



Journal of Philosophical Investigations

Journal of Philosophical Investigations

Print ISSN: 2251-7960 Online ISSN: 2423-4419

Homepage: <https://philosophy.tabrizu.ac.ir>



University of Tabriz

Lifeworld, Place, and Phenomenology: Holistic and Dialectical Perspectives

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Article Info

Article type:

Research Article

Article history:

Received 13 June 2024

Received in revised form
23 June 2024

Accepted 26 June 2024

Published online 07
September 2024

Keywords:

homeworld; lifeworld;
lived emplacement;
Lively, Penelope; natural
attitude; phenomenology;
phenomenology of place;
place.

ABSTRACT

In this article, I clarify the phenomenological concept of lifeworld by drawing on the geographical themes of place, place experience, and place meaning. Most simply, *lifeworld* refers to a person or group's day-to-day, taken-for-granted experience that typically goes unnoticed. One aim of phenomenological research is to examine the lifeworld as a means to identify and clarify the tacit, unnoticed aspects of human life so that they can be accounted for theoretically and practically. Here, I discuss some key phenomenological principles and then draw on phenomenological renditions of place as one means to clarify some of the lifeworld's social, environmental, spatial, and geographical aspects. To concretize my discussion, I draw descriptive evidence from British writer Penelope Lively's *Spiderweb*, a 1990s novel describing one outsider's efforts to come to inhabit a place—a fictitious present-day village in the southwestern British county of Somerset.

Cite this article: Seamon, D. (2024). Lifeworld, Place, and Phenomenology: Holistic and Dialectical Perspectives. *Journal of Philosophical Investigations*, 18(48), 31-52. <https://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2024.18406>



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<https://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2024.18406>

Publisher: University of Tabriz.

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[E]very opinion about “the” world has its ground in the pre-given world. It is from this very ground that I have freed myself through the epoché; I stand *above* the world, which has now become for me, in a quite peculiar sense, a *phenomenon*. Edmund Husserl (1970, 152).

Introduction

In 1979, I published *A Geography of the Lifeworld*, a phenomenological examination of *everyday environmental experience*—“the sum total of a person’s firsthand involvements with the geographical world in which he or she typically lives” (Seamon 1979, 15-16).¹ The book was a revision of my 1977 doctoral dissertation, *Movement, Rest, and Encounter: A Phenomenology of Everyday Environmental Experience*, written under the direction of human geographer Anne Buttimer, who was then a professor in Clark University’s School of Geography in Worcester, Massachusetts (Seamon 1977; Buttimer & Seamon 1980). Beginning in the late 1960s, Buttimer and other human geographers such as David Ley, Edward Relph, Marwyn Samuels, and Yi-Fu Tuan initiated a new disciplinary subfield called “humanistic geography.” This subfield sought to position “humans and human consciousness, feeling, thoughts, and emotions at the center of geographical thinking” (Cresswell 2013, 109). A primary aim was to understand the lived relationship between people and the geographical world in which they find themselves. How and why, for example, are places important in human life, what are they experientially, and how do environmental qualities contribute to their constitution? What does it mean to be emplaced humanly in a world that always includes geographical dimensions such as space, distance, nearness, mobility, materiality, landscape, region, and nature?²

It was in the academic context of a developing humanistic geography that I wrote *A Geography of the Lifeworld* (henceforth *Lifeworld*). At the time, humanistic geographers were experimenting with a wide range of conceptual and methodological approaches that included idealism, pragmatism, existentialism, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, and grounded theory (Cloke et al. 1991; Ley and Samuels 1978; Seamon 2015). In *Lifeworld*, I drew on the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, which, most simply defined, is the careful description and interpretation of human experience, awareness, and meaning. The phenomenological focus is *phenomena*— things or experiences as people experience those things or experiences. Phenomenologically, the aim is to describe any phenomenon in its own terms as it is as an experience, situation, or event understood via the real lives of real human beings. As philosopher David Cerbone, explains, phenomenology works to hold attention on “the experience itself”, to

¹ The book was reprinted in Routledge Press’s “Revival” series in 2015; for a set of commentaries on the book, see Moores 2006; Seamon 2006. The current article draws from discussions in Seamon 2018, 2023.

² Introductions to humanistic geography include Buttimer 1976; Cloke et al. 1991, Ch. 3; Cresswell 2013, Ch. 6; Relph 1981; Seamon 2015, 2018, 2023; Seamon and Larsen 2021; Tuan 1976.

concentrate on its character and structure rather than whatever it is that might underlie it or be causally responsible for it” (Cerbone 2006, 3).¹

In *Lifeworld*, my phenomenological method was primarily grounded in what qualitative researchers identify today as “focus groups” (Cameron 2000; Seamon and Gill 2016). Calling them *environmental experience groups*, I gathered firsthand experiential accounts from small discussion groups of volunteer participants who were willing to meet once a week to examine, in their own daily lives, environmental and geographical experiences relating to specific weekly themes such as movement patterns, emotions relating to place, the nature of noticing and attention, the meaning of home and at-homeness, places for things, deciding where to go when, and so forth (Seamon 1979, 28). Through a phenomenological explication of some 1,500 first-person observations provided by these environmental experience groups, I eventually arrived at three overarching themes—*movement*, *rest*, and *encounter*—that delineated a common lived core of everyday environmental experience. The book’s first section on movement examined the habitual nature of everyday environmental behaviors and argued that the lived foundation of these behaviors is the preconscious, intelligent awareness of the body, an aspect of human experience first explored thoroughly by French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962). The second section on rest considered people’s attachment to place and gave particular attention to at-homeness and sustaining affective relationships with places and environments. The book’s third section on encounter explored the multifaceted ways in which people make or do not make attentive contact with their surroundings. I identified and described such modes of awareness as obliviousness, noticing, watching, and heightened contact. The book’s concluding section examined the lived relationships and interconnections among movement, rest, and encounter and argued that their threefold structure offers one simple but integrated way to envision human environmental experience conceptually and to think about design, planning, and policy practically.

