Humanism, Phenomenology, and Geography
Author(s): Ted Relph, Yi-Fu Tuan and Anne Buttimer
Source: *Annals of the Association of American Geographers,* Vol. 67, No. 1 (Mar., 1977), pp. 177-183
Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of the Association of American Geographers
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2562264
Accessed: 09-12-2019 20:09 UTC

levels. The fundamental concepts are very simple: First Law of Thermodynamics ("total energy equation"), Newton's Second Law ("equation of motion"), and the conservation of mass ("equation of continuity"), that is, energy, momentum, and mass transfers. Any freshman can and does understand such basement ideas which are applicable for most macrophenomena in our universe. Such ideas are initially approached as "semantic equations." When dealing with the primary concepts of environmental physics on the introductory level, no superficial treatment is necessary since the basic principles ("equations," "statements," etc.) can be used directly in conjunction with canonical structures and flow charts. In fact, they can be independently "derived" by students in class or lab discussions. In later courses, the connectivity or feedback lines on such graphs are turned more and more into sets of mathematical statements, but the fundamental ideas remain unchanged. This way, the course structure becomes continuous, progressive and integrated. The freshman already knows the fundamental concepts which he might use later as a graduate student on a more complete level. The liberal arts student who takes only one course in physical geography is also better off, since concepts are retained longer than masses of facts.

This way, new ideas are not so frightening to the novice. For over two years, my introductory physical geography and beginning climatology courses have been taught completely as process-response systems.[2] Student reaction has been very good. Some students, a minority, continue to prefer memorization—but do we need to cater to them? Most students appear to favor, intuitively, cause-effect ideas to catalog climatic or geomorphic "information" (e.g., time and spatial distribution of the landscape's morphological components; the responses to the processes of energy, mass, and momentum exchanges).

Oliver mentions other "untapped research areas" in geographical climatology. Outside the methodological framework which is all-encompassing by definition, what might they be? In all honesty, I would be interested to know what has been overlooked. Besides, the system of five levels of research-teaching methodology or philosophy is not meant to be restraining. All types of endeavors fit into it regardless of level. It is meant to be a beacon or an orientation for research and teaching.

WERNER H. TERJUNG

*Dr. Terjung is Associate Professor of Geography at the University of California in Los Angeles, CA 90024.*

[2] Course syllabus is available on request.

## HUMANISM, PHENOMENOLOGY, AND GEOGRAPHY

*Ted Relph*

POSSIBLY I am, in Yi-Fu Tuan's phrase, "seeing design," but both his paper on "Humanistic Geography" and Anne Buttimer's on "Grasping the Dynamism of Lifeworld" in the June, 1976 *Annals* appear to develop related themes concerning the nature and practice of geography.[1] In particular they contrast with the scientific pretentiousness of much that has been written about the discipline in the last decade by expressing views about geography that strike a tone of sensitivity to human issues. While there is a great deal in them that I find encouraging I am nevertheless concerned that several of the interpretations of humanism and phenomenology are too extravagant or are misleading in other ways.

*Dr. Relph is at Scarborough College, University of Toronto, in West Hill, Ontario M1C 1A4, Canada.*

[1] Yi-Fu Tuan, "Humanistic Geography," *Annals*, Association of American Geographers, Vol. 66 (1976), pp. 266–76; Anne Buttimer, "Grasping the Dynamism of Lifeworld," *Annals*, Association of American Geographers, Vol. 66 (1976), pp. 277–92.

### HUMANISTIC GEOGRAPHY

Yi-Fu Tuan acknowledges that the humanist "does not deny scientific perspectives on man; he builds on them."[2] The impression I gained

[2] Tuan, op. cit., footnote 1, p. 267.

of both his and Anne Buttimer's understanding of "humanistic geography" is that it is a branch of the discipline having its own identifiable content (place, crowding and privacy, religion, etc.) and approach (that of the humanities based on sensitivity to language and philosophical awareness). There is an apparent exclusiveness to this which is disturbing, for the implication, though I am sure it is unintended, is that those engaged in other fields of geography are somehow less concerned with the qualities and possibilities of human life. This is clearly not in keeping with the principles of humanism as they are stated, for instance, in the second Humanist Manifesto; there it is held that there are many forms of humanism including scientific, ethical, democratic, religious, and Marxist humanism.[3] In this sense humanism transcends divisions both within and between disciplines; it is an attitude that offers ethical guidance by recognizing the rights of every individual to fulfil his or her potential and to be free of arbitrarily imposed political or other restrictions. From this perspective a humanist geographer is not merely one who investigates the ambiguities in man-nature relations or the varieties of geographical knowledge, but someone, whether geomorphologist or spatial analyst or regional specialist, who conducts his life and studies humanistically, who is tolerant of the views of others yet constantly questions dogma and prejudice, and who always considers the human implications of his own decisions and actions.

