

Habermas and the 'Presupposition' of the Common Objective World

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ABSTRACT. Habermas asserts that the 'presupposition' of the common objective world is thrust upon us by the pragmatics of language use. However, this is a dubious claim. A pre-linguistic relation to the world as common and objective is required for language acquisition. What's more, Husserl's analyses indicate that aspects of our experience of the common world are grounded in experiences of spatio-temporal horizontality and of the co-presence of others within that world-horizon. This is not to negate the importance of communicatively achieved intersubjectivity, nor to diminish the rational significance of our linguistically articulated 'world concepts'. But it is to suggest that the 'presupposition' of the common objective world has phenomenological, not linguistic-pragmatic, roots.

KEYWORDS. Husserl; Habermas; Life-world; Pragmatics.

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*The waking have one common world,
but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own.*

Heraclitus, fragment B89

Heraclitus thought it worth remarking that the world of our waking experience is singular and shared. It was not until the post-Kantian era that this theme became a topic of serious philosophical reflection in the work of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Ludwig Feuerbach. At the heart of their epistemologically-oriented inquiries was the observation that the experience of the world's objectivity is contingent upon the experience of others:¹

The certainty of the existence of other things apart from me is mediated for me through the certainty of the existence of another human being apart from me. That which I alone perceive I doubt; only that which the other also perceives is certain.²

In the early twentieth century, the same set of interconnections between intersubjectivity, objectivity and world were explored by Edmund Husserl. For the founder of phenomenology, the experience of the world as «once for all truly existing [...] for everyone» is a fundamental feature of our «natural attitude».³ However, far from treating the natural attitude as an axiomatic starting point, Husserl fixed upon it as a central topic for philosophical reflection. How do we

1 G.W.F. Hegel no doubt also belongs to this constellation of thinkers. However, his important discussions of recognition and the sociality of reason never directly treat the topic in the terms discussed here.

2 FEUERBACH 1986, 59 (§41).

3 HUSSERL 1969, 236: «[...] The world is the world *for us all*; as an Objective world it has, in its own sense, the *categorical form*, 'once for all truly existing', not only for me but *for everyone*».

experience the world *as* there for everyone? What makes this experience possible? And why does this experience, as remarkable as it is, appear so “natural” to us? Husserl embarked on a decades’ long project of phenomenological inquiry into these matters, and his reflections are still among the most creative and extensive in the literature.

In recent decades, Jürgen Habermas has continued the line of thought that runs from Heraclitus to Husserl. He affirms its core insight regarding the connection between the objectivity of the world and intersubjectivity: «To say that the world is ‘objective’ means that it is ‘given’ to us as ‘the same for everyone’». ⁴ He also gives a central place in his philosophy to the supposition of a single, objective world, identifying it as one of the “‘transcendentally’ necessary” structures that make communication and communicative rationality possible. ⁵ Furthermore, like “the phenomenologist,” whose approach Habermas refers to approvingly, he seeks to make the phenomenon of the objective world a topic of dedicated philosophical reflection:

The phenomenologist does not [...] simply begin with the ontological presupposition of an objective world; he makes this a problem by inquiring into the conditions under which the unity of an objective world is constituted for the members of a community. ⁶

Nonetheless, Habermas’s inquiry into the conditions of world-experience runs in a quite different direction than Husserl’s. Rather than reconstructing the meaning structures of world-experience and tracing their genesis within the sphere of transcendental subjectivity,

4 Habermas, «From Kant’s ‘Ideas’ of Pure Reason to the ‘Idealizing’ Presuppositions of Communicative Action: Reflections on the Detranscendentalized ‘Use of Reason’», in HABERMAS 2003, 89. Hereafter *FKI*. Also: «The vertical view of the objective world is interconnected with the horizontal relationship among members of an intersubjectively shared lifeworld. The objectivity of the world and the intersubjectivity of communication mutually refer to one another» (HABERMAS 2003, 16.)

5 *FKI*, 98.

