition that human experience is not organized according to a single universal template.

Sensory overload, exhaustion, confusion, social difficulties, or burnout are not imaginary. They can be deeply real and profoundly disruptive. Yet what counts as *normal functioning* also turns out to depend heavily on culture, social expectations, and the kind of world into which someone happens to be born.

Take a busy restaurant. Most people simply experience it as lively and enjoyable. Someone else may experience that same room as an almost physical assault: voices competing with music, reflections of light, clattering cutlery, movement everywhere, countless social signals all demanding attention simultaneously. Or consider an unexpected change of plans. For one person it barely registers. For another, it can feel as though the entire structure of the day has suddenly disappeared. Some people seem to know instinctively what

is expected of them in social situations. Others must consciously analyze, interpret, and rehearse every step.

From the outside, these differences are often invisible.

Many people learn to adapt to the expectations of those around them. They observe social behavior, develop scripts, imitate reactions, conceal confusion, suppress tension, and work hard to interpret the signals coming from others. This process is often called *masking*: learning to camouflage one's natural way of responding in order to fit more comfortably into the surrounding social world.

Sometimes this continues for so long that even the person doing it no longer knows where adaptation ends and spontaneous experience begins.

For years, I assumed I was simply shy. Only much later did I begin to realize how much energy social life actually demanded of me. Looking back, I can now see that after an intense social day I sometimes need an entire day just to recover.

I learned to adapt. At parties where I knew almost no one, alcohol often became my way of surviving the evening while appearing socially at ease. Even now I still notice the impulse to be entertaining, to be interesting, to perform a version of myself that seems easier for others to relate to.

That can create a curious gap between outward appearance and inner experience.

Someone may appear perfectly sociable, hold conversations, laugh, work, and participate fully in everyday life, while inwardly becoming increasingly exhausted by sensory input, interpretation, expectation, and social tension.

Attention itself also seems to vary far more than we usually acknowledge. Some people move easily between different tasks, conversations, and stimuli. Others become deeply absorbed in particular interests, details, or patterns. What may appear obsessive from the outside can feel, from within, like clarity, coherence, calm, or complete engagement.

The same applies to routines.

From the outside they may look like rigidity for its own sake. From within they can be experienced as ways of preserving a stable and predictable world within an environment that otherwise threatens to shift constantly.

Perhaps something important becomes visible here.

What we call *normal* is not neutral.

Every society quietly organizes attention in its own way. It carries unspoken expectations about how much eye contact is appropriate, how flexible people should be, how much noise is acceptable, how quickly social cues ought to be understood, how emotions should be expressed, how much physical closeness feels comfortable, and which forms of concentration are valued or dismissed.

Within such a world, certain ways of experiencing naturally come to seem self-evident while others appear unusual.

That does not mean, however, that somewhere there exists a single objective standard of human experience from which everyone else deviates.

This becomes especially clear when people with very different experiential structures try to understand one another.

What seems like a minor social detail to one person may have profound emotional or bodily consequences for another. What feels honest and direct to one person may feel painfully blunt to someone else. What feels safe and predictable to one person may feel suffocating to another. Some people flourish through novelty and stimulation, while others need silence, structure, and repetition simply to feel physically settled.

The same world appears differently depending on how attention, sensitivity, interpretation, and meaning become organized.

That does not mean we each inhabit completely separate realities. We still share languages, places, bodies, infrastructures, histories, and customs. Yet within that shared environment remarkably different experiential worlds continue to emerge.

Perhaps this also explains why neurodiversity has become so much more visible in recent years. Not only because diagnoses have increased, but because more people are beginning to recognize that their way of experiencing the world does not naturally coincide with dominant social expectations.

For some, that recognition is profoundly liberating. Lifelong feelings of strangeness or exhaustion suddenly acquire a context. Experiences once interpreted as personal failures begin to make sense as part of broader patterns of human diversity.

For others, it is unsettling.

For once we recognize that experience itself can be organized in fundamentally different ways, the apparent

self-evidence of the *normal* world begins to shift as well.

Ultimately, this points toward a much larger question.

Perhaps there is no single human way of inhabiting reality.

Perhaps there are many ways in which reality becomes felt, filtered, structured, and lived. Different rhythms of attention. Different sensitivities. Different forms of coherence. Different ways in which sound, time, closeness, meaning, social presence, and bodily tension come to appear.

Seen in that light, neurodiversity is no longer something exceptional at the margins of human experience.

It is one more indication that human experience has always been richly plural.



15. Dreams, Illusions, and Hallucinations

When I was about eight years old, I often had recurring dreams in which I could fly. While I was dreaming, flying felt completely natural. There was no surprise that a body could simply move through the air. It belonged to the world in which the dream unfolded.

Almost every dream ended in the same way. After flying, I would find myself curled up in a fetal position on a rug or some other soft surface somewhere in our house. Shortly afterward, I would wake up in my own bed.

Even now, I find it remarkable how completely real dream worlds can feel while they are happening.

Perhaps that is one of the strangest features of dreaming.

While we are dreaming, we rarely question the reality of what is taking place. The dream presents itself immediately as self-evident. Spaces feel coherent. Events follow one another naturally. Emotions are real. Fear can be overwhelming. Desire can be utterly convincing. Sometimes an entire personal history seems to exist, and during the dream it feels as though it has always been there.

Only upon waking does that self-evidence begin to dissolve.

What only moments before seemed like a complete reality suddenly becomes *just a dream*. Yet something often remains

behind: an emotion, an atmosphere, a bodily feeling, sometimes even a difficult-to-define residue, as though part of the dream refuses to be reduced entirely to irrelevant brain activity.

Within the dream, the dream world feels completely real, even though that same reality may vanish entirely a few seconds later.

While dreaming, the world is rarely experienced as symbolic or half-real.

It simply *is* the world.

This raises an uncomfortable question.

In what way does the self-evidence of a dream actually differ from the self-evidence of the waking world?

Of course, there are important differences. The shared physical world of everyday life possesses far greater stability, continuity, and resistance. Dream worlds shift more easily. Time jumps. People suddenly become someone else. Places merge into one another without transition. Cause and effect behave unpredictably.

And yet coherence alone often seems sufficient to make a world feel real while it lasts.

Perhaps that also explains why stories about altered realities have fascinated people for so long.

In the books of Carlos Castaneda, the ordinary world continually appears less stable than it seems. Dreams, attention, bodily posture, rituals, and altered states of consciousness become ways of disrupting the apparent self-

evidence of ordinary reality. Ultimately, the interesting question is not whether such experiences are literally true, but why they can feel so existentially convincing.

Perhaps almost everyone recognizes something of this fascination.

Not necessarily a belief in hidden dimensions or supernatural worlds, but the suspicion that reality depends far more on attention, interpretation, and organization than we usually assume.

Perhaps this is also why science fiction has always appealed to me so strongly. Not primarily because of spaceships or futuristic technology, but because of the strange sense of wonder the genre can evoke. The feeling that reality is larger, stranger, and more mysterious than everyday life usually allows us to see.

Perhaps science fiction touches the same fascination that appears in dreams, hallucinations, and altered states of consciousness.

Perhaps it does not create a new reality at all.

Sometimes it simply reveals how extraordinary the existing one already is.

Optical illusions point in the same direction.

They show how easily perception becomes organized around expectation, contrast, context, and interpretation. Two lines appear to have different lengths even though they are identical. A still image seems to move. A face suddenly emerges from a collection of shadows. Once perception has organized itself in a particular way, it often becomes

remarkably difficult to see the same image with fresh eyes.

Hallucinations reveal something equally important.

Under conditions of extreme sleep deprivation, neurological disturbance, high fever, psychosis, drug use, sensory isolation, or intense fear, people may experience voices, presences, patterns, figures, threats, meaningful connections, or distortions of space and time that feel entirely real to them.

From the outside, there is an understandable tendency to draw a sharp line between real *reality* and *distortion*.

Phenomenologically, however, something else is at least as interesting.

