Living in Worlds

Plurality Without Foundations

by Ton Haarmans

Introduction

Why Worlds, Not Foundations

Philosophical reflection repeatedly returns to the same gesture. When plurality becomes unsettling, when explanations diverge, when disagreement persists, the impulse arises to look for what lies beneath. Something deeper, more original, more fundamental. The language varies, but the movement remains constant. What appears on the surface is treated as secondary; what truly counts is assumed to lie elsewhere.

This book begins from a refusal of that movement.

The refusal is not motivated by skepticism toward experience, nor by indifference to truth. It arises from a simple observation: the appeal to foundations does not resolve plurality, it suppresses it. By elevating one mode of experience, one form of access, or one description to a foundational position, other worlds are rendered derivative, partial, or misguided. Hierarchy enters not as a conclusion, but as a presupposition.

This presupposition often goes unnoticed. Foundational language presents itself as descriptive rather than normative. Terms such as “deeper,” “more basic,” or “prior to interpretation” appear to name features of reality, when in fact they organize it. They establish an order among experiences and worlds while masking the act of ordering itself.

The alternative explored in this book does not consist in replacing one foundation with another. It consists in suspending the demand for foundations altogether.

To suspend that demand is not to deny coherence, reliability, or constraint. It is to shift attention from grounding to *functioning*. Instead of asking which experience, perspective, or world is most fundamental, the question becomes how different worlds operate, how they sustain their own coherence, and how they make certain forms of experience appear obvious while others remain unthinkable.

The term *world* is used here to designate such coherences. A world is not a domain of objects, a cultural framework, or a subjective outlook. It is a configuration of experience in which what appears, how it appears, and what counts as evident are internally aligned. Worlds are not partial views of a single underlying reality, nor are they layers arranged along a vertical axis. They function laterally, each complete in its own terms, none entitled to ground the others.

This lateral plurality is not an ideal to be achieved. It is a condition that is already operative, even when denied. Scientific, spiritual, therapeutic, everyday, and philosophical worlds do not coexist as perspectives awaiting integration. They coexist as functioning wholes, each carrying its own norms, forms of relevance, and criteria of legitimacy. The drive to integrate them under a common foundation does not eliminate their differences; it obscures how those differences actually work.

Experience plays a central role in this obscuring. When foundations grounded in metaphysics or ontology lose credibility, experience often takes their place. What is experienced seems immune to doubt, closer to reality, less mediated. Yet this elevation places an impossible burden on experience. It asks experience to be both situated and absolute, both world-bound and world-transcending. The result is not clarity, but a hidden reintroduction of hierarchy.

This work argues that experience does not need to be defended as foundational in order to be taken seriously. Experience is unavoidable, but it is not decisive. It does not ground worlds; it operates within them. To recognize this is not to weaken experience, but to relieve it of a task it cannot perform.

The refusal of foundations does not lead to relativism. It does not claim that all claims are equal, or that anything goes. Worlds are internally normative. They sustain distinctions, exclusions, and constraints. What is rejected is not normativity, but the idea that normativity must be anchored in an ultimate ground.

The chapters that follow do not build toward a unifying conclusion. They work instead to make visible the mechanisms through which worlds are stabilized, prioritized, and sometimes imposed. By examining how foundational thinking persists in phenomenology, spirituality, and contemporary philosophy, the book seeks to clear conceptual space for a different orientation: one in which plurality is not a problem to be solved, *but a condition to be described*.

This orientation does not promise resolution. It promises precision.

To live with worlds, in this sense, is not to choose between them, nor to transcend them. It is to acknowledge their functioning without ranking them, and to resist the comfort of foundations when that comfort is purchased at the cost of clarity.

1.1 Phenomenology as an Anti-Reductionist Project

Phenomenology emerges from a dissatisfaction with reduction. Against explanations that translate experience into causal mechanisms, physiological processes, or abstract representations, phenomenology insists that what appears must be taken seriously as it appears. Experience is not an obstacle to knowledge, but its unavoidable medium.

This insistence is neither naïve nor anti-intellectual. It responds to a real philosophical problem. When explanation bypasses experience in favor of external frameworks, something essential is lost. The world becomes a construct inferred from data rather than a lived field of meaning. Phenomenology resists this displacement. It seeks to restore contact with what is given, without immediately subordinating it to theoretical schemes.

At its core, phenomenology is motivated by a demand for fidelity. Description is meant to precede explanation. What appears should be allowed to show itself before it is interpreted, explained, or justified. This demand is not merely methodological; it carries an ethical weight. To describe experience is to acknowledge its authority against forms of thinking that dismiss it as secondary or illusory.

In this sense, phenomenology positions itself as an anti-reductionist project. It rejects both empiricist atomism and rationalist abstraction. Experience is not raw data awaiting organization, nor is it a derivative effect of underlying structures. It is the site where meaning is already operative.

This commitment explains phenomenology’s enduring appeal. It promises a way to think rigorously without sacrificing lived reality. It offers precision without alienation. Against the flattening tendencies of naturalism and the distancing effects of formalization, phenomenology proposes a return to experience as it is lived.

However, this return already contains a tension. To resist reduction, phenomenology must identify what in experience resists it. Description cannot be indiscriminate. Some features of experience must be treated as philosophically decisive, others as secondary. Even before any explicit theory is introduced, a distinction begins to form between what is essential to experience and what can be bracketed.

This tension does not undermine phenomenology’s motivation. It marks the point at which description begins to carry responsibility. What counts as experience worthy of description, and what can be set aside, is never neutral. The anti-reductionist gesture already prepares the ground for prioritization, even if that prioritization is not yet articulated.

The question is not whether phenomenology should resist reduction. It must. The question is what happens once resistance requires selection.

1.2 Description and Its Silent Priorities

Phenomenology presents itself as descriptive rather than explanatory. It claims to let phenomena show themselves, without imposing external frameworks or speculative constructions. Description is meant to suspend judgment, not to organize reality. This self-understanding is central to phenomenology's authority.

Yet description is never simply receptive.

To describe is to attend, and to attend is to select. Certain aspects of experience are brought into focus, while others recede. This selection does not necessarily reflect bias or distortion. It reflects the fact that experience is already structured, and that description must follow that structure. But following a structure is not the same as refraining from ordering.

Every description implies a criterion of relevance. Some features of experience are treated as revealing, others as derivative. Some are said to disclose how experience truly functions, while others are considered superficial, habitual, or obscuring. These distinctions are rarely presented as hierarchies, yet they function as such.