6 HABERMAS 1984, 12. (Hereafter: *TCA* 1).

Habermas asserts that the presupposition of the common objective world is thrust upon us by *the pragmatics of language use*:

It is linguistic practice—especially the use of singular terms—that forces us to pragmatically presuppose such a world shared by all. The referential system built into natural language ensures that any given speaker can formally anticipate possible objects of reference. Through this formal presupposition of the world, communication about something in the world is intertwined with practical interventions in the world.⁷

This is a controversial claim. Can it really be maintained that language and/or language use is the source of our experience of the world as singular, objective and shared? Must there not be some relation to the world as singular, objective and shared prior to, or in addition to, our linguistically-mediated relation to it?

In the first section of the article, I review the philosophical background and methodological commitments that give Habermas's linguistic-pragmatic approach to the phenomenon of the common objective world its distinctive shape (I). I then consider Habermas's account of the 'presupposition' of the common objective world, first in its relation to the concept of the lifeworld and then in relation to what Habermas calls 'formal world-concepts'. These discussions will show how Habermas can view our relation to the world as always both a *presupposition* and an *achievement*, since our relation to the objective world as such is a relation constructed in the linguistic medium (II). But this leaves unanswered the question of the origin of our 'presupposition' of the common objective world, in particular its relation to the pre- or extra-linguistic strata of human experience. In the final section of the paper, I argue that the 'form' and 'sense' of our world-experience are grounded in perceptual (not linguistic)

⁷ FKI: 89.

experiences of spatio-temporal horizontality and of the co-presence of others within that world-horizon (III). These conclusions do not negate the importance of communicatively achieved intersubjectivity, nor do they diminish the rational significance of our linguistically articulated *world concepts*, but they do suggest that the 'presupposition' of the common objective world has phenomenological, not linguistic-pragmatic, roots.

1. Habermas's Kantian pragmatism

Habermas's mature philosophical position has been aptly described as a Kantian pragmatism.⁸ It is Kantian in a number of respects. It places autonomy at the centre not only of its conception of morality but also of its conception of rationality;⁹ it insists that «the constructions of reason» (to use Onora O'Neill's expression) provide the final court of appeal in all matters of rational debate;¹⁰ it affirms the emancipatory power of critical self-reflection as the path of genuine enlightenment;¹¹ and, most importantly for our discussion, it affirms the legitimacy of the project of transcendental philosophy introduced by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Habermas agrees with Kant that we require a form of philosophical inquiry whose aim is to analyze «our a priori concepts of objects in general—that is, the conceptual structure of any coherent experience whatsoever».¹² Indeed, he argues that an additional set of “a priori concepts” must be added to the agenda of transcendental investigation, namely those conceptual structures that

8 Habermas applies this term to himself, see HABERMAS 2003, 8. For discussions of this description and its meaning, see BAYNES 2016, 82-96; FLYNN 2014, 230-60; BERNSTEIN 2010, 168-99; LEVINE 2010, 677-95.

9 For Habermas, the social practice of giving and asking for reasons rests upon the communicative freedom of participants. See *FKI*: 93-99.

10 *FKI*, 102-9. The allusion is to O'NEILL 1989.

11 Habermas, «From Kant to Hegel and Back Again: The Move toward Detranscendentalization» in HABERMAS 2003, 181.

12 Habermas, «What is Universal Pragmatics? (1976)», in HABERMAS 1998, 44.

enable «situations of possible mutual understanding».¹³ Not only the conditions of possible *experience* but the conditions of possible *mutual understanding* must be made the theme of study, and Habermas's own work is conceived as a contribution to the second of these tasks.

However, Habermas argues that such tasks need to be approached afresh within our radically altered philosophical context, so much so that the Kantian transcendental problematic of the experience of objects collapses into the new problematic of mutual understanding. Without being able to reconstruct, let alone defend, the arguments he puts forth, it will have to suffice to mention the basic philosophical commitments that Habermas holds.¹⁴ Following the linguistic turn, he argues that the subject's relation to the world can no longer be understood in 'mentalistic' terms as an 'idea' or 'representation' of the world (Descartes, Hobbes, Locke)—nor as the active 'constitution' of a world of appearances (Kant, Husserl)—but must be modelled in terms of propositionally structured content susceptible to semantic analysis (Frege). Furthermore, following the pragmatic turn, the symbolically structured character of lived experience must be understood in relation to the agent's practical ability to 'cope' with its environment and its rule-following ability to interact with others through symbolic action (Pierce, Mead, and later Wittgenstein). On this view, the 'world-constituting' activity of the subject is not solitary but social, not intuitive but linguistically mediated, not atemporal but historically situated.

