

Lived Experience as a Strife Between Earth and World: Toward a Radical Phenomenological Understanding of the Empirical

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In the following essay, I set out to rethink the concept of the empirical by following the phenomenological train of thought that the empirical is always tied to a mode of living and can therefore not be thought of as existing independently from subjective modes of engagement. This does not mean that every experience is henceforth to be understood as a subjective experience because the subject is just as much constituted by the object as vice versa. This dialectical interpretation of lived experience is best exemplified in Heidegger's interpretation of experience as a strife between earth and world. This concept is developed further and used to reanchor experience in a thirdness between subject and object. Finally, suggestions are made of what it will mean to adopt the concept of strife as the basis of a new kind of empirical psychology.

Keywords: strife between earth and world, phenomenology, empiricism, Heidegger, intentionality, time

Psychology has always prided itself on being an empirical science. However, rarely do psychologists stop to ask themselves what exactly the nature of the empirical *is*. It is often simply taken for granted that empirical reality consists of objective events (realism) that can be either truthfully or wrongfully observed through the senses (positivism). Either way, the empiricism of reality is considered to consist of data that exist independently of the observer and make up the reality of an external objective world. This external reality is often what is studied in the scientific laboratories of psychologists and described with the epithet “empirical,” whereas everything that does not conform to this test is relegated to the realm of subjective biases and mere opinions.

In the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, however, a challenge is made to this

basic view of the empirical as something that stands over and against a biased subject because, as phenomenologists point out, every reality is a *lived* reality, or, as Von Eckartsberg (1986) has also formulated, every experience is an *experi-action*.

What such a phenomenological understanding of the empirical entails is that every experience of something worldly is an experience that is tied to a subjective way of relating to this worldliness. A subjective perception of the world and the external reality of the world can thus not be separated. To have one is to have the other. This primordially of the relation between subject and object, or the living of reality (*lived*) and the raw data of reality (*experience*), is what is designated by the phenomenological concept of *intentionality*. Starting from the concept of intentionality leads to an entirely different empiricism than that presupposed by mainstream psychology, which, as Stenner (2009) has argued, defines reality by means of “quantifiable variables that can be entered into an experimental set up” (p. 199).

In the remainder of this paper, I would like to investigate what such an alternative empiricism would entail considering how we might reconsider the empirical nature of both the world of objects and subjective ways of being in the world.

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Starting from the concept of intentionality, I intend to advance the notion that lived experience is neither a property of the subject nor a function of the object but the product of a “strife” *between* subject and object. This particular view is one that I take from the later works of Martin Heidegger, and it leads me to make an interpretation of phenomenology not as a phenomenology that reduces the empirical to subjective experience but as a phenomenology of an experience that first brings subject and object together. In this sense, I do not here simply intend to offer a summary of the phenomenological viewpoint of empirical reality but to advance my own interpretation of this viewpoint through a radical understanding of the concept of intentionality, which I understand no longer as a property of consciousness but as a condition of possibility for consciousness as such.

The phenomenological viewpoint presented in this essay will not be the first to challenge the positivist view of reality that currently predominates in psychology or to suggest an alternative empirical basis for psychological research. Even at the time of psychology’s inception as a science, William James (1904) pointed out that no empirical reality can be experienced outside of thought constructs that belong entirely to the mind. He viewed conjunctions of the mind such as “but,” “and,” and “with” as empirical as are colors, shapes, and motion and entitled his hybrid between rationalism and empiricism “radical empiricism.” More recently in psychology, we have also seen the resuscitation of the empiricism proposed by Alfred North Whitehead (1927/1985), in which the minimal observable entity is defined as an “actual occasion” and is said to involve the outcome of both subjective and objective elements that cannot be abstracted from their interactions in concrete situations. In the work of social psychologist Paul Stenner (2009), for example, this kind of empiricism, dubbed “deep empiricism,” is used to consider psychological reality as “entailing rather rare and sophisticated actual occasions.” Finally, I would like to mention the work of developmental psychologist Benjamin Bradley (2005), who has advanced a synchronous view of psychological development, in which development does not unfold as a linear process but through a series of social or interpersonal events. This view leads him to resituate experience in the

encounter with others that first lends reality to any experience rather than in the solipsism of the subjective mind or in the facts gathered from an experimental situation.

As a philosophy of science, phenomenology can be said to insert itself into this tradition of nondualistic alternatives to a more traditional view of empiricism. Far too often, however, phenomenological sources are used to simply assert the priority of the subject in the subject-object dichotomy, such that performing a phenomenological study of some phenomenon simply has come to mean investigating the subjective experience of the phenomenon. Multiple phenomenological studies have thus been performed in psychology departments on the subjective experience of everything from self-forgiveness, friendship, and parenting to more esoteric experiences such as encountering oneself through photography or aversion to one’s own nose.¹ My Heideggerian interpretation of lived experience as rooted in strife rather than subjectivity thus represents not only a contribution to the general debate on empiricism in psychology but also to a renewed understanding of the empirical viewpoint of phenomenology.

The Concept of Intentionality

The phenomenological viewpoint can be said to be founded on the concept of intentionality. As a first approximation, intentionality designates the fact that no thing can initially be experienced outside of a relation to a subject who is experiencing it. Brentano (1874/1995) makes this definition of intentionality clear in his book *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint* when he writes:

“Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgment something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on.” (p. 41)

Although this idea of the inseparability of subject and object might initially seem very

¹ The first titles refer to dissertations made in the Psychology Department at Duquesne University where psychological phenomenological research has been practiced for several decades. The last title refers to Dutch psychiatrist H. C. Rümke mentioned in Herbert Spiegelberg’s book *Phenomenology in Psychology and Psychiatry*. (1972, p. 113)

simple, its implications are profound, for “It creates an entirely new climate of thought in which the classical antinomy of idealism versus empiricism is overcome” (Luijpen, 1972). Intentionality points to the fact that there can be no perception that is not a perception “of something,” which means, conversely, that there can be no perception of something that is not a subjective perception. As a consequence of this original belongingness between the subjective and the objective, we can thus no longer speak of a subjective realm of feelings, desires, and thoughts as existing separately from an objective realm of inanimate objects. To feel sad, angry, or tired, for example, is to feel sad, angry, or tired about something in the world and hence to be in a world-relation. Van den Berg (1972) provides a good example of this when he writes that:

“A person who, in the morning after a restless night, finds himself ill and decides to stay in bed for the day can, if invited to do so, report on his condition by stating how he feels subjectively: tired, nauseated, without appetite and with a headache—data which seem subjective but which, in reality, can hardly be called that. For one feels tiredness in legs and head, nausea in the throat, no appetite in relation to a cracker, and so forth. To express a strictly subjective complaint, a complaint pertaining to the subject and not to the body or its environment, is beyond our powers. He who complains, complains about things there, in the body or in the objects there.” (p. 44)

Although Heidegger (1927/1996) uses the concept of *being-in-the-world* rather than the concept of intentionality, this concept nevertheless gives expression to the same idea, namely that the subject or the self has no independent reality of the object or the world. As Heidegger explains in *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle* (1922/2001a).