I grant that there are confusions about the term "humanistic" and that it can refer either to the humanities or to humanism. But in stressing, for instance, the value of ethology in developing powers of observation, and in arguing for the usefulness of humanistic geography, Tuan and Buttimer are certainly going beyond the sense of "humanistic" as having to do with the humanities. I think it is unnecessarily restrictive to imply that there is or should be a separable branch of the discipline called "humanistic geography." This is not to deny that the issues and approaches which they describe are important; on the contrary I think they are quite fundamental, but I also think that they could be grouped more accurately under a title such as "experiential" geography, or perhaps not named at all—just adopted and used.

[3] Paul Kurtz and E. H. Wilson, "Humanist Manifesto II," *Current*, Vol. 156 (November, 1973), pp. 28–36.

### PHENOMENOLOGY

While I believe that humanism is an attitude rather than a branch of knowledge, I also recognize that there are approaches and philosophies which reflect and encourage this attitude. Phenomenology is certainly one of these for it stresses the anthropocentric character of all experience. Any humanistic geography must surely draw on phenomenological concepts and methods, though it has to be acknowledged that these methods, like any others, can be and have been used with scant attention to humanist concerns. Phenomenology has had limited influence in geography to date, and I therefore applaud any attempt such as Anne Buttimer's to correct this lack of use even though I would much prefer to see substantive applications rather than discussions of the possible uses of phenomenology. In programmatic statements there is a serious danger of introducing misleading impressions and confusions, for they are inevitably derived from diverse and complex philosophical discussions about phenomenology. Furthermore phenomenology does not summarize easily for the reason that it has to do with the variety of human experience. It is much better, then, to show by example the insights that phenomenology does give than to suggest what insights it might possibly offer.

There is a great deal in Anne Buttimer's paper which I find enlightening or with which I have no issue, but there are a number of interpretations and arguments which strike me as misleading. I am disturbed that she seems to take a neutral stance apparently outside both social science and phenomenology and then tries to fit these together like the parts of a jigsaw puzzle. What this involves is an acceptance of existing concepts and patterns of geographical thought, and she even suggests that there are structures, for instance time-space rhythms of spatial activity, that phenomenologists might find in geography.[4] For her phenomenology is, in part at least, an adjunct or preamble to scientific procedures, a means of adding to and improving accounts of overt behavior; she also proposes that there is a need for a language and a set of categories that will enable us to inter-

[4] Buttimer, op. cit., footnote 1, pp. 286–87.

pret lifeworld experience.[5] All this is, I think, an erroneous interpretation. In phenomenology it is widely accepted that when ordinary language fails to communicate lifeworld experiences it is because that language has been buried and distorted by scientific meanings, and that what is needed to overcome this is not a new language (which will only obscure matters further) but a clarification of the uses and origins of existing language. Furthermore it is inconsistent with the major tenets of phenomenology to accept existing concepts and explanations of phenomena; on the contrary the aim is to suspend belief in such explanations and to elucidate the variety of our direct, prescientific experiences of the lifeworld. It could be that phenomenological approaches will lead to the identification of time-space rhythms of some form, but these cannot be assumed beforehand, nor if they are discovered will they have the same ontological status as those discussed by Hagerstrand.

Phenomenological descriptions and interpretations are based in part on imaginative involvement in the experience of others, and in part on reflexivity—that is, a careful examination of one's own attitudes toward and consciousness of the phenomenon in question.[6] This reflexive approach is one of impersonal subjectivity and has been used, for example, by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. But this is not, I think what Buttimer means when she writes that the "fundamental message" of phenomenology is to move us toward a keener sense of self-knowledge.[7] Possibly phenomenology does provide fertile ground for the introspection that leads to self-awareness but it offers no particular guidance on how to achieve such a goal, and this is no more an explicit aim of phenomenology than it is of most philosophical and religious traditions. Self-knowledge is one of the foundations of humanism and like humanism transcends the boundaries of academic disciplines and intellectual traditions.