On the basis of these commitments, Habermas concludes that the 'transcendental' conditions for the experience of objects must be traceable to our problem-solving behavior and our practical ability to use signs within a linguistic community. The relation of thought to things (the starting point of the Kantian and the phenomenological traditions) is derivative upon the relation to things that we establish as speaking and acting beings. Accordingly, the insights Kant bequeathed

¹³ HABERMAS 1998, 44.

¹⁴ For a fuller analysis of Habermas's arguments for embracing a paradigm shift to a linguistic intersubjectivism focusing on the critique of Husserl's phenomenology, see ZAHAVI 2001 and RUSSELL 2011.

to modernity via his transcendental philosophy must now be set upon new foundations. The necessary conditions for the possibility of experience and cognition can no longer be explicated via a self-reflection upon subjectivity but must be investigated via a reflection upon the formal structure of *practices* or *performances* of speaking and acting beings.

After the pragmatist deflation of Kantian conceptuality, 'transcendental analysis' refers to the search for presumably universal but only *de facto* unavoidable conditions that must be fulfilled in order for fundamental practices or achievements to emerge. [...] The reflexive self-reassurance by an active subjectivity *in foro interno*, outside space and time, is replaced by the explication of a practical knowledge that makes it possible for subjects capable of speech and action to participate in these sorts of practices and to attain the corresponding accomplishments.¹⁵

As mentioned above, Habermas's theory of communicative action is supposed to contribute to this 'detranscendentalizing' revision of the project of transcendental philosophy by rationally reconstructing the basic structures of language use that enable speakers to come to an agreement with each other about something in the world. Its theme is the conditions of possible *mutual understanding*. Its method is the rational reconstruction of the 'formal pragmatic' presuppositions of communication, understood as a constellation of practices and performances that are practically mastered by competent speakers.

In order to 'rationally reconstruct' these features of communication, the 'participant standpoint' is basic. The know-how of speakers, along with their unthematized understanding of the situation of communication, is the source material for the inquiry. However, the rational reconstruction of this background knowledge does not rely upon an introspective process of self-reflection as does

15 HABERMAS 2003, 11.

phenomenological inquiry, since the capacities and performances in question are connected to *public practices* rather than being features of 'inner' subjective experience to which others gain access only through self-disclosing reports of the first person.

In his mature writings, Habermas identifies four basic features of communicative practice which are 'transcendentally necessary' in the sense that they "cannot be corrected by experiences that would not be possible without [them]."¹⁶ He calls these «idealizing performative presuppositions of communicative action»:

1. the shared presupposition of a world of independently existing objects,
2. the reciprocal presupposition of rationality or 'accountability,'
3. the unconditionality of context-transcending validity claims such as truth and moral rightness, and
4. the exacting presuppositions of argumentation that force participants to decenter their own interpretative perspectives.¹⁷

All four of these presuppositions are necessary to account for the possibility of the 'cognitive' use of language, i.e. its role in the communication and justification of knowledge. To assert *that p* is to assert a *belief* that one holds to be true or right (3rd presupposition). It is to make a *knowledge* claim.¹⁸ This means that one asserts *p* to be (i) *true* in the sense that it describes a state of affairs that obtains in the world independently of its being believed or stated (1st presupposition), and (ii) *justified* insofar as the speaker is able to show why it is worthy of belief in a suitable procedure of discursive testing (4th presupposition). Furthermore, to assert *that p* is to assume (iii) one's own rational capacity to assume responsibility for making claims that satisfy conditions of rational acceptability, along with (iv) the rational capacity of one's interlocutor to take up a rationally motivated 'yes/no'

16 FKI, 98.

17 FKI, 86.

18 Habermas shares this conviction with Dummett and Brandom. See HABERMAS 2003, 125, 143-4.

stance with regard to the rational acceptability of the claims made (2nd presupposition). In what follows, I shall focus more or less exclusively on the first of these four "idealizing presuppositions": the shared presupposition of a world of independently existing objects.

2. Lifeworld and formal world-concepts

Kant's treatment of the cosmological ideas in *The Critique of Pure Reason* asserts a distinction between the *regulative* function played by the idea of a unitary world as a principle of completeness employed by the faculty of reason, and the *metaphysical illusions* that follow from treating the world as an object of experience. According to Kant, the idea of the world makes it possible for us to anticipate the possibility of a systematic unity of knowledge, but the idea of the world is neither a condition for the constitution of objects of experience, nor itself an object of experience.

