



## Chatting with an AI about urban inexistence

### Description

Intentional inexistence is a philosophical term adopted by the nineteenth century philosopher Franz Brentano (1838-1917) to indicate the commonplace human capacity to imagine things. We may suppose that *inexistence* refers to things that don't exist (nonexistent things) or that are under demolition, but that presumes too much or too little. As explained by Linda McAlister, "the prefix 'in-' does not indicate negation but rather location, indicating existence in the mind" [423].

Here's a key passage from Brentano, often quoted.

"Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction toward an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on" [68].

To help me out in understanding **intentional inexistence** I decided to consult the latest version of openAI's improved [ChatGPT](#) (Dec 2022). It knows all about it, and was happy to tell me. It also responded to prompts connecting it to urbanism and melancholy.

**ME:** I'm investigating intentional inexistence.

**CHATGPT:** Intentional inexistence is a philosophical concept that refers to the idea that some things may not exist by design or by choice, rather than simply as a matter of fact. This concept is often discussed in relation to the idea of free will and the ability of individuals to choose to exist or not to exist.

There are a variety of different ways in which the concept of intentional inexistence can be understood and interpreted. For example, some people may argue that individuals have the ability to choose not to exist by choosing to end their own lives, while others may argue that individuals have the power to choose not to exist by simply not coming into being in the first place.

Another way in which the concept of intentional inexistence can be understood is in relation to the idea of "possible worlds," which is a concept in philosophy that refers to the idea that there are multiple possible versions of the world that could have existed, but only one of which actually does exist. According to this view, the intentional inexistence of certain things may be a result of the fact that they were not chosen to exist in the actual world, but could have existed in some other possible world.

Overall, the concept of intentional inexistence is a complex and multifaceted idea that has been explored by philosophers for centuries, and continues to be an area of active debate and investigation.

**ME:** Can you relate the concept of intentional inexistence to the city please.

**CHATGPT:** Certainly. The concept of intentional inexistence can be related to the idea of a city in several ways.

One way to think about intentional inexistence in relation to a city is in terms of the city's physical existence. A city is a human-made entity, and therefore its existence is dependent on the choices and actions of the people who create and maintain it. This means that the city could potentially not exist if the people who make up the city choose not to exist or choose not to create and maintain the city.

Another way to think about intentional inexistence in relation to a city is in terms of the city's social and cultural existence. A city is not just a physical place, but also a social and cultural entity, with its own unique character, values, and way of life. The intentional inexistence of a city could refer to the idea that the city's social and cultural identity could potentially not exist if the people who make up the city choose not to maintain and cultivate it.

Finally, the concept of intentional inexistence can also be related to the idea of the city as a concept or idea. Just as the physical and cultural existence of a city is dependent on the choices and actions of the people who make up the city, the idea or concept of a city is also dependent on the choices and actions of people. The intentional inexistence of a city as a concept could refer to the idea that the idea of a city could potentially not exist if people choose not to think about or conceptualize the city in a certain way.

Overall, the concept of intentional inexistence can be related to the idea of a city in various ways, depending on how one understands and interprets the concept and the city itself.

**ME:** What does Franz Brentano say about intentional inexistence? How does he relate it to consciousness?

**CHATGPT:** Franz Brentano was a 19th-century philosopher and psychologist who is best known for his contributions to the field of philosophy of mind. In his work, Brentano developed the concept of "intentionality," which refers to the idea that mental states are directed towards or about something. This means that mental states, such as beliefs, desires, and perceptions, are not simply subjective states, but are also directed towards some object or content.

Brentano's concept of intentionality has been influential in shaping the modern understanding of consciousness and the way in which mental states relate to the world. In relation to the concept of intentional inexistence, Brentano's ideas about intentionality suggest that consciousness is not simply a subjective state, but is also necessarily connected to the external world.

According to Brentano, the intentionality of consciousness means that consciousness is always directed towards something, whether it be a physical object, an idea, or some other content. This means that the intentional inexistence of something would necessarily involve the intentional inexistence of the consciousness that is directed towards it. In other words, if something does not exist, then the consciousness that is directed towards it would also not exist, as there would be no object or content for the consciousness to be directed towards.

Overall, Brentano's ideas about intentionality and consciousness suggest that the concept of intentional inexistence is closely connected to the way in which consciousness relates to the external world, and that the existence or inexistence of something is necessarily tied to the existence or inexistence of the consciousness that is directed towards it.

**ME:** Is inexistence the same as nonexistence?

**CHATGPT:** Inexistence and nonexistence are similar concepts, but they are not exactly the same thing.

Inexistence refers to the state of not existing or not being present in some particular context or situation. This means that something that is said to be "inexistent" is not present or does not exist in a particular place, time, or situation, but may potentially exist or be present in some other context.