In this chapter, I draw partly on *Lifeworld* to examine directions for lifeworld research today, giving particular attention to recent phenomenological research on place. Most simply, *lifeworld* refers to one’s everyday, taken-for-granted experience that typically goes unnoticed. One aim of phenomenological research is to examine the lifeworld as a way to identify and understand the tacit, unnoticed aspects of human life so that they can be accounted for theoretically and practically. Here, I identify four important assumptions that underlie a phenomenological understanding of lifeworld and then draw on the concept of place to clarify some of the lifeworld’s social, environmental, spatial, and geographical aspects. To concretize my discussion, I draw on descriptive evidence from British writer Penelope Lively’s *Spiderweb*, a 1990s novel describing

¹ Introductions to phenomenology include Cerbone 2006; Finlay 2011; Moran 2000; Sokolowski 2000; van Manen 2014. The classic work is Spiegelberg 1982.

one outsider's efforts to come to inhabit a place—a fictitious present-day village in the southwestern British county of Somerset (Lively 1998).

Phenomenological Assumptions for Understanding Lifeworld

I grounded *Lifeworld* in the conceptual perspective of *existential phenomenology*, a mode of phenomenological study originally developed by such philosophers as Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Martin Heidegger (1962).¹ These existential phenomenologists distrusted phenomenological founder Edmund Husserl's original emphasis on pure intellectual consciousness and instead worked toward a reflexive understanding of everyday human life and its lived meanings (Moran 2000, 13-14). Here, to clarify its nature, I discuss four central assumptions of existential phenomenology relating to the nature of human being, experience, and understanding (Compton 1997; Seamon 2018, 2023). These assumptions are:

- Understanding grounded in experience;
- Phenomena approached as openly as possible;
- People immersed in the worlds in which they find themselves;
- Describing and understanding lifeworlds as a major phenomenological aim.

1. Understanding grounded in experience

As I've already suggested, existential phenomenologists give attention to concrete human experience and the lived reality of everyday life. Phenomenologist Max van Manen explains that the aim is to discern “the primordialities of meaning as we encounter and live with things and others in our lived experiences and everyday existence” (van Manen 2014, 28). At first glance, the use of the word “lived” in phrases like “lived experience” or “lived meaning” may seem tautological—what, other than “lived,” can experience be? For existential phenomenologists, however, “lived” is an essential descriptor because it “announces the intent to explore *directly* the originary or prereflective dimensions of human existence: life as we live it” (van Manen 2014, 28). Van Manen writes:

Lived experience is [the] active and passive living through experience. Lived experience names the ordinary and the extraordinary, the quotidian and the exotic, the routine and the surprising, the dull and the ecstatic moments and aspects of experience as we live through them in our human existence (van Manen 2014, 39).

In this sense, any phenomenological articulation of human beings and their worlds must be grounded in an awareness, language, and conception that arise from, remain with, and return to *lived* human experience and meaning. The foundation for conceptual and applied claims is human actions, situations, events, and understandings as they happen spontaneously in the unfolding world of human

¹ Introductions to existential phenomenology include Finlay 2011; Compton 1997; Seamon 2000; Valle 1998; van Manen 2014.

life, which is “the ultimate setting for ourselves and for all the things we experience” (Sokolowski 2000, 44). On the one hand, this unfolding world is inestimably more than what any one person can experience or know. On the other hand, for each person, this unfolding world is always only what he or she uniquely experiences and understands it to be. As philosopher John Compton explains,

The world is inexhaustible and transcends us; we are inevitably out in the middle of it; it is experienced independently of us. At the same time, the world is what, in the most inclusive sense, we experience (or perceive) it to be. There is no world “behind” or “beneath” the world of primordial lived experience (Compton 1997, 208).

2. Phenomena approached openly

If the topical focus of existential phenomenology is human experience and meaning, the methodological focus is empathetic contact with the phenomenon. The aim is an openness whereby the phenomenon is offered a supportive space in which it can present itself in a way whereby it is what it is most accurately and comprehensively. One way that founder Edmund Husserl described phenomenology was “back to the things themselves,” by which he meant setting aside personal, cultural, ideological, and conceptual prejudices so that one might offer the phenomenon a supportive venue in which it can appear in a way that is most real (Moran 2000, 9). One of the most incisive descriptions of phenomenological method is Heidegger’s cryptic directive: “To let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (Heidegger 1962, 58). How, in other words, might we encounter the phenomenon so that it freely has the space to be what it is rather than what we might suppose, imagine, claim, or dictate it to be?

The central means by which phenomenologists work to allow openness to the phenomenon to happen is the *phenomenological reduction*, which refers to ways to facilitate a progressively deepening awareness of the phenomenon so that it is seen in stronger and stronger light. Van Manen (2014, 215) contends that this reduction incorporates contrasting but complimentary modes of encountering the phenomenon—on the one hand, suspending any obstacles that block the phenomenon (called “bracketing” or the “epoché”); on the other hand, moving closer to the phenomenon via careful, persistent, deepening contact (called the “reduction” proper). Van Manen writes:

The epoché describes the ways that we need to open ourselves to the world as we experience it and free ourselves from presuppositions.... The aim of the reduction is to re-achieve a direct and primitive contact with the world as we experience it or as it shows itself—rather than as we conceptualize it. But we need to realize as well that in some sense nothing is “simply given.” The phenomenological attitude is sustained by wonder, attentiveness, and a desire for meaning.... The reduction aims at removing any barriers, assumptions,

suppositions, projections, and linguisticities that prevent the phenomena and events of the lifeworld to appear or show themselves as they give themselves. So we need to engage in the reduction in order to let that which gives itself show itself (van Manen 2014, 220-221).