“I encounter myself in the world, in that which I live and in that which engages me, in my successes and failures, in my environment, in my surrounding world, in my shared world. I encounter myself in a world which acquires and takes its determinate meaningfulness from my own self, but in which the self “is” not there qua self, and where “from my own self” is neither reflectively given nor explicitly placed on stage within this reflection.” (p. 72)

Strasser (1968) also seems to express this principle of fundamental world-relatedness of the subject when he writes that “Man depends on something which he is not [. . .] To acquire experiences, his finite consciousness has to ad-

dress itself to ‘something.’ In doing so, it opens itself and lets itself be determined by that which it experiences” (p. 84). In Strasser’s example, the human being is thus not an observer that perceives an object by directing a gaze that is initially objectless to a world that exists independently of this gaze. Instead, as Van den Berg (1987) has pointed out, the person “evaporates into a void, when we [. . .] take his world away from him” (p. 61).

These variations of the principle of intentionality, although dissimilar in some regards, are not far from Husserl’s original understanding of intentionality. Although Husserl (1925/1977) sometimes speaks of phenomenology as “the science of pure subjectivity” (p. 146), indicating that he is still stuck in the subject-object split of a traditional scientific view of the empirical, what Husserl calls subjective is not here set against the objective as a separate entity. As he writes in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (1929/1969), “Psychological experience, including internal experience, is an experience of something worldly; it is intimately combined in its intentionality, with experience of Nature” (p. 284), and as he writes in *Ideas* (1913/1962), “The experiencing Ego is still nothing that might be taken *for itself* and made into an object of inquiry on its *own* account. Apart from its ‘ways of being related’ or ‘ways of behaving,’ it is completely empty of essential components, it has no content that could be unraveled, it is in and for itself indescribable: pure ego and nothing further” (p. 214). We thus already see in Husserl the precursor to Heidegger’s use of the term “being-in-the-world” as a way to express the nature of a subjectivity that is always already worldly. Husserl even gave perfect expression to this idea when, in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (1929/1969), he wrote, “As a human being (as living in the natural attitude), I am “in” the world, I find myself as being “in” it and, accordingly, as determined in many different respects from the outside (a spatiotemporal externality)” (p. 276).

Although different in many other respects, both the concept of intentionality and the concept of being-in-the-world define an experience that is primarily relational; that is, which is not pasted together of two separate entities that exist independently first and only subsequently enter into a relation with each other. What both concepts indicate is that an independently exist-

ing subject does not go into an independently existing “objective” world of which it *has* an experience. Rather, the subject is always already defined by the world or by the object of its experience, and the object of this experience is thus already revealed within one or the other subjective state or mode of relating, requiring such a state to appear at all.

An initial intertwinement between subject and object thus seems to precede the moment in which I can identify myself as this particular subject and can identify an object as this particular object. It is this intertwinement that comes to designate the empirical reality of the phenomenological worldview, in contradistinction to the empirical reality of the subject-less world presupposed more traditionally by psychologists. Phenomenology, as we can therefore see, offers an alternative starting point for constructing an empirical psychology. Psychology would now become a science that seeks its empirically verifiable objectivity in the intertwinement of subject and object that defines “lived experience” instead of in “brute data.” However, as we can also see from the account above, lived experience does not really privilege the subject but treats both subject and object as dependent upon each other. To more fully bring this mutual presupposition into view, I find Heidegger’s view of the intentional relation as a strife between subject and object to be a better representation of intentionality than that of a world-directed consciousness because the latter seems to inevitably prioritize the subject.

Intentionality as a Strife Between Earth and World

The understanding of intentionality as strife is a concept I take from Heidegger (1936/1993b), who speaks of it in his acclaimed essay on *The Origins of the Work of Art*. Here, he more specifically speaks of experience as a “strife between earth and world.” Strife here indicates the crossroad of two opposing forces that want to take experience in two different directions. The object, in Heidegger’s terminology, always refuses part of itself to the subject by keeping itself withdrawn from absolute disclosure and thus retaining its essence as the self-concealing earth. The subject, in Heidegger’s terminology, always discovers itself in the continuous effort to make sense of the

earth by drawing it into a particular subjective world. In this sense, subject and object are in a strife or battle with each other, but, at the same time, it is only through their opposing tendencies that they can each be what they are: the subject requires the object to become a worldly subject, whereas the object requires the subject to become an object for someone. Strife is thus not meant to designate a lack or error at the heart of lived experience as much as it is meant to designate a motor force behind the phenomenon of experience as such. It is the condition of possibility for something to appear at all.

Heidegger’s concept of strife as a fundamental descriptor of intentionality makes it such that intentionality can no longer simply be defined as the world-directedness of consciousness. Such a definition would give undue priority to the subject in the subject-object dialectic that defines the strife. The starting point of strife thus poses a challenge to the more traditional humanistic underpinnings of phenomenology. No longer is lived experience simply the province of a subject who unilaterally casts its projects or meanings onto the world in line with personal goals because these goals always originate in a strife from which I as a subject with goals and plan first have to emerge.

The goal in the following text is thus not only to advance an understanding of empiricism that is different from the one assumed by psychology as a natural science but also to challenge an empiricism that is rooted in subjective experience. My goal will be to show that both subject and object are equal participants in lived experience. “Living” is never divorced from the agency of the object that calls me or invites me into a particular life possibility. At the same time, the object is completely dependent on me to take up this challenge and respond to this call to become part of a particular experience.

