Existentialism / existential geography

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Glossary
Body-subject the pre-conscious intelligence of the lived body manifested through action; plays a major role in the habitual, routine aspects of the lifeworld.
Dasein human being-in-world and referring to the lived fact that human beings are always and already inescapably immersed in the world in which they find themselves.
Existential geography a range of geographic approaches that insist human experience, awareness, and meaning must be incorporated into any study of peoples’ relationships with space, place, and environment; closely related to humanistic geography and phenomenological geography.
Existentialism a way of philosophy that works to understand the basic structures of human existence so that individuals can create useful meaning in their lives through free and informed understanding and action.
Lifeworld the tacit, taken-for-granted context, tenor, and pace of daily life to which normally people give no reflective attention; a major focus of phenomenological investigation.

Phenomenology a philosophical approach that examines and describes phenomena—i.e., things and experiences as human beings experience those things or experiences.

Place a fusion of human and natural order and any significance spatial center of a person or group’s lived experience.

Synopsis
Existential geography examines how qualities of the geographical world like place, home, journey, mobility, habitual embodiment, and natural landscape establish and contribute to human existence, both broadly, in relation to human experience generally; and, specifically, in terms of persons and groups living in particular places, cultural contexts, and historical moments. Existential geography is most closely related to humanistic and phenomenological geography, which arose in the 1970s as a critical response to then-dominant positivist geography. Critics of existential geography claim that existential approaches are essentialist, implicitly masculinist, neglect power structures, and have an ideological bias toward bounded, static, exclusionary places. Proponents respond that their motives are misunderstood and that a closer understanding of environmental and place experience is crucial in an increasingly rootless, mobile world of global interconnectedness.

Introduction
Existential geography refers to a range of geographic approaches that insist human experience, awareness, and meaning must be incorporated into any study of peoples’ relationships with space, place, and environment. Existential geography is most closely related to the larger movement of humanistic geography, which arose in the 1970s as a critical response to positivist research that, at the time, dominated the discipline. In emphasizing the conceptual and applied need for understanding the lived relationship between people and their geographical worlds, humanistic geographers argued that positivist geography reduced environmental and place experience and meaning to tangible, measurable, quantitative units and relationships expressed spatially and materially—for example, symbols on maps, points on graphs, physical linkages in flow diagrams, or figures in equations.

Today the term “existential geography” is rarely used because the point of view and subject matter are subsumed in different ways by more specific topical and conceptual labels that include phenomenological geography, phenomenological ecology, environmental hermeneutics, ecopsychology, environmental philosophy, and place studies. Geographers of postmodernist, poststructuralist, and critical-theory persuasions claim that their approaches reinterpret, improve upon, and supplant earlier existential-geographical
work, though geographers and other environmental researchers who continue to work in the existential tradition strongly disagree.

**Existentialism and Phenomenology**
Philosophically, existential geography is most closely related to the continental traditions of existentialism and phenomenology. Associated especially with 20th-century philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber, and Gabriel Marcel, existentialism is a way of philosophy that works to understand the basic structures of human existence so that individuals can create useful meaning in their lives through free and informed action. Existentialism insists that philosophy must arise from a person’s own life and from his or her own particular individual, historical, and societal situation. “Existence precedes essence,” proclaimed Sartre, meaning that human beings experience their world first and only then endow it with self-conscious meaning, whether personal, cultural, ideological, or scholarly.

Existentialists claim that earlier Western philosophy was too much concerned with reason, ideas, and abstract theory. Instead, philosophy must start with one’s own experience and personal understanding, which can be studied, clarified, and thus enriched. Reason can contribute to this effort, but all other aspects of human being—e.g., bodily, sensual, sexual, emotional, interpersonal, cultural, societal, and transpersonal dimensions—must also be considered and given a place.

The philosophical tradition of phenomenology became important to some existentialists because it offered a practical method for probing and understanding the nature and quality of human existence, though this was not the original aim of phenomenology’s founder, philosopher Edmund Husserl, who instead had developed the phenomenological method as a means to identify invariant structures of cognitive consciousness.

Because Husserl viewed consciousness and its essential structures as a pure “region” separate from the flux of specific experiences and thoughts, his style of phenomenology came to be known as “constitutive” or “transcendental.” Eventually, however, other phenomenological philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty reacted against Husserl's transcendental structures of consciousness. These “existential phenomenologists,” as they came to be called, argued that such transcendental structures are questionable because Husserl based their reality on speculative, cerebral reflection rather than on actual human experience taking place within the world of everyday life.