In seeking to locate and describe the lived reality of human experiences and meanings, phenomenologists are skeptical of any conceptual system that arbitrarily transcribes human life, actions, and experiences into secondhand, cerebrally-derived presentations. Humanistic geography arose in part because, in the 1950s and 1960s, the discipline was dominated by quantitative-analytic research that reduced the lived richness of geographical phenomena to piecemeal, measurable, pre-established renditions that, to humanistic geographers, often seemed simplistic, intellectual caricatures of the original phenomena (Cloke et al. 1991). More recently, existential phenomenologists have criticized poststructuralist, social-constructionist, and relationalist approaches because they are seen to misrepresent and reduce the complex plenum of human experience and meaning via preselected social, cultural, political, gender, or discourse constructs and interpretations (Rojcewicz 2010; Rosenau 1992; Seamon 2015).

3. People immersed in world

Phenomenologists claim that human experience, awareness, and action are always *intentional*—i.e., necessarily oriented toward and finding their significance in a world of emergent meaning. Human beings are not just aware but aware *of something*, whether an object, living thing, idea, feeling, environmental situation, or the like (Sokolowski, 2000, 8-11). Merleau-Ponty (1962, xvii) explains that the distinguishing feature of intentionality is that “the unity of the world, before being posited by knowledge in a specific act of identification, is ‘lived’ as ready-made or already there.” In this sense, intentionality relates to “the ways we are ‘attached’ to the world” and means that, experientially, we can never separate or “‘step out’ from the world and view it from some detached vista. We are *au monde*, meaning simultaneously ‘in’ and ‘of’ the world” (van Manen 2000, 62).

The concept of intentionality leads to a central phenomenological claim crucial in understanding lifeworld: *that human beings are always already inescapably immersed and entwined in their worlds that, most of the time, “just happen” without the intervention of anything or anyone* (Seamon 2014a, 5). How, phenomenologically, do we describe the way in which, existentially, selves and world are reciprocally related and mutually dependent? How, phenomenologically, do we locate and understand the complex, multivalent ways in which we, as human beings, are intertwined, intermeshed, entrenched and submerged in the worlds in which we find ourselves? Because of this lived intimacy between person and world, one cannot assign specific phenomena to either person or world alone. Everything experienced is “given” but also “interpreted,” is “of the world” but also “of the person” (Compton 1997, 208).

One early thinker who explored the lived interconnectedness between people and their geographical worlds was French historian Eric Dardel, who examined what he called *geographicality* (*géographicité*)—the experiences and relationships binding human beings to the earth and a lived situation he considered fundamental to human life (Dardel 1952; Relph 1985, 2014). According to Dardel, this intentional commingling between people and their geographical worlds, though mostly taken for granted, is always inescapably present, whether the particular geographical surrounds are ordinary or extraordinary, within or beyond the circle of usual daily life (Dardel 1952, 1). As phenomenological geographer Edward Relph explains, geographicality is “unobtrusive, inconspicuously familiar, more lived than discussed. It is, in fact, a naming of the geographical forms of being-in-the-world” (Relph 1985, 21).

4. Describing and understanding lifeworlds

The everyday structure through which “being-in-the-world” unfolds is the *lifeworld*—a person or group’s day-to-day world of taken-for-grantedness normally unnoticed and, therefore, concealed as a phenomenon. “As conscious beings,” writes Moran (2005, 9), “we always inhabit—in a *pre-theoretical* manner—an experiential world, given in advance, on hand, and always experienced as a unity. It is the universal framework of human endeavor, including our scientific endeavours. It is the general structure that enables objectivity and thinghood to emerge in different ways in different cultures.” One aim of existential-phenomenological study is to disclose and describe the various lived structures and dynamics of the lifeworld, which always includes spatial, environmental, and place dimensions. There is a lived wholeness to lifeworld in that, on the one hand, it refers to the normally unnoticed, automatic unfolding of everyday life as it happens for the individuals and groups involved. On the other hand, lifeworld incorporates the world in which that unfolding happens. In this sense, there is a lifeworld for each experiencing person and group but there is also a lifeworld of the place or situation that embraces those individual and group lifeworlds. This collective lifeworld is grounded and sustained, totally or in part, by the individual and group lifeworlds, just as they are grounded and sustained, totally or in part, by the collective lifeworld comprising them.

Unless it changes in some significant way, we are almost always, in our typical human lives, unaware of our lifeworld, which we assume is *the* way that life is and must be. This typically unquestioned acceptance of the lifeworld is what Husserl called the *natural attitude*, because of which we habitually assume that the world as we know and experience it is the *only* world. We “accept the world and its forms of givenness as simply *there*, ‘on hand’ for us” (Moran 2005, 7). Husserl characterized the natural attitude as “naïve” because “we are normally unaware that what we are living in is precisely given to us as the result of a specific ‘attitude’. Indeed, even to *recognize* and identify the natural attitude as such is in a sense to have moved beyond it” (Moran 2005, 55). The difficult question, however, is “how one can awaken to the world as phenomenon instead of being directed at the things and events that appear within that world?” (Jacobs 2013, 353). One pathway toward an

answer is offered by Moran, who describes the complex lived relationship between the natural attitude and the lifeworld:

In the natural attitude into which we are born or into which we wake, we encounter not just individual things and indeed an environing ‘world of things’, but also living organisms, bodies, like ours, which we encounter as *persons*, all within the context of an infinite ‘surrounding world’. Moreover, we recognize that each of these embodied persons has his or her own sensitivity, sphere of free movement, view on the world, with its correlated aspects..., his or her stream of conscious experiences, his or her ‘slant’ on the world, surroundings, or environment...” (Moran 2005, 56).

