

Attention, Experience and Self: Reflecting on Spinelli's Notion of 'Worlding' (2016)

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Abstract

Spinelli's notions of 'self' and 'worlding' are examined from the perspective of the operational psycho-phenomenological model of consciousness as delineated in the paper, *Consciousness as Reflexive Shadow*. It is argued that Spinelli's model still allows for an ontologically neutral approach to unpacking 'self' and 'other' within the 'how' of the operations of attention deployment.

Key Words

Worlding; consciousness; attention; self; phenomenology

Introduction

In this paper I intend to offer some reflections on Ernesto Spinelli's notion of 'worlding' in which I will suggest an expansion of his concept that hopefully adds a functional dimension. By employing an 'operational phenomenology' (Nelson, 1997-98). I believe it is possible to reveal how we construct and construe reality in a way that becomes useful in our therapeutic and coaching work with clients. Through exploring the 'how' of attention deployment and the phenomenological 'operations' that generate and shape the flux of experience that lead to any given 'worldview', we give ourselves an opportunity to re-align our experiential worlds and hence gain a greater understanding of who we believe we are. By taking this functional, 'ontologically neutral' approach, we are more able to facilitate our clients' direct altering of their own 'worlding' process and hence the resultant collection of ascriptions, meanings and behaviours that emerge from a given worldview (Nelson and Howell, 1993-4). I argue here and in previous publications that altering the manner in which individuals pay attention can change how they 'collapse' their experiences into the worldviews that become their existential worlds and beliefs (Nelson, 1990; 1997-98; 2000).

About 22 years ago I summarized my position in the paper cited above, *Consciousness as Reflexive Shadow*. Its earliest version was given as a poster presentation at the first Consciousness Studies conference held at the University of Tucson Medical School in 1994. Later, a highly condensed

version of the original 45-page paper was published in the international, peer-reviewed journal, *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*.

What I argued for in that paper was a re-orientation in what should constitute consciousness research together with a model of how that might work. My primary emphasis was the necessity to study consciousness *qua* consciousness, setting aside attempts to find the origins or physical substrate underlying it and, instead, explore the phenomenological processes at the heart of attention and states of awareness. In effect, I was suggesting that we should explore the ‘how’ of consciousness in place of the ‘what’ or ‘why’. It seemed to me then, and still does now, that understanding the phenomenological operations underpinning how human beings experience and construe the world are more illuminating and have far greater use than simply being able to say that consciousness arises as a result of quantum processes in micro neural tubules of the neurons in the brain or any other neurophysiological generative mechanisms.

I have always believed that most practitioners of science confuse the epistemological nature of the scientific enterprise with the belief that they are actually uncovering the ontological source of what they study. Science is an operationalized methodology designed to produce reliable, repeatable knowledge about ‘things’ and ‘systems’. Of course to know something is a mental construct created from the experience of immediate perception and memory. As has been argued by far more illustrious minds than my own, that knowledge is not the ‘thing-in-itself’ (Kant, 1929). ‘Things’ and ‘processes’ known to us become ‘things’ and ‘processes’ because we ascribe to them an existence and a place in a hypothetical ‘world-space’ as a definite otherness that we intuitively feel exists apart from ourselves. However, that sense of otherness is just another ascription created in our experiential worlds of consciousness. I am not arguing that ‘out there’ does not exist, merely that it is important for us to recognise ontological uncertainty, and maintain a stance of what I call ‘ontological neutralism’ (Nelson and Howell, 1993-4).

It is my view that the widely held belief that science’s main function is to reveal the what exists has contributed to a missed opportunity when we attempt to understand perception, consciousness and self. When cosmologists or neuroscientists make statements about the nature of the worlds they study, they appear to forget that these are human cognitive constructs that exist within the human experiential frame only. If they seem to point to extant processes and things beyond human knowing, whatever these might be, the ‘thing-in-itself’ will never be directly available to human knowing. The world ‘out there’ remains a series of ascriptions we make that are related to and interpreted within the context of human experience and knowing in which they arise.