Like Kant, Habermas believes that the idea of the unitary world is a cornerstone of rationality. He also agrees that the 'transcendental difference' between 'the world' and 'the innerworldly' must be retained.¹⁹ The world is not an object of experience. Nonetheless, with Heidegger, Habermas observes that we *experience* objects as 'innerworldly'. That is, objects are experienced *as* belonging to the single, objective world. When we think of, speak of, or interact with a real object, we experience it and treat it *as* an element standing in relation to a broader totality of mind-independent objects to which we, along with others, have access. The world is thus not merely a 'regulative' idea of reason that enables the construction of theoretical knowledge. Rather it is a condition of the *experience* of objects. Thus, it is more akin to the forms of intuition or categories of the

19 *FKI*, 90: «Like Kant's cosmological idea of reason, the conception of a presupposed world rests on the transcendental difference between the world and the innerworldly, which reappears in Heidegger as the ontological difference between 'Being' and 'beings.' According to this supposition, the objective world that we posit is not the same kind of thing as what can occur in it as object (i.e. as state of affairs, thing, event)».

understanding than the ideas of reason.²⁰

Heidegger's conception of world, as a totality of meaningful relations that structures a context of life, is subsumed and incorporated by Habermas under the Husserlian category of 'lifeworld'.²¹ The 'shared lifeworld', as Habermas understands it, denotes the stock of interpretative patterns and background convictions available to agents to interpret the situations in which they find themselves. The world is opened up to us and becomes intelligible through our repertoire of interpretative possibilities. «Everything that members of a local linguistic community encounter in the world they experience not as neutral objects, but in light of an inhabited and habituated 'grammatical' preunderstanding».²² Furthermore, for members of a shared lifeworld, the ways in which the world is 'disclosed' always enjoy a presumption of intersubjectivity. That is, thanks to sharing a lifeworld, members can assume that their interpretations of a given situation will be intelligible to, if not actually endorsed by, others.

But Habermas recognizes that *the world itself* is not equivalent to the understandings we have of it, even if those understandings are shared with others. A 'shared lifeworld' is not 'a world of independently existing objects' as such.²³ What then is the relationship between the two?

On one hand, Habermas claims that our grasp of the objective world is sustained through our *achievements* as communicating subjects.

20 *FKI*, 90: «[...] This conception no longer fits within the Kantian framework of oppositions. Once the a priori categories of the understanding and forms of intuition have been detranscendentalized and thus disarmed, the classic distinction between reason and understanding is blurred. Obviously, the pragmatic presupposition of the world is not a regulative idea, but it is 'constitutive' for referring to anything about which it is possible to establish facts».

21 For a fuller discussion of Habermas's appropriation of the concept of lifeworld from Husserl, see RUSSELL 2011, 42-5.

22 *FKI*, 93.

23 There has been a controversy in recent years concerning whether Heidegger recognized this distinction and/or had the conceptual resources to account for it satisfactorily. The controversy was precipitated by LAFONT 2000. I can't pursue these debates here. This discussion is limited to presenting Habermas's own approach to this controversial issue.

When we attain intersubjective recognition of validity claims through communication, we not only assure ourselves of the intersubjectivity of our lifeworld, we also assure ourselves of 'the unity of the objective world'²⁴: «The world gains objectivity only through *counting* as one and the same world *for* a community of speaking and acting subjects». ²⁵ Our speech and action is always culturally shaped, historically situated, and linguistically articulated, but in and through it we come into contact with *the world itself*. The world is not hidden behind our linguistically-mediated understandings, as though behind 'a veil of appearances'.²⁶ In phenomenological parlance, we might say that the world is the 'object pole' of our intentional relations, while the 'lifeworld', broadly speaking, denotes the ('noematic') senses according to which the world, or more precisely that which is encountered within the world, is experienced or interpreted.²⁷

On the other hand, Habermas claims that the 'presupposition' of the common objective world is a 'transcendentally necessary' condition for reaching agreement through communication:²⁸ «The abstract concept of the world is a necessary condition if communicatively acting subjects are to reach understanding among themselves about what takes place in the world or is to be effected in it». ²⁹ When we assert *that p*, we must assume that we are speaking of some mind-independent world of objects, a world of objects that is 'there' also for our interlocutor; without such an assumption, acts of referring can neither

24 TCA 1, 10.

25 TCA 1, 12.

26 This is another way of phrasing Habermas's commitment to 'internal realism'. For a discussion, see LEVINE 2010.

27 Of course, Habermas would not see the connection to Husserl, but he makes the same critique of Kant's distinction between appearance and "thing-in-itself" from a pragmatic point of view. See FKI, 90.