This is not a moral criticism of phenomenological description. It is a structural observation. Description cannot proceed without prioritization, because not everything that appears can be equally decisive. To describe experience meaningfully is to distinguish between what matters and what does not.

The difficulty arises when these priorities remain implicit. When description presents itself as neutral, the ordering it performs becomes invisible. What is emphasized appears self-evident, while what is de-emphasized appears irrelevant by nature rather than by decision. Hierarchy enters quietly, not as a claim, but as a background condition.

This silent prioritization becomes especially potent when description is contrasted with theory. Because description is framed as faithful to experience, its selections acquire a normative force. What is described is not merely what appears, but what truly counts as experience. Other modes of appearing are not rejected outright.

In this way, description begins to function as a filter. It does not deny plurality, but it organizes it. Experiences that align with the descriptive focus are treated as clarifying; those that do not are treated as confused, derivative, or insufficiently examined. The descriptive stance thus performs an ordering it does not acknowledge.

The point is not that phenomenological description is covertly authoritarian. It is that description, once tasked with philosophical responsibility, cannot avoid instituting priorities. The claim to neutrality obscures this fact, making hierarchy harder to detect and harder to question.

This sets the stage for the developments that follow. Once description is entrusted with identifying what is essential in experience, it becomes difficult to prevent those essentials from assuming a foundational role. What begins as resistance to reduction gradually acquires the power to organize worlds.

At this point, the transition to explicit accounts of intentionality, embodiment, and ontology is no longer accidental. It is prepared in advance by the demands placed on description itself.

1.3 Intentionality and Constitution

Edmund Husserl

Husserl’s introduction of intentionality marks a decisive shift in how experience is approached. Experience is no longer treated as an inner stream opposed to an external world, nor as a passive reception of sensory data. Consciousness is always consciousness *of* something. Experience is inherently directed, structured, and meaningful. This move successfully dislodges empiricist and psychologistic reductions, and it remains one of phenomenology’s most enduring contributions.

At the same time, intentionality introduces a subtle but far-reaching reorientation. By emphasizing the constitutive role of consciousness, Husserl situates experience as the site where meaning, objectivity, and worldhood come to be. Objects are not merely encountered; they are constituted. The world is not simply given; it is disclosed through intentional acts. What appears as a methodological clarification gradually assumes a more decisive role.

This shift becomes explicit in Husserl’s analyses of constitution. Constitution does not mean fabrication. It names the way in which objects, meanings, and even the sense of an objective world emerge through lawful correlations of experience. The world is not invented, but its sense is inseparable from the structures of consciousness through which it appears. In this sense, phenomenology aims to describe conditions of possibility without lapsing into metaphysical speculation.

Yet it is precisely here that a hierarchy quietly takes shape.

Constitution assigns experience a privileged position. While Husserl repeatedly insists that phenomenology is descriptive rather than foundational, the constitutive role of experience effectively places it at the origin of world-meaning. The world, insofar as it is intelligible as world, depends on experiential structures. Even when this dependency is framed methodologically, its implications are difficult to contain.

Experience begins to function not only as the medium through which the world appears, but as the locus in which its legitimacy is secured. What counts as objective, real, or meaningful is traced back to constitutive acts, syntheses, and horizons of experience. The world is intelligible because it can be constituted. Other descriptions, explanations, or worldviews are thereby measured against this constitutive framework, even when no explicit ranking is intended.

This is not a doctrinal claim about Husserl’s intentions. It is a structural consequence of the constitutive model itself. Once experience is positioned as the condition under which worldhood becomes possible, it cannot avoid assuming a form of priority. Experience does not merely accompany the world; it underwrites it. What appears as a methodological starting point begins to function as a foundational reference.

The transcendental reduction intensifies this effect. By bracketing the natural attitude, phenomenology gains access to the structures that make experience and objectivity possible. This move successfully suspends naïve realism, but it also reinforces the sense that the ultimate clarification of the world lies in a deeper level of experiential analysis. The more radical the reduction, the more decisive the experiential standpoint becomes.

Here, hierarchy enters without announcement. The transcendental standpoint does not present itself as superior, yet it implicitly governs what counts as philosophically legitimate. Worlds that do not

submit to constitutive analysis, or that organize experience differently, appear secondary or insufficiently clarified. The plurality of worlds is preserved descriptively, but ordered implicitly by depth of access.

The issue is not that Husserl privileges experience. Phenomenology would be incoherent without doing so. The issue is that experience comes to carry a justificatory weight it cannot sustain without transforming its role. Experience is asked not only to disclose the world, but to ground its sense. The distinction between description and foundation becomes increasingly fragile.

This fragility does not result from error or inconsistency. It arises from the ambition to secure objectivity without metaphysics while retaining a unifying point of reference. Intentionality and constitution succeed in freeing philosophy from naïve objectivism, but they do so by installing experience as the silent center around which world-meaning revolves.

From the perspective developed in this book, this move cannot be completed without cost. Once experience is positioned as constitutive in this strong sense, plurality becomes difficult to sustain without hierarchy. Worlds that align with the constitutive framework appear clarified; others appear derivative, confused, or in need of correction. The foundational gesture has been displaced, not dissolved.

This does not invalidate Husserl’s analyses. It situates them. Intentionality and constitution remain powerful tools for describing how worlds appear and cohere. What they cannot do, without contradiction, is function as a non-hierarchical account of plural worlds. The attempt to preserve both descriptive neutrality and experiential priority pulls phenomenology in opposing directions.

The tension exposed here is not a failure of phenomenology, but a limit. It marks the point at which description begins to harden into ordering, and where experience, relieved of metaphysical burden, quietly assumes it again in another form.

1.4 Embodiment and Pre-Reflective Depth

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty's intervention is often read as a correction of Husserl rather than a continuation. Where Husserl emphasizes intentional structures and constitutive acts, Merleau-Ponty turns toward the lived body, perception, and the pre-reflective field in which meaning is already underway before conceptual articulation. Experience is no longer primarily analyzed through acts of consciousness, but through an embodied openness to the world.

This shift addresses a genuine problem. By foregrounding embodiment, Merleau-Ponty resists the abstraction that threatens transcendental phenomenology. Experience is not something that happens *in* consciousness; it is enacted through a body already situated in the world. Perception is not a construction layered onto neutral data, but a direct engagement in which world and body are intertwined.

In this sense, Merleau-Ponty deepens phenomenology's commitment to experience without retreating to empiricism. The body is not a thing among things, nor a mere instrument of cognition. It is the site of an operative intentionality, a pre-reflective orientation that precedes explicit thought. Meaning is not imposed on the world; it is lived.