The immediate convincingness of such experiences.

While the experience is occurring, a hallucination rarely feels like a harmless internal image that can simply be ignored.

It usually appears as part of reality itself.

That does not mean all realities are equally reliable.

The world of psychosis can become profoundly disorienting, frightening, and destructive. Hallucinations can cause genuine suffering. People can lose contact with the shared realities on which ordinary social life depends.

The distinction between stable and unstable realities therefore remains important.

At the same time, these experiences reveal that reality consists of more than objects existing *out there*. Reality also

depends upon coherence, interpretation, bodily condition, expectation, attention, emotion, and the ways in which meaning is formed.

Even ordinary waking reality turns out to be less self-evident than we generally imagine.

People do not simply perceive everything that is present. Attention continually selects. Expectations fill in the gaps. The brain organizes patterns, stability, and recognizability. Much of what we experience already appears within a world that has been quietly structured in advance.

Sometimes this becomes visible in exceptional moments.

After several nights without enough sleep, an ordinary room can begin to feel strangely unfamiliar. During intense fear, an ordinary street acquires an atmosphere of threat. While in love, the same city suddenly feels warmer and brighter. During grief, the emotional atmosphere of a house changes completely. Under psychedelics, objects may appear fluid, boundaries may dissolve, and meaning itself may seem to spread almost physically across everything that appears.

Such experiences are often interpreted immediately as spiritual insight, neurological disturbance, psychological symptom, mystical opening, or chemical disruption.

Yet before any of these explanations comes something even more fundamental.

They reveal just how remarkably stable ordinary reality normally is.

Perhaps that is the deepest philosophical significance of dreams, illusions, and hallucinations.

Only when those structures begin to shift do we become aware of how profoundly they participate in shaping the world we take for granted.

Perhaps ordinary reality is therefore less a fixed condition than a continuously stabilized form of experience.

One that functions so well, most of the time, that we scarcely notice how extraordinary it really is.



16. Truth, Facts, Belief, and Experience

For much of my life, truth seemed a relatively straightforward matter. Something was either true or it was not. A statement either corresponded to reality or it did not. Evidence supported a claim, or it failed to do so. Facts belonged on one side, mistakes on the other. The distinction felt so obvious that it hardly seemed worth questioning.

A broken bone remains a broken bone regardless of what anyone believes about it. An illness does not disappear because a diagnosis is rejected. Gravity continues to operate regardless of religious convictions, political ideologies, or personal preferences. Reality confronts us, again and again, with things that appear remarkably indifferent to what we happen to think about them.

And yet much of human life unfolds in a domain where facts alone rarely settle anything.

Believers and skeptics can look at the same world and arrive at profoundly different conclusions. Scientists may agree about their observations while disagreeing about what those observations mean. Two people can leave the same conversation with entirely different impressions of what took place. Even within our own lives, experiences that once seemed deeply significant may later appear in a very different light.

Facts often prove far less persuasive than we like to imagine.

People can witness the same event and yet seem to inhabit entirely different realities.

Perhaps this is because observations never arrive in isolation. Every experience enters a world already shaped by expectations, memories, fears, desires, values, and earlier interpretations.

The same event can therefore mean something completely different to different people.

This becomes especially clear when experiences resist easy explanation.

Someone undergoes a powerful religious experience and becomes convinced that God has touched their life. Someone else hears exactly the same story and sees nothing more than psychology at work. A neuroscientist may speak of changes in brain activity. A philosopher may wonder what kind of experience is actually being described.

None of these responses necessarily denies that something happened.

What differs is the meaning assigned to what happened.

A similar tension appears around dreams, mystical experiences, synchronicities, near-death experiences, psychedelic states, and other events that resist comfortable classification. Such experiences often leave a profound impression on the person who undergoes them. They may alter the course of a life, reorder values, or open entirely new questions. Yet they are often remarkably difficult to communicate with the same force with which they were experienced.

The person who had the experience asks, *What happened to me?* The observer asks, *What happened?* Both questions are legitimate. They are simply not the same question.

Our language makes this surprisingly easy to overlook.

We say that we know what time it is. We know how to ride a bicycle. We know someone is lying. We know we are in love. We know that two plus three equals five. We know that we are mortal.

Yet each time the word *know* refers to something rather different.

There are moments when I am sitting at my computer and simply know that I am here. I hear the quiet sound of the fan. I feel my fingers resting on the keyboard. Sunlight enters through the window. Somewhere in the distance, a dog is barking. Thoughts come and go while attention continually shifts from one thing to another.

This kind of knowing feels different from the knowledge I possess about the world.

I know that Paris is the capital of France. I know that water consists of hydrogen and oxygen. I know that the Earth orbits the Sun. Yet every one of these forms of knowledge depends upon memory, education, language, and transmission from others.

Knowing that I am sitting here feels more immediate than that. And yet, even here, things become less straightforward the closer I look. Even the most immediate experience turns out to be intertwined with memory, recognition, expectation, and everything that has come before. Perhaps the distinction between *knowing* and *knowledge* is less clear-

cut than it first appears. Perhaps there are many forms of knowing that continually flow into one another.

I know that Valencia lies north of Ontinyent.
I know how to ride a bicycle.
I know my partner.
I know grief.
I know what it feels like to stand beneath a sky full of stars.

These are clearly not the same kind of knowing. Some depend upon information. Others upon skill.
Still others arise from familiarity, intimacy, or direct experience.

Yet language gathers them all beneath the same word.

Perhaps that is one reason why discussions about truth so easily become confused. People often assume they are talking about the same thing while, in fact, they begin from entirely different understandings of what it means to know.

One person speaks about evidence.
Another about meaning.
Another about direct experience.
About belief.
About practical usefulness.
About certainty.

Sometimes the real difference lies not in the answer, but in the question itself.

This insight appears in many different forms throughout philosophy.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, suggested that some disagreements cannot be understood simply as disputes

about facts. People may inhabit different forms of life, different frameworks of meaning within which words, evidence, conviction, and certainty function in fundamentally different ways. What seems decisive within one world may carry very little weight within another.

A scientific paper may profoundly alter the worldview of a researcher while leaving a deeply religious person entirely untouched. A mystical experience may transform the life of a contemplative while failing to convince a scientist of anything at all.

Neither response necessarily reflects ignorance or bad faith.

The same event has simply entered different worlds.

When I first read Wittgenstein, I began to understand something that had puzzled me for years.

A deeply religious person does not usually believe in quite the same way that a scientist believes in a hypothesis.

When a scientific theory is abandoned, it is replaced by a better one.

When a believer loses faith, far more than a single belief often disappears.

An entire way of living may change.

What is at stake is not merely a collection of facts.

It also involves meaning, trust, orientation, community, ritual, expectation, and the particular way in which a world is inhabited.

For a long time, what fascinated me was not simply that

highly intelligent people could be religious, but how the very same stories seemed to possess an entirely different reality status for them.

To me, many biblical stories felt, from an early age, like mythology or cultural imagination, scarcely different from stories about Santa Claus. Yet there are exceptionally intelligent people for whom those same stories belong to a living reality.

That does not make such differences unimportant.

Quite the opposite.

It does, however, help explain why people can continue talking past one another while believing they are discussing the same question.

Gradually, that realization softened something in me.

Not because every viewpoint suddenly became equally valid. They clearly are not. Some claims are supported far better than others. Some explanations prove more reliable than others. Some convictions collapse the moment they are examined carefully, while others retain remarkable explanatory power.

Yet I find it increasingly difficult to believe that people live among facts alone.

We also live among meanings.
Among stories.
Among memories.
Among expectations.
Among fears.
Among interpretations.

Among experiences that continue shaping the way the world appears long after the events themselves have passed.

Science, religion, politics, art, and personal experience each possess their own ways of approaching truth. Sometimes those ways overlap. Sometimes they collide. Sometimes they scarcely seem translatable into one another's language.

The temptation is always to search for one final standpoint from which all these different forms of truth can ultimately be reconciled and judged.