The problem is compounded when we attempt to explore that quintessential experience of experiences we call our consciousness and, hence, our supposed

'self'. We seek to find the 'thing-in-itself' so that our worlds of experience have some kind of consistency that makes sense. Everything must have its place and correctly ordered relationship in the metaphoric physical 'space' we ascribe as 'objective', 'out-there' reality. It appears that consciousness does not have a natural place in that world, so we struggle to find one, with the most likely candidate being the brain (another construct built from a collection of experiences and ascriptions).

Radical Empiricism and reality as ascription

In his essay, 'Radical Empiricism', William James brings the objective and subjective worlds together in the most logical place to do so—in the experiential frames of those human beings having an experience they believe to be reality.

...there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff 'pure experience', then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter... The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the 'pure' experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality, or existence, a simple that. In this naïf immediacy it is of course valid; it is there, we act upon it; and the doubling of it in retrospection into a state of mind and a reality intended thereby, is just one of the acts.

(James, 1967: pp 5, 23-24)

Much of the discussion of the nature of 'self' and 'consciousness' seems to have embedded in it a fundamental confusion. Statements are constantly made about what is (ontological) drawn from what is experientially known (epistemological). As a human knower we only have access to our moment to moment awareness – everything else is an ascription. Thus our knowledge of all aspects of our world – 'things', 'consciousness' and 'self' – are ascriptions created by us. Recognizing that we are only making an ascription and that what actually exists is out of reach to human knowing is what I call taking an 'ontological neutral' stance. We recognize and acknowledge our ontological ascriptions as symbols – a picture drawn from experience regarding what we believe that experience implies about existence apart from the knower. It is also acknowledged that the knower is operating only in the world of human experience and must admit that anything s/he says about existence is a current (and perhaps temporary) belief about what is.

In Spinelli's paper on the nature of 'self' he argues for what he calls the 'Third Grand Theory', which implies that the experience we have of an

experiential self arises only in relation to ‘otherness’ (Spinelli, 2016). Although his notion of ‘self’ appears not to be a ‘thing-in-itself’, there is still the implication that ‘self’ is to be found in the deeper layer of ontological relatedness. It appears that Sartre, Husserl, Heidegger and Spinelli are all trying to specify an ontological ‘bottom-line’ that defines being as thing, self or interrelatedness.

Why bother? What does such a specification allow us to do? I would argue that it offers nothing more than a base from which we can argue with others about who is right and who is wrong regarding the nature of the ontological bottom line for consciousness. What we do in life (therapy included) is all about attending and experiencing. What drives that experience is the act of attention – from whatever that arises – whether brain or existential ‘field’.

Whether or not the ‘self’ exists (in itself) or arises as some kind of Hegelian antithesis resulting from an endless process of relatedness, what is important to anyone attempting to understand who we are, I would argue, is the process and how attention and knowing work, in a function sense, within the phenomenological domain. Spinelli appears to be pointing us toward a conception of that process:

*In recent writings, I have employed the term *worlding* to signify that mode of existence which is always-becoming, ever-shifting, process-like, and linguistically-elusive. As such, any attempts to convey worlding can only be indirectly expressed through allusion and metaphor [ascription]. In contrast, when, as human beings, we experience our existence reflectively so that our experience of existing is essentialised and appears as ‘thing-based’, separate and distinct constructs such as self and other and world emerge. This structural ‘thing-ification’ of our experience of being is expressed via the term the worldview... From a worlding-focus, no I/other/world separateness exists. The worldview is a fragmented expression of worlding and, therefore, is as ‘real’ as worlding.*

(Spinelli, 2016: pp 317-318)

The concept of ‘worlding’ as used by Spinelli implies a process but without offering any idea of how it works. What are the movements of attention and consciousness that create a particular point-of-view and knowing? Labelling is not sufficient to give us the kind of insight we require to explore it ourselves or guide others in therapeutic and spiritual encounters. However, if we stick to ‘raw experience’, as James would have it, we can remain aware that we are talking about process and thus remain cognizant that any label we provide is an ascription we attach to that

process in order to talk about it. 'Worldview' should be considered to be a 'collapsed experiential waveform' that implies an ontological 'thing-in-itself' but is not it. Recognizing how we engage and conduct the process of Spinelli's 'thing-ification' is at the heart of doing therapy and, I would argue, acts of creativity and spiritual development as well.