Moran’s emphasis on the existential variedness of lifeworlds can be clarified in part by realizing that any lifeworld incorporates three constitutional dimensions that, though always integrally related and interconnected experientially, can be given specific research attention, depending on a phenomenological study’s particular thematic focus:

- First, a person or group’s unique individual situation—e.g., one’s gender, sexuality, physical and intellectual endowments, degree of ableness, personal likes and dislikes;
- Second, a person or group’s unique familial, social, cultural, geographical, and historical situation—e.g., the time and place in which one lives, economic and political circumstances, religious and societal background, technological infrastructure;
- Third, a person or group’s situation as it involves their lived typicality as human beings sustaining and sustained by a typical human world—e.g., the lived fact that we are bodily beings of a particular size, morphology, and physical constitution that all contribute in specific ways to how we experience and encounter our worlds.

As I sought to demonstrate in *Lifeworld*, any lifeworld is *transparent* in the sense that it is normally tacit and *just happens*, grounded in spatial-temporal situations and events more or less regular (Seamon 1979). As I argue in the last part of this chapter, one integral dimension of this lived transparency is *place*, for which I explore some holistic and dialectical dimensions. Before introducing that discussion, however, I present the concept of lifeworld in a more grounded, real-world way by drawing on a novel by critically-acclaimed British author Penelope Lively (Lively 1998).

Concretizing Lifeworld

Lively’s 1998 *Spiderweb* provides a sobering, present-day portrait of one newcomer’s effort to become at home in England’s West Country. The novel is set mostly in Somerset, a bucolic region that, though once perhaps an integrated lifeworld grounded in history and place, has become a diverse mix of contrasting lifeworlds, more or less different because of time, happenstance, and varying life

paths—in short, “people who have always been there and people who come there fortuitously” (Lively 1998, p 1-2). Lively recounts the efforts of recently retired social anthropologist Stella Brentwood to make a home for herself by purchasing and settling in a cottage near the small, unremarkable Somerset village of Kingston Florey. From a lifeworld perspective, Stella’s story is revealing because she tries to become a lived part of the Somerset lifeworld rather than remain the detached observer she has been her entire professional life, studying lineage and kinship in far-flung places like Egypt, Malta, and Scotland’s Orkney Islands. How, through commitment, involvement, and affection, can she draw this chosen place inside herself so that she is *a part of* the place rather than *apart* as she has always been as professional anthropologist? Early on in the novel, she realizes that, until her present effort to make a home, she has never really felt a sense of lived connection to the communities and places she studied, which are little more than “worlds out there, richly stocked and inviting observation” (Lively 1998, 15). She has never really gathered herself up into place and actually *lived* there:

Her professional life has been that of a voyeur, her interest in community has been clinical. She has wanted to know how and why people get along with each other, or fail to do so, rather than sample the arrangement herself. She had been simultaneously fascinated and repelled. Moving around the world, she was always alert, always curious, but comfortable also in the knowledge that, in the last resort, this was nothing to do with her. Indeed, casting a cold eye back, it now seems to her that she and her like can be seen as parasites. Intellectual parasites (Lively 1998, 75).

In seeking finally to *enter life* rather than just to observe it, Stella sets herself to engage her retirement place and to embrace its lifeworld: “This is where she would now live, not just for weeks or months but for the foreseeable future. For years” (Lively 1998, 14). She takes long walks, drives through the countryside, studies maps, reads local newspapers, and visits old buildings and places of earlier historical times. She converses with locals, shops in the small village grocery, tries to know her neighbors, and presents a talk to the local historical society. As Somerset as a place of human life comes into focus, Stella realizes that it incorporates not one but many lifeworlds that interact and overlap through subtle lived dynamics like family ties, longevity, employment, commerce, and informal interpersonal encounters:

And thus Stella learned.... The place took shape. It ceased to be a landscape, a backdrop.... Stella perceived the intricate system of checks and balances by which things worked. She saw that there was a continuous state of negotiation, of dealing, of to-and-fro arrangements. Everyone stood in a particular relationship to everyone else, often literally so in terms of marriage connections or distant ties of blood. People employed one another, or sold things to each

other, or exchanged services, or simply rubbed shoulders here, there, and everywhere. Each passing casual encounter in a lane or at a shop entrance reinforced this subtle and elaborate system, as hard to penetrate as any she had met.

But Stella also sees that, entwined within the more complex lifeworld of Somerset-as-place, is an unspoken, less visible mesh of individually-defined lifeworlds grounding different individuals and groups in differing ways with varying degrees of place engagement and place identity. Most broadly, she identifies two distinct substrata of Somerset's lifeworld mesh: On the one hand, the all-important stratum of long-time residents deeply rooted in place; on the other hand, visitors and residents from elsewhere, like her, who "would never be truly attuned" (Lively 1998, 72). All these lifeworlds presuppose more or less different natural attitudes that, almost entirely prereflective and unself-conscious, sustain one's relative place status and degree of belonging:

For there were two layers here, she saw. There was the basic and significant layer, which went back a long way—two, three, or more generations. These were the people whose parents and grandparents looked out from here and who continued to do so themselves, for whom these parts were the hub of things and elsewhere was... elsewhere. Though, admittedly, a rather more familiar elsewhere nowadays, thanks to several decades of mass communications and package holidays. But grafted on to this layer was a further one, the layer of subsequent settlement—some of it transitory, some more permanent. Most transitory of all were the summer visitors, a valuable source of income for some, a confounded nuisance for others. Then there were the more abiding settlers—the retired, the owners of holiday cottages, the potters and woodcarvers and the weavers. These were digested, up to a point and depending upon their personal achievements in terms of participation and commitment... But they would never be able to plug into the elaborate communication system which hinged upon intimate knowledge of how things stood, how things had changed and why, and what this implied in terms of expedient response and reactions. They would always tramp around wearing blinders. They would always speak with a foreign accent.