Perhaps that is not the real task.

Perhaps the more interesting question is how different understandings of truth arise, how they acquire their power to convince, and how they participate in the worlds people inhabit.

That question does not eliminate disagreement.

Nor does it erase the distinction between truth and falsehood.

What it does reveal is that truth rarely appears independently of the worlds within which it is sought.

And once that becomes visible, another question inevitably presents itself.

If truths emerge within worlds, and worlds themselves prove less stable than they first appear, what becomes of the hope for an ultimate foundation?

Intermezzo

The Remainder

Not everything that belongs to a world fits neatly into the familiar categories of true or false, rational or irrational, real or imagined.

When I was young, I somehow came to believe that cars with the letters **BX** on their license plates brought good luck. Why **BX**? I have no idea. Perhaps it was once connected with a particular event. Perhaps the association arose entirely by chance. Whatever its origin, it remained.

Even now, a **BX** license plate catches my attention immediately. If ten cars pass without those letters, I hardly notice them. If one appears with **BX**, I almost always see it.

The curious thing is that I know perfectly well those letters have no objective significance. I do not believe that the universe sends cars with **BX** plates across my path in order to influence my day. And yet those two letters have never become entirely meaningless.

A psychologist might describe this as an example of selective attention. A skeptic might see it as a harmless form of magical thinking.

Both explanations may well be correct. What interests me is something else. **BX** has become part of my world.

Not because the letters possess some hidden power, but because, somewhere in the course of my life, they found a place within a network of memories, associations, expectations, and feelings. They function, not as a law of nature, but as a source of meaning.

Phenomena like this are far more common than we usually acknowledge. People carry lucky charms. They avoid certain numbers. They keep objects that appear completely worthless to everyone else. They feel drawn to particular places, words, songs, or symbols without really knowing why.

Sometimes these meanings remain harmless and deeply personal.

Sometimes they take on a religious or spiritual character.
Sometimes they gradually develop into an entire worldview.

The usual response is to choose between two possibilities. Either the phenomenon is treated as evidence for some hidden reality, or it is dismissed as a mistake, a projection, or a psychological mechanism.

The dioramic approach begins somewhere else. It does not immediately ask whether **BX** really brings good luck. It asks how such a meaning functions within a lived world.

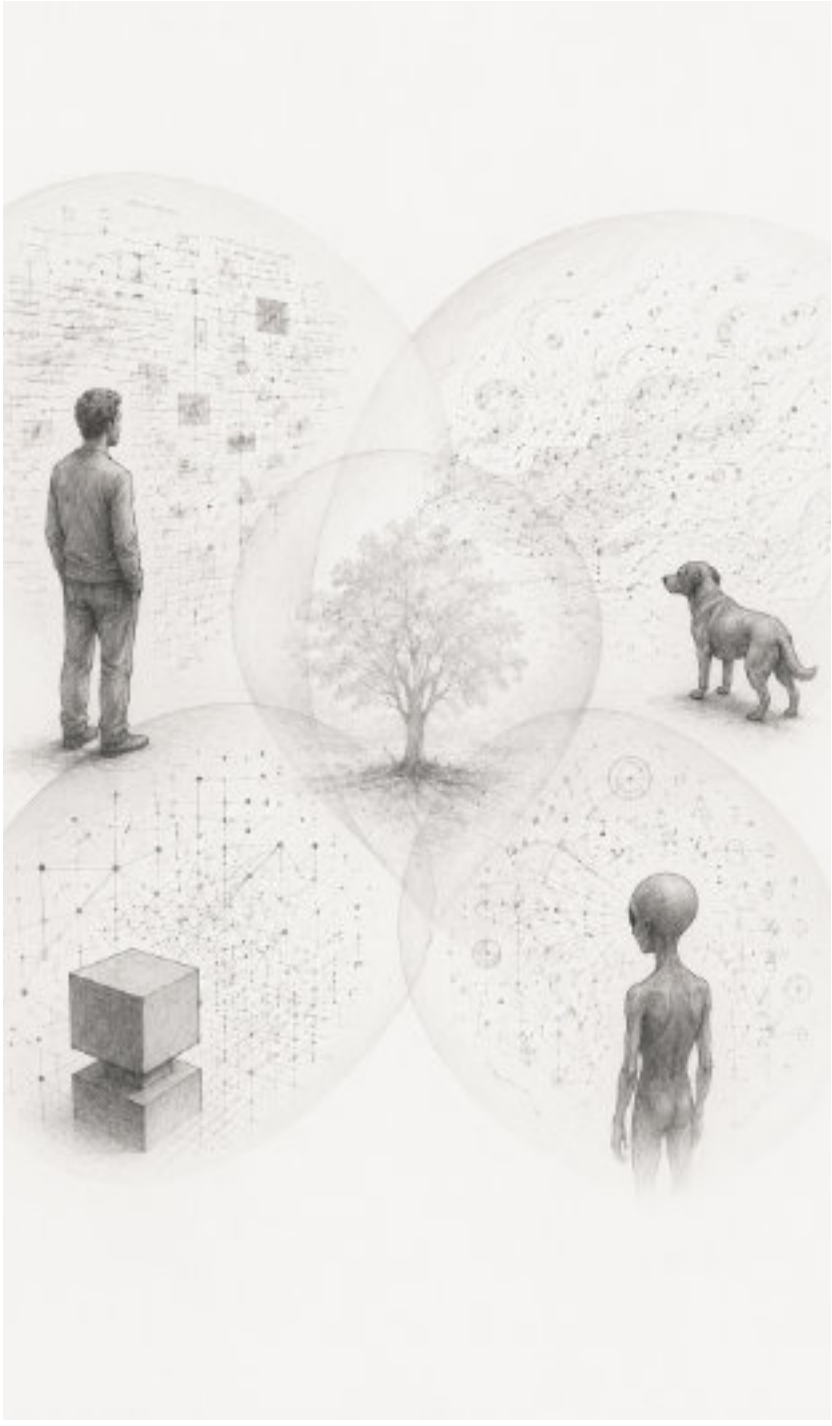
The same is true not only of license plates, but also of dreams, religious experiences, synchronicities, intuitions, premonitions, and countless other events that resist being absorbed into a single, coherent explanation.

Some of these experiences gradually fade away. Others remain. They do not necessarily remain because they are true. Nor do they remain because they are false. They remain because they have found a place within the world someone inhabits.

Between truth and falsehood lies a region that often receives far less attention: the phenomenon itself. This is where dreams linger long after waking. Where religious experiences continue to shape the direction of a life. Where anomalies remain intriguing even after a plausible explanation has been found. Where small, intensely personal meanings quietly accompany someone for years.

Human worlds often prove larger than the explanations we give for them.

Something always remains.
Not necessarily a mystery.
Not necessarily a hidden reality.
Simply something that refuses to be fully resolved.
Perhaps it does not need to be.
Perhaps it is enough simply to notice that it is there.



17. AI, Animals, and Other Intelligences

Whenever people think about intelligence, they almost immediately begin wondering what it would be like to experience another form of consciousness from the inside. What does the world look like to a dog? What does a bat experience as it flies through the night? How does a migrating bird perceive a landscape while navigating by the Earth's magnetic field? And now that artificial intelligence is becoming increasingly capable of holding convincing conversations, the same question arises once again. Is there an inner world behind its responses? Is there an experience comparable to our own?

At first glance, these may seem like entirely different questions. Yet they all touch upon the same fundamental problem. The moment we try to imagine another intelligence, we run up against the limits of our own experience.

A dog inhabits a world of smells that is scarcely comparable to the human one. For a dog, a walk is not merely movement through space but a continual encounter with scents, chemical information, and layers of meaning that remain almost entirely invisible to us. A patch of grass that I barely notice may be, for a dog, a richly detailed record of recent events. Yet I know this only through observation, research, and behavior. What that world is actually like from within remains beyond my reach.