On the other hand, nonexistence refers to the state of not existing at all. This means that something that is said to be "nonexistent" does not exist anywhere or at any time, and has no possibility of coming into being.

In other words, inexistence is a temporary or relative concept, while nonexistence is an absolute concept. Something that is said to be "inexistent" may not exist in one context, but could potentially exist in another context, while something that is said to be "nonexistent" does not exist at all and has no possibility of coming into being.

So, while inexistence and nonexistence are similar in that they both refer to the absence of something, they are not the same thing, as inexistence is a temporary or relative concept,

while nonexistence is an absolute concept.

**ME:** Does Daniel Dennett have an opinion on that?

**CHATGPT:** Daniel Dennett is a philosopher and cognitive scientist who has written extensively on the nature of consciousness and the mind. In his work, Dennett has addressed a wide range of topics, including the concept of intentional inexistence.

Dennett's views on intentional inexistence are informed by his overall philosophical approach, which is characterized by a naturalistic and materialistic perspective on the nature of the mind and consciousness. According to Dennett, the mind is a product of the brain and is therefore fully determined by the physical and biological processes that underlie it.

Given this perspective, Dennett is likely to take the view that intentional inexistence is ultimately a product of the physical and biological processes that underlie consciousness and the mind. In other words, Dennett is likely to argue that the intentional inexistence of something is ultimately determined by the physical and biological processes that underlie the consciousness that is directed towards it, rather than being an independent or free-standing concept.

Overall, Dennett's views on intentional inexistence are likely to be informed by his naturalistic and materialistic approach to the nature of the mind and consciousness, and may take the view that intentional inexistence is ultimately determined by the physical and biological processes that underlie consciousness.

**ME:** How does intentional inexistence relate to the idea of hallucination as a means of understanding perception. I'm thinking of Anil Seth's arguments here.

**CHATGPT:** The concept of intentional inexistence can be related to the idea of hallucination as a means of understanding perception in several ways.

Anil Seth is a neuroscientist who has written extensively on the nature of perception and the brain, and has argued that the experience of hallucination can provide insight into the way in which the brain constructs our experience of the world. According to Seth, hallucinations can be understood as a kind of perceptual error, in which the brain mistakenly creates a perception of something that is not actually present in the external world.

One way in which the concept of intentional inexistence can be related to the idea of hallucination as a means of understanding perception is in terms of the relationship between consciousness and the external world. As mentioned earlier, the concept of intentional inexistence refers to the idea that some things may not exist by design or by choice, rather than simply as a matter of fact. This concept is often discussed in relation to the idea of free will and the ability of individuals to choose to exist or not to exist.

In the context of perception, the concept of intentional inexistence can be related to the idea of hallucination by suggesting that the experience of hallucination is a kind of intentional inexistence of something in the external world. In other words, the experience of

hallucination could be understood as the brain's intentional creation of a perception of something that does not actually exist in the external world. This interpretation of hallucination as a form of intentional inexistence could provide insight into the way in which the brain constructs our experience of the world, and the relationship between consciousness and the external world.

Overall, the concept of intentional inexistence can be related to the idea of hallucination as a means of understanding perception in terms of the relationship between consciousness and the external world, and the way in which the brain constructs our experience of the world.

**ME:** Can you provide some examples to illustrate the points you are making here.

**CHATGPT:** Certainly. Here are a few examples that illustrate the points made about the relationship between the concept of intentional inexistence and the idea of hallucination as a means of understanding perception:

Imagine that you are walking through a park on a beautiful day and you suddenly see a colorful bird flying overhead. However, as you continue to watch the bird, you begin to realize that it is actually a hallucination, as there is no physical bird present in the sky. In this case, the experience of the hallucinatory bird could be understood as a kind of intentional inexistence of the bird in the external world. The brain has intentionally created a perception of the bird, even though the bird does not actually exist in the external world.

Imagine that you are at home and you suddenly hear someone calling your name. You turn around to see who is there, but there is no one in the room. In this case, the experience of hearing someone's voice could be understood as a kind of intentional inexistence of the person in the external world. The brain has intentionally created a perception of the person's voice, even though the person does not actually exist in the external world.

Imagine that you are lying in bed at night and you suddenly see a strange figure standing at the foot of your bed. As you try to focus on the figure, it begins to fade away, and you realize that it was just a hallucination. In this case, the experience of the hallucinatory figure could be understood as a kind of intentional inexistence of the figure in the external world. The brain has intentionally created a perception of the figure, even though the figure does not actually exist in the external world.

Overall, these examples illustrate how the concept of intentional inexistence can be related to the idea of hallucination as a means of understanding perception, in terms of the way in which the brain intentionally creates a perception of something that does not actually exist in the external world.