How one achieves or does not achieve "belonging to place" is one of Lively's major themes in *Spiderweb*. On the one hand, Stella realizes that really belonging somewhere requires devoted engagement: "Now was the time to prove herself. Even if she could not hope to melt into the ancient levels of this place..., there were still slots into which she could fit in the wider context. Join things, she told herself sternly... Participate" (Lively 1998, 76). On the other hand, she faces an unyielding disinterest in engaging this place:

She [became aware of] a reality that continued to surprise her—this house that was apparently hers, this pleasant landscape in which she had fortuitously arrived... She was comfortable enough with these surroundings, but still not certain how she had gotten here or why. In the past there had been good reason to be wherever she found herself. Now, she was where she was simply because one had to be somewhere (Lively 1998, 133).

The insurmountable challenge for Stella is to move from detached observer to immersed-inhabitant-in-place. Partly because of unexpected, unsettling events, Stella cannot find in herself the personal commitment or involvement required for fully inhabiting her retirement place. She is unable to intertwine her lifeworld with the lifeworld of Somerset. She cannot shift from outsider to insider, never really fits in, and eventually leaves. I return to Stella's situation later in this chapter, but first I examine conceptual and lived connections between lifeworld and place.

Placing Lifeworld

As I've emphasized repeatedly, a central phenomenological assumption is that people and their worlds are integrally intertwined. If the concept of lifeworld offers one way to clarify this lived intimacy between people and world, another useful concept is *place*, which is powerful conceptually and practically because, by its very constitution, it offers a way to specify more precisely the experienced wholeness of lifeworlds.¹ Phenomenologically, place can be defined as *any environmental locus that draws human experiences, actions, and meanings together spatially and temporally* (Seamon 2014, 1). By this definition, a place can range from an environmental element or room to a building, neighborhood, town, city, or geographical region. Phenomenologists are interested in the phenomenon of place because it is a primary contributor to the spatial, environmental, and temporal constitution of any lifeworld. Human being is always human-being-in-place.² As phenomenological philosopher Edward Casey explains,

The relationship between self and place is not just one of reciprocal influence (that much any ecologically sensitive account would maintain) but also, more radically, of constitutive coingredience: each is essential to the being of the other. In effect, there is *no place without self and no self without place*. What is needed is a model wherein the abstract truth of this position... can be given concrete articulation without conflating place and self or maintaining the self as an inner citadel of unimplaced freedom (Casey, 2001, 684).

¹ Reviews of place research include Cresswell 2014; Gieryn 2000; Janz 2005; Lewicka 2011; Manzo 2005; Patterson and Williams 2005; Seamon 2021; Trentelman 2009.

² Discussions of a phenomenological approach to place include Casey 2009; Donohoe 2014; Malpas 1999, 2001, 2009, 2014; Moores 2012; Mugerauer 1994; Relph 1976, 2009; Seamon 2000, 2013a, 2014b, 2018, 2023

As indicated by Casey's emphasis on lived inseparability and intertwinement—what he calls “constitutive coingredience”—place is not the physical environment distinct from the people associated with it. Rather, place is the indivisible, typically transparent phenomenon of person-or-group-experiencing-place. The phenomenologist recognizes that places are dynamic, shifting, and encountered differently by different experiencers (Seamon 2014b, 2018). For example, the same physical place can invoke a wide range of place experiences and meanings existentially (as illustrated by Stella Brentwood's progressive recognition of Somerset lifeworlds). Similarly, over time, a person or group's experience and understanding of place may shift (for example, Stella's eventual failure to inhabit her chosen place). In short, place as a phenomenon is typically complex in experiential constitution and dynamic in the sense that all places change over time. In the last part of this chapter, I offer one way to clarify this lived complexity by considering some holistic and dialectical aspects of place that I illustrate experientially via Stella Brentwood's situation in *Spiderweb*.

Place as Wholeness

Phenomenologically, place is a significant concept because, by its very constitution, it offers a way to articulate and understand the experienced wholeness of people-in-world (Casey, 2009; Malpas 1999; Stefanovic, 2000). Place is a phenomenon integral to human life and holds worlds together spatially and environmentally, marking out centers of human experience, meaning, and action that, in turn, make place. One of the most important thinkers for understanding the wholeness of place is Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1968), who contended that the lived foundation of human experience is *perception*, which he interpreted as the immediate, taken-for-granted givenness of the world undergirded by the *lived body*—a body that simultaneously experiences, acts in, and is aware of a world that, typically, responds with immediate pattern, meaning, and contextual presence. Merleau-Ponty understood the lived body as a pre-predicative, lived relationship between an intelligent but unself-conscious body and the world it encounters, understands, and makes use of through continuous immersion, awareness, and actions. “The body [is] the place,” he explains, where we “take a hold upon space, the object, or the instrument” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 154).

In considering the relationship between the lived body and place, one can speak of *environmental embodiment*—in other words, the various lived ways, sensorily and motility-wise, that the body in its pre-reflective perceptual presence encounters and reciprocates with the world at hand, especially its environmental and place dimensions (Finlay 2006; Seamon 2013a; Toombs 2001). Merleau-Ponty argued that perception incorporates a lived dynamic between perceptual body and world such that aspects of the world—for example, *seeing* the softness of wood shavings or *hearing* the hard brittleness of glass when it breaks (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 229)—are understood because they instantaneously evoke in the lived body their interconnected, experienced qualities. Merleau-Ponty also related the lived body to a more active, *motor* dimension of perception—what he termed *body-subject*, or pre-reflective corporeal awareness manifested through action and

typically in sync with and enmeshed in the physical world in which the action unfolds (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Morris 2004; Seamon, 2013a).

