Living in Worlds

Dioramic Phenomenology

Prelude

On the Occasion of This Work

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction

The Problem of Hierarchy in Experience

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Describing worlds in this way entails a methodological restraint. The aim is neither to reduce experiential diversity to a common foundation nor to integrate different worlds into a single account. It is to clarify how experiential configurations organize perception, relevance, temporality, and agency from within, without presupposing that one such configuration provides the standard for all others.

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

The question guiding this work can therefore be stated simply:

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

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

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

Chapter 1

Phenomenology and Its Hidden Hierarchies

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

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

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

1.1 Husserl: Constitution and Functional Asymmetry

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

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

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

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

1.2 Merleau-Ponty: Embodiment and the Metaphor of Depth

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

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

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

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

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

1.3 Heidegger: Disclosure and Ontological Privilege

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

Heidegger's critique of subjectivism and representationalism profoundly reshapes phenomenological inquiry. Everyday involvement is no longer understood as a deficient mode of access, but as the site where meaning is already at work. Nevertheless, Heidegger introduces a decisive evaluative distinction between modes of being-in-the-world [6].

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

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

1.4 Structure Without Foundation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 2

Against Fundamental Experience

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

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

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

2.1 The Appeal to Fundamentality

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

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

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

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

2.2 Non-Dual Experience and Experiential Authority

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

These accounts frequently emphasize that non-duality is not a theory, but the absence of all conceptual positions. Yet phenomenologically, they introduce a hierarchy of experience. One

configuration is granted authority over others, not by argument, but by virtue of its supposed immediacy.

The difficulty here is not experiential. Non-dual experience may indeed involve a profound reorganization of experience, including the suspension of familiar structures of agency, ownership, and interpretation. The difficulty lies in the inference drawn from this disruption. To claim that non-dual experience is more real, more fundamental, or ontologically privileged is already to reintroduce a conceptual framework that the experience itself does not provide.

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

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

2.3 Scientific Explanation and Ontological Overreach

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

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

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

Phenomenologically, this is unwarranted. Scientific explanation reorganizes experience into a coherent world. It does not ground all experiential worlds. To elevate explanatory power to ontological privilege is to confuse function with foundation.

2.4 The Criterion of Shared Location

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

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

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

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

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

2.5 Coherence Without Ground

The recurring appeal to fundamental experience rests on a shared error. Features that belong to the functioning of experience within a configuration are treated as indicators of ontological priority. Immediacy, explanatory power, stability, or disruption are transformed into credentials of fundamentality.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

12) For contemporary presentations of non-dual experience emphasizing immediacy and the collapse of subject–object distinction, see Rupert Spira, *Being Aware of Being Aware* (Salisbury: Non-Duality Press, 2017), and Tony Parsons, *The Open Secret* (Boulder: Inner Directions, 1999).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3

Worlds as Configurations of Experience

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

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

3.1 Experience as Already Organized

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

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

To describe experience as already organized is not to deny its variability. Different situations, practices, and contexts give rise to different modes of organization. What remains constant is that experience never appears unconfigured. There is no raw experiential given beneath organization. Wherever something appears as real, it does so within a field of sense that renders it intelligible, relevant, and consequential.

The notion of an experiential configuration names this field.

3.2 Experiential Configurations

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

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

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

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

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

3.3 Worlds, Not Perspectives

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

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

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

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

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

3.4 Configuration Without Hierarchy

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

This does not entail that all configurations are equivalent in every respect [25]. They differ in stability, scope, consequences, and the kinds of coordination they support. Some enable long-term continuity and intersubjective correction; others do not. These differences are real and describable.

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

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

3.5 From Foundation to Configuration

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

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

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

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

20) Phenomenological accounts have long emphasized that experience is not given as raw data subsequently structured by interpretation. See Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Book I*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), §§27–28, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. D. A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), Introduction.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 4

The Diorama as Philosophical Instrument

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

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

4.1 Why Perspective Language Fails

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

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

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

4.2 The Diorama: Bounded Worldhood

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

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

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

4.3 Instrument, Not Theory

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

As an instrument, the diorama serves three purposes:

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

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

3. **Symmetry**
   It prevents silent privileging. No world is exempt from description on the basis of familiarity, usefulness, or apparent self-evidence.