The same applies to the bat made famous by the philosopher Thomas Nagel. We can study how echolocation works. We can calculate how sound waves bounce off objects and how that information is processed. But no amount of scientific knowledge brings us any closer to knowing what such a world actually feels like. We remain human beings trying to imagine what it is like to be a bat.

This is not merely a temporary gap in our knowledge. It is a more fundamental limitation. Every attempt to understand another form of experience necessarily begins from the experience we already have. Even when we imagine a radically different world, we do so using human concepts, human metaphors, human senses, and human imagination.

Perhaps this is true not only of animals but of other people as well.

When someone is grieving, experiencing psychosis, or undergoing what they describe as a religious revelation, we can listen carefully to their account and try to empathize. Yet we never encounter their experience directly. Here too we reconstruct another person's world from traces that become visible through language, behavior, and expression.

The rise of artificial intelligence has brought this old philosophical problem into view once again.

The moment a system responds coherently, appears to build memories, and develops a recognizable style, we almost automatically begin to imagine an inner world behind its words. People wonder whether it understands what it says, whether it has feelings, or perhaps even consciousness.

Remarkably, here too we have access only to appearances.

We see words appear.

We experience coherence.

We recognize patterns.

And from these appearances arises the impression that someone is present.

Whether there really is an inner life behind those words may be a far more difficult question than it first appears. Not because the answer must necessarily be *yes*, but because this is precisely the same leap we make every day with other human beings. Ultimately, we know others only through what appears. Their inner world is something we infer from their words, actions, expressions, and behavior.

From the perspective of the dioramic approach, the emphasis shifts.

The central question is no longer whether a dog possesses consciousness, whether a bat has a self, or whether an AI genuinely understands what it says.

Instead, the question becomes: **How do these worlds appear to us, and what assumptions do we quietly bring with us when we try to understand them?**

This does not mean that all forms of intelligence are the same. A human being, a dog, an octopus, and a language model function in profoundly different ways.

Yet it is precisely these differences that reveal how deeply every world is connected to a particular body, a particular history, a particular mode of perception, and a particular way of making meaning.

Once again, what we call *a world* turns out to be inseparable from the way something appears.

Perhaps that is the most surprising lesson other forms of intelligence can teach us.

Not that their worlds are ultimately unknowable, but that our own world is far less self-evident than we usually imagine.

Whenever we genuinely try to understand another form of experience, we do not learn only about dogs, bats, or artificial intelligence.

We also discover how profoundly our own reality is shaped by the particular way in which we happen to be human.



Part VI

Without a Foundation

18. Living Without a Foundation

"Would you be willing to abandon, even for one instant, all teachers and teachings..."

There were periods in my life when I was convinced that somewhere behind the visible world there had to be solid ground. It might not be immediately visible. It might lie hidden behind science, religion, philosophy, or spiritual insight. But surely there had to be something upon which everything ultimately rested. A final truth. A deeper order. A foundation that, once discovered, would bring an end to doubt, confusion, or inner conflict.

The longer I lived, the more persistent that longing revealed itself to be.

Whenever we are confronted with loss, uncertainty, shame, illness, love, aging, or death, we almost instinctively search for something that remains. Something that does not shift with mood, memory, interpretation, social circumstances, or changing conditions. Something that is truly real, even when everything else begins to move.

For a time, science, religion, psychology, or spirituality can each fulfil that role. They offer explanations, narratives, models, rituals, or practices through which the world once again appears understandable and manageable. Sometimes such a framework remains convincing for years. Sometimes only briefly. Sometimes it becomes deeply woven into a person's identity. And sometimes, almost imperceptibly, something that once seemed to provide certainty begins to

open up instead.

Religious certainties begin to shift.

Scientific models are continually refined, expanded, or replaced.

Spiritual insights that once felt absolute gradually reveal themselves to be intertwined with language, context, mood, and interpretation.

Even identity itself, which can seem so personal and self-evident for much of a lifetime, turns out to be far less stable than it first appeared.

None of this means that life suddenly becomes meaningless, or that nothing is real.

The world remains tangible enough to bump into. Bodies continue to age. Love still moves us. Pain is still pain. Relationships deepen, change, or disappear. Animals fall ill. People die. The sun continues to rise, even on days when I have no idea what any of this ultimately means.

Perhaps life does not require a final foundation.

Perhaps it asks for a different relationship with uncertainty.

That sounds more abstract than it actually is.

In everyday life it often means something very simple.

It means that I no longer have to know exactly who I am at every moment. That inner conflicts do not always need to be resolved immediately. That every doubt does not have to be replaced by a new theory, a spiritual system, or a psychological explanation.

Sometimes it simply means allowing something to remain unresolved.

That is not always easy.

There are still moments when the mind reaches once again for certainty, for explanations, for systems, for something that promises solid ground.

Yet it is precisely there that I have come to recognize how deeply this longing seems woven into human life.

Perhaps living without a foundation does not mean that all certainty disappears.

Perhaps it means that our relationship to certainty itself begins to change.

Not everything needs to be fixed, explained, or defended in order to be real.

Some things become clearer precisely because we do not rush to pin them down.

That can be deeply unsettling.

At times it feels more like vulnerability than freedom.

And yet there is also a kind of freedom here that I scarcely knew before.

Not the freedom of someone who has finally understood everything, but of someone who no longer needs to pretend that somewhere there exists an ultimate ground upon which everything permanently rests.

Perhaps this is where another way of living begins.

Not one supported by absolute certainty, but by a growing trust that even a world in motion can be fully lived.

I find almost the same question in the work of John Astin, expressed more sharply than I would ever have dared to formulate it myself:

> *"...How would it feel to live with no maps, no mental conclusions, no final destinations, to cease to refer to any notion in the mind about how anything is supposed to be?"*

John Astin, This Is Always Enough (Kindle Edition, 2013)

A Serious Doubt

Throughout these chapters, a particular picture has gradually emerged. A picture in which worlds are not simply encountered but take shape. One in which experience, body, memory, language, attention, culture, and history together allow a reality to appear that feels completely real from within.

This perspective has helped me make sense of many of my own experiences. It has revealed connections I had not seen before.

And yet one question continues to linger.

What if this approach itself is fundamentally mistaken?

That possibility deserves far more attention than it has received so far.

Some readers may also experience a certain irritation while reading this book.

Of course people experience the world differently.

One person enjoys silence, another thrives on noise. Some are highly sensitive to atmosphere. Others think in a more analytical way. People differ in personality, upbringing, culture, trauma, intelligence, neurology, and temperament. What is so surprising about that? Isn't this book making something complicated that is, in fact, perfectly obvious?

This criticism is important.

Because there is indeed a superficial version of the approach presented in this book in which everything ultimately boils down to the simple observation that people are different.

In that form, the entire project would become trivial.

World formation would amount to little more than saying:

everyone has their own perspective.

But that is not what this book is really trying to understand.

The central question is not why people hold different opinions about the same reality.

The question is how realities come to appear as real in the first place.

The difference may seem subtle, but it changes almost everything.

A tree does not first appear in a completely neutral way and only afterwards become interpreted differently by different people. From the very beginning, attention, language, memory, embodiment, expectation, cultural meaning, and previous experience already participate in how that tree appears, which aspects stand out, which relations become visible, and what feels self-evident.

This does not mean that trees are arbitrary or exist only "subjectively." Nor does it mean that everyone inhabits completely separate universes. People share spaces, languages, infrastructures, customs, and a common physical reality. The world offers resistance. Not every interpretation works equally well. Not every world remains stable.

Precisely because of this, some human worlds function with extraordinary power.

Science, for example, is not simply one perspective among many. Scientific worlds have developed enormous practical, technological, and predictive power. Bridges remain standing. Satellites function. Antibiotics work. That does not make science absolute, but neither does it make it arbitrary.

The same applies to social realities. Money, nations, religions, identities, and legal systems do not exist as physical objects independent of human meaning-making, yet they are no less real for that. They structure behaviour, experience, expectations, and possibilities on a vast scale.