Yet it is precisely through this appeal to depth that a new hierarchy takes shape.

The notion of the pre-reflective introduces a distinction that is difficult to keep descriptive. What is pre-reflective is not merely earlier in a temporal sense; it is treated as more original, more authentic, and more revealing of how experience truly functions. Reflection appears as a secondary modification, while pre-reflective life is granted explanatory priority. The language of depth, sedimentation, and origin subtly reorders experience.

This reordering is not incidental. By situating meaning in the pre-reflective body, Merleau-Ponty seeks to avoid both intellectualism and empiricism. However, in doing so, he installs a privileged layer of experience that functions as a ground. The lived body becomes the locus from which perception, thought, and worldhood derive their legitimacy. What is bodily and pre-reflective is not simply described; it becomes normative.

The difficulty is not that embodiment matters too much, but that it begins to matter in a specific way. Pre-reflective experience is treated as that which explains reflective experience, rather than as one mode of functioning among others. Reflection is understood as derivative, parasitic, or distorting, while embodied perception is cast as closer to how the world "really" appears.

Here again, hierarchy enters without explicit declaration. No ranking is announced, yet a vertical relation is established: from pre-reflective depth to reflective articulation, from lived perception to conceptual thought. Experience is stratified according to degrees of authenticity, even as phenomenology claims to resist such stratification.

This becomes especially apparent when the pre-reflective is invoked as resistant to error. Because it is said to precede interpretation, it is often treated as less susceptible to distortion. Reflection may mislead, but bodily perception is trusted. The body becomes a guarantor of immediacy, and immediacy becomes a criterion of philosophical legitimacy.

As in Husserl, this move responds to a real concern. Merleau-Ponty seeks to preserve the richness of lived experience against reductive explanation. But the price of this preservation is a renewed foundational gesture. The body, now elevated to a primordial status, carries a justificatory role analogous to that previously assigned to transcendental consciousness.

From the perspective developed here, this gesture repeats the same structural tension under a different guise. Experience is again asked to ground the world, this time not through constitutive acts but through embodied presence. What appears as a correction of abstraction reinstates priority through depth. The hierarchy is inverted, but not abandoned.

This does not diminish the descriptive power of Merleau-Ponty's analyses. His account of perception, movement, and embodiment remains indispensable for understanding how worlds are lived rather than merely thought. What it cannot sustain, without contradiction, is a fully non-hierarchical account of plural worlds. By privileging one mode of experience as more original, it constrains plurality at the level of explanation.

The significance of this tension lies not in a failure of phenomenology, but in its consistency. Whether through transcendental constitution or pre-reflective embodiment, phenomenology repeatedly seeks a point of priority that can secure meaning without metaphysics. Each time, experience assumes the burden of foundation. Each time, hierarchy returns under the name of depth.

This recurrence prepares the next step. If neither constitutive consciousness nor embodied pre-reflectivity can ground plurality without reintroducing hierarchy, then the problem does not lie in their specific formulations. It lies in the expectation that experience must function as a ground at all.

1.5 Ontological Priority

Martin Heidegger

With Heidegger, the hierarchical tendency that remains implicit in earlier phenomenology becomes explicit. The question is no longer how experience constitutes or lives the world, but how the being of that world is to be understood. Phenomenology is reoriented toward ontology. What is at stake is not merely how things appear, but what it means for them to be.

This shift is not a betrayal of phenomenology's descriptive ambition. Heidegger radicalizes it. By insisting that the question of Being precedes all ontic inquiry, he seeks to uncover the conditions under which any understanding of entities is possible at all. The analytic of *Dasein* is introduced not as an anthropology, but as a way of accessing the structure of world-disclosure itself.

Here, priority is no longer subtle.

The ontological difference explicitly orders philosophical inquiry. Questions concerning beings, explanations, sciences, and regional ontologies are secondary to the more fundamental question of Being. This priority is not merely methodological. It is presented as necessary. To misunderstand this order is to misunderstand philosophy itself.

Experience, in Heidegger's account, is no longer the primary site of constitution or embodiment. Instead, it is subordinated to a more originary structure: being-in-the-world. Understanding, attunement, and discourse are not experiences among others, but existential structures through which a world is disclosed. The world is not grounded in experience; experience is possible because world-disclosure has already taken place.

This move avoids several difficulties encountered in earlier phenomenology. By shifting emphasis from experience to disclosedness, Heidegger resists the temptation to treat experience as a foundational datum. The focus on Being seems to promise a way beyond experiential absolutism. However, this promise is fulfilled only by installing a different form of priority.

Ontological priority functions as a decisive ordering principle. Ways of relating to the world that do not align with the analytic of *Dasein* appear derivative or deficient. Scientific explanation, theoretical reflection, and everyday understanding are all situated within a hierarchy of disclosure. What is more originary is not simply earlier or deeper; it is more fundamental in determining what counts as intelligible at all.

Plurality survives descriptively, but not structurally.

Different modes of access to the world are acknowledged, yet they are ranked according to their proximity to the ontological question. The everyday world is not denied, but it is understood as fallen. Scientific understanding is not rejected, but it is ontically superficial. Philosophical access gains legitimacy precisely by virtue of its ontological depth.

Unlike in Husserl or Merleau-Ponty, this hierarchy is not an unintended consequence. It is openly affirmed. Ontology does not merely clarify experience; it governs it. The claim is not that one mode of experience is richer or more authentic, but that one level of questioning is fundamentally prior to all others.

From the perspective developed in this book, this clarity comes at a cost. Ontological priority leaves no room for a lateral plurality of worlds. Worlds become modes of disclosure ordered by their

relation to Being. What does not participate in this order cannot claim equal philosophical standing. The possibility that different worlds might function without reference to a single ontological axis is excluded in advance.

This exclusion is not accidental. Heidegger's project is animated by the conviction that philosophy must recover its most fundamental question. That conviction requires a hierarchy. Without ontological priority, the distinction between philosophy and other forms of inquiry collapses. What is gained in rigor is paid for in openness.

The issue, once again, is not error. Heidegger's analytic of worldhood remains one of the most powerful accounts of how meaning, relevance, and understanding are intertwined. What it cannot accommodate is a conception of worlds that are complete without being ordered, coherent without being grounded, and plural without being ranked.

At this point, the pattern that has been developing throughout this chapter becomes unmistakable. Whether through constitutive consciousness, embodied depth, or ontological priority, phenomenology repeatedly seeks a point of origin that can secure meaning. Each attempt is motivated by a legitimate concern. Each results in an ordering that restricts plurality.