In 1927 in his *Being and Time*, Heidegger argued that consciousness was not separate from the world and human existence. He called for an existential correction to Husserl that would interpret essential structures as basic categories of human experience rather than as pure,
cerebral consciousness. In 1945 in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty broadened Heidegger's correction to include the active role of the body in human experience. Merleau-Ponty sought to reinterpret the division between body and mind common in traditional Western philosophy and psychology. This “existential turn” of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty shifted away from Husserl's focus on pure intellectual consciousness and toward a reflexive understanding of everyday human life and its lived meanings.

**Central Existential Claims**

As the preceding account suggests, there are great range and variation in the approaches and conclusions of existential and phenomenological philosophers. Both Camus and Heidegger, for example, repudiated the “existentialist” label, while Sartre would eventually attempt to reconcile his existentialism with Marxism. These contrasting understandings of existentialism have led to different uses and points of view on the part of geographers claiming some degree of existential perspective in their work, thus, for example, Tim Cresswell, in his 2004 *Place: A Short Introduction*, finds a continuation of earlier existential perspectives in current poststructural and postmodernist geographies, while Stuart Elden, in his 2001 *Mapping the Present*, argues that Heidegger’s philosophy played a major role in the historical theories of critical theorist Michel Foucault, particularly his understanding of what Elden calls “spatial history.”

In spite of the wide range of ways in which existentialism has been interpreted—both by its original founders and by geographers later drawing on the tradition—one can identify several conceptual claims that mark out a certain amount of common ground. These claims have been central for many (but not all) geographers seeking to make use of existential principles.

1. To study human beings existentially is to study human experiences, meanings, actions, situations, and events as they happen spontaneously in the course of daily life. On one hand, the world in which we find ourselves is inexhaustible and much more than each of us as unique individuals can ever experience or know. On the other hand, existentially, the world is only what each of us uniquely experiences and understands it to be.

2. There is no world “beneath” or “beyond” the world of our primordial lived experience, which is always and already before us as the world for which we have no choice but to have. Through knowledge, effort, and will, a person or group may over time have some possibility to change the constitution and tenor of their world, but in any particular moment of experience, our world is as it is; it cannot be otherwise.

3. Human awareness and consciousness are always intentional—i.e., necessarily oriented toward and finding their significance in a world of emergent meaning. We are never just
aware but always aware of something, whether an object, living thing, idea, or the like. This always-present quality of intentionality is an invariant feature of human existence and demonstrates that human experience, action, and meaning always unfold in relation to the world in which we find ourselves.

4. This intentional relationship with the world means that person and world are not separate and two but indivisible and one. Human beings are inescapably immersed and enmeshed in their world—what Merleau-Ponty called “body-subject” and Heidegger called “Dasein,” or “being-in-the-world.” Because of this lived reciprocity between self and world, one cannot assign specific phenomena to either self or world alone. Everything experienced is “given” but also “interpreted,” is “of the world” but also “of the person.”

5. This lived reciprocity means that each person’s existence gives meaning to his or her world, which in turn gives meaning to that person’s existence as it emerges both for himself or herself and for others. This lived reciprocity also means that traditional philosophical dualities—e.g., self-world, subject-object, body-mind, perception-cognition, thinking-feeling, personal-transpersonal, people-environment, individual-society, nature-culture, and so forth—must be called into question, revisioned, and rephrased through existential-phenomenological explication. One of the most difficult challenges is to describe the lived reciprocity of person and world in language and conception that do not fall prey to traditional philosophical dichotomies.

6. The everyday structure through which this lived reciprocity unfolds is the lifeworld—a person or group’s day-to-day world of taken-for-grantedness that is normally unnoticed and therefore concealed as a phenomenon. One aim of existential study is to disclose and describe the various lived structures and dynamics of the lifeworld, a focus that has become central to existential-geographical research.

7. There are three dimensions of lifeworld that all must be considered in a thorough existential-phenomenological understanding of human existence, experience, and meaning: (a) a person or group’s unique personal situation—e.g., one’s gender, sexuality, physical and intellectual endowments, degree of ableness, personal likes and dislikes; (b) a person or group’s unique social, cultural, and historical situation—e.g., the time and place in which one lives, economic and political circumstances, religious and societal background, technological infrastructure; (c), a person or group’s situation as it involves their being typical human beings sustaining and sustained by a typical human world—e.g., the lived fact that we are bodily beings who are always and already “emplaced” physically in our world.
**Existential Perspectives in Geography**

Foreshadowed by the humanist work of earlier geographers such as Johannes Granö, J. K. Wright, Clarence Glacken, and David Lowenthal, the existential tradition was initiated in the early 1970s largely by three geographers: Edward Relph, Yi-Fu Tuan, and Anne Buttimer. The first explicit discussion of the value that an existential approach might have for geography was in a 1970 *Canadian Geographer* article by Relph, who drew on the insights of existential phenomenology and emphasized that all knowledge arises from the world of experience, including peoples’ everyday understanding of their geographical world. In his popular 1974 *Topophilia*, Tuan examined the positive, affective bond between people and place, while Buttimer, in a 1976 article in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, considered how the phenomenological notion of lifeworld might offer insights into sense of place, social space, and time-space rhythms.