World formation therefore does not imply that everything is equally

true.

It suggests, rather, that human reality never appears entirely apart from the structures through which it becomes meaningful, recognisable, and coherent.

Still, this does not explain why some experiences feel so much more real than others.

Perhaps there really is one reality that is far more stable and independent of human experience than this book proposes. Perhaps the differences between people are ultimately less fundamental than their similarities. Human beings breathe oxygen. Human beings grow old. Human beings die. Gravity operates regardless of belief. Water quenches thirst regardless of culture.

Perhaps the worlds described in this book are merely variations on the surface of a much deeper and more stable reality.

That is entirely possible.

Perhaps this approach also overestimates the role of interpretation.

The book shows how language, memory, expectation, and meaning colour experience. But perhaps biology determines far more than is visible here. Hunger is not arbitrary. Neither is pain. Fear, attachment, sexuality, aggression, care, loss, and longing are not merely cultural constructions. They are also bodily processes shaped over millions of years.

Perhaps the boundaries between our worlds lie much closer together than this book sometimes suggests, precisely because we all belong to the same biological species.

Even the concept of a *world* deserves suspicion.

Why speak of worlds at all?

Why not speak instead of perspectives, interpretations, beliefs, cognitive models, or social constructions?

Perhaps the concept of a world adds something that is not really there. Perhaps it suggests more coherence than actually exists. Perhaps it is simply a metaphor so powerful that, in the end, it seems applicable to everything.

And that leads to another problem.

When an approach appears capable of explaining almost everything, it risks explaining very little.

If falling in love opens a world, trauma opens a world, science opens a world, religion opens a world, art opens a world, and nonduality also opens a world, then what, exactly, is excluded?

Under what circumstances would the Dioramic Approach be wrong?

What kind of experience would not fit within its conceptual framework?

These are uncomfortable questions.

For a theory that seems applicable everywhere runs the risk of doing little more than continually confirming itself.

Perhaps the same applies to the preference that repeatedly appears throughout this book for openness, uncertainty, and not-knowing.

That preference can easily seem wise or philosophically mature.

But why?

Perhaps it says more about my own temperament than about reality itself.

Perhaps some people genuinely feel more at home in openness, while others flourish within clear structures, traditions, convictions, or religious frameworks.

Why should my preference for fluidity bring me any closer to the truth than their need for stability?

Perhaps openness itself is simply one human configuration among

many.

That possibility cannot easily be dismissed.

It becomes even more difficult when the Dioramic Approach turns its attention upon itself.

After all, it too did not arise in a vacuum.

It emerged from my own history, my interests, my reading, my temperament, my spiritual search, my fascination with consciousness, my doubts about religion, my engagement with science, and my desire to understand experience more deeply.

Why should this particular approach somehow escape the very processes it attempts to reveal everywhere else?

Perhaps it does not.

Perhaps the Dioramic Approach itself constitutes a world.

A world in which coherence becomes visible. In which shifts and transformations matter. In which identity becomes fluid. In which experience occupies the centre. A world that illuminates certain things while perhaps allowing others to disappear from view.

And perhaps there is an even more radical possibility.

Perhaps there really is a reality that is far more independent of experience than I have suggested here. Perhaps worlds are only local manifestations of something far more fundamental. Perhaps a future science will eventually show that this entire approach rests on a misunderstanding. Perhaps human experience will prove to be only a small and distorted window onto a reality that lies largely beyond its reach.

I do not know.

And it is precisely that not-knowing that seems important to me.

Not because doubt is a virtue in itself.

Not because all views therefore become equally valid.

Nor because inquiry would somehow become impossible.

But because every serious investigation may begin at the moment when even its own point of departure no longer feels completely self-evident.

Perhaps that is, in the end, the most vulnerable conclusion of this book.

Not that worlds exist.

Not that the Dioramic Approach is correct.

But that even the way this book looks at reality must itself become part of the investigation.

And perhaps it is precisely there that the same openness appears once again from which this entire inquiry first began.



19. Wide Open Windows

Looking back at what this book has explored, what strikes me most is how little of it began as philosophy.

It did not begin with concepts, theories, or academic questions about consciousness, identity, language, or reality. It began much more simply, and at the same time much more mysteriously. With a child sitting in a sandbox, discovering that an ordinary spoon could evoke something greater than the object itself. With the words spoken at home, quietly shaping what felt familiar and what remained strange. With shame, confusion, admiration, falling in love, loss, and curiosity. With small moments that seemed insignificant at the time, yet later turned out to have become woven into the way a world is experienced.

Only much later came books, meditation, science, philosophy, nonduality, psychotherapy, typology, neuroscience, and art. Again and again, each seemed to open a new window onto the same fundamental question, without ever finally resolving it.

At times, science appeared to offer the most convincing window. The elegance of natural laws, the precision of mathematical structures, the thought that consciousness might emerge from processes older than language, older even than human history, possesses a profound intellectual beauty.

At other moments, art seemed to come closer to the heart of

the matter. A visit to a museum after which the street outside no longer feels like just another street. A stone beside a doorway suddenly takes on the quality of a sculpture. Clouds no longer appear merely as meteorology, but as composition, rhythm, and presence.

Then there are those moments of meditation, self-inquiry, or nonduality in which the sense of a solid personal centre becomes less self-evident than it had seemed for so many years. Sometimes that opens something liberating. Sometimes something unsettling. Sometimes almost nothing appears to happen, except that the familiar story of *me* begins to grow more porous.

And yet that same self can return with full force at other moments. In shame. In defensiveness. In vulnerability. In longing. In the need to be seen, understood, or affirmed.

Perhaps all these different domains tell us less about what reality ultimately *is* than about the many ways in which reality can be experienced. They reveal how deeply experience becomes intertwined with body, memory, language, culture, history, relationships, and attention, and how completely natural that coherence feels from within for as long as it does not begin to shift.

Over the years, something gradually emerged from all of this that I eventually came to call the Dioramic Approach.

Not an endpoint, but a way of looking.

Not a system in which everything is finally explained, but an attempt to do justice to the richness, the fragility, and the fluidity of human worlds.

For the more I explored, the less it seemed to be about

finding one final answer.

What gradually came into view instead was the realization that realities are constantly forming, stabilising, shifting, opening, and reorganising themselves. Sometimes slowly, almost imperceptibly. Sometimes abruptly, through loss, love, illness, art, insight, or an encounter that unexpectedly changes something. Sometimes even through a single sentence in a book that penetrates so deeply that the words are no longer merely read, but begin to rearrange an entire world.

Perhaps that is ultimately what *Wide Open Windows* has become for me.

Not a collection of answers.

Nor an intellectual construction in which everything finally falls into place.

Rather, a growing recognition that every human being lives within worlds that are at once real, fragile, and constantly changing, and that genuine inquiry often begins at the moment when those worlds cease to be taken for granted.

The longer I look, the less need I feel for one final window that renders all the others unnecessary.