This is the limit at which the phenomenological strategy turns against itself. In seeking to protect experience, worldhood, or Being from reduction, it installs a hierarchy that quietly determines which worlds count, and why.

What remains to be shown is that this outcome is not contingent on particular doctrines, but intrinsic to the search for priority itself. That task belongs to the next section.

1.6 The Recurring Pattern

The analyses of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger differ in scope, vocabulary, and ambition. They do not form a linear progression, nor do they share a single doctrine. What unites them is not agreement, but a recurring structural movement. Each seeks to secure meaning without reverting to naïve realism or reductive explanation. Each turns to experience, embodiment, or world-disclosure as a way of doing so. And each, in its own way, introduces a form of priority.

This priority is not always declared. In some cases it remains methodological, in others descriptive, and in still others ontological. Yet its effect is consistent. One mode of access is positioned as more originary, more revealing, or more fundamental than others. Whether through constitutive consciousness, pre-reflective embodiment, or ontological disclosure, a vertical order emerges.

The pattern can be stated schematically.

First, phenomenology resists reduction. It rejects explanations that bypass lived experience in favor of causal, naturalistic, or theoretical accounts. Experience is reclaimed as philosophically irreducible.

Second, in order to secure this irreducibility, a privileged point of access is identified. This point may be methodological, as in the transcendental reduction; experiential, as in embodied perception; or ontological, as in the analytic of *Dasein*. In each case, something is said to reveal what is most essential.

Third, this privileged access begins to function as a criterion. Other modes of experience, understanding, or world-relation are interpreted in its light. They may be acknowledged, but they are no longer equal. They are derivative, secondary, or less fundamental.

Finally, plurality is preserved descriptively but constrained structurally. Different worlds are allowed to appear, but only within an implicit order that determines their philosophical legitimacy.

This pattern is not the result of oversight or inconsistency. It follows from a shared ambition: to find a point from which meaning can be clarified without remainder. As long as such a point is sought, hierarchy is unavoidable. Priority may change its name, its justification, or its target, but it does not disappear.

What becomes visible here is a limit of phenomenology understood in this way. The commitment to description does not prevent ordering; it enables it. By identifying what is most revealing, phenomenology necessarily distinguishes between what counts as primary and what does not. Description slides into organization, and organization into hierarchy.

This does not invalidate phenomenology. It situates it.

Phenomenology offers powerful tools for analyzing how worlds appear, cohere, and sustain themselves. What it cannot provide, without contradiction, is a framework in which multiple worlds can be described as complete without being ranked. The moment experience, embodiment, or Being is asked to function as a ground, plurality is subordinated to unity.

The consequence is not theoretical failure, but conceptual closure. Once priority is established, alternative worlds can be acknowledged only as variations, deviations, or incomplete disclosures. The possibility that different worlds might function fully without reference to a shared axis is excluded in advance.

This chapter has not argued against phenomenology. It has traced the conditions under which phenomenology repeatedly reintroduces hierarchy despite its descriptive intentions. That recurrence suggests that the problem does not lie with particular authors or formulations, but with the expectation that *philosophy must identify what is most fundamental*.

If that expectation is suspended, a different task emerges. Instead of locating priority, philosophy can attend to functioning. Instead of grounding worlds, it can describe how they take shape, hold together, and sometimes come apart.

The implications of this shift are not yet developed here. They require a confrontation with the idea of fundamental experience itself. That confrontation is the task of the next chapter.

2.5 Why Fundamental Experience Cannot Bear the Weight Assigned to It

The appeal of fundamental experience is understandable. Faced with doubts about representation, theory, and mediation, experience appears as the last remaining anchor. What is experienced seems immune to error in a way explanations are not. It appears immediate, undeniable, and self-evident. This apparent immediacy is precisely what allows experience to be treated as foundational.

Yet this move places a burden on experience that it cannot carry.

To function as a foundation, experience would have to meet at least two conditions simultaneously. First, it would need to be absolute: independent of context, framework, or configuration. Second, it would need to be authoritative: capable of legitimating other claims, descriptions, or worlds. Fundamental experience is expected to be both what cannot be doubted and what grounds everything else.

This double demand cannot be met.

Experience is always situated. It appears *as* a world, and cannot be described except as one. What counts as experience, what stands out, what is felt as immediate, and what is dismissed as secondary are already determined by the configuration in which experience functions. There is no experience that arrives without such determination. Even experiences described as pre-reflective or non-conceptual are not outside configuration; they merely function within configurations that do not thematize themselves.

This does not make experience illusory or unreliable. It makes it *worldly.*

The difficulty arises when this situatedness is ignored or denied. In order to function as a foundation, experience must be detached from the world in which it appears, while simultaneously retaining the authority it derives from appearing within that world. Experience is asked to be both inside and outside configuration at once. This is the structural contradiction at the heart of fundamental experience.

The contradiction often remains unnoticed because the language used to describe experience masks it. Terms such as “immediate,” “direct,” or “prior to interpretation” suggest independence from configuration, while continuing to rely on the coherence that configuration provides. The felt certainty of experience is then taken as evidence of its foundational status, rather than as an effect of internal consistency within a world.

In this way, experience is transformed from a mode of appearing into a criterion of legitimacy. What is experienced is no longer simply what appears; it becomes what authorizes other descriptions or invalidates them. Worlds that do not align with the privileged experience are relegated to secondary status, derivative explanation, or misunderstanding. Hierarchy enters not by argument, but by elevation.

This elevation also overextends experience conceptually. Experience is asked to explain why it should count as foundational, yet any such explanation would already presuppose a framework in which explanation is meaningful. Fundamental experience thus oscillates between two incompatible roles: it is invoked as beyond justification, while simultaneously functioning as the ultimate justification. It is declared self-evident, yet made to do justificatory work.

Once this oscillation is exposed, the foundational claim collapses. Experience cannot ground worlds because it already appears as one. It cannot adjudicate between configurations because it is always configured. It cannot serve as a neutral reference point because neutrality would require a standpoint it does not possess.

None of this diminishes the significance of experience. What it undermines is the expectation that experience can carry philosophical finality. Experience does not fail as a foundation because it is too weak, but because it is too entangled. Its strength lies in *functioning*, not in grounding.

The insistence on fundamental experience therefore reveals less about experience itself than about *the persistence of foundational thinking*. When foundations are no longer sought in metaphysics or ontology, they reappear in phenomenology and spirituality. The form changes, but the operation remains the same. Experience becomes the last refuge of certainty, even as it is stripped of the conditions that make it possible.