In short, I find Anne Buttimer's account of phenomenology too programmatic and too conservative and Yi-Fu Tuan's view of humanistic geography too restrictive. Phenomenology is not just an excuse for subjectivity, nor does it allow straightforward combinations with existing geographical concepts, nor is it an easy road to enlightenment, and even though it is sympathetic to humanist principles it does not necessarily lead to humanism. It is a complex and subtle approach to all phenomena of experience which, like any methodology or philosophy, requires perseverance, commitment, critical insight, and imagination if it is to be used well. If it can be used well in geography, and if it can be combined with the attitudes of humanism, I believe it will have to offer radical interpretations of geographical experience and sensitive recommendations for the making of environments and places.

[5] Buttimer, op. cit., footnote 1, p. 288.

[6] See for example H. Spiegelberg, *Doing Phenomenology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975).

[7] Buttimer, op. cit., footnote 1, p. 290.

## COMMENT IN REPLY

TED RELPH says that my view of humanistic geography is too restrictive. It is restrictive because I take humanistic geography to be a subfield in our discipline, and because I think it has a distinctive standpoint which enables a humanist to formulate and clarify certain problems of concern to geographers. I may have made the field seem even narrower by stating explicitly how a student grounded in the humanities can make distinctive contributions to the geographical enterprise.

Conceptually, humanistic geography is not restrictive because its point of departure is no less than the range and quality of human awareness. An old pensioner's attachment to his routine and to his neighborhood is a type of awareness, as also a geographer's new understanding of spatial hierarchy. Aesthetic sensibility is a type of awareness, as also the compulsive need for clarity or quantification. What is the relation of awareness to behavior? Brushing off the fly on one's forehead is action in response to awareness; at the other extreme, an image may be so compelling as to induce a people to abandon their homeland for the New World. Ignorance is the converse of awareness.

The deliberate refusal to contemplate certain kinds of evidence merits our attention. The farmer who abuses his land and the geographical scientist who abuses his model are both of interest to the humanist scholar. It is tempting to trumpet the cliché that nothing human is alien to the humanist. Such claim, however, is largely empty because no thinker has a theory of awareness that is comprehensive and powerful enough to illuminate the entire range of human experience. We cannot demand a work of towering genius. It will come when the time is ripe. Meanwhile humanists need not sit on their haunches. We do have partial theories, including phenomenology in its current stage of modest achievement, with which to explore the world in a systematic fashion.

I entirely agree with Ted Relph that humanist geographers should produce substantive works rather than more programmatic statements. I am glad to say that a few substantive works already exist and that more are forthcoming. As for my paper in the June issue of the *Annals*, it was written in the hope that it clarifies certain issues for students trained in the humanities, and also because John Fraser Hart assured me that it was my only opportunity to say something "presidential" to the profession.

YI-FU TUAN

*Dr. Tuan is Professor of Geography at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, MN 55455.*

## COMMENT IN REPLY

EDWARD RELPH's commentary provides a welcome opportunity to explore neglected issues and to share some of the afterthoughts which have weighed on my mind since the manuscript was first submitted for publication. I am not alone, I presume, in my frustrations over the limitations of print as a medium for exchanging our messages, and the inevitability of misunderstanding when one dares to venture on speculative ground within the narrow confines of a journal article. It is indeed heartening when someone responds and opens the way for further conversation which may prove constructive for both of us, as well as for our readers.

First, let me disclaim any conspiracy by Yi-Fu Tuan and me to launch a new course in geography labeled "humanistic." This may well be his intention, but it was not mine. We have shared many conversations, assent to many basic values, but we still think independently and probably wrote these two essays at opposite corners of the globe.[1] Please understand these remarks as solely mine; I should not dare to speak for his opinion on these matters.

If I understand your commentary correctly, there are three major areas which invite response: 1) on humanism and "humanistic" geography; 2) on phenomenology and its correct interpretation; and 3) on the lack of empirical illustrations. You also introduce the question of language, which I feel demands more discussion than could be entertained here. On the first I shall plead not guilty; on the second I am open for correction; and on the third, of course, I cannot plead innocent. There are some clarifications, however, which should be made so that our exchange may become a constructive one.