The Liminal Nature of Subjects and Objects

My basic assumption is that starting from the concept of intentionality as a dialectical movement between subject and object means that subject and object can never exist independently of each other and can therefore never be thought of as complete without a reference to each other. Essentially, this means that we discover the identity of the thing only through the

fact that the subject discovers itself through things and that we discover the identity of the subject only through the fact that the object expresses itself through the subject.

The identity of both subject and object thus rests on a fundamental difference by means of which both become themselves in and through being different from themselves or in and through being constituted by the other. I will now seek to demonstrate the implication of this conclusion first in regard to the object, which I understand as encompassing everything non-subjective, including worldly experiences that are not yet objective such as “the other,” and then in regard to the subject, which includes every sense of mineness, not merely of the “thinking I” but also of the bodily, action-oriented, and feeling self. In choosing this bifurcation as my starting point, I am aware that I am inevitably reiterating the very bias I am trying to surmount. Nevertheless, like Wittgenstein’s famous metaphor in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922/2007) of the ladder needed to get to the top and can be discarded once it has served its purpose,² so too I find it easier to communicate my ideas not by speaking a non-dual language but making use of a dualistic language in the effort to show how it needs to be transcended.

The Subject Discovers Itself Through Things: A Phenomenological Interpretation of the Object

According to Heidegger (1927/1996), the subject has no content in and of itself, no inner space in which feelings, memories, or thoughts can reside. I discover myself always only in relation to things. An inquiry into the nature of subjectivity thus ultimately entails an inquiry into the manifestations of the thing because “any landscape is a state of soul” (Amiel quoted in Van den Berg, 1987, p. 62), and “psychology is cosmology,” a “physiology of the elements: earth, air, water, and fire” (Van den Berg, *ibid*).

To illustrate, I would like to offer an example of a recent experience I had in a therapy group that involved training in mindfulness. One day as part of a mindfulness exercise, stones in various colors, shapes, and textures were passed around to the group members and we were all asked to notice as much as we could about these stones. What became apparent, however, was

that in noticing different aspects of the stones, each participant also noticed aspects of him or herself. This mirrors Merleau-Ponty’s (1964/2000) statement that “since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision” (p. 139).

As one person, for example, caressed the stone with her hand and fingernails and was asked to comment on what she had noticed, she said, “I realized that I wanted to get my fingernails done, which I haven’t felt like for months.” Another person noticed the cracks in the stone she had picked out, which made her realize that she is the kind of person who “always goes for the underdogs.” In each case, the appearance of the stone both determined and was determined by a particular subjective state. The people in question were not just imagining or thinking something about themselves, they were discovering themselves *through* the stone. The stone allowed them to understand something about themselves. We can therefore say that my desire to treat myself to a spa treatment resides in the sensation of a smooth stone on my fingernail, not in some inner will, and that my identity as someone who cares for the underprivileged resides in the cracks and imperfections that surround me, not in some inner core of my being. In each of these cases, our subjective state resides outside ourselves. This is why Heidegger (1927/1996) speaks of the human being as being-in-the-world because subjectivity in each of these instances is not a free-floating consciousness that goes out to meet the things of the world but is itself a response to a claim made on it *by* the things that evoke particular kinds of subjectivity. It is this fact that Langeveld (1984) refers to when, rather than speaking of things as inanimate objects, he speaks of them as *invitations*. The ball, for example, is never initially just there in front of me as some alien object but is there first as an invitation to kick, to throw, or to roll, that is, as

² As Wittgenstein (1922/2007) writes after completing his analysis: “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly” (proposition 6.54).

an evocation of a particular subjective state or act.

What Langeveld brings to view by thinking of things as invitations is what Straus (1966/1980) has also talked about as the *pathic* quality of things. The pathic quality of the thing refers to how the thing *moves* us, that is, how it calls for us to respond. It refers to that realm of reality that the thing inhabits before our knowledge of it. When we listen to the radio, for example, the song on the radio does not initially reveal itself to us as an object in front of us (pure sound). It reveals itself as something that has already moved us into a particular relationship to itself. We know the song because we find ourselves tapping our feet to its rhythm, humming its lyrics, wanting to turn off the radio, and so forth. In short, music reveals itself to us first and foremost as a change in *us* and not as a thing in-itself. According to Straus, all things first and foremost reveal themselves in such an affective attunement. It is this that he defines as the pathic quality of things and that he locates in “the immediate communication we have with things on the basis of their changing mode of sensory givenness” (Straus, 1966/1980, p. 12). He distinguishes this pathic relation we have with things from that of a *gnostic* or knowing relation, which is always only a retroactive elaboration of the former and requires an analytic separation of self from world that departs from an original synthetic unity or harmony with the things.

On the basis of these examples, the object of phenomenology we could therefore say is not some thing external to consciousness, waiting to be represented, but something sensible that “enwraps me and infiltrates through all my senses” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 330). It is an object of “nonthetic” consciousness (Sartre, 1948/1989) represented through a kind of knowledge of the hand or of the senses that my body knows before I consciously or intellectually know that I know. My subjective self-awareness is thus always an appropriation or thetic reflection upon a world of which I am already a part, in which I already know how to act, and to which I have already responded without being aware of it. The objectivity of the object is thus an objectivity of a world that is already part of my very flesh or included within me the moment I become aware of myself as a

“me.” “The thing” is therefore never initially a simple object in front of me.

The upshot of this analysis is that the word object, relying as it does on the conscious meanings of representation, no longer suits the objectivity of the phenomenological “thing.” Something more akin to what the French phenomenology inspired psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1975/1991) calls “the real” and what Heidegger calls “the earth” is thus needed to designate the material conditions of our existence as subjects. The real as Lacan thinks of it is what drives me in my conscious pursuits because, in its withdrawal from view, it becomes precisely that which introduces a lack in my subjectivity that I seek to fill. Rather than thinking of the object as lacking, phenomenologists would rather think of it as consisting of an excess (Marion, 2002) or nourishment (Levinas, 1961/1969) that makes it possible for me to come into being as something worldly in the first place. In fact, as we have seen, the earth is not some passive “lost object” but is participating actively in its own realization through a subject. It calls me or invites me. It is akin to the flower that actively incites the bee to pollinate it. In this sense, we could therefore speak of it as being an “actant” (Latour, 2000) of its own and not just some passive or inert matter because it acts on subjects just as much as we as subjects act on it. In a similar recognition, Heidegger (1971/2001c, p. 178) therefore also speaks of the thing as “thinging,” which is the English translation of the German word “bedingt.” The word thinging both denotes the thing as active and as founding. In other words, thinging denotes that the thing becomes a thing only through the founding of a nonthing, which in this case we can call the subject or a subjective world.