If experience is relieved of this burden, a different picture emerges. Experience no longer needs to justify worlds, explain their legitimacy, or guarantee their truth. It can be acknowledged as unavoidable without being elevated, as decisive without being final. What replaces foundation is not arbitrariness, but *functioning*: the way experience operates within worlds, sustains their coherence, and makes them livable.

This shift does not resolve plurality. It makes it unavoidable.

2.6 Experience Without Foundation

Relieving experience of its foundational role does not weaken it. It restores it to what it actually is able to do. Once experience is no longer expected to ground worlds, guarantee truth, or provide ultimate legitimacy, it can be described without distortion.

Experience does not disappear when foundation is withdrawn. It remains unavoidable. What changes is its function.

Rather than serving as a final court of appeal, experience appears as the ongoing mode in which worlds operate. It does not stand behind or beneath worlds; it unfolds as them. Experience neither precedes configuration nor survives it intact. It is inseparable from the ways in which coherence, relevance, and normativity are already in place.

This means that experience does not require safeguarding against distortion. Mediation is not what corrupts experience; it is what makes experience possible as experience. The search for an unmediated core mistakes functioning for interference. What is taken to be distortion is often simply the visibility of configuration.

Experience without foundation is therefore not raw, immediate, or pre-theoretical. It is situated, shaped, and internally consistent. It carries the marks of its configuration, without thereby being reduced to interpretation or belief. To say that experience is configured is not to say that it is fabricated. It is to say that it operates.

In this sense, experience does not justify worlds. Worlds render experience intelligible, insofar as justification is possible at all. What counts as experience, what is recognized as such, and what is ignored or dismissed are all functions of world-specific coherence. This does not introduce circularity in a problematic sense. It makes explicit that circularity is already at work, but without a hidden center.

Removing foundation also removes the expectation that experience must settle conflicts between worlds. If experience is always already world-bound, then no experience can adjudicate between configurations from a neutral standpoint. There is no experiential court above worlds. Conflicts between worlds are not resolved by appeal to deeper experience, but by shifts in configuration, by breakdowns, overlaps, or transformations that cannot be guaranteed in advance.

This has an important consequence. Plurality no longer appears as a failure of convergence or as a problem to be overcome. It appears as the normal condition of experience. Different worlds name different configurations of experience, each internally coherent, each compelling from within, and none capable of grounding the others. Experience does not unify these worlds beneath a shared essence. They remain distinct by virtue of their configuration.

Experience without foundation is therefore neither skeptical nor relativistic. It does not say that anything goes, nor that experience is unreliable. It says that experience functions locally, as a coherent configuration, and that its authority does not extend beyond that functioning. What experience can do, it does fully. What it cannot do, it should not be asked to do.

This shift reframes philosophical responsibility. Instead of seeking the right experience, the deepest access, or the most fundamental disclosure, attention turns to how experience operates, how worlds stabilize, and how their internal norms arise and hold. The task is no longer to secure an ultimate ground, but to describe functioning without smuggling in hierarchy.

In this light, the problem of fundamental experience dissolves rather than being solved. Once experience is no longer treated as a foundation, the demand it was meant to satisfy disappears. What remains is not emptiness, but plurality: multiple worlds, each sustained through experience, none entitled to rule the others from below.

This does not close the inquiry. It displaces it.

The question is no longer whether experience can ground worlds, but how worlds take shape, maintain coherence, and sometimes lose it. That question requires a different vocabulary. It requires a shift from foundation to configuration.

That shift is the task of the next chapter.

3.1 Why the Concept of World Is Necessary

The concept of *world* is introduced here not as a metaphysical claim, but as a descriptive necessity. Without it, experience remains fragmented, and plurality becomes either a problem to be solved or a confusion to be reduced. Terms such as perspective, context, or framework prove insufficient, not because they are wrong, but because they underdescribe how experience actually functions.

To speak of perspectives presupposes a shared object or reality that is viewed from different angles. This presupposition already introduces a unifying background against which differences are measured. What appears as plurality is then treated as variation within a single underlying order. The differences between scientific, spiritual, therapeutic, or everyday experience are flattened into differences of viewpoint rather than differences of world.

Similarly, the language of context suggests an external frame that surrounds experience without constituting it. Context explains conditions, influences, or circumstances, but it does not account for why certain distinctions, norms, and evidences appear as self-evident from within experience itself. Context remains ancillary, while the core of experience is left unexplained.

The concept of world addresses this gap. A world names the coherence within which experience makes sense at all. It refers to the alignment of what appears, how it appears, and what counts as relevant, real, or meaningful. A world is not added to experience; it is the condition under which experience is experienced as intelligible rather than as noise.

This does not mean that worlds are totalities in an ontological sense. They are not containers, domains, or layers of reality. Nor are they interpretive overlays imposed on a neutral given. A world is the way in which experience already hangs together before it is thematized as experience. It is what makes certain questions possible and renders others unintelligible.

Without the concept of world, plurality is easily misdescribed. Differences between ways of experiencing are treated either as superficial disagreements or as competing claims about the same underlying reality. In both cases, plurality is subordinated to unity. The concept of world allows plurality to be described as real without being reduced, and as coherent without being integrated.

Worlds, in this sense, are neither subjective nor objective. They are not inner realms opposed to an external reality, nor are they collections of objects independent of experience. They are configurations in which subject-object distinctions themselves take shape. To speak of worlds is therefore not to multiply realities, but to acknowledge how reality appears differently depending on how experience functions.

The necessity of the world concept lies precisely here. It makes it possible to describe plurality without invoking hierarchy, and coherence without invoking foundation. It provides a vocabulary for difference that does not immediately collapse into either relativism or unification.

3.2 From Experience to Coherence

Experience does not occur as a series of isolated moments. What is experienced appears within a field of relevance that gives it sense, weight, and direction. This field is not constructed retrospectively, nor is it inferred from individual experiences. It is operative from the outset.

When experience is treated atomistically, coherence must be added from the outside. Meaning is explained through synthesis, interpretation, or conceptual organization. Yet this approach misrepresents how experience actually functions. What counts as an experience already presupposes coherence. Discrete experiences are recognizable as such only because they occur within a world that sustains distinctions between significant and insignificant, salient and peripheral.

This does not mean that experience is uniform or homogeneous. It means that experience is already aligned. What appears stands out against a background of expectations, habits, and norms that are rarely explicit. This alignment is not chosen, nor is it imposed by reflection. It is lived.

