

# Introduction to the special issue on existence theory

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**Patrick Baert** 

University of Cambridge, UK

**Marcus Morgan**

University of Bristol, UK

**Rin Ushiyama**

Queen's University Belfast, UK

## Abstract

After exploring the main tenets of existence theory and the affinities between this theory and other philosophical traditions, this introduction lists the central points of each contribution to this special issue. In what follows, we provide a brief synopsis of the critical commentaries by David Inglis, Simon Susen, Robin Wagner-Pacifici, Bryan S. Turner, William Outhwaite, and Thomas Kemple.

## Keywords

Existence theory, existentialism, pragmatism, social theory, sociology

We are most grateful to the editors of the *Journal of Classical Sociology*—Simon Susen and Bryan S. Turner—for suggesting the possibility of creating a special issue around our article on existence theory. We would also like to thank the contributors to this special issue—David Inglis, Thomas Kemple, William Outhwaite, Robin Wagner-Pacifici, Simon Susen, and Bryan S. Turner—who have made a real effort to engage with our arguments. We very much agree with some of the contributors' suggestions—notably Inglis and Susen's—that the framework that we propose here is still in its infancy, and indeed the title alludes to the programmatic and incomplete nature of the theoretical proposal.

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## Corresponding author:

Patrick Baert, University of Cambridge, Selwyn College, Grange Road, Cambridge, England CB3 9DQ, UK.

Email: [pjnb100@cam.ac.uk](mailto:pjnb100@cam.ac.uk)

Whilst the main objective of this paper is to develop a proposal for a new theoretical perspective (and therefore the possible links with classical sociology remain secondary), the paper does fit neatly within the remit of the *Journal of Classical Sociology* in that it posits a new “tradition” and therefore a new set of canonical or classical authors. Indeed, the underlying philosophical traditions that have influenced us in this endeavor are two-fold. Firstly, as we point out explicitly toward the beginning of our article, existentialist themes clearly underscore the framework. They range from issues around people’s awareness of their mortality to the individuals’ conception of their lives as a project. Secondly, as pointed out by Wagner-Pacifici, the paper implicitly draws on a pragmatist account of human action, one which understands human beings as very much conceiving of the present from the vantage point of accomplished futures. In that respect, G.H. Mead’s musings on Whitehead and temporality, as summarized in his *Philosophy of the Present* (1959), inspired us, as did Alfred Schutz’s social phenomenology. Relatedly, our perspective also relies on a neo-pragmatist philosophy of social science, as will become more apparent in the response to our critics.

The main intuition underlying our essay is the idea that people’s notions of a fulfilled or relatively complete life affects how they make key decisions and structure their lives. At times people might be very much aware of this process; that is, of their own notions of completeness and of the extent to which they are structuring their lives around what they see as existential milestones. At other times, they might be less aware. Whether fully conscious or not, because of the way in which these existential milestones are organized in society, people end up becoming entangled in a variety of commitments, eventually contributing to an element of predictability in the social realm. Contrary to what Outhwaite and Kemple seem to intimate, none of this is meant to be read in a normative fashion, as if we somehow endorse the rigidities and the patterns that we observe around us. Also, we *do* recognize that, especially more recently, some people “individualize” their existential milestones, but we also note that not everyone is in a position to do so. As we point out in the paper, this is one area where inequality comes into play. Following up on Inglis’s contribution, we will also argue in our reply that this form of individualization is not necessarily always a manifestation of authentic rebellion; it can also be the product of new forms of commodification.

We should not be getting ahead of ourselves, however, as these issues will be addressed in full in our reply. At this stage, it is more useful to introduce the main tenets of each of the commentaries on our paper. Starting with David Inglis’s contribution, it begins with an excellent synopsis of the key notions of existence theory and is then followed by a constructive critique. Inglis’s main point here is that the theoretical outline could be developed further by engaging with previous attempts to develop an existentialist-inspired form of sociology and also with other theoretical approaches. One such theoretical model is Karl Mannheim’s sociology of generations, and Inglis rightly points out the significance of the notion of generations for our proposal, as well as the distinctiveness of Mannheim’s contribution in this area. Another intellectual source, according to Inglis, resides in the neo-Marxist tradition; and in this respect he astutely points out the commodification of existentialist milestones, whereby people are enticed into thinking about their lives in terms of a “bucket list,” on which many of the items can be “tick off” through commercial consumption practices.