The Thing Reveals Itself Through the Subject: A Phenomenological Interpretation of the Subject

Just as the subject always owes a debt to the thing that first invites it, attunes it, or calls it into a relation from which or out of which it can think and act, so too the thing owes a debt to the subject for providing it with the purpose or direction that first brings it to appearance as something that has a meaning or a significance and can be talked about with others.

In the example I gave of the mindfulness group, for example, we could say that the one stone only revealed itself as smooth because it was caressed and that the other stone only revealed itself as cracked because it was looked at. The stone has thus in each example already fallen away from its pure state as an object in itself (earth) and has already become an object for a subject (a worldly thing). It took a caress to bring the stone into its smoothness, as opposed to its hardness or heaviness, and it took looking for its imperfections to appear as opposed to one of its other sensible features. In this sense, the smoothness and the cracks of the stones are not so much properties of the stones as they are products or effects of the encounter between subject *and* stone. The answer to the ancient Zen riddle, “If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it still make a sound?,” is therefore “no,” because sound is not a property of the tree, nor for that matter of the ear. Rather, it is the property of a particular relationship the ear can have with the tree and therefore of an encounter.

The nature of this encounter between subject and object is, however, not simply that of an encounter of a subject who looks at or caresses an object. Instead, it is that of a subject who discovers its very purpose in the thing. This is so because looking and caressing are always purposive, always guided by certain aims and thus always revelatory of a human way of existing beyond the thing. Initially, the human encounter with the thing is thus not directed at a present state of affairs but at the future promise of the thing, understood as the human possibility of engaging with it that the thing opens up. In this sense, what we are really attuned to when we are attuned to a thing is not its sheer materiality but rather its subjective possibility. Stated differently, what shows itself of the thing is always already a sign that points us toward something else that does not show itself. As Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002) writes, “It is thus of the essence of the thing and of the world to present themselves as ‘open,’ to send us beyond their determinate manifestations, to promise us always ‘something else to see’” (p. 388).

According to Husserl (1925/1977), the identity of the thing always depends on a subjective act of going beyond the purely visible aspects of the thing toward an invisible horizon of other *potentially* visible aspects of the thing. To see a

cup as a cup, for example, requires the “knowledge” by a subject that the particular profile of the cup, which I am presented with now, points toward other possible profiles that are currently hidden from view but *could* become present in the future. Without such an understanding, the cup would not have the full dimensionality of a human cup but would remain a one-dimensional profile. We could therefore say that it is only because I *complete* the cup by leaping ahead of the purely visible aspects of the cup into an understanding of the cup that it appears to me as a cup with a back side and as a vessel for drinking. The thing needs this leaping ahead of the present, which characterizes human subjectivity, to become itself. The “thingness” or “cupness” of the cup can thus not be said to reside in the mere materiality of the cup because it requires a subjective understanding to achieve the fullness of its being. If we said of the subject that it can only become revealed through a “cosmology of things,” then we must therefore also say of the thing that it can only be revealed through the invisible completions by a subject who discovers itself in the thing’s potentials and possibilities. The cup can, in other words, not be reduced to its mere sensory data, as empiricists would have it, because it loses its cupness if we take away its invisible subjective horizon and thus ceases to be the thing as we know it in the everyday.

Whereas Husserl privileges the way in which subjectivity goes beyond the thing toward a unified “idea” of the thing in both its manifest and nonmanifest aspects, Heidegger (1927/1996) believes we primarily discover the thing through the unity of a practical purpose. The hammer, for example, does not first and foremost exist as a thing in itself with a front side and a back side, with a certain weight, and with certain material properties but exists first and foremost as a tool with which to get something done. It thus refers me to the wooden boards that I can nail together to build a house and not to its own self-contained essence. The thing is thus not only revealed within a horizon of its anticipated other sides but is revealed within what Husserl (1936/1970) calls the thing’s *external horizon* and what Heidegger (1927/1996) calls its *world*.

The world of the thing is defined through the thing’s usefulness for other things. Through the hammer’s usefulness as a knocking device, for

example, it reveals the boards of wood as *pliable*, the nails as *piercing*, the soil as a *foundation* for the nailed-together planks of wood, the four walls of the planks as the four sides of a *house*, and the house as a *shelter* that will help protect me from the weather. In this way, the hammer gathers a whole world within which it can first show itself as this particular hammer. By showing itself as this particular hammer, the hammer helps unveil the possibilities of other things that first receive their meaning in light of their connection with the hammer: The nail was not piercing until the hammer became a tool that made it piercing, the wood was not pliable until the hammer made it possible to pierce a nail through it, the soil was not a foundation until the hammer made it possible to build a house, and so forth.

According to Heidegger, the way we for the most part disclose the meaning of the thing is thus by going beyond it toward its world, understood as the chain of references of “in order to” that connects hammer with nail, nail with wood, wood with planks, planks with walls, walls with house, and house with shelter. The last term in this order of things is “shelter” as the “for-the-sake-of-which” all of these things are put to use. This for-the-sake-of-which is always indicative of a possibility of being human and hence of one or the other human purpose or horizon that I discover in the things.

The subject that is here assumed to discover itself as the ultimate purpose of things is not initially an “I think,” but rather an “I can” (Merleau-Ponty’s, 1945/2002, p. 159). I am not necessarily consciously aware of the horizons within which I discover the thing. Initially when I discover the thing within a world, the world is merely presupposed not posited as a plan or contained in a thought. I discover the world as a precondition for my every doing. Even when I go to take a shower, walk the dog, or shovel the snow, I presuppose an understanding of the world of the shower, the dog, and the snow. This understanding, however, is an “understanding of the hand” not of the “head”: it is what allows me to act purposefully even when I am not thinking about what I am trying to accomplish. It is thus an understanding that is contained in simple living or in the “know-how” of an initial bodily rapport with things.