Coherence, in this sense, is not a property added to experience. It is the condition under which experience appears as experience. A sound, a thought, a sensation, or an event counts as something only insofar as it resonates with an existing field of relevance. Outside such a field, appearance would dissolve into indeterminacy.

The transition from experience to world is therefore not a step, but a clarification. Experience does not first occur and then become coherent. It occurs as coherent, even when that coherence is fragile or contested. What varies between worlds is not the presence of coherence, but its form.

This insight undermines the temptation to locate meaning in individual experiences. No single experience carries significance by itself. Its significance depends on how it fits within a broader configuration. What feels immediate or self-evident is not so because it is unmediated, but because it is well-integrated into a functioning world.

This also explains why appeals to experience often fail to resolve disagreements between worlds. What counts as decisive experience in one world may be marginal or unintelligible in another. The disagreement does not concern the experience as such, but the coherence within which it appears. Without acknowledging this, debates are misframed as conflicts over facts rather than as differences in world-functioning.

By attending to coherence rather than isolated experience, the analysis remains descriptive without becoming foundational. Coherence is not invoked as a ground. It is observed as an effect of functioning. Worlds hold together not because they rest on something deeper, but because their configurations remain operative.

This shift from experience to coherence prepares the ground for the functional concept of configuration developed in the previous section. Configuration names precisely this alignment without reifying it. It allows experience to be described as world-bound without being reduced to structure or foundation.

3.3 Configuration as a Functional Concept

The concept of configuration is introduced here to describe how a world operates without invoking structure, foundation, or underlying mechanism. Configuration does not name what a world is made of, nor does it refer to a hidden order beneath experience. It names the way in which elements are attuned to one another such that experience functions coherently as a world.

Configuration is therefore not explanatory in a causal sense. It does not account for why a world exists, nor does it predict its outcomes. *It describes how a world holds together while it functions*. The emphasis lies on operation, not origin.

This distinction is crucial. Concepts such as structure, system, or framework tend to imply stability, repeatability, and abstraction. They suggest that what matters can be separated from what appears, formalized, and reapplied. Configuration resists this implication. A configuration is inseparable from the experience in which it is at work. It cannot be lifted out, generalized without remainder, or treated as an independent object of analysis.

To speak of configuration is to remain at the level of functioning.

A configuration consists in the mutual adjustment of multiple elements: patterns of attention, habitual distinctions, linguistic resources, bodily orientations, expectations, and implicit norms. None of these elements is primary. None functions in isolation. What matters is not their presence, but their coordination. A configuration exists only insofar as this coordination is effective.

This effectiveness is not guaranteed. Configurations are dynamic. They stabilize, shift, overlap, and sometimes break down. When they function smoothly, the world appears self-evident. When they falter, experience becomes disjointed, ambiguous, or unsettled. These moments of instability do not reveal a deeper layer beneath configuration. They reveal configuration itself as operative.

Configuration should therefore not be understood as something that *precedes* experience. It becomes visible only through experience, and only retrospectively. One does not encounter a configuration as such. One inhabits it. Its contours appear only when coherence is questioned, disrupted, or contrasted with another way in which the world might function.

This also means that configuration does not introduce a new level of hierarchy. It does not sit above worlds as a meta-principle, nor does it rank configurations according to their adequacy or depth. Different configurations give rise to different worlds, each with its own internal coherence and norms. Configuration explains neither superiority nor priority. It accounts for functioning, not for legitimacy.

By using configuration as a functional concept, this account avoids two opposing temptations. The first is substantialism, in which worlds are treated as domains with fixed properties. The second is subjectivism, in which worlds are reduced to attitudes or perspectives. Configuration allows worlds to be described as neither objects nor viewpoints, but as operative unities sustained through experience.

This functional use of configuration also clarifies why no world can serve as a foundation for another. Because configuration is always world-specific, there is no configuration-neutral standpoint from which worlds could be compared, ordered, or grounded. Each world functions through its own configuration, and that functioning cannot be translated without loss into another.

Configuration, in this sense, is not a deeper explanation. It is a restraint. It prevents the analysis of worlds from sliding into metaphysics or hierarchy by keeping description tied to operation. What configuration offers is not depth, but *precision*.

With this concept in place, it becomes possible to describe worlds as coherent without being grounded, plural without being ranked, and stable without being fixed. The remaining task is to show how such configurations sustain norms internally, and how plurality can be maintained without collapsing into arbitrariness. That task belongs to the next sections of this chapter.

3.4 Internal Normativity of Worlds

To describe worlds as configurations of experience is not to describe them as norm-free. On the contrary. Worlds are normative through and through. What distinguishes them is not whether norms operate, but *how* they do.

Normativity here does not refer to external standards or universal criteria. It does not require appeal to truth in an absolute sense, nor to values grounded outside experience. It refers instead to the internal distinctions that allow a world to function at all. Within a world, some things count as correct, others as mistaken; some responses are appropriate, others misguided; some questions make sense, others do not.

These distinctions are not optional. They are constitutive of coherence. Without them, experience would not merely become plural; it would become indeterminate. A world that could not distinguish between what fits and what does not would not function as a world.

This internal normativity is often misunderstood. It is tempting to think that rejecting foundations entails rejecting standards. Yet the opposite is the case. Foundations seek to secure normativity by anchoring it in something ultimate. Worlds secure normativity by sustaining it locally, through ongoing functioning. What counts as correct or incorrect is not derived from a deeper ground, but from the coherence of the configuration itself.

This is why the absence of hierarchy does not imply arbitrariness. Within a world, not everything goes. Experiences can be challenged, interpretations corrected, practices refined. Disagreement is possible precisely because norms are operative. The difference is that these norms do not claim authority beyond the world in which they function.

From this perspective, normativity is neither imposed nor discovered. It emerges from use. It is sustained through repetition, correction, and mutual attunement. A scientific world, for example, does not appeal to its norms as expressions of ultimate reality; it enacts them through methods, instruments, and practices that render certain moves legitimate and others invalid. A spiritual world does something analogous, though with different criteria and forms of attestation.

Crucially, these norms are not merely subjective. They are shared, enforceable, and consequential. One can fail within a world. One can misunderstand, misapply, or violate its norms. Such failure is meaningful only because the world provides a framework within which it can be recognized as failure.

What internal normativity does *not* provide is a means of ranking worlds. The fact that a norm functions effectively within one world does not grant it authority over another. Norms do not travel intact across configurations. When they are applied outside the world in which they operate, they either lose their force or become instruments of imposition.

This is the point at which foundational thinking typically re-enters. Faced with multiple normative orders, philosophy often seeks a higher norm that can adjudicate between them. Yet such adjudication inevitably privileges one world’s criteria as universal. The result is not neutrality, but hierarchy.