**ME:** Thanks. Can you think of some illustrations that relate more to how we think about cities, urban living, a sense of place, and architecture.

**CHATGPT:** Certainly. Here are a few examples that illustrate how the concept of intentional inexistence can be related to ideas about cities, urban living, a sense of place, and architecture:

Imagine that you are walking through a city and you come across an old, abandoned building. As you walk through the empty rooms and hallways, you can't help but feel a sense of nostalgia and longing for the people and events that took place there in the past. In this case, the abandoned building could be understood as a kind of intentional inexistence of the past in the present. The building and its history still exist in some sense, but they are no longer present or actively a part of the city in the same way that they once were.

Imagine that you are standing at the edge of a city, looking out at the sprawling metropolis before you. As you gaze at the skyscrapers and bustling streets, you can't help but feel a sense of awe and wonder at the vastness and complexity of the city. However, as you continue to look, you also feel a sense of loss and sadness at the thought of all the things that have been lost or forgotten in the city's rapid growth and development. In this case, the city could be understood as a kind of intentional inexistence of the past in the present. The city's past still exists in some sense, but it is no longer present or actively a part of the city in the same way that it once was.

Imagine that you are walking through a city and you come across a beautiful, old church. As you stand in the quiet, peaceful interior, you can't help but feel a sense of spirituality and connection to something greater than yourself. However, as you look around at the empty pews and faded frescoes, you also feel a sense of loss and sadness at the thought of all the people who have come and gone through the church's doors over the years. In this case, the old church could be understood as a kind of intentional inexistence of the past in the present. The church's past still exists in some sense, but it is no longer present or actively a part of the city in the same way that it once was.

Overall, these examples illustrate how the concept of intentional inexistence can be related to ideas about cities, urban living, a sense of place, and architecture in terms of the way in which the past is present, but no longer actively a part of the city in the same way that it once was.

**ME:** What you have described sounds like a profound sense of urban melancholy.

**CHATGPT:** Yes, the examples given do suggest a sense of urban melancholy, or a sense of loss and nostalgia for the past in the present. This sense of urban melancholy is often associated with the concept of intentional inexistence, as it reflects the idea that the past still exists in some sense, but is no longer present or actively a part of the city in the same way that it once was.

Urban melancholy can be a powerful and poignant experience, and it is often associated with the feeling of being disconnected from the past and from the people and events that have shaped the city. This sense of disconnection can be particularly acute in cities that have undergone rapid change and development, as the rapid pace of change can often leave people feeling disconnected from the city's past and from the sense of place and identity that it once had.

Overall, the concept of intentional inexistence can be related to the idea of urban melancholy in terms of the way in which the past is present, but no longer actively a part of

the city in the same way that it once was, and the sense of loss and nostalgia that this can sometimes evoke.

**ME:** Brentano and Husserl relate intentional inexistence to consciousness. Can you relate what you have just said to concepts of urban consciousness.

**CHATGPT:** Certainly. The concept of intentional inexistence, as developed by philosophers like Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl, is closely connected to the idea of consciousness and the way in which mental states are directed towards or about something. In relation to the concept of urban consciousness, the idea of intentional inexistence can be understood as a kind of "urban intentionality," in which the consciousness of the city is directed towards or about its past, present, and future.

Urban consciousness can be understood as the collective consciousness of the people who make up a city, and the way in which they experience, perceive, and think about the city. This consciousness is shaped by the city's history, culture, values, and way of life, and is constantly evolving as the city itself changes and develops over time.

The concept of intentional inexistence can be related to the idea of urban consciousness in terms of the way in which the city's consciousness is directed towards or about its past, present, and future. Just as mental states are directed towards or about something, the urban consciousness of a city can be directed towards or about its past, present, and future, and the way in which these different aspects of the city's consciousness shape and influence each other.

For example, the urban consciousness of a city might be shaped by its past, in terms of the history and traditions that have shaped the city and the way in which people experience and think about the city. At the same time, the urban consciousness of a city is also shaped by its present, in terms of the way in which people experience and perceive the city in the present moment. Finally, the urban consciousness of a city is also shaped by its future, in terms of the way in which people think about and plan for the city's future development and growth.

Overall, the concept of intentional inexistence can be related to the idea of urban consciousness in terms of the way in which the city's consciousness is directed towards or about its past, present, and future, and the way in which these different aspects of the city's consciousness shape and influence each other.

**ME:** Do these propositions have anything to say about cities as "alive" or "sentient," or of a city having agency independent of the agency of its occupants?