We could add many other modes of subjectively completing the thing,³ but what I have

wanted to demonstrate in my analysis is simply that the thing is revealed according to many different subjective ways of disclosing its meaning, making its way of appearing inseparable from a particular subjective way of existing and thus inseparable from a way in which the subject discovers itself through the thing.

From Subjective Experience and Objective Experience to Experience as a Strife Between Earth and World

What my interpretation of the phenomenological concept of intentionality or lived-experience has revealed is that it refers to a process of intertwining by which the subject becomes a subject in and through a completion of an object and the object becomes an object in and through inviting the subject into particulars of its possibilities. This means that intentionality is not the property of a subject or the property of an object but the outcome of a strife or play *between* subject and object. To understand the nature of lived experience we must therefore develop a phenomenology of the between rather than of the subject or the object because it is the nature of the interrelation between the two that is instrumental in bringing each about. In the following I will therefore attempt to understand the nature of lived experience through an analysis of Heidegger’s concept of strife.

The Concept of Strife

In the *Origin of the Work of Art* (1936/1993b), Heidegger first mentions the concept of “strife” when he speaks of experience as a “strife between earth and world.”

The earth here designates “that which is essentially undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up” (p. 172). It designates the thing as the source or reserve from which objects and artifacts are disclosed within the world. The world, on the other hand, designates “the ever nonobjective” (p. 170) horizon for things that corresponds to a particular subjective or existential engagement with things. The use of the

³ J. P. Sartre (1948/1989), for example, has described an intentionality of the emotions and J. Linschoten (1969) an intentionality of the flesh.

term world instead of subject here follows from Heidegger's analysis of subjectivity as displayed in the movement beyond the thing toward a purpose or potential that first makes the thing relevant for other things and thus provides a context or word in which the thing can attain a concrete significance.

The use of the terms "earth" and "world" thus transcends a simple distinction between object and subject. The materiality of the earth is essentially what can never become an object within the world, what by definition resists such disclosure and keeps every world-view incomplete. The subjectivity of the world essentially refers to a future of the thing that gives rise to a subjective or existential way of being through which I can first recuperate myself as this or that identity. Strife thus ties together a subjectivity that is always beyond me because it arrives at me from the future of the thing and an objectivity that is always prior to any subjective disclosure of the thing because it must withdraw certain aspects of itself to make other of its potential manifestations possible. The lived experience of any given moment is thus that of a strife of forces pulling in two different directions. It is not that of a perfect self-correspondence in which subject and object become one, such as when a thought or idea corresponds to a perception or state of affairs. Instead, as Heidegger (1936/1993b) writes, confronted with each other, world and earth are "always intrinsically and essentially in conflict, belligerent by nature" (p. 180). As he explains this, "The world, in resting upon the earth strives to surmount it. As self-opening it cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there" (p. 174). The earth, in other words, always tends toward concealment, whereas the world always tends toward unconcealment, and it is for this reason that the strife itself is always a *concealing-revealing*. Nevertheless, the result of this strife of forces is not that of a fundamental discord, dispute, or exclusive disjunction (either/or) but is that of a mutual enrichment of the one by the other because "in strife each opponent carries the other beyond itself" (ibid). Another way to say this is that the world allows the earth to function as earth, whereas the earth allows the world to function as world. Their opposition is a precondition for them to be what they are.

To give a concrete example of how the concept of strife could be put to use in a concrete way, let us take any "thing" that we readily take for granted in our everyday and ask how it can be the thing that it is. Let us say I am holding a pen in my hand, for example. From a dualistic perspective of thought and matter, the pen could be said to be constituted either through its material properties that are "out there" in some empirical spatial reality or "inside" a thinking mind that has the power to conceive of matter in terms of cultural or theoretical concepts. The pen, in other words, is through this dualistic conception either a self-subsisting "thing" or a subjective "idea." From the perspective of intentionality as strife, however, the nature of the pen is not *in* the matter and not *in* the head of a subject but *in* the encounter *between* subject and object that holds it together as this particular pen. If subjectivity is defined as a process of always going beyond what is given in the present, then subjectivity first gives the pen a future and allows it to be some kind of pen (now with which to sign my will, now with which to write a love letter, now as something I can give as a present, etc.) Subjectivity, in other words, is displayed in and through the particular existential horizons opened up by the pen. What then about the objective nature of the pen? The objectivity of the pen is never quite what is revealed in such subjective completions of the pen because with every completion, something always holds itself back as the continuous source from which yet other completions are possible. The material nature of the thing is thus not something that can be made empirically present because if the present always involves a subjective completion that makes it present in light of a particular future, then the materiality of the thing can only be said to pertain to something that always withdraws from the present because it has always already been transcended. The picture we have is therefore of a present that is only held together in and through the strife of two opposing forces that bring forth the nature of the pen in a concrete way in and through their struggle. The pen, we can also say, never actually exists in a present as a self-subsisting thing but only exists in and through *the difference* (Heidegger, 1971/2001b) or opening created by a subjectivity that always carries an objectivity beyond itself and an objectivity that always roots this subjective possibility in a source of

nonpresent possibilities that withdraw from view. In fact, in the final analysis, the pen does not designate a thing at all but designates a subject-object encounter, a veritable event or happening that resides in neither but requires both.

The strife of earth and world thus points us toward the middle of their dif-ference that alone defines the presence of what is present. The dif-ference that we here have in mind is not an empirical difference between two things such as matter and thought or subject and object because the dif-ference “does not mediate after the fact by connecting world and things through a middle added to them” (Heidegger, 1971/2001b, p. 200). Rather, “Being the middle, it first determines world and things in their presence, that is, in their being toward one another, whose unity it carries out” (ibid.). What Heidegger calls the dif-ference is thus the unity of a strife that both joins and divides. Experience is held together, he says, through the “pain of intimacy” (ibid, p. 204) described as “the joining agent in the rending that divides” (ibid, p. 200). What Heidegger seems to be expressing here is that of the simultaneous unity *and* separation of earth and world, of an exclusive difference (separation) that is also an inclusive difference (unity). It is this tension that his translators are trying to capture in and through the hyphen in the word dif-ference, which simultaneously indicates division and unity.