By contrast, acknowledging internal normativity allows plurality to remain real without collapsing into relativism. Worlds are not equal in the sense of interchangeable. They differ in what they make

possible, in what they sustain, and in how they constrain experience. These differences matter. What is rejected is not discrimination, but elevation.

Internal normativity thus stabilizes worlds without grounding them. It provides discipline without hierarchy, constraint without foundation. Norms hold because worlds hold, not because they are anchored elsewhere.

This understanding of normativity shifts philosophical responsibility. The task is no longer to determine which norms are ultimately correct, but to describe how norms arise, function, and sometimes fail within worlds. Evaluation becomes immanent rather than transcendent. Critique does not disappear, but it changes its address.

With this in view, plurality no longer appears as a threat to meaning. It appears as a field of distinct normative orders, each coherent on its own terms, none entitled to subsume the others. The challenge is not to unify these orders, but to understand how they coexist, interact, and sometimes collide.

That challenge leads directly to the question of lateral plurality itself.

3.5 Laterality Without Leveling

To reject hierarchy is not to deny difference. Laterality does not mean that worlds are interchangeable, nor that their distinctions dissolve into indifference. It means that worlds are not ordered along a vertical axis of depth, truth, or reality. They exist alongside one another, not above or below.

This lateral relation is easily misunderstood. Without hierarchy, it is tempting to assume that all worlds must count as equally valid in every respect. Yet this assumption reintroduces what it seeks to avoid. It replaces vertical ranking with horizontal leveling. Difference is preserved only in name, while significance quietly disappears.

Laterality avoids both moves.

Worlds differ not in degree of access to an underlying reality, but in how they organize experience, sustain coherence, and enact normativity. These differences are consequential. They shape what can be seen, said, and done. They determine what counts as a problem and what does not. A world is not weakened by the presence of others, nor strengthened by denying them.

The absence of hierarchy does not remove tension between worlds. It exposes it. When worlds collide, the conflict cannot be resolved by appeal to a deeper level or a more fundamental standpoint. There is no neutral court in which competing worlds can be judged. What appears instead are negotiations, exclusions, translations, or breakdowns. These outcomes are not failures of rationality, but expressions of plurality without ground.

This is where leveling must be resisted most carefully. To say that no world is foundational is not to say that all worlds are equally livable, sustainable, or consequential. Some worlds support practices that endure, others exhaust themselves quickly. Some generate forms of coordination that extend across domains, others remain locally effective. These differences matter, but they do not accumulate into a single scale of superiority.

Laterality preserves difference without converting it into rank.

This preservation requires restraint. The impulse to evaluate worlds globally is strong, especially when norms conflict. Yet global evaluation inevitably borrows criteria from within one world and projects them outward. What appears as assessment is often annexation. Laterality insists that such moves be recognized as world-specific rather than universal.

At the same time, laterality does not prohibit criticism. Critique remains possible, but it operates immanently. A world can be criticized for failing *by its own standards*, for internal incoherence, or for instability that undermines its practices. What cannot be done is to declare a world deficient simply because it does not conform to another world’s criteria.

This distinction is essential. Without it, non-hierarchical pluralism collapses into either relativism or covert domination. Laterality keeps both at bay by maintaining difference without elevation and critique without transcendence.

Laterality also clarifies why attempts at integration so often disappoint. Integrative frameworks promise reconciliation, synthesis, or higher-order unity. They aim to dissolve conflict by subsuming worlds under a broader scheme. Yet such schemes invariably reinstate hierarchy by determining what counts as integrable and on what terms. Worlds that resist integration are reclassified as partial or immature.

From a lateral perspective, the persistence of non-integrability is not a problem to be solved. It is a feature of plurality itself. Worlds do not need to converge in order to coexist. Their coexistence does not require reconciliation at a higher level.

This does not entail isolation. Worlds interact, overlap, and influence one another. But these interactions occur without guarantee of harmony or convergence. Influence does not imply subordination. Overlap does not erase distinction. Laterality accommodates these dynamics without forcing them into a single narrative.

In this sense, laterality names a condition rather than a prescription. It does not instruct worlds how to relate. It describes the absence of a privileged axis along which relations could be ordered in advance. What remains is coexistence without guarantee.

With this in place, the remaining task is to account for movement. Worlds are not static. They shift, intersect, and sometimes collapse. Understanding these dynamics requires attention to configuration as something that can change, rather than as a stable arrangement.

That task is taken up in the next section.

3.6 Transitions, Overlaps, and Breaks

Worlds are not static formations. Their configurations shift, intersect, and sometimes lose coherence altogether. These movements do not follow a linear trajectory, nor do they point toward convergence or improvement. They are contingent, uneven, and often opaque from within the worlds they affect.

Transitions between worlds rarely occur as deliberate choices. One does not step from one world into another by decision alone. Transitions typically involve gradual reconfiguration: patterns of attention shift, norms loosen or tighten, distinctions lose their grip. What once appeared obvious becomes questionable, while previously marginal elements gain salience. The world does not disappear at once; it thins.

Such transitions are often experienced as ambiguity rather than clarity. Because configuration is what sustains coherence, its alteration unsettles experience before it becomes intelligible. The sense of being "between worlds" is not the experience of inhabiting two worlds simultaneously, but of inhabiting one whose configuration no longer holds without resistance.

Overlaps occur when configurations partially align. Elements from different worlds resonate without fully integrating. Practices, concepts, or experiences migrate, but they do not arrive unchanged. What appears as overlap is not fusion, but temporary compatibility. The worlds involved remain distinct, even as certain configurations operate across their boundaries.

These overlaps are frequently misread as evidence of a deeper unity. Shared vocabulary, similar experiences, or converging practices are taken to indicate an underlying foundation. Yet overlap does not imply sameness of world. It indicates only that configurations can intersect without collapsing into one another. What functions in more than one world does so differently in each.

Breaks are more disruptive. A configuration may lose coherence without being replaced. Norms fail to regulate experience, distinctions no longer guide action, and relevance becomes unstable. Such breaks are not revelations of a deeper truth beneath the world. They are failures of functioning. The world does not give way to foundation; it ceases to operate.

These moments are often interpreted retrospectively as transitions toward something more authentic or fundamental. From the perspective developed here, this interpretation is unwarranted. Breakdown does not point downward. It exposes the absence of ground. What becomes visible is not depth, but contingency.