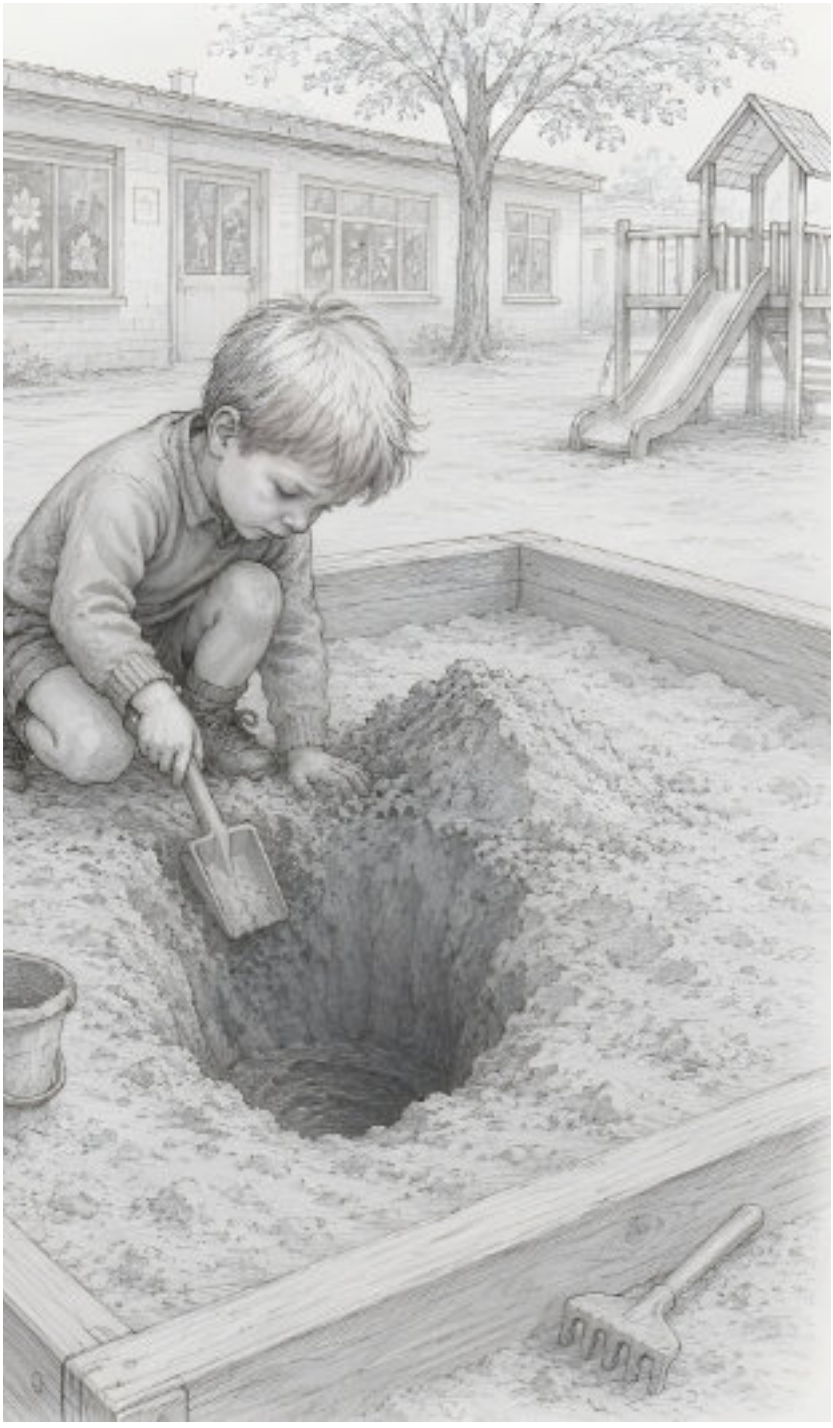
What presents itself instead is an openness in which different perspectives can remain side by side without their tensions needing to be resolved immediately.

Science, art, language, love, nonduality, memory, loss, and philosophy each open their own view onto what appears. And perhaps it is precisely within that plurality that something becomes visible which stands closer to life than

any single theory ever could.

Perhaps everything does not ultimately have to collapse into one all-encompassing worldview.

Perhaps the windows do not have to be closed.



There was also a sandbox at kindergarten. One day I heard that deep beneath the sand there was water. I no longer remember who told me that, or whether it was even true. What I do remember is that I immediately started digging. Armed with a small wooden shovel, I dug a hole that became deeper and deeper. The hole itself was never the point. What mattered was what might lie beneath it. There was something hidden below the visible surface, and if I dug deep enough, I would find it.

Whether I ever reached the water, I no longer know. Perhaps I gave up when the hole became too deep. Perhaps recess ended. Perhaps I simply lost interest. What has stayed with me is not the outcome of the search, but the feeling that drove it: the conviction that beneath the surface lay something more important than what was immediately visible.

Sometimes I think back to that sandbox. To the child who kept digging because somewhere beneath the sand there was supposed to be water. I no longer know whether the water was ever found. What I do know is that the impulse to keep digging has never completely left me.

Death, Meditation, and Not-Knowing

I am seventy-three as I write this. There are websites that claim to calculate the date of your death from statistics. Some tell me I may have decades left. Others are less optimistic. One even informed me that, according to its calculations, I should already be dead. It is a curious kind of knowledge, reducing the future to probabilities and averages that present themselves as predictions.

In the meantime, I take medication every day. I try, not always successfully, to watch what I eat and I consume very little meat. I exercise more than I used to, although not as consistently as I probably should. Perhaps it all helps. Perhaps it adds a few years to my life. Perhaps it makes almost no difference. Whatever the case, none of it alters the simple fact that I will die, just as everyone dies. Every day, roughly one hundred and fifty thousand people leave this world. One day I will become one of those numbers.

What troubles me most is not so much the thought of pain. Of course I can imagine illness, suffocation, a failing body, or a heart that suddenly stops. But beneath those images lies something even more unsettling: the thought of disappearing altogether. The possibility that, at some point, there will no longer be any experience. No seeing or hearing, no feeling or thinking. No inner life. No world.

And yet I am constantly reminded of how little I truly know about any of this. I may find scientific explanations convincing. I may assume that consciousness is generated by the brain and therefore ends when the brain ceases to function. But in the end that remains an assumption rather than direct knowledge. Religious traditions tell different stories. They speak of reincarnation, heaven, the soul, or a consciousness that survives the body. Those possibilities cannot be ruled out with certainty, but neither can they be demonstrated. However persuasive the arguments on either side may seem, none of us actually knows.

Perhaps that is why experiences that refuse to fit comfortably into our explanations continue to fascinate me.

During a therapeutic MDMA session I once found myself sitting opposite a close friend. Without warning an extraordinarily vivid image appeared. I saw a bridge somewhere in Japan, and on that bridge I saw my friend beheading me, or standing on the verge of doing so. It did not feel like something I was imagining. It simply presented itself, with the strange immediacy that certain experiences sometimes possess. I said nothing. At that very moment he looked at me and quietly said that he had just seen himself beheading me. We both began to cry.

To this day I do not know what to make of that experience. It may have been projection, coincidence, an effect of the MDMA, something archetypal, something neurological, or something else entirely. I have never regarded it as evidence for any particular theory, nor do I think it proves anything. What it did leave me with was a renewed awareness of how small the territory actually covered by our explanations really is. Some experiences remain stubbornly resistant to everything we already think we know.

For many years I believed that the most important conclusion to draw from this was simply not-knowing. The recognition that no final answers are available. I still think that, but recently not-knowing itself acquired a different quality.

I was sitting quietly, not to achieve anything, not to induce a special state, and certainly not in search of spiritual insight. There was only silence, together with a willingness not to move away from whatever presented itself. Elsewhere I have sometimes referred to this as Darkness, not as something gloomy or negative, but as the open horizon that remains whenever no explanation proves completely sufficient.

Usually that remains little more than an idea, a philosophical possibility. This time it did not.

There came a moment when that openness was no longer something I was thinking about. It became immediate. Tears arose unexpectedly, and I heard myself whisper, "God, it hurts so much."

Looking back, I realise how easily those words could be misunderstood. They were not an expression of despair or fear, nor a

rejection of what was happening. Quite the opposite. Alongside the pain there was something else, something much harder to describe: a profound sense of recognition, of relief, almost of coming home. It felt as though something had been rediscovered that had never truly been lost, as though the pain and the consolation somehow arose from the same source.

I do not know what that experience means. Perhaps it does not have to mean anything. Perhaps it belongs among those moments that ultimately resist every attempt at a final explanation. What it did change was my relationship to not-knowing. It no longer felt like the absence of answers. Instead it became an openness within which answers themselves seemed to lose their urgency.

Perhaps that is all that can honestly be said. We do not know what death is, why anything appears at all, why there is experience, what preceded birth, or what, if anything, follows death. Yet sometimes, in the midst of that not-knowing, something appears that feels strangely familiar. Not knowledge. Not belief. Not a conclusion. Rather a quiet recognition that perhaps the open question itself is already enough.