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

4.4 Against Relativism

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

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

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

4.5 Applying the Instrument

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

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

The chapters that follow examine several experiential configurations as dioramas: the conventional world, the scientific world, the spiritual or New Age world, and the non-dual world. Each is approached on its own terms, without reduction to a deeper ground and without elevation to a privileged status.

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

4.6 From Instrument to Description

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

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

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

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

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

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

30) Suspending external foundations does not entail relativism. Validity is assessed internally to a configuration, in terms of coherence and constraint, rather than by appeal to an absolute standard. See Dan Zahavi, "Phenomenology and the Question of Relativism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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

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

Chapter 5

Worlds at Work: Case Studies

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

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

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

5.1 The Conventional World

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

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

Meaning here is primarily practical. A chair is for sitting, a road for walking, a clock for telling time. Objects solicit use before reflection [35]. Understanding precedes explanation. The world is navigated rather than interpreted.

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

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

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

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

5.2 The Scientific World

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

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

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

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

At that point, the lived world appears thin. A stone becomes mass and density. Light becomes wavelength. Warmth becomes energy transfer. What is given is treated with suspicion. The real story is assumed to lie beneath appearance, in hidden mechanisms and deeper structures.

Within the scientific world, this move feels natural. Explanatory depth appears as progress. Reduction promises clarity. Yet phenomenologically, this is a reorganization of relevance, not a revelation of fundamentality [37].

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

5.3 The Spiritual or New Age World

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

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

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

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

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

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

The spiritual world functions as a complete experiential configuration. Its coherence does not depend on verification from outside. It does not require reduction to psychology or dismissal as illusion. It is one way reality holds together.

5.4 The Non-Dual World

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Intermezzo

Dreaming Worlds

Dreaming cuts across all waking configurations [42]. The conventional actor, the scientist, the spiritual seeker, and the non-dualist alike dream.

In dreaming, a world appears.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 6

A Flat Phenomenology

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

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

6.1 What Flatness Denies

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

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

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

6.2 Flatness as Method, Not Doctrine

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

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

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

6.3 Comparison Without Hierarchy

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

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

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

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

6.4 The Place of the Non-Dual World

The non-dual world occupies a decisive position within this framework. It is often treated as an exception: either as the ground beneath all worlds or as the point at which worldhood dissolves altogether. Flat phenomenology rejects both interpretations.

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

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

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

6.5 Consistency of the Method

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

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

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

6.6 From Ground to Adjacency

By suspending hierarchy, flat phenomenology reorients philosophical attention. Instead of seeking foundations, it attends to adjacency [52]. Worlds are not steps in a progression. They are neighboring possibilities.

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

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

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

Conclusion

Living With Worlds

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Afterword

On Method and Position

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

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

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

This methodological stance also bears on contemporary discussions at the intersection of philosophy, science, and spirituality. Scientific naturalism frequently emphasizes the constructed character of perception while retaining an ontological hierarchy in which models are ultimately anchored in an underlying physical reality. Non-dual discourse often dissolves conceptual structure while simultaneously elevating a particular experiential configuration to the status of ultimate truth. In both cases, the appeal to fundamentality returns, even where it is explicitly disavowed [54].

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

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

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

By adopting this stance, flat phenomenology does not abandon critique. It relocates it. Critique no longer operates by appeal to a deeper truth, a more authentic mode of experience, or a privileged explanatory level. It operates through comparison, contrast, and careful description. Worlds can be

evaluated in terms of their internal coherence, their limits, and their consequences, without being measured against an assumed foundation.

If this work can be said to take a position, it is this: philosophy need not secure reality in order to describe it. It need only remain faithful to how realities take shape. What flat phenomenology offers is not a new metaphysics, nor a final account of experience, but a discipline of attention [55]. A refusal to turn coherence into hierarchy, and a refusal to turn disruption into ground.

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

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

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

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

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