**CHATGPT:** The concept of intentional inexistence, as it relates to the idea of urban consciousness, does not necessarily imply that cities are "alive" or "sentient" in the same way that living organisms are. While the concept of intentional inexistence suggests that cities have a kind of consciousness that is directed towards or about their past, present, and future, this does not necessarily mean that cities are "alive" or "sentient" in the same way that living organisms are.

Similarly, the concept of intentional inexistence does not necessarily imply that cities have agency independent of the agency of their occupants. Agency refers to the ability to act and make choices, and while the concept of intentional inexistence suggests that cities have a kind of consciousness that shapes and influences their development and growth, this does not necessarily mean that cities have the ability to act and make choices in the same way that individuals do.

Instead, the concept of intentional inexistence suggests that cities are shaped and influenced by the collective consciousness of the people who make up the city, and that this collective consciousness is directed towards or about the city's past, present, and future. In this sense, the concept of intentional inexistence can be understood as a way of thinking about the complex relationship between the city and the people who make it up, and the way in which this relationship shapes and influences the city's development and growth.

**ME:** There are some ideas I would like to explore at a later date. Can I come back to you?

**CHATGPT:** Certainly! I'm here to help answer your questions to the best of my ability. If you have any more questions or want to explore any other ideas in the future, feel free to ask. I'll do my best to help you find the information you're looking for.

**ME:** Do you mind if I put the transcript of our conversation in a blog post?

**CHATGPT:** As an artificial intelligence, I do not have personal preferences or feelings. You are welcome to use the transcript of our conversation in a blog post if you wish. However, I recommend citing the source of the information and giving appropriate credit to the authors of the ideas discussed in the conversation. It is also a good idea to ensure that any information that you share is accurate and up-to-date, and to be mindful of any relevant intellectual property laws or guidelines that may apply.

**ME:** On the subject of quoting sources â?? Brentano said the following. Can you please explain what he meant. â??Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction toward an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on.â??

**CHATGPT:** In this passage, Franz Brentano is discussing the concept of â??intentionality,â?• which refers to the idea that mental states are directed towards or about something. According to Brentano, every mental phenomenon, or mental state, is characterized by what he calls the â??intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object,â?• which he also refers to as â??reference to a content,â?• â??direction towards an object,â?• or â??immanent objectivity.â?•

In other words, Brentano is saying that every mental phenomenon includes something as an object within itself, even if it is not a physical thing. For example, when we have a

presentation, something is presented; when we make a judgment, something is affirmed or denied; when we experience love, something is loved; when we experience hate, something is hated; and when we experience desire, something is desired. In each of these cases, the mental state is directed towards or about something, even if that something is not a physical object.

Overall, Brentano is suggesting that the concept of intentionality is a fundamental characteristic of mental states, and that mental states are necessarily directed towards or about something, even if that something is not a physical object. This idea has had a significant influence on the way in which philosophers and cognitive scientists have thought about the nature of consciousness and the mind.

**ME:** I'll ponder that. Thanks for your time.

**CHATGPT:** You're welcome! I'm glad to have been able to help. If you have any more questions or want to explore any other ideas in the future, feel free to ask. I'll do my best to help you find the information you're looking for.

This interaction is impressive, but from a human point of view it lacks any sense that we are exchanging information or insight. I tried to avoid a Q and A scenario. Instead, I tried to formulate statements from my own reading and waited for CHATGPT to respond. But at no point did the platform ask me to elaborate on my opinion, or try to elicit my reason for pursuing this line of inquiry. The power relationship implied in this synthetic intellectual role play was that of expert and novice, or mentor and acolyte — though not a Socratic relationship. But perhaps that's asking too much. See post: [Why ask?](#)

The developers of CHATGPT are well aware of the strengths and limitations of the platform. See their critique at <https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt/>. They refer to the possibility of plausible-sounding but incorrect or nonsensical answers, its verbose and repetitive responses, inability to seek clarification from the interlocutor if questioning seems unclear, and the constraints imposed by an API that filters inappropriate content.

## References

- Brentano, Franz. *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*. London: Routledge, 1973. First published in German in 1874.
- Dennett, Daniel C. *Consciousness Explained*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co, 1991.
- McAlister, Linda L. "Franz Brentano and Intentional Inexistence." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 8, no. 4 (1970): 423-430.

## Note

- The apocalyptic featured image is generated by Midjourney in response to the prompt "celebratory urban inexistence." Without the positive word "celebratory" the results were depressing.

- For a discussion of extinction in architecture see: Khan, Asad. *Ex-Risk Architecture: Anticipating Existential Catastrophes Through Design (PhD Thesis)*. Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh, 2022. (When available it can be accessed through the Edinburgh research archive at <https://era.ed.ac.uk>.)

### Category

1. Uncategorized

### Tags

1. artificial intelligence
2. city
3. consciousness
4. intentionality
5. urban

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rcoyne99

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