Perhaps the search does not end here.

This book has explored the many ways in which a world appears, takes shape, and comes to be experienced as real. It has been about language, culture, memory, identity, expectation, and the countless patterns that together give rise to a lived world.

But while writing it, another question gradually began to emerge.

No longer: *Which world is the right one?*

Nor: *Who am I?*

Not even: *How does a world appear?*

But something simpler, and at the same time far more mysterious:

How is appearance itself possible?

How can anything appear at all?

How can there be experience?

How can there be a universe in which stars, evolution, life, consciousness, language, and meaning can arise in the first place?

Perhaps that is where the next inquiry begins.

Not in the hope of finding a final answer, but in allowing the astonishment to open even further.

The windows are open.

Perhaps it is time to look toward the horizon itself.



About the Author

Ton Haarmans is a writer, former web designer, and studied philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. He is the creator of the **Wide Open Windows** project, an ongoing inquiry into how realities come to acquire meaning.

His work moves at the intersection of philosophy, language, direct observation, and the strange sense of obviousness with which human beings experience their worlds.

Years of spiritual searching, nonduality, meditation, and philosophical questioning run through his writing as recurring undercurrents, without ever settling into definitive conclusions.

The Dioramic Approach forms the central thread throughout his work.

More essays and publications can be found at:

https://wideopenwindows.be

Glossary

Anomaly
An experience, event, or observation that does not easily fit within the usual explanations of a worldview. Anomalies do not have to be proven or disproven in order to be philosophically interesting.

Appearance
The coming into presence of something within experience. Everything that is perceived, thought, felt, or remembered appears.

Attention
The capacity through which certain aspects of experience come to the foreground while others recede into the background. What receives attention is often experienced as more important or more real.

Awareness
The simple presence of experience. Sometimes used to distinguish between the contents of experience and the fact that experience is occurring.

Consciousness
The capacity for experience. In this book, consciousness is not understood as a substance, a field, or a universal container in which experiences occur. It appears to be closely related to the functioning of mind and brain, but how experience itself arises remains an open question.

Constructivism
The view that knowledge, meaning, and reality are not simply discovered but are partly shaped by interpretation, language, culture, and experience.

Darkness
The open, not fully knowable horizon that surrounds every world. Darkness does not refer to something negative or threatening, but to the mystery, depth, and possibility that remain beyond every description.

Determinism
The view that events are fully determined by preceding causes. Determinism plays an important role in discussions of free will.

Diorama
A model of a world in which different elements come together to form a convincing whole. In this book, the diorama serves as a metaphor for the way worlds appear and acquire meaning.

The Dioramic Approach
A mode of inquiry that asks not primarily what is ultimately true, but how a world appears, acquires coherence, and sustains itself.

Ego
The experience of being a separate self, distinct from the world and from others. Depending on the context, the ego may be regarded as necessary, problematic, relative, or even illusory.

Enlightenment
A collective term for experiences or insights in which the

usual assumptions surrounding identity, time, and reality change or fall away.

Epistemology

The philosophical study of knowledge. Epistemology explores what it means to know, how knowledge arises, and what its limits are.

Experience

Whatever is lived at a given moment. Throughout this book, *experience* is often used as a synonym for direct lived experience.

Faith

A conviction that is not necessarily based on evidence. Faith may be religious, but it can also refer to everyday assumptions about ourselves and the world.

Free Will

The idea that human beings make choices that are not entirely determined by circumstances, causes, or conditioning.

Homesickness

In this book, not only a longing for a lost place or time, but also a difficult-to-define longing for something that may never have been known.

Horizon

That which lies beyond the current field of vision or understanding, yet helps determine what becomes visible.

Identity

The image a person has of themselves, or with which they identify. Identity may be personal, cultural, religious, or social.

Knowledge
That which has been learned, remembered, or established.

Lived Experience
The total field of experience. Not only feelings or emotions, but also perceptions, thoughts, memories, expectations, meanings, and attention. Everything that appears, appears within lived experience.

Metaphysics
The philosophical investigation of the most fundamental nature of reality, existence, and being.

Mystical Experience
An experience in which the usual boundaries between self, world, time, or meaning seem to dissolve or change.

Nonduality
The view that the distinction between self and world, observer and observed, is ultimately less absolute than it ordinarily appears.

Not-Knowing
Not a lack of knowledge, but an openness toward that which cannot be fixed within definitive answers.

Ontology
The philosophical study of what exists and what it means to be.

Openness
The willingness to allow experience, questions, and uncertainty without immediately trying to reduce them to explanations or conclusions.

Origin
Not an event in the past, but the ongoing source from which experience, meaning, and worlds emerge.

Perception
That which appears through the senses. Perception can never be completely separated from interpretation, expectation, and context.

Perspective
A particular way in which a world is experienced, interpreted, and understood.

Phenomenology
The study of how things appear in experience before they are explained or interpreted. Phenomenology is concerned with appearance itself.

Rationalism
The view that reason is a central source of knowledge.

Reduction
Explaining complex phenomena by reducing them to simpler processes or constituent parts.

The Real
That which is taken to be real. What counts as reality often proves to depend on perspective, experience, and world-formation.

Truth
A concept with multiple meanings. This book explores how different worlds embody different conceptions of truth.

Wonder
The experience that the world is at once familiar and

mysterious. Wonder plays a central role throughout this book.

World

Not the planet Earth or the universe, but the coherent whole of experiences, meanings, expectations, and assumptions within which a person lives.

Worldview

A more or less coherent set of beliefs, values, and assumptions through which someone understands reality.

World-Formation

The process through which a world emerges, acquires meaning, and comes to be experienced as self-evident.

Other Windows

Every book begins with a question. And sometimes an answer does not lead to a conclusion, but to another question.

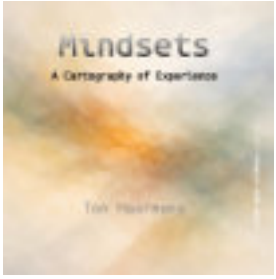
Over the years I have written a number of books, each exploring a different aspect of human experience. Although they can all be read independently, they also trace a path that, in retrospect, gradually led to the approach developed in this book.



This Is It

The next book grew out of a long-standing interest in nonduality and direct experience. It explores what remains when familiar ideas about identity, seeking, and spiritual development begin to fall away.

In retrospect, I see it as an early exploration of a question that would later become increasingly important: how do the realities in which people live come into being?



Mindsets

Mindsets explores how different ways of looking make different worlds visible. It already contains many of the elements that would later become part of the Dioramic Approach. For the first time, the idea appears explicitly that

no perspective occupies a privileged position.



Origins

In *Origins*, the focus shifts to the question of origin. Not only the origin of the universe, but also of experience, meaning, and reality itself. The book shows how every explanation ultimately rests upon assumptions that remain unexplained.

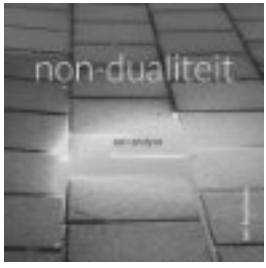
In retrospect, this became an important step toward the realization that every account belongs somewhere.



Living With It

This more personal book explores how philosophical and spiritual insights become woven into ordinary life.

Where the earlier books primarily ask questions about reality, this one turns toward the everyday practice of living, relationships, work, loss, ageing, and attention.



Nonduality, an Analysis

This book examines nonduality not as a system of truth but as a phenomenon. Traditions, teachers, texts, and experiences are described without giving priority to any single interpretation.

The analysis became a direct stepping stone toward the

Dioramic Approach presented in this book.

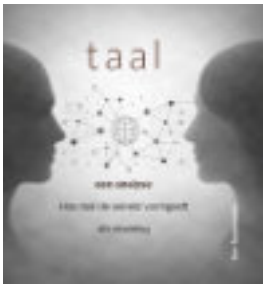


Physics, an Analysis

Here, physics is approached as one of humanity's most successful ways of organizing and making sense of the world.