Misinterpretation of Strife as a Strife Inherent to the Subject or the Human Way of Being

In many interpretations of phenomenology, the understanding of the original strife between subject and object tends to get lost from view. Although the aforementioned strife might get acknowledged, it is often treated as a property of the human being and reinternalized in an ontology of the identity of human existence or subjective experience.

As some phenomenologists might say, the strife between earth and world is really a strife introduced into reality by the fact that we are human. It is because we as human beings are ec-static, ec-centric, or never correspond to ourselves that the dialectic between earth and world gets started. The dif-ference that unites and divides subject and object is thus the difference of a self-relation in-

herent to the human being’s way of being in a worldly way, always having to recuperate its “self” from the things.

Such appears to be the view of many an existential phenomenologist (Giorgi, 1970; May, 1983; Plessner, 1941/1970; Heidegger, 1927/1996; Van Manen, 1990). In its most pure expression, it leads to a reinternalization of intentionality to the human being who through its nature (whether as human *dasein* or as transcendental cogito) becomes the foundation for each and every phenomenon. Everything that shows itself now does so only for a human consciousness or through the projects of the human being’s way of being. Phenomenology, in this view, becomes an attempt to trace back an experience of the world to the structures of an underlying consciousness or human way of being (*Dasein*) within which it shows itself. If we adhere to this understanding of the strife, which claims that something identical is the basis of the strife, the liminality of that strife can always only become a moment within the existence of a subject and not, as I am proposing, the very condition of the subject’s coming into being. If we adopt a humanistic interpretation of the strife, then the between loses its importance as ontological ground and instead becomes a transition within the sameness or identity of human existence as the more original ground.

Strife as the Difference Between Subject and Object

In keeping with my mission to develop a phenomenological empiricism grounded in strife rather than subject or object, the question must be raised: *How may we challenge the reabsorption of the strife into an ontology of the human being?* and *What basis can we find in the phenomenological literature for developing a different viewpoint? Is phenomenology ultimately a humanism that raises the human being to the status of the measure of all things or is there another way to think the dif-ference of the strife?*

We do indeed find evidence of another possibility of conceptualizing the dif-ference in the phenomenological literature.

Let us take Merleau-Ponty, for example. When he speaks of the body, does he mean a personal body or does he mean what he later comes to call “the flesh of the world?” At one

point in his book, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2002), Merleau-Ponty speaks of a “bodily existence which runs through me, yet does so independently of me” (p. 192). There is thus the hint here of an other agency that expresses itself through me. A volition here seems to be attributable to the earth, which speaks through me and demands to be completed before any subjective choice. I am thus not the lord of beings, we could say, but the shepherd or guardian of Being (worlding) as something that has always already been entrusted to me and precedes any subjective intentionality (Heidegger, 1947/1993a). The “Da” of dasein (the “there” that I have to be) thus no longer seems to belong to a prior me but to something that precedes me and from out of which I am first able to come into being.

In his book, *Reduction and Givenness* (1998), Jean-Luc Marion finds evidence of the idea of a nonhuman root of existence in the experience of boredom. In boredom, Marion says, the world has not yet claimed us or admitted us into the possibilities of things. Marion uses this intuition to argue that the claim itself, by which I am admitted into the world and into a worldly concern, preexists any human intention or activity. I must first be claimed or brought into a caring relationship with things before I can be said to complete things by means of the purposes I discover in them. I am thus ultimately referred back to this initial event of being called into a relationship with things as the basis of my existence and do not simply project meaning onto things from some initial volition within. Something must happen to jolt me into a relationship with things, something that comes from “elsewhere” and cannot be said to originate from me.

In his posthumous work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1964/2000) also begins to abandon the language of the existing subject as a ground for experience. He now begins to attribute agency to what he calls “the flesh of the world,” which he defines as “a relation of the visible with itself” (p. 146) or of the visible “as the formative medium of the object and the subject” (p. 147). He now seems to abandon a humanistic interpretation of the strife between subject and object and to think of subject and object as two moments in the unfolding of the same flesh. As he now says, “We must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit—for then it

would be the union of contradictories—but we must think of it, as we said, as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general way of being” (p. 147). I take this to mean that the true subject of experience is that of water constituting itself alternately as the subjective wetness of being immersed in water and the objective drinkability of a glass of water or of fire constituting itself alternately in the warm interior feelings of a subject and the objective heat of a fireplace. In other words, the subject and the object are caught up in and produced by the same element that announces itself through the style or manner in which the one is folded into the other. Both water and fire are thus never presented as things in themselves but hold themselves back as earth. The way we know of water and fire is always through concrete instances of subjective perceptions and objective qualities that when combined make up an “event” of fire or of water. We are never in possession of fire or water as pure phenomena. Fire and water are here considered elements, not things, and Merleau-Ponty defines an element as “a general thing, midway between the spatiotemporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being” (p. 140). We could of course say that the subject “has” an experience of fire or water or that fire or water have certain objective qualities, but this would be to put the carriage before the horse because it is the concrete event of bringing together the subjective and the objective (the concrete happening) that in each case sustains the subjective experience and the experience of material properties. The point here is not that there is no such thing as a subjective experience or an objective experience, and that these are two distinct types of experiences, but rather that each of these experiences are always modes of the event’s self-manifestation and thus always refer back an event or encounter that has itself vanished from view.