### HUMANISM

The terms "humanist" and "humanistic" are, as you point out, fraught with all kinds of ambiguous associations. In fact, I did not use the term "humanistic geography" for many of the same reasons you cite. I spoke of "more humanistic foundations for the field," and now, if I were to rewrite the article, I might not use the terms at all. If you wish me to choose between the two options you proposed, viz., humanism as an attitude expressed in the Humanist Manifesto, or humanism as a style of thought characteristic of the humanities, I have little difficulty in adopting the former. But the terms themselves, even as you define them, have too close an association with anthropocentrism to be effective communicators of my basic position. It is this taken-for-granted stance which

[1] Yi-Fu Tuan, "Commentary," in *Values in Geography*, Commission on College Geography, Resource Paper No. 24 (Washington, D. C.: Association of American Geographers, 1974), pp. 54–58.

may be the most intransigent barrier on the way toward discovering the dynamics of lifeworld. Geographers, of all people, it seems to me, should be cultivating a perspective which sees man as part of nature, not dominant over it, nor submissive to it, but as intrinsically part of the biosphere. The various styles of social space and administrative systems which characterize our "intersubjective" worlds, as well as the flights of imagination, myth, and scientific theory constructed by the human mind, need to be studied in the context of our common terrestrial home. I did hint that this might be our most important contribution to the dialogue with phenomenology, for writers in that field often demonstrate an anthropocentric bias. If I had been aware of this while writing the article, I should perhaps have proposed a more explicit definition of what I mean by "Human," emphasizing its bio-ecological and spiritual dimensions, and thus expanding on conventional definitions of man as primarily a social or intellectual creature. The essential purpose of using the term "humanistic" at all was to anchor my endeavors with those who seek to weave together the strands of human experience which have become compartmentalized into specialized analytical channels. It was intended to express an implicit desire for wholeness in our conceptions of human persons, communities, and places. That "togetherness" of people, things, and all living beings in situ, does not fit the agenda of more specialized disciplines. Nor is it likely to be achieved by developing a distinct branch of geography labeled "humanistic" if this were to follow the conventional pattern of systematic specialization.

### PHENOMENOLOGY

Your admonitions and corrections on the potentially misleading interpretations of phenomenology are provocative and helpful. The preamble to my article did not claim an exhaustive coverage of that field, but its very brevity and succinctness leave it vulnerable to misinterpretation. I have frankly paid less attention to the "letter of the phenomenological law," as it were, than to capturing something of its spirit and the direction which it seems to indicate for knowledge generally, and for geographic thought and practice particularly. If we are to accept the existentialist challenge of freedom in our interpretations and reflections on that direction, is it not inevitable that we may arrive at different stances? My references to phenomenology were biased toward the central motif of the paper, and I am fully aware of the risk involved in exposing such a partial perspective on an enormously complex field. Misleading comments should therefore be corrected, and I eagerly invite you to do so.

I must take issue, however, with two charges which you make. First, you claim that I assume "a neutral stance outside both social science and phenomenology . . . and then try to fit these together like the parts of a jigsaw puzzle." I am not clear what you mean by "neutral," but I am clear that I do not see the mutual relationships of science and phenomenology as parts of a jigsaw puzzle. The metaphor which I would like to propose is to see social sciences as searchlights whose beams interpenetrate at various angles, and phenomenology as a more general illumination which seeks to unmask experience, and the relative locations and distinctive functions of scientific searchlights. The jigsaw metaphor implies a mosaic of discrete and bounded regions of intellectual effort, and I suppose this could be applied usefully to the agenda of a scientist. Phenomenology does not fit this metaphor. A painting perhaps, but not a jigsaw. The metaphor which might be more appropriate is that of a sculpture, where the artist endeavors to allow form to emerge from matter. In the use of materials and techniques, he may well be aided by scientific knowledge, but these alone cannot provide the disposition or creative vision to let the piece of art take shape. Could one not speak of the art and the science of phenomenological enquiry? This is my objection to the jigsaw metaphor: it forces phenomenology into the preordained categories of scientific procedures, and that robs it of much of its creative value. I can appreciate how I may have given the impression of a jigsaw in the manner whereby I outlined potential directions for enquiry. I should perhaps have emphasized that I saw these three "routes" as *catalysts for discovery* rather than operational programs for analysis.

If you accept my alternative metaphor, then perhaps your second charge, that for me phenomenology is "an adjunct or preamble to scientific procedures, a means of adding to and improving accounts of overt behavior" needs to be reconsidered. This is only part of the story, and it does not specify the steps involved in gaining a grasp of their mutual relationships.