The most influential study in this early work was Relph’s 1976 *Place and Placelessness*, an existential phenomenology of place, which he defined as a fusion of human and natural order and any significance spatial center of a person or group’s lived experience. The existential crux of place experience, Relph claimed, was insideness—the degree to which a person or group belong to and identify themselves with a place. Relph argued that the existential relationship between insideness and its experiential opposite outsideness is a fundamental dialectic in human experience. Through different degrees of insideness and outsideness, different places take on different meanings and identities for different individuals and groups (see Table 1). For Relph, “existential insideness” is the foundation of the place concept because, in this mode of experience, place is experienced without any directed or self-conscious attention yet is laden with significances that are tacit and unnoticed unless the place is changed in some way—for example, one’s home and community are destroyed by natural disaster. <Table 1 near here>

The first comprehensive work to demonstrate the considerable topical range that existential approaches could offer geography was David Ley and Marwyn Samuels’ 1978 *Humanistic Geography: Problems and Prospects*, an edited collection that included Samuels’ chapter, “Existentialism and Human Geography.” In this and later work, Samuels drew on Martin Buber’s ideas regarding the significance of spatiality in human life to call for geographical research on what he called a “biography of landscape”—the lived foundations of geographical and spatial patterns, interconnections, and attachments. In practice, conceptual and applied efforts to identify and explore such “existential origins” continued to be conducted by geographers and other environmental researchers drawing on the perspective of existential phenomenology.
**Major Themes in Existential Geography**

Since the 1970s, partly through the conceptual foundations established by Buttimer, Ley, Relph, Samuels, and Tuan, existential work examining human beings’ lived relationship with the geographical world has steadily continued, though overshadowed in the last two decades by the more vocal efforts of postmodernist, poststructural, and critical geographies. Most broadly, the aim of current existential-phenomenological work is to understand how qualities of the geographical world like place, home, journey, mobility, habitual embodiment, natural landscape, and so forth found and contribute to human existence, both broadly, in relation to human nature generally; and, specifically, for persons and groups living in particular places, cultural contexts, and historical moments. Three themes are highlighted here to exemplify this work: (1) lived body; (2) place; and (3) a lived environmental ethic.

1. Research on the lived body examines ways in which our existence as bodily beings contributes to our lived geographies. The fact that we are solid, upright bodies gives a sense of immediate centeredness to space and—in conjunction with upright posture and binocular vision—orient us within a sixfold directional axis of up-down, front-back, and left-right. We experience the world largely through the five senses, and existential-phenomenological research has studied how each sense offers a different but complementary way of knowing the world. Existential-phenomenological studies of the lived body have also examined specific environmental experiences of particular individuals or groups, thus Jonathan Cole and Kay Toombs explored how less-abled persons’ loss of mobility leads to a changed interaction with the surrounding physical and human world, while sociologist Chris Allen examined the bodily encounters and resulting social geography of visually-impaired children.

Beyond bodily structure and process, there is research on the pre-reflective but learned intentionality of the body, which Merleau-Ponty termed body-subject—the pre-conscious intelligence of body manifested through action. For geography, one of the most significant aspects of body-subject is its automatic, taken-for-granted ability to work in extended ways over time and space. One can ask how routine behaviors of individuals coming together regularly in space can transform that space into a place with a regular dynamic and character. David Seamon has explored how such “place ballets” can be established and sustained through environmental design and policy.

2. The theme of place has been a central focus in existential-phenomenological work since the seminal studies of Buttimer, Tuan, and Relph highlighted above. In philosophy, Edward Casey, Jeff Malpas, and Robert Mugerauer have written book-length accounts arguing for place as a central ontological structure founding human experience. As Casey wrote in his 1993 *Getting Back into Place*, “place, by virtue of its unencompassability by anything other
than itself, is at once the limit and the condition of all that exists... To be is to be in place” (pp. 15-16).