Drawing on the concept of body-subject, other phenomenological studies have pointed to its spatial and place versatility as expressed in more complex bodily ensembles extending over time and space and contributing to a wider lived geography (Allen 2004; Hill 1985; Seamon 1979; Toombs 2001). In *Lifeworld*, I highlighted two such bodily ensembles: first, *body ballets*—sets of integrated gestures, behaviors, and actions that sustain a particular task or aim, for example, planting a garden, doing laundry, setting a table, and so forth; and, second, *time-space routines*—sets of more or less habitual bodily actions that extend through a considerable portion of time, for example, a getting-ready-for-bed routine, or a Saturday-afternoon-shopping routine (Seamon, 1979, Ch. 6). Perhaps most pertinent to the wholeness of place is the possibility that, in a supportive physical environment, individuals' bodily routines can converge and commingle in time and space, thereby contributing to a larger-scale environmental ensemble that, in *Lifeworld*, I called *place ballet*—an interaction of individual bodily routines rooted in a particular environment, which often becomes an important place of interpersonal and communal exchange, meaning, and attachment. Examples would include a popular student café, a well-used village grocery; a vibrant city street, a lively urban plaza, or a flourishing urban neighborhood (Fullilove, 2004, Jacobs, 1961; Klinenberg, 2004; Oldenburg, 2001, Seamon, 1979, 2013a; Seamon & Nordin, 1980).

Place Ballet in *Spiderweb*

In her novel, Lively infers direct and indirect references to place ballet. She describes how southwestern England shifts in summer, as tourists and vacationers overwhelm the region. Yet “real life continues” and “People are still growing things and selling them and providing one another with services and necessities. Most of them spend most of their time in one place, contemplating the same view, locked in communion with those they see every day” (Lively, 1998, 6). Throughout the novel, Lively sketches the life of Somerset by inserting items from the local newspaper highlighting events like fox hunts, puppy shows, livestock sales, and entertainment venues. Intimating the presence of a Kingston Florey place ballet, Lively describes the importance of the village green as “the scene of various concurrent actions, most of them mutually exclusive” (Lively, 1998, 184). Teenagers regularly hang out at one corner of the green and ignore a gathering of mothers with small children, who in turn ignore Stella and other older users—mostly “the retired, the settlers, the colonizers” (Lively, 1998, 184).

Another important site of village place ballet is the local shops, which “still had some clout as “centres for the exchange of information and opinion” (Lively 1998, 120). As one way to learn about Kingston Florey, Stella regularly shops in the village grocery nearest her cottage—an establishment run by Molly, “a product of the place” and with whom it is “neither possible or expedient to complete any transaction without a conversation” (Lively, 1998, 121). After two months in her new home, Stella is asked by Molly if she is getting to know her neighbors. Molly

then offers an unasked-for evaluation of the “mixed lot along the lane there” (Lively, 1998, 121). She is particularly critical of the dysfunctional Hiscox family, who will play a key role in Stella’s eventual departure from Kingston Florey: “those boys—not what you might call charmers, those two, are they? Never a civil word” (Lively, 1998, 121).

At one point in the novel, Stella contrasts her Kingston Florey encounters with her research observations in a Malta village where old men sat regularly on a bench under a tree and where, at every street corner, “there was forever a knot of talking women.” The village is a perpetual place ballet, and Stella generates a list of its parts:

The informal conference centre that was the shop or the coffee house. The comments and interrogations shouted from the doorways. The small excursions on foot from here to there for no particular purpose other than to see who might be around... In other words, the fervent face-to-face community life of a world largely innocent of cars and telephones, for better or for worse. What have we come to? Thought Stella (Lively, 1998, 75).

Stella, however, is not sure that she would wish to live like that, even though Kingston Florey might offer similar possibilities, if only she could become more deeply engaged. Independent and detached, however, Stella finds intercourse with her new world difficult: She “retreats behind her closed door and into the protective shell of her car, from which a wave and a smile will suffice” (Lively, 1998, 75).

Place as Dialectic: Homeworld and Alienworld

If place can be examined phenomenologically as an environmental whole via concepts like place ballet, it also can be considered *dialectically* in terms of such lived binaries as here/there, near/far, center/horizon, dwelling/journey, horizontal/vertical, insiderness/outsiderness, and so forth (e.g., Casey 2009, Harries 1997; Relph, 1976, Seamon, 1979; Tuan, 1974, 2014, 9-28). Binary relationships are significant phenomenologically because environmental and place experiences often involve some continuum of lived opposites as, for example, Stella Brentwood’s efforts as an outsider to become an insider to place. To illustrate one way in which a dialectical perspective might shed additional light on lifeworlds and places, I discuss Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological explication of *homeworld/alienworld* (Husserl, 1973).

To clarify this lived binary, one first needs to understand the lived meanings of homeworld and alienworld separately. As Husserl interpreted it, the *homeworld* is the tacit, taken-for-granted sphere of experiences, understandings, and situations marking out the world into which each of us is born and matures as children and then adults. The homeworld is always in some mode of lived mutuality with the *alienworld*, which is the world of difference and otherness but is only provided awareness because of the always already givenness of the homeworld (Donohoe, 2011, 2014, 12-20; Seamon, 2013b; Steinbock, 1995, 178-85). Phenomenological philosopher Anthony Steinbock

emphasizes that homeworld and alienworld are always “co-relative,” “co-constitutive,” and “co-generative” in the sense that neither can be regarded “as the original sphere [of lifeworld], since they are in a continual historical becoming as delimited from one another” (Steinbock 1995, 179). In this situation of co-constitution and go-generation, the homeworld is that lived portion of the lifeworld wherein one is most unself-consciously who one is, largely because of the happenstance of time, place, birth factors, and familial and societal circumstances. As phenomenological philosopher Jane Donohoe explains, the homeworld is “a unity of sense that is manifest in a pre-giveness of the things of the world that constitute the norm by which we judge other worlds and by which the pre-giveness of other worlds becomes given” (Donohoe 2011, 30). Here, norms and normativity do not refer to some arbitrary ethical or ideological system of right and wrong or better and worse but, rather, to “a foundational standard to which other places are compared in terms of our embodied constitution of the world” (Donohoe, 2011, 25).