There were many reasons why I tended to emphasize the potential dialogue rather than the opposition between phenomenology and science. I feel that the polarization of "science" and "humanities," their associated "cultures," and the irreconcilable contrasts between these two ways of knowing, may have been overstated in recent years. Such dualistic abstractions may be intellectually comfortable, but not necessarily accurate, or helpful, in practice. In geography, if we wish to understand the human experience of dwelling together on earth, then protests about disciplinary orthodoxy and the tidiness of our abstractions may be less important than the encouragement to open our minds, hearts, and senses to direct experience. For this one needs dialogue rather than debate, a shared journey rather than competing ones, and which of us does not need a secure foothold on familiar ground before we risk a leap into unknown territory?

To suggest that one may begin a route toward phenomenological awareness from conventional territory does not mean that this is the ideal or only starting point. Rather, it is one which I have found effective during the past few years in a variety of contexts. It has served to make us all grow in awareness of the intentionality of our own modes of knowing, and also examine some of the presuppositions of analytical procedures.[2] Perhaps at the end of such a series of discoveries one may arrive at a grasp of the phenomenological notion of "essence" and the quality of "transcendence," but to confront the beginner with this at the outset may be not only insensitive but also self-defeating. I see many potential pathways through the thicket of semantic and conceptual undergrowth which separates our "scientific" knowledge from the clearing where one may grasp direct experience, and the leads provided by phenomenology may not be the only ones possible. At this point, however, I feel that definitions of contrasts between the forest where we are, and the clearing where we should be, are less urgent than a word of encouragement and some guidance to blaze a trail through the intervening space.

### ON EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATIONS

For most readers, I suppose, the lack of "demonstration cases" is the most disappointing aspect of the article. The only excuses I can offer are lack of space and inappropriateness of the medium. Any adequate illustration of how phenomenology "works" (as you should especially appreciate), would demand more space, and perhaps a different medium, than this introductory essay could allow. I am not convinced that one can communicate the full significance of phenomenology via the abstract medium of print. In my view, the process of phenomenological enquiry, the progressive dialogue and growth toward awareness which it can involve, are at least as important as a product, such as the "lifeworld" article. Of course, illustrations could have been cited such as your own dissertation study, the Duquesne Studies, Yi-Fu Tuan's *Topophilia*, and others, but if one were to incorporate any such illustration in a review article, there would surely be the risk of listing the wholeness of those experiences.[3] I did offer vignette illustrations from Coles and from Heidigger, but they obviously did not suffice. The main purpose of my article was to outline the directions toward which phenomenology seemed to point for geographers, and to show how that direction seemed to harmonize well with those traditionally espoused within the field. A direction is not yet a route map, and I feel it is more appropriate at this stage to invite colleagues to design their own route maps than for me to parade my own tentative version.

Your remarks about my conservatism are somewhat amusing, but understandable, given my attempt to dispel some exaggerated images of phenomenology which seem to be prevalent

[2] Many of our experiences, such as student projects, do not lend themselves to publication within conventional media. It is the process of discovery which we have found most valuable. As for "product" I did refer to one study of elderly persons in Worcester, Massachusetts, by Graham Rowles, "The Geographical Experience of Older People," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Clark University, 1976. Another, in preparation, is David Seamon, "Movement, Rest and Encounter: A Phenomenological Exploration of Some Taken-for-Granted Dimensions of Everyday Geographical Experience," Clark University.

[3] Donald W. Moncrieff, "Aesthetics and the African Bushman," in A. Giorgi, et al., eds., *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology*, Vol. 2 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1975), pp. 224–32; Constance T. Fischer, "Toward the Structure of Privacy," in A. Giorgi, et al., eds., *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology*, Vol. 1 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1971), pp. 149–63; and Edward Relph, "The Phenomena of Place," unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, 1973.

in our literature. I wished to caution about the confusion of phenomenology with any or all attempts to explore "subjective" experience, and protest against the tendency to envision it as panacea for disillusioned positivists. In this respect, I share your reservations about how much phenomenology may actually contribute toward the achievement of the stated goals, but let us test it, as openly as possible, before judging it inappropriate on the one hand, or relegating it to the archives on the other, where only the well-read and philosophically inclined may touch it!

I am grateful for your comment and hope to learn more from you in the future. In engaging thus we may help to stretch the narrow scope of our conventional media. Perhaps this exchange may also help readers to see journal articles as benchmarks on a trail toward discovery, rather than monuments to name and claim a charted territory.

ANNE BUTTIMER

*Dr. Buttimer is Associate Professor of Geography at Clark University in Worcester, MA 01610.*