Simon Susen's commentary is remarkably comprehensive, and it is difficult to do justice here to the full range of incisive points that he makes. Of all the constructive criticisms that he lists, key is the need for us to locate ourselves within broader methodological, meta-theoretical, and philosophical debates in sociology, for instance, around rationalism and empiricism, deductivism and inductivism, universalism and contextualism, agency and structure, and so on. Three other points are connected to this. Firstly, Susen wonders why we did not mention the obvious affinities of our approach with both hermeneutics and pragmatism, especially given our sympathies toward both traditions in previous publications. Secondly, Susen argues that we should clarify whether we are making claims as to the universality of the phenomena that we describe or whether most of our "observations" are context-dependent. Thirdly (and, in our view, most problematically), Susen seems to accuse us of associating agency with philosophy and structure with sociology. We address all these points in our response.

Whereas Susen's contribution elaborates on various meta-theoretical and methodological issues, Robin Wagner-Pacifici builds further on some of the ideas in our article and makes associations with other sociological work, including her own. Building further on our notion of incompleteness, Wagner-Pacifici is intrigued by its centrality in people's lives and by the way in which people nevertheless succeed in making their lives "manageable." She also elaborates on the similarities between our description of precarity in terms of a "perennial present" on the one hand, and what Hartog described as the "tyranny of the instant" and "presentness" on the other. Building on her own theory of political semiosis, like Inglis, she rightly draws our attention to the relevance of Mannheim's sociology of generations, as illustrated by various sociological studies, ranging from Bin Xu's book on the so-called *zhiquing* generation in China following the Cultural Revolution to Manuela Badilla Rajevic's research on contemporary Chilean activists. Most importantly, Wagner-Pacifici perceptively points out the significance of transformative events in history, encouraging people, as they do, to reconfigure their life course.

Bryan S. Turner's paper ties in nicely with Wagner-Pacifici's. He too points out the importance of turbulent events in history and how they shape generational experiences and memories. Turner pays particular attention to what he calls "catastrophic events," such as the Great War and the current pandemic: they disrupt our future horizons, including the feasibility and the very conception of existential milestones. In this highly personal essay, Turner is acutely aware of people's vulnerability in the context of these catastrophic events; for instance, elderly people are suddenly confronted with mortality and others might question whether they deserve societal protection. In this sense, he makes a valuable link between existence theory and some of his own seminal work on a variety of topics, ranging from the sociology of generations to the sociology of the body and the sociology of aging.

Whilst resembling Turner's contribution in referring to his personal experiences, William Outhwaite's essay adopts a more critical tone. Outhwaite seems broadly sympathetic to our view that, whilst making decisions, individuals conceive of an accomplished future. However, he has interpreted existence theory in a distinctly normative fashion, suggesting that our metaphor of "milestones" implies a "linear progress" along a track. According to Outhwaite, there is an implicit prescriptive bias in writing, as we did, about the "failure" to obtain existential milestones or the act of "recuperating" a missed milestone. If we understand Outhwaite correctly, part of his argument seems to be

that individual biographies are messier than we present and these biographies cannot be captured as easily within the framework that has been proposed here. Outhwaite is more sympathetic when it comes to some of the more recent “applications”: that is, where we discussed populism, forced migration, and the current global health crisis.

Like Outhwaite, Tom Kemple feels slightly uneasy about the perceived linearity implied in our model of existential milestones. Kemple’s article attempts to explore the various ways in which people develop their own path, respond to unexpected events, improvise and depart from societal scripts. Drawing on Vico and Simmel, Kemple proposes “queer time” and “queer phenomenology,” centered around “existential cornerstones” (rather than “milestones”). In this picture, various events provide opportunities to redefine who we are and where we are heading. There appears to be a strong normative component to his argument in that he is clearly advocating a particular approach to life—not just a descriptive account of social life as it presents itself. In existentialist terms, we would characterize that approach as one of “authenticity”: the ability to remain oneself and to reinvent oneself in the face of the contingencies that life throws at us.

As you will be able to infer from our reply, we have found each commentary to be an exciting contribution, making us think differently about the theory that we propose. Each paper in this special issue provides new pathways for developing existence theory further, whilst making links with sociological research on a variety of topics ranging from memory and the life-course to generations and the body. Again, we would like to thank the contributors for engaging with our proposal and for the work and effort that they have invested in this task.

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### **ORCID iD**

Patrick Baert  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8290-2651>

### **References**

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### **Author biographies**

Patrick Baert is Professor of Social Theory at the University of Cambridge.

Marcus Morgan is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Bristol.

Rin Ushiyama is Lecturer in Sociology at Queen’s University Belfast.