Much of this place research has focused on particular groups’ lived relationships with particular places; one early example was David Ley’s study of African-American neighborhoods in inner-city Philadelphia presented in his 1974 *The Black Inner City as Frontier Outpost*. More recent efforts include Ray Oldenberg’s 1989 *The Great Good Place*, which highlights “third places”—public or semi-public establishments where people informally gather and socialize; Mindy Fullilove’s 2004 *Root Shock*, a study of the traumatic impact that urban renewal had on African-American neighborhoods in several American cities; and Douglas Rae’s 2003 *City*, an examination of traditional American urbanism grounded in lively streets and place-based community, using the city of New Haven, Connecticut, as a study focus.

3. Research involving a lived environmental ethic considers ways whereby people might become more sensitive to and involved with the natural world so that their wish and will to care for the environment becomes stronger and more durable. Mugerauer, Relph, and philosopher Ingrid Stefanovic have all drawn on Heideggerian thinking to suggest possible ways whereby people might better care for the natural world. In his 1981 *Rational Landscapes and Humanistic Geography*, for example, Relph developed the concept of environmental humility—a way of seeing and understanding that is responsive to the best qualities of the Other and that might foster a compassion and gentle caretaking for places, people, and the things of nature. In a related way, Stefanovic drew on Heidegger’s understanding of place and emplacement as means to reconsider the nature of environmental and economic sustainability.

**Criticisms of Existential Geography**

With the development in the 1980s and 1990s of postmodernist, poststructural, and critical geographies, existential and humanistic geography has faced numerous conceptual and ideological criticisms that can most broadly be described by charges of: (1) essentialism; (2) authoritativeness; (3) voluntarism; and (4) an ideological bias toward bounded, static, exclusionary places.

As indicated by the writings of Buttimer, Relph, Samuels, and Tuan, early existential work in geography focused largely on human typicality with the result that critical and social-constructionist critics label existential studies as essentialist—i.e., presupposing and claiming an invariant and universal human condition only revealed when all “non-essentials” like culture, economics, or history are stripped away, leaving some inescapable core of human experience and existence. A second, related criticism, leveled especially by feminist geographers, is that the existential approach is authoritative in that it privileges the
interpretive sensibilities of academic experts who arbitrarily claimed to provide an accurate depiction of the geographical situations and experiences of more ordinary human beings. This depiction, the feminist critique argues, is in fact grounded in an implicit masculinist point of view assuming that the experience of (mostly) academically trained men could represent all human situations—for example, the experiences of women, gays and lesbians, the less advantaged, particular racial and ethnic groups, and so forth.

As already pointed out, however, any thorough existential presentation of the geographical lifeworld requires that, in addition to human typicality, researchers must also recognize and examine the personal and cultural dimensions of particular environmental and place experiences; the already-cited work of Allen, Cole, Fullilove, Oldenburg, Rae, and Toombs are convincing examples of the conceptual and lived effectiveness of existential work dealing with specific individuals, groups, and places. Existential researchers claim that their people and place portrayals, grounded in the openness of phenomenological method, are more accurate and fair than social-constructivist or critical accounts that too often force fit their subjects through some pre-defined set of cultural, political, gender, or socioeconomic filters and thus end in lifeworld misrepresentation and distortion.

A third criticism of the existential approach is that it is voluntarist—i.e., that it tacitly views society and the world as a product of intentional, willed actions of individuals. This criticism arises from critical geographers, especially neo-Marxists and feminists, who give attention instead to the broader societal structures and power relations that underlie particular lifeworlds and places. As a way of philosophy that highlights self-awareness as a vehicle of personal and societal change, the existential perspective places greatest emphasis on individual freedom, understanding, and agency. On one hand, there is an underlying ideological assumption that individual will and personal growth provide the major means for making a difference in the larger world. On the other hand, an existential approach can examine power, exclusion, resistance, justice, political process and other central emphases of critical geographers, though little work has been done in this direction, perhaps because most existential thinkers instinctively favor an interest in experience, selfhood, and personal and group autonomy; one exception is political theorist Daniel Kemmis’s 1990 *Community and the Politics of Place* and his 1995 *The Good City, the Good Life*, two books that explore how citizens’ sense of responsibility for the place in which they live might facilitate a civilized politics.