Configuration, because it is functional, can fail. This failure is not exceptional. It is a possibility inherent in any world that holds together without foundation. Worlds persist through ongoing adjustment, not through stability guaranteed in advance. Their fragility is not a defect, but a condition of their plurality.

Understanding transitions, overlaps, and breaks in this way prevents their appropriation by hierarchical narratives. Change does not imply ascent. Breakdown does not reveal essence. Movement does not trace a path toward unity. It marks the limits of coherence and the emergence of new configurations without guarantee.

3.7 What This World Concept Does and Does Not Do

The account developed in this chapter proposes a way of describing worlds as configurations of experience without grounding them in foundation or ordering them hierarchically. It is important to be clear about what this account claims, and what it deliberately refrains from claiming.

It does not offer an explanation of why worlds exist. It does not identify causal mechanisms or underlying structures. It does not propose a meta-framework capable of integrating all worlds into a single system. Any attempt to do so would reintroduce the very hierarchy this account seeks to avoid.

Nor does it provide criteria for deciding which world is correct, superior, or more real. Such criteria would have to be drawn from within a world and projected outward. The result would not be neutrality, but annexation.

What this account does provide is a descriptive vocabulary for plurality without foundation. It allows worlds to be understood as coherent, normative, and consequential without being ranked. It makes visible how experience functions world-specifically, how coherence is sustained through configuration, and how plurality persists without requiring resolution.

This vocabulary does not eliminate disagreement. It reframes it. Conflicts between worlds are no longer treated as failures to converge on a shared truth, but as encounters between distinct normative orders. The task is not to resolve these encounters in advance, but to understand their dynamics.

The concept of world used here is therefore neither explanatory nor therapeutic. It does not aim to reconcile differences, dissolve tension, or provide orientation. It aims to describe how orientation already operates, and how it varies.

In refusing foundation, this account also refuses closure. Worlds are not stabilized by ultimate grounds, nor are they secured against breakdown. Their coherence is provisional, their norms immanent, their plurality irreducible. This refusal is not a loss. It is what allows worlds to be described without distortion.

What remains unresolved is not a deficit, but a task. If worlds function without foundation, then describing them requires a method that can remain with functioning without seeking depth. Such a method must resist overview, integration, and finality. It must allow plurality to remain visible without organizing it.

The development of such a method lies beyond this chapter. It requires a different philosophical instrument, one oriented toward situated description rather than systematic explanation.

That instrument is introduced next.

4.1 From Description to Showing

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

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

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

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

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

What follows does not offer a new account of what worlds are. It offers a way of positioning description so that worlds can appear without overview, without synthesis, and without appeal to foundations.

4.2 Why the Diorama Is Not a Metaphor

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

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

The diorama does not operate in this way.

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

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

The diorama refuses this relation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.3 The Diorama as a Positioning Instrument

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.4 No Overview, No Synthesis

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

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

The diorama refuses this move.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This restraint prepares the next step. If overview and synthesis are excluded, description itself must be reconsidered. How can description remain precise, responsible, and critical without appealing to

neutrality or totality? That question concerns the practice of description itself, and it is taken up in the following section.

4.5 Diorama and Description

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

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

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

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

The diorama disciplines description by keeping it local. What is described must be shown to function within the world it belongs to.Claims that exceed this scope no longer do the work they were introduced to do. Description cannot appeal to what lies beneath or beyond the world in order to justify itself. Its adequacy is tested internally: does it allow the world’s coherence to appear without distortion?

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

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

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

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

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

What remains to be addressed is how multiple dioramas relate to one another. If description is always situated, then no single diorama can be sufficient. The plurality of worlds entails a plurality of dioramas. The implications of this multiplicity must be made explicit, lest the instrument itself become singular and privileged.

That task follows.

4.6 The Plurality of Dioramas

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

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

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

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

The plurality of dioramas also prevents the reintroduction of authority through repetition. Reusing the same diorama across different worlds risks imposing a single configuration of relevance where it no longer fits. What initially functioned as an instrument of visibility becomes an instrument of distortion. Fidelity requires variation.

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

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

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

4.7 The Limits of the Instrument

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

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

Nor can the diorama secure description against error. Situated description remains fallible. It can misjudge relevance, misread norms, or fail to register what matters within a world. The diorama does not protect against such failures. It only makes their conditions visible.

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

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

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

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

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

What remains unresolved is not a methodological gap, but a normative question. If worlds function without foundation, and if description can only situate without adjudicating, then what follows for how one lives among worlds? That question cannot be answered instrumentally. It requires a different kind of reflection.

That reflection is taken up next.

5.1 Why This Is Not Relativism

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

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

This position is unavailable here.

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

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

This difference matters.

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

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

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

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

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

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

To call this relativism is therefore inaccurate. Relativism presupposes the very overview it claims to deny. What is at stake here is not the leveling of claims, but the refusal to elevate any claim to the status of arbiter.

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

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

5.2 Internal Normativity Revisited

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

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

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

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

These failures matter. They have consequences. Practices are abandoned, revised, or excluded on their basis. Worlds do not float freely. They discipline themselves through the very norms that allow them to function.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5.3 Why No External Criterion Is Possible

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

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

Every criterion is world-bound.

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

This applies equally to criteria presented as universal. Appeals to reason, objectivity, coherence, or even human flourishing do not escape this condition. Each of these terms acquires its force within particular configurations. When they are abstracted from those configurations and projected outward, they lose their anchoring and gain authority only by concealment.

The illusion of externality is maintained by forgetting this origin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That question is taken up next.

5.4 Responsibility Without Foundation

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

Responsibility arises from situatedness.

To act, judge, or speak is always to do so from within a world. One cannot step outside all worlds in order to decide neutrally how to act. Every decision presupposes a configuration of relevance in which some consequences matter and others do not. Responsibility is inseparable from this condition. It is not something added to action after the fact; it is inherent in acting at all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That acknowledgment follows next.

5.5 Living Between Worlds

Living among worlds is rarely a matter of inhabiting one world exclusively. Most lives unfold in the space between configurations. Different worlds make competing demands, sustain incompatible norms, and organize relevance in divergent ways. This condition is not exceptional. It is structural.

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

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

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

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

What remains is endurance.

Endurance here does not mean passive tolerance. It means remaining with tension without converting it into a problem to be solved. It involves recognizing that some conflicts are not resolvable because they are not misunderstandings. They are expressions of plurality.

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

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

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

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

5.6 Critique Without Elevation

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

Critique operates immanently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This understanding of critique completes the normative arc of the book. Normativity remains, responsibility persists, critique is possible. What has been relinquished is the fantasy of final authority.