Spinelli writes, 'At a worlding level, our existence is a dynamic, continuous becoming' (2016, p 318). As we grasp after 'meaning' and 'understanding' we take an ontological position without realizing it and, even if for a moment we are aware that we are solidifying our experiential world ('worldview'), we quickly forget that our position is an ascription and start to believe it is what exists or who we are (self).

Spinelli also argues:

Via the worldview, we construct a temporally and spatially essence-bound version of worlding. We create reflectively-derived structures that, at best, only partially express the flux of process-like worlding. The worldview's attempts to reflect worlding are necessarily incomplete insofar as no worldview that exactly parallels worlding can be maintained. No matter how flexible the structures that make up the worldview may be, simply that they are structures imposes any number of limitations upon how the worldview can express the dynamic openness of worlding.

(Spinelli, 2016: p 318)

Without specifically stating so, Spinelli's 'process-like worlding' appears to be taking place somewhere 'out there', giving it a quality of being a crypto-transcendental 'real' world 'behind' the ascribed 'reality' of worldview, somewhat like Bohm's notion of a 'Superimplicate Order' underlying quantum processes (1980). However, this 'place' or base-level 'process' can only be yet another ascription that, like all ascriptions, is an attempt to create a worldview that points to what is *really* 'out there' *beyond our on-going experiential worlds*. On the other hand, Spinelli's notion of 'process-like worlding' appears to have considerable merit in that it signals a process underlying our knowing (worldview) and I would argue that process is the totality of phenomenological operations that create a type of attention that collapses our awareness into a specific type of knowing, which is then taken to be the 'real' world.

The hidden problem embedded in the notion of 'worlding', as Spinelli seems to describe it, is that it appears to move the ontological problem below the surface and out of reach, as Bohm did. 'Worlding' is still a 'thing' that has to be located. Also, by casting 'worlding' into the 'lower world' of the 'great unknown', we are doomed only to be able to watch what bubbles to the surface of our experiential worlds as if we are not

participants in the process of creation. This way of working seems to please physicists who remain happy if their equations are sufficiently predictive of the phenomena, even if they often ascribe a bizarre picture of what goes on ‘beneath’ as an ontological bottom line.

Operational phenomenology, attention and the integration of ‘self’ and ‘other’

So, what is the value proposition being offered by abandoning metaphysical structures (or processes) outside the human experiential domain and by moving toward a solely experiential-operational understanding of human knowing and reality? It has been my observation over the past 50+ years of my professional life that we are driven and guided by our attention – both what we pay attention to as well as how we pay attention. My personal experience and empirical research into other human beings has revealed that radical changes in the deployment of attention can lead to different worldviews and ascribed realities – whether the changes in attentional processes were driven by therapy, meditation, psychedelics, or sudden emotional shocks to our existential worlds (Nelson, 1990).

When I began to study the emergence of extraordinary experiencing in ordinary people, I found that most had developed explanatory ascriptions concerning the origins of what had occurred. For some it was God, others spoke of Karma or attributed their encounters to gurus and/or discarnate entities such as angels; some simply insisted that it was the energy of the earth where they were at the time; and drug users placed the source of their experience in the type and quality of the psychotropic substances they had ingested. Many of these non-ordinary experiences had phenomenological features that did not necessarily meet with the expectations of those having them and what they believed was possible. Also, there were many common phenomenological qualities occurring across a variety of experiences.