A fourth criticism of the existential approach is that it portrays lifeworlds and places as bounded, static, exclusionary, and reactionary; that place, insideness, dwelling, and rootedness are ethically favored over non-place, outsideness, journey, and mobile, shifting modes of life and styles of identity. This criticism has been brought forward by poststructuralists, who emphasize relativist, shifting meanings and distrust any kind of
permanent conceptual or lived structures. Existential thinkers respond that these poststructuralists misread existential conclusions and that, throughout existential-geographical work, there is a flexibility of conceptual expression—a recognition that an excess of place can lead to a provincialism and callousness just as an excess of journey can lead to a loss of identity or an impartial relativity that allows for commitment to nothing. One central question that thinkers like Kemmis, Oldenburg, and Seamon address is whether, through design and policy, progressive, connected places can be made that draw together human diversity through everyday environmental co-presence and co-awareness—e.g., the potential that a small-grained, permeable pathway system has for bringing people of difference together in city districts through informal, serendipitous sidewalk and street encounters.

Poststructuralist critics are also concerned that existential work too often seems a nostalgic paean to pre-modern times and places. How can authentic places, at-homeness, and dwelling exist in a postmodern era of human diversity, rapid technological change, globalization, and geographical and social mobility? This criticism, however, ignores a central conclusion of existential thinkers like Relph, Casey, Malpas, Mugerauer, and Stefanovic: that regardless of the particular cultural, technological, or historical situation, people will always need place because having and identifying with place are integral to what and who we are as human beings.

From this perspective, the postmodernist and poststructuralist devaluation of place as it supports individual and group identity and solidarity is questionable existentially and potentially devastating practically. Instead, the crucial theoretical and real-world question is how a conceptual and applied understanding of place might lead to the making of actual places that draw together diverse individuals and groups through a shared sense of environmental involvement and attachment. In our mobile, ever-changing, globally-dominated world, one of the few real-world ways to accommodate a pluralistic society may be the power of place to gather human differences together spatially and thereby sustain the autonomy of individuals and groups as, at the same time, they feel a sense of belonging and commitment to the larger place of which they are a part.

Further Reading

Websites
Center for Advanced Study in Phenomenology
http://www.phenomenologycenter.org/

Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology Network
http://www.arch.ksu.edu/seamon/EAP.html

International Association for Environmental Philosophy
http://www.environmentalphilosophy.org/

Merleau-Ponty Circle
http://www.uri.edu/artsci/phl/impc/

Phenomenology Online
http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/home.html

Research on Space and Place Website
http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~janzb/place/
Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy
http://www.spep.org/

Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences
http://pages.slu.edu/faculty/harriss3/SPHS/

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Existentialism
http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/

Suggested cross-references to other articles:
body, cultural geography, critical geography, feminist geography, humanistic geography, phenomenological geography, place, positivist geography, postmodernist geography, poststructural geography, qualitative methods, social constructionism
### Relph’s Modes of Insideness & Outsideness

1. **Existential insideness**  
   A situation involving a feeling of attachment and at-homeness. Place is “experienced without deliberate and self-conscious reflection yet is full with significances” (Relph 1976, p. 55). One feels this is the place where he or she belongs. The deepest kind of place experience and the one toward which people probably all yearn.

2. **Existential outsideness**  
   A situation where the person feels separate from or out of place. Place may feel alienating, unreal, unpleasant, or oppressive. Homelessness or homesickness would be examples. Often, today, the physical and designed environments contribute to this kind of experience *unintentionally*, e.g., the sprawl of suburban environments, the dissolution of urban downtowns, or the decline of rural communities.

3. **Objective outsideness**  
   A situation involving a deliberate dispassionate attitude of separation from place. Place is a thing to be studied and manipulated as an object apart from the experiencer. A scientific approach to place and, typically, the approach most often taken by planners, designers, and policy makers.

4. **Incidental outsideness**  
   A situation in which place is the background or mere setting for activities, e.g., the landscapes and places one drives through as he or she is on the way to somewhere else.

5. **Behavioral insideness**  
   A situation involving the deliberate attending to the appearance of place. Place is seen as a set of objects, views, or activities, e.g., the experience one passes through when becoming familiar with a new place—figuring out what is where and how the various landmarks, paths, and so forth all fit together to make one complete place.

6. **Empathetic insideness**  
   A situation in which the person, as outsider, tries to be open to place and understand it more deeply. This kind of experience requires interest, empathy, and heartfelt concern. Empathetic insideness is an important aspect of approaching a place phenomenologically.

7. **Vicarious insideness**  
   A situation of deeply-felt secondhand involvement with place. One is transported to place through imagination—through paintings, novels, music, films, or other creative media. One thinks, for example, of Claude Monet's paintings of his beloved garden Giverny, Thomas Hardy's novels describing 19th-century rural England, or John Sayles’ films portraying conflicts within and between particular American communities and regions.

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Table 1. Relph’s modes of insideness and outsideness (Relph 1976, pp. 51-55).