

Phenomenological Writing – Lifeworld
“Neurophenomenology of the Lifeworld”

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[T]he everyday lifeworld...is the province of reality in which man continuously participates in ways which are at once inevitable and patterned. (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973, p. 3)

The lifeworld is the progenitor of the natural attitude, the everyday milieu through which we can move subconsciously – predictably and unreflectively – so that we may free our minds for more deliberate thinking. As Heidegger would say, we are “thrown” into a *pre-existing* lifeworld: we take it for granted and assume that it will continue in its present shape and form indefinitely. This provides a (perhaps false) sense of security; yet it may also prevent us from critically examining this all-encompassing “province of reality.” Ultimately, the shape and form of our lifeworld will begin to shape and form us. Our minds become so accustomed to this reassuring structure of continuity that it begins to be reflected in our very neural patterning.

I’m thinking here most intimately of the *spatial* structuring of the lifeworld: the defined spaces through which we move daily have very specific geometries and patterns. These geometries and patterns are registered in the visual cortex. As we move through our familiar lifeworld, day after day, the registering of these geometries and patterns soon becomes imprinted onto associated neuronal assemblies, while each new passing movement only strengthens and reinforces the synaptic connections involved. What we are left with, then, is an indelible neuronal imprint of the spatial structuring of our lifeworld.

Take, for example, the daily trip you make from your computer to the kitchen. How many times a day do you make this journey? Each time the passage is made the visual cortex registers the very specific geometries and patterns involved. We take this as commonplace, so natural; yet we remain unaware of the neuronal connections being solidified with each passing movement. So one day you decide to rearrange the furniture on this passage. Suddenly, the visual cortex is presented with an entirely new spatial configuration. Old synaptic connections wither away as the new spatial configuration begins to be imprinted on associated neuronal assemblies. Next time you return to your computer will you ever-so-imperceptibly detect new realizations? A new train of thought becomes manifest in the writing: a whole new perception of reality becomes possible.

Or how about another scale? Consider a person living in a high-rise apartment in Manhattan. The spatial configuration of their lifeworld consists of multiple overlapped squares: there is the square of their apartment overlaid on top of the square of the building in which

they live overlaid on top of the squares of the street pattern. They routinely take the elevator down to the ground floor. They step outside and look left and right. Their place of employment may be 7 blocks up and 4 blocks over. Their favorite deli may be 2 blocks over and 3 blocks down. Wherever they move in their everyday lifeworld, they are subject to the rigid, digital, orthogonal geometries and patterns of the encompassing square grids. A neurophenomenology would assert that continuously experiencing the cubical squareness of their everyday lifeworld is being imprinted upon associated neuronal assemblies. May we assert that this imprinting, this strengthening and reinforcing of synaptic connections, is having an effect on their worldview?

One way to answer this question would be to make a phenomenological contrast with the geometries and patterns of moving through a different sort of spatial configuration. For example, I have had the distinct pleasure of moving through some of the hill towns in Tuscany. There are no square grids there: the buildings and thoroughfares evolved *organically* as a reflection of the existing topography. There is a sense of flow, of concatenation of visual impressions, of sequences of experiential unfolding, of inevitable centripetal resolution, of resonance and attunement with natural patterns and processes. For residents of these organic embodiments, the lifeworld is not so cut and dry, so black and white, so digitally impressed upon associated neuronal assemblies. I would assert that this sort of experience of the spatial configuration of the lifeworld would result in worldviews of similar functional isomorphic topology, simply because the recurring experience is imprinted neurally.

I could take this neurophenomenology of the lifeworld even a step further: I could propose consciously *designing* the lifeworld to *enhance* the neural configurations of the embodied minds moving therein. As a designer I would want to emphasize the experience of flow, the curves and proportions of a sacred geometry, evocative smells and sounds, texture and iconography, hierarchies and holarchies of scale, contrasting hues and tones, the play of depth perception, the incongruity of strategically positioned surprise, and in every way, multidimensional unfoldings of sensory awareness...etc., etc. I would consider this “designing for consciousness” by deliberately arranging the spatial configuration of the lifeworld to optimally stimulate neural functioning. This is what I mean by a “neurophenomenology of the lifeworld.”