The normative significance of the homeworld is entirely relative objectively but, subjectively, affords the taken-for-granted world view and values by which the person and group evaluate lifeworlds more or less different than their own. The homeworld incorporates one’s manner of lived embodiment, and his or her lived relationships with place evoke a particular mode of comportment that “is not simply one’s comportment toward this particular place, but simply one’s comportment” (Donohoe 2011, 31). In this sense, we always “carry with us the structure of our [homeworld] in the structure of our lived-bodies, in our typical comportment and in our practices” (Steinbock, 1995, 164).

Though still remaining in the natural attitude, we only recognize the presence of the homeworld when we find ourselves in worlds different from its tacit typicality, normativity, and taken-for-grantedness. In relation to the homeworld, the alienworld presents norms, behaviors, and situations that are more or less different from what a person in his or her homeworld takes for granted. As Steinbock explains, the homeworld plays a central role in sustaining the identity we understand as ourselves:

A homeworld is privileged because it is that through which our experiences coalesce as our own and in such a way that our world structures our experience itself. This constitutional privilege... is indifferent to whether we like it or not, or to whether it makes us happy or miserable. The point is that the norms that guide the homeworld are our norms, our way of life, as that to which we have accrued (Steinbock, 1995, 232).

Husserl argued that we potentially grow as persons through two sorts of lived exchanges between homeworld and alienworld—what he calls *appropriation* and *transgression* (Steinbock 1995, 179). In appropriation, we involve ourselves in situations of “the co-constitution of the alien through appropriative experience of the home” (Steinbock, 1995, 179). Conversely, transgression involves situations of “the co-constitution of the home through the transgressive experience of the

alien” (Steinbock, 1995, 179). In appropriation, we encounter qualities of an alienworld *within our own homeworld*; perhaps we accept those qualities because they are helpful, inescapable, or revelatory. In a reciprocal way, in transgressive experiences, we encounter the alienworld because *we have left our homeworld*; as in appropriation, we recognize and perhaps accept potentially necessary or helpful qualities of that alienworld (Seamon, 2013b). Steinbock (1994, 214) describes appropriation and transgression as modes of “critical comportment” that “may entail the renewal of a homeworld’s norms, revitalizing and renewing its internal sense; [this process] may even demand going against the prevalent normality, replacing old norms with a new ethical normality in an attempt to realize the homeworld more fully.” One must emphasize, however, that appropriation and transgression can also involve the acceptance of alienworld values and actions that undermine the homeworld and weaken its lived integrity as a lifeworld.

I am not claiming here that the homeworld/alienworld dialectic works conceptually for describing all manner of places. Especially in today’s world of social and cultural diversity, however, Husserl’s phrasing offers a valuable way to think through place complexity: the way, for example, socially-different neighborhoods perceive and interact with each other; or the situation of a household of domestic violence or child abuse. Husserl’s homeworld/alienworld offers one way to understand the typical, taken-for-granted ground of the places in our lives: That place is part and parcel of the homeworld’s normative significance so who people are in their homeworld places is not simply their comportment in or way of being toward those places but simply their comportment and way of being (Donohoe, 2011, 31).

Homeworld and Alienworld in *Spiderweb*

In Lively’s novel, the lived binary of homeworld/alienworld marks a central factor because of which Stella Brentwood ultimately fails in making Somerset a home. Sarah describes her homeworld before retirement in terms of a “bird of passage”: “in the field she had been in the ultimate state of transience—the invisible observer, the visitor from outer space. The people in whom she was interested were there, in that place—she herself was both there and crucial apart” (Lively, 1998, 176). At one point, she describes her life as a mesh-like homeworld comprised of temporary places and connections encountered in shifting ways because of shifting self-understandings:

She saw lines—black lines that zig-zagged this way and that, netting the map of England, netting the globe, an arbitrary progress hither and thither. And sometimes these lines crossed one another. The intersections must surely be points of significance—these places to which she had been twice, three times, many times, but as different incarnations of herself, different Stellas ignorant of the significance of this site—that she would revisit it as someone else.

In many ways, Somerset is an alienworld for Stella, particularly in the sense that it challenges her to enter into place via efforts of appropriation and transgression whereby she attempts to make Somerset's presence a part of her lifeworld, which, reciprocally, might become a small but embedded part of Somerset's lifeworld. Unfortunately for Stella, one of her neighbors is Karen Hiscox, her husband Ted, and two sons. Though Stella only makes their acquaintance superficially, this family demonstrates a profoundly dysfunctional homeworld grounded in psychosis and physical and mental abuse. Forties-something Karen Hiscox is deeply disturbed psychologically, partaking in explosive verbal attacks against people by whom she feels slighted, including her husband and sons: "She always won in a fight—with anyone at home or outside—just because she never gave up. She could shout anyone down—eventually the other person had had all they could stand and backed off" (Lively, 1998, 168). Teenage sons Michael and Peter have absorbed her odious ways and are "a general cargo of resentment" (Lively, 1998, 176). They misunderstand Stella's neighborly actions and eventually, out of misplaced spite, shoot and kill a shelter dog that Stella has recently adopted as one way to engage with her place.