This understanding of something elemental that exceeds subjective experience and a reality of readymade things also finds expression in Heidegger’s later works. Granted, in *Being and Time* (1927/1996), Heidegger does seem to suggest that the originating source of experience is situated within human existence. This in fact is

the very reason why he tries to work out an ontology of existence as the basis for phenomenology. Yet, he later backs away from this stance. As he writes in his notes now published as *Contributions to Philosophy* (1938/1999), “In *Being and Time* Dasein⁴ still stands in the shadow of the ‘anthropological,’ the ‘subjectivistic,’ and the individualist,’ and so forth—and yet the opposite of all this is what we have in view. . . .” (p. 208). Instead as he now says, “[Dasein is] not something that could be simply found in extant man but rather the ground of the truth of be-ing made necessary by the fundamental experience of be-ing as enowning, through which ground (and its grounding) man is transformed from the ground up” (p. 209). The translator here translates Heidegger’s old German usage of “Seyn,” instead of “Sein,” as be-ing. The hyphen is here intended to designate that what is primary in experience is not an identity (the human being as a thing or substance) or the unity of a flowing experience (the human being as ex-isting) but a fundamental dif-ference irreducible to self as object or self as subject. The hyphenation of the word dif-ference does this by indicating both unity and separation: the very difference that divides is also the difference that unites, or, as I have phrased it earlier, earth and world are different, but only in and through this difference are they themselves identical. Second of all, Heidegger here uses the word *Ereignis* (enowning) to designate the being of this dif-ference, and, we could say, the being of the “Da” of Dasein that the human being has to take over as part of its being. “Ereignis” means “event” in German, but it also means what the translator here refers to as “enowning.” Enowning implies a process by which something can come into its *own* or attain the status of its identity. It thus designates a moment before the moment of identity through which identity itself comes into being. Hence, the “Da”, as Heidegger says, “itself nowhere placeable—moves away from the relation to man and reveals itself as the “between” [Zwischen] that is unfolded by be-ing itself. . . .” (p. 211).

In summary, in the later works of phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, as well as in the work of Marion, we seem to find a concept of the strife as an original betweenness that can no longer be reabsorbed into an ontology of the subject or the human

being. Dif-ference here comes to designate a liminality that cannot be subordinated to a material substance or thinking substance but must be thought of as the very turning point that first gives thought something to think about and first gives matter someone for whom it matters. Heidegger gives a good example of this new vantage point in his discussion of the relationship between artist (subject) and artwork (object) in his essay *The Origins of the Work of Art* (1936/1993b). Here he writes, “The artist is the origin of the work and the work is the origin of the artist. Nevertheless, neither is the sole support of the other. In themselves and in their interrelations artist and work *are* each of them by virtue of a third thing which is prior to both. . . .” (p. 143). It is this third thing, obfuscated or ignored by more standard interpretations of phenomenology, which I propose we develop into the new starting point for a phenomenology of lived experience and use as the basis of a new empirical grounding of psychology.

Toward an Empirical Psychology Grounded in Strife

What becomes of a psychology that takes the thirdness between subject and object as its empirical starting point? Such a psychology will be based on a different understanding of empiricism in which what is primary is not an experience that can be defined according to the plans and predictions of a subject or according to methods constructed to exclude such a subject.

I would like to suggest that the best way to study the empirical reality brought forth by the concept of strife is to study experience in relation to a new understanding of the future. Strife destabilizes the self-containment of the present moment. What it indicates is that reality is always in excess of any present world-view. This excess phenomenologically corresponds to what exists outside or in addition to any pre-conceived knowledge, expectations, projec-

⁴ For the uninitiated, Heidegger (1927/1996) uses the word Dasein to describe the kind of being of the human being as distinct from the kind of being of things. Dasein, which in German means existence and literally refers to being in the here or there of the present moment, suggests that the human being has the being of someone who has no readymade essence but has to become itself or attain to its nature (become its “there”) by the way it takes up a relationship with things.

tions, plans, categorizations, or calculations. It represents something that will take me by surprise because it won't lend itself to my manipulation and control and cannot be reduced to the predictions of natural scientific models based on the past. We can call this "other" future for "the novel" because it refers to that which cannot be defined in advance. The future of the novel only reveals its riches once it has already happened to me. From the perspective of the present, however, it can be anticipated as what will strike me, baffle me, amaze me, take me by surprise. It is the future through which I will become something, learn something, realize something, from which I will receive myself in some unexpected way. The strife continues to bring something novel about because it withdraws something of the thing both from the scientist in the laboratory who seeks to study it and the lay person in the everyday who seeks to live it in a habitual and orderly way.

A traditional empirical viewpoint is unable to include this future within the purview of its method because its fundamental premise is that everything that happens happens in reference to a present moment from which it can be predicted, anticipated, or known in advance or could in principle have been so. The failure of both a subjectivist and objectivist perspective on experience is that both only allow the presencing of an experience that shows itself in accordance with a particular predefined worldview based on past knowledge or premade projections. Although such attempts to fit experience into neat packages is certainly part of experiential reality as we live it, they account for only one half of the truth because life is bound to eventually burst through the seams of such packages and reveal its novelty despite the best intentions to shut it out. In science, this happens most profoundly through "paradigm shifts" (Kuhn, 1962) or the insufficiencies of scientific prediction, whereas for the person in the everyday, it accounts for the fact that when I experience life most fully and most intensely I experience the world not in terms of old categories but in terms of life's surprises.

The novel has very much been excluded from the view of both a phenomenology of subjective experience and from an objective understanding of things as facts because it consists of something that entirely shakes up my old frameworks and rattles every sense of being in control. And

yet this elusive element of the novel is what most accurately depicts what is human about my human reality and most factual about my factual experience. Just like a movie manages to create suspense in the spectator only by means of future events that change my perspective of events that went before, so too life is lived in suspense of future moments that change who I have been or what was. The primary temporality of experience in its empirical rawness is thus not the temporality of chronological time that gets constructed on the basis of the projection of the already known into the future but the temporality of retroactive determination, in which what will have been is always contingent on what has yet to reveal itself.

The challenge for a psychology that wishes to be faithful to experience is therefore to construct a method by means of which reality as we live it is not exchanged for reality as it conforms to a readymade world-view because as phenomenological psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1982) has said, "When we turn to experience and learn what it may have to teach us, we cannot do so by a method constructed to exclude it" (p. 12). We must in other words design our psychological studies so as to capture the strife between earth and world rather than pretend that we can fix the strife either through the worldview of the scientist or the viewpoint of some permanent subject or "I."

At the margins of psychology such methodological innovations are already in the process of being constructed.

As mentioned earlier, Benjamin Bradley (1995) has made an attempt to redefine experience by means of a concept of synchronicity rather than a concept of chronology. As Bradley argues, the scientific approach in psychology chiefly considers subjective experience in terms of the unfolding of something that is innate, fixed, past, or known in advance. This is evident in so-called stage theories of psychological development in which the future is always to some extent predicted and projected in advance based on a prior knowledge of the past. To Bradley, however, this chronological framework distorts the synchronicity of experience as always taking shape through interpersonal or psychic events in which interactions with others or the environment reshape the personal past. Bradley thus reverses the priority of past and future, such that future events are no longer

caused by what is past but is instrumental in bringing the past about.