What appeared to be most useful analysis when trying to understand how individuals, who suddenly experience themselves moving into what they believe to be a different world, make their ‘ontological leaps’, is to explore how they deployed their attention at the time. As delineated in my papers cited previously (Nelson, 1990, 2000), the approach I took was to examine the phenomenological ‘operations’ that were altered by a redeployment of attention during the initiation process just preceding their non-ordinary encounters. An operational analysis of ‘set’ (as experienced), ‘setting’ (as existentially given) and their effect on attention provided the most clearly delineated path from one experiential reality to another. How this is to be understood *post hoc* is, as I stated in my original paper.

...[Sartre (1972)] suggests that intentionality is consciousness itself. In arguing this position, he is declaring consciousness to

be a 'backward cast shadow' of the contiguity of remembered reflected awarenesses experienced as part of self-reflection in the present. Although James seems to put all things, states, and knowledge on the side of experience, Sartre puts them back out onto the 'object'. In either case, both positions point us to the unique reality-making quality of intentional conscious experience and appear to suggest that it is here that we should focus our attention in any systematic and scientific exploration of consciousness [and self].

(Nelson, 1997-98: p 3)

Spinelli appears to have a similar view:

From a worlding-focus, no I/other/world separateness exists. The worldview is a fragmented expression of worlding and, therefore, is as 'real' as worlding.

(Spinelli, 2016: p 318)

This expression makes complete sense to me. All I am arguing for in addition is: 1) we remind ourselves that 'thingness' is an ascription drawn from our experience of the world and that we should attempt to remain neutral regarding any ontological ascriptions we make, and, 2) by observing the processes of attention deployment and experience formation (operational psychophenomenology) we can understand how any given worldview arises and thus how to transform it through direct engagement with our own experience and attentional processes, an approach that can be seen in some of the practices from esoteric Buddhism (Mi-Pham, 1970).

Spinelli further states:

Speaking on a recent BBC Radio Four programme, Christakis stated: 'Your emotional experience is not only a product of your own choices and actions but rather that your emotional experience is a product of the emotional experiences of others around you, even people you do not know' (Christakis, 2016: BBC Radio 4 broadcast on 26 February, 2016). As an example, he considered how the communication of someone's happiness in a social network 'cascades through the network—your happiness impacts upon others' and generates their happiness just as others' happiness impacts upon and generates your own experience of happiness'.

(2016: p 313)

When attention is deployed in a particular manner, an experience of 'everything being connected as one' occurs. Whether it is or not does not

matter, the experience leads to a change in ontological beliefs arising from an altered way of experientially being-in-the-world. What I write about in *The Way of a Seer* is how this process works within the domain of non-ordinary attention and knowing.

Although the ‘Third Grand Theory’ more or less meshes with my position at a functional level, from the point of view of *Consciousness as Reflexive Shadow* the theory as an overarching ontological grounding is extraneous and hence not very useful. All such theories are attempts to locate some kind of ontological base for ‘self’ and ‘consciousness’, even if they suggest ‘anti-thing’ or ‘non-ontological’ ontologies. I am arguing that we abandon that whole ontological enterprise and pay attention only to what is in the frame of immediate experience and what we do with our attention (within that frame) to maintain or change it – we should attend to the ‘how’ only, rather than to the ‘what’ or the ‘why’. We should give little thought to the theory called ‘worlding’ and instead pay attention to our phenomenological act of ‘worlding’ as well as the attention deployment and operations of awareness that function in the creation of ‘self’ and ‘other’ within the phenomenological domain.

What I am suggesting is, in effect, an experiential functionalism that abandons trying to locate ourselves in the universe (whatever that is) and gives our attention solely to attention and the experiential act of knowing. Why? Because anything we say about the nature of what’s ‘out there’ is an ascription and it is not useful in the existential enterprise of being in the (experiential) world. The quest for foundations is a vanity that takes us away from the kind of knowing that is actually possible for us and leads to a fragmentation and separation that contributes to our destruction, ‘metaphorically’ as well as ‘actually’. ‘Remember, be here now’ (Huxley, 1962) or you can easily imagine that you are engaged in an enterprise that will only turn out to be a fantasy.

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