Lively's novel is powerful, partly for the way it depicts these two geographically adjacent but dramatically contrasting homeworlds that have no lived sense of the other. Stella sees Peter and Michael as "poor little tykes," whereas they see Stella as an old woman who regularly makes fun of their appearance and possessions, even though all she is attempting is to be friendly to the two teenagers by greeting them when she sees them and asking what she assumes to be pertinent, non-judgmental questions about their lives. Ironically, in trying to engage with her place through getting to know Michael and Peter, Stella unknowingly turns them against her, and they shoot the dog, which Stella has left alone in her unlocked cottage: "they'd be one up on that silly old cow forever now..." (Lively, 1998, 197).

The lived binary of homeworld/alienworld is useful because all places have a generative dimension by which they evolve, devolve, or remain more or less the same. Especially today when shared geographies sometimes clash because of social and cultural diversity, homeworld and alienworld offer a useful way to think about identity, alterity, commonality, and the reconciliation of differences. For much of her professional life, Stella took for granted a homeworld incorporating a detached attitude—from the places she studied and from the lifeworlds associated with those places: "The people in whom she was interested were there, in that place—she herself was both there and crucially apart. If she lived permanently anywhere, it was in a landscape of the mind" (Lively, 1998, 176). Successfully objectifying the homeworlds of others, however, is a much different lived situation than subjectively dissolving one's objectifying attitude to place and becoming deeply rooted, like Stella's garrulous postman, a Somerset inhabitant by birth who "was of this place, and knew what was what" (Lively, 1998, 93). Yet again different is the dysfunctional insularity of the Hiscox homeworld, which takes for granted and perpetuates a damaging way of being those distrusts and despises the "alienworld" of any "different" person like Stella, for whom

the Hiscox sons have no intellectual or emotional means to be interested in or trust. Once they kill her dog, Stella's brittle lived connectedness to place is broken, and she leaves—to where, we're not told.

Understanding Lifeworld and Place

In this chapter, I have sought to clarify the phenomenological concepts of lifeworld and place and suggest some ways in which they can be considered holistically and dialectically. The examples here are limited, and one could draw on other holistic and dialectical interpretations to generate complementary understandings of lifeworld and place. In *Lifeworld*, for example, I drew on several lived binaries grounded in the movement/rest dialectic and offering interpretive ways to understand that dialectic via more penetrating lived structures like home/horizon, dwelling/journey, and insiderness/outsiderness (e.g., Buttimer, 1980; Jager, 1974; Relph, 1976; Seamon, 2008). I also considered how the lived wholeness of everyday environmental experience could be portrayed through the interconnected “triad” of movement, rest, and encounter. I identified two complementary lived ways whereby people understand and engage with their geographical worlds (Seamon, 1979, Ch. 18). On the one hand, I identified a *triad of habituality*, which referred to the usual ordinariness and humdrum of everyday life, which much of the time involves taken-for-granted repetition and routine that most people, unless required, are unwilling to change. On the other hand, I identified a *triad of openness*, which involves those moments in day-to-day life when one is suddenly aware of the world in a more alert, sensitive way. Ultimately, everyday environmental experience involves some lived combination of these two triads, though phenomenologically a major aim is to develop self-conscious means for more often invoking the engaged, expanding awareness of the triad of openness.

The broader point to be made is that there are many interpretive ways to direct phenomenological studies of lifeworld and place, and I hope this chapter points toward some promising possibilities. An existential-phenomenological understanding of lifeworld and place begins with the specific experiences of specific individuals and groups in specific times and places. The aim, however, is not idiographic descriptions of particular real-world situations. Rather, these situations are a descriptive context for exploring and locating broader patterns and structures of human experience and human life.

In ending this chapter, I want to make one last important point about lifeworld. One mistake made by newcomers to phenomenology is to objectify lifeworld by misunderstanding it as a thing that can be separated from the experiencer of which it is part. One can never say that he or she “has” a lifeworld. It would be more accurate to say that the lifeworld “has” us in the sense that the lifeworld is the always, already pre-given world in relation to which the experiencer has no choice but to be entwined and a part. Lifeworlds can change for better and worse, but always this change happens because of and via the lifeworld—for example, a young woman is able to break out of a limiting homeworld because aspects of her lifeworld open horizons to education and a better life.

The concept of lifeworld is so difficult to grasp because it is always present but almost always hidden from conscious awareness. At times, when some aspect of the lifeworld suddenly shifts—for example, our computer crashes or our car won't start—we realize the taken-for-granted structure and connectedness of daily life but this realization *remains within the natural attitude*. Most of the time, daily life just happens and the lifeworld and natural attitude stay hidden as phenomena. As Husserl writes: “The world is pre-given to us, ... not occasionally but always and necessarily as the universal field of all actual and possible praxis, as horizon. To live is always to live-in-certainty-of-the-world” (Husserl, 1970, 142).

One aim of phenomenology is to reveal, describe, and interpret the various dimensions of lifeworld and natural attitude. Phenomenology, writes Merleau-Ponty, “slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, xiii). At the same time, phenomenological discovery is not easy or immediate because so often it reveals aspects of lifeworld and place that are “strange and paradoxical” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, xiii). One need go no further than the uncanny, inopportune adjacency of Stella Brentwood and the Hiscox family—an unpredictable and unfortunate alignment of serendipity and geography that unravels one person's possibility for embracing place. “Fortune,” writes Lively, “can serve up some strange conjunctions” (Lively, 1998, 2).

Yet running beneath the ambiguity, uncertainty, and hazard of real-world human experience are essential, invariant, non-contingent structures marked by phenomenological concepts like lifeworld, natural attitude, place, and homeworld. These lived structures always and inescapably underlie human worlds, wherever and whenever. A primary aim of phenomenological explication is to make these lived structures available for academic research, practical intervention, and deeper understanding.

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