Bradley's view can on this score be said to be similar to the Buddhist idea of *interbeing* (Nhat Hanh, 1997) by means of which the identity of each present relies chiefly on the synchronous relations in which the thing is embedded. Hence, my identity as the "funny one," for example, is not a characteristic of "me" but is sustained only in and through others who find me funny by laughing at my jokes. In this sense, my identity, or sense of self, is held together in and through a situation or context that allows me to be who I am in that particular moment. The experience of being funny is thus neither possible to bring about as a subjective act that can be planned and controlled, nor is it simply caused by one object acting on another. Rather subjects and objects are coproduced through a happening whose outcome is uncertain and whose faith will determine whether I am funny or lack humor altogether. I come into being not of my own volition but through that part of the experience that escapes prediction. The psychological self is here a self that receives itself by means of retroactive determination. It did not exist first to project its ideas or impress its action on reality but came into being through the unpredictability of the experience itself.

Social psychologists Steve Brown (2009) and Paul Stenner (2009) are two other psychologists who have tried to shake the foundation of the old psychological empiricism by adopting Whitehead's position that the minimum empirical entity is never that of a discrete element but that of an "actual occasion" of elements. The actual occasion is here defined as the actualization of potentials, which means that what shows itself as the empirical is never just confined to what is present but presupposes the perpetual coming into being of potentials that interact to produce the present. Here again, we must say that the future is never just a projection of the past but an event in which the final outcome is always to some extent unpredictable and undecided until after the fact. No one can know exactly what potentials will become actualized in any concrete encounter, much less so the more complex the event, and the events that make up human and social reality are among the most complex.

In my doctoral dissertation (Mølbak, 2010), I showed precisely how it is the potentiality that

defines the empirical reality of flirting and not the known actuality. What makes flirting flirtatious is precisely that it puts a human being who was previously living within a chronological and knowing relationship with the world into contact with another person who exemplifies a future beyond any which I can predict and control. It is this relationship with the unknowable that accounts for both the excitement and anxiety of my relation with the other when I flirt. The other allows me to discover myself beyond the certainties and doldrums of my own ego-logical world with its predictability and routines. It offers me an encounter with the future as an event that can change me and allow me to discover myself anew. When we flirt, one could therefore say, we flirt not with the other person as a concrete individual in the present but with the other as a potential or an unpredictable future. The moment the future offers up its fruit as this or that concrete present, the flirt inevitably comes to an end and turns into something else. I can only flirt as long as the outcome of the flirt remains uncertain and as long as the future remains unpredictable. Flirting in its phenomenological essence is thus a welcoming of the future of the novel into one's life so that one might discover a new potential of being oneself. It can simply not be defined by means of the future of prediction or projection because it is what escapes this future—what withdraws—that is instrumental in lending the present moment its present tenor of excitement or anxiety. As Levinas writes, "The relationship with another puts me into question, empties me of myself, and does not let off emptying me—uncovering for me ever new resources. I did not know myself so rich . . ." (Levinas, 1963/1986, p. 351).

The proposition that I would make is that life is filled with such events and that we are only really living once we do not approach life as a series of problems to be solved and mastered through calculations, predictions, plans, and methods. It is in my opinion an inescapable empirical fact that life at times breaks through such worldviews, reasserts itself as earth, and happens as a strife that leaves me intoxicated, dumbfounded, surprised, or amazed. Life as the still representation of a known present is a poor index of the phenomenality or empiricism of the reality that we here experience. It amounts to the difference, as Alan Watts (1951/1993) has pointed out, between the fixity of money and the

perishability of the things money can buy or between the orderliness of the menu card and the experience of eating an actual meal.

The implication of the empiricism I am proposing is therefore that what we refer to as the psychological never emanates from something we can identify in advance. Instead, the psychological *emerges* or *comes into being*. It resides in ever-shifting encounters from which I as a subject am able to discover myself by being afforded certain possibilities of acting and from which the object is able to act on me within the parameters afforded to it by a certain situation. In each instance or each event, potentialities are both closed down and opened up, but in no situation are all potentialities present simultaneously because something must always withdraw for something else to appear. At the heart of the empirical we therefore find something that transcends any *one* experience and prevents us from ever attaining some final point of view in which all things can finally be classified and offered up as the facts of our being. The mistake here is to think of the psychological as a thing rather than to think of it as an “element.” An element cannot be pinpointed. Just like water and fire, it never exists in itself, but always only exists in the form of a particular constellation, such as water in a cup or fire in a fireplace. I like the metaphor of water here because water always both depends on interactions with other elements to attain a shape and refuses to offer itself up as “water in itself” in any such situation. Water either exists concretely, in which case it conceals itself as pure water in itself, or it exists not at all. What water *is* is thus ever elusive, but it is this elusiveness that allows it to appear now as drinkable, now as cleansing, and now as nourishing a plant. If we want to study the psychological, we thus need to follow its manifestations just like we would follow water. We cannot grasp it like a “thing” or as a collection of facts but must describe the intertwinements that continue to bring it to life, now within a subjective world-view through which I attempt to control experience and now as event that teaches me who I am. We alternately project our future to subsequently live it and receive our plans from a series of momentous events that arrive at us like a chemical reaction that changes us. Hence, we live life in a strife.

In conclusion, we can name and define an experience by assimilating it to known catego-

ries or purposes that are defined in advance, “interpret it in accordance with the dead and the past” (Watts, 1951/1993, p. 83), or we can open ourselves up to its novelty and let it happen as an event. To develop a method for psychology that is phenomenologically faithful to the excess of the empirical over the static categories of the already known is to develop a method founded on strife rather than any preknowledge of the subject or the object. To study experience as a strife is to study and bring into view the novel moment that first gives me to myself and first lets the object become a particular object. Only then can we bring the empiricism of the living, of the vitality that accounts for the often exciting and harrowing quality of our experience, back into psychology and back into the lived experience, which ought to make up its empirical subject matter.

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