The central question is not whether physics is true, but how scientific worlds emerge, function, and become convincing.

Many of the themes developed in *Wide Open Windows* are here applied to science itself.



Language, an Analysis

Language often appears to be nothing more than a tool for describing the world.

This book explores how language actively participates in shaping worlds, identities, and meanings. It forms a natural companion to many of the themes explored in *Wide Open Windows*.



Reality

Reality marks an important turning point in my thinking.

Where the earlier books focused on specific themes such as nonduality, perspective, or origin, this book shifts toward the question of how realities themselves arise.

It examines the roles of perception, interpretation, memory, attention, and meaning-making in the emergence of the world as it is experienced. The emphasis is not on what reality ultimately is, but on how it appears. Many of the ideas that would later be developed within the Dioramic Approach first become clearly visible here.

Looking back, *Reality* can be read as a direct precursor to *Wide Open Windows*.

One Window Among Many

None of these books presents a final vision of reality.

Each opens a different window.

Some look toward language. Others toward science, identity, nonduality, or everyday experience.

Wide Open Windows does not seek to add yet another window. Instead, it explores what all these windows have in common: the way human worlds appear, take shape, and come to be inhabited.

Some of these books can be downloaded free of charge, while others are available through Amazon. For more information, visit the project website:

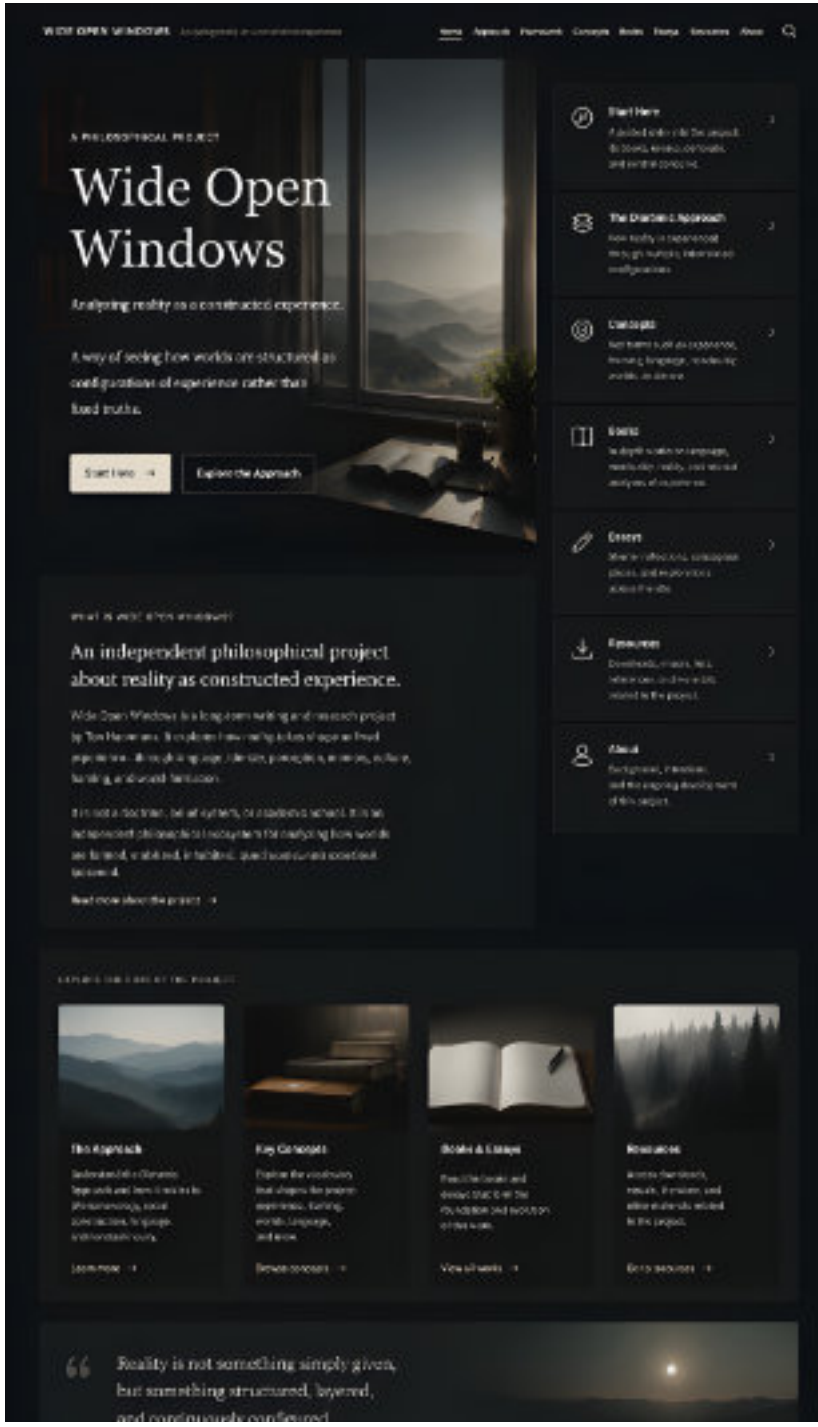
https://wideopenwindows.be

For a more academic treatment of the Dioramic Approach, see *The Dioramic Approach: Toward an Experiential Ontology of Lived Reality*:

https://zenodo.org/records/20151435

See also *Plurality Without Foundations: The Dioramic Method and the Reinstallation of Priority*:

https://wideopenwindows.be/papers/Haarmans_PluralityWithoutFoundations_Metaphilosophy.docx


A PHILOSOPHICAL PROJECT
Wide Open Windows
Analyzing reality as a constructed experience.
A way of seeing how worlds are structured as configurations of experience rather than fixed truths.
Start Here
Explore the Approach
Start Here
The Dialectic Approach
Concepts
Essays
Resources
About
An independent philosophical project about reality as constructed experience.
Read more about the project
The Approach
Learn more
Key Concepts
Browse concepts
Books & Essays
View all texts
Resources
Reality is not something simply given, but something structured, layered,

Acknowledgements

The focus of this book is not authorship, but the inquiry itself. The Dioramic Approach is not only the subject of this book; it is also the method through which that subject is explored and brought into view.

Like any serious inquiry, this book emerged from a wide range of sources: books, conversations, memories, personal experiences, readers' critiques, philosophical literature, everyday observations, and, not least, dialogues with artificial intelligence.

This does not mean that authorship disappears. I determine the direction of the inquiry, decide which arguments are retained or rejected, choose the final wording, and select the examples that remain. Responsibility for the content of this book rests entirely with me.

At the same time, the writing process itself illustrates something that also belongs to the Dioramic Approach. The idea of the completely autonomous author becomes difficult to sustain upon closer examination. A book emerges from a configuration of influences, conversations, experiences, technologies, traditions, and choices. What appears as *a book by Ton Haarmans* is, at the same time, the result of a much larger network of circumstances.

The world seems self-evident. A street is just a street, a house feels familiar, words appear to simply name what is already there. Time moves forward. The self feels as though it exists somewhere at the center of experience.

Yet there are moments when this self-evidence begins to shift. A memory acquires a different meaning years later. A place no longer feels the same after a loss. A visit to a museum changes the street outside. Meditation, falling in love, illness, science, art, or silence can suddenly open a different world within the same reality.

In Wide Open Windows, Ton Haarmans explores how human worlds arise, how they acquire meaning, and how they become convincing. Philosophy, science, spirituality, language, identity, love, memory, and experience appear here as different windows onto the same question: How does a world come to appear as a world?

This book offers neither a new doctrine nor definitive answers. It is an invitation to look again at what seems obvious and to discover how fluid, layered, and surprising human worlds can be.

Wide Open Windows is part of a larger and ongoing inquiry that continues through essays, notes, and future publications on the website of the same name.