28 FKI, 98.

29 TCA 1, 13. Habermas quotes Melvin POLLNER 1974: «The assumption of a commonly shared world (lifeworld) does not function for mundane reasoners as a descriptive assertion. It is not falsifiable. Rather, it functions as an incorrigible specification of the relations which exist in principle among a community of perceivers' experiences of what is purported to be the same world (objective world)».

succeed nor fail.³⁰

What then is the status of the ‘presupposition’ of the common objective world invoked by Habermas? How can our grasp of the common objective world be both a ‘presupposition’ and an ‘achievement’ of communication?

The first point to make is that there are at least three level of ‘intersubjectivity’ that Habermas canvasses in his account.³¹ (1) The most demanding is the intersubjectivity that inheres in a shared, linguistically-articulated common conviction, i.e. a validity claim to which both parties assent. In every attempt to reach an agreement about something, there is the risk of disagreement. Hence, intersubjective recognition of validity claims is a fragile form of intersubjectivity. (2) The intermediate level of intersubjectivity is the sharing of a lifeworld, i.e. participation in a common language, background knowledge and shared interpretative frameworks. A relatively rich level of commonality can almost always be assumed at this level, even in the face of overt disagreements. Since it is impossible to problematize one’s lifeworld as a whole, disagreements always take place against a ‘massive background consensus’. (3) The third and most attenuated form of intersubjectivity is that in which agents orient themselves together toward a common domain of reality without presupposing any shared agreements or convictions about it, and, indeed, without necessarily even sharing a lifeworld or language. It is at this third level of intersubjectivity that Habermas situates what he calls ‘formal world-concepts’, which he also calls «formal

30 *FKI*, 86.

31 Cf. «Here we should distinguish three levels: the level of linguistic articulation of the lifeworld background, the level of practices of reaching understanding within such an intersubjectively shared lifeworld, and the level of the objective world, formally presupposed by the participants in communication, as the totality of entities about which something is said. The interaction between world-disclosure and innerworldly learning processes—an interaction that expands knowledge and alters meaning—takes place on the middle level where, within the horizon of their lifeworld, communicatively acting subjects reach understanding with one another about something in the world». (HABERMAS 1998, 336). My discussion changes the order in which these three ‘levels’ are presented.

presuppositions of intersubjectivity».³² Among these formal world-concepts we find the presupposition of the common objective world «as the totality of objects to be dealt with and judged».³³

The distinction between second and third levels of intersubjectivity becomes salient in instances of disagreement and communicative breakdown. When disagreements arise, we find ourselves compelled to retreat, as it were, to a *less descriptive stance* towards the world. The ability to relate together to the world in this more attenuated fashion enables speakers to sustain a more abstract level of agreement and thus to keep the conversation oriented to a common subject matter, however loosely defined, and in such a way to sustain the disagreement *as* a disagreement. If this deeper level of 'intersubjectivity' were not assumed, there would be no disagreement *about* the world. As Melvin Pollner remarks:

That a community orients itself to the world as essentially constant, as one which is known and knowable in common with others, provides that community with the warrantable grounds for asking questions of a particular sort of which the prototypical representative is: 'How come, he sees it and you do not?'.³⁴

The practice of conflict resolution we call 'discourse' rests on this basis:

For both parties the interpretive task consists in incorporating the other's interpretation of the situation into one's own in such a way that in the revised version 'his' external world and 'my' external world can—against the background of 'our' lifeworld—be relativized in relation to 'the' world, and the divergent situation definitions can be

³² TCA 1, 50.

³³ HABERMAS 2003, 16.

³⁴ POLLNER 1974, 40. Quoted by Habermas, TCA 1, 13. A similar set of observations are set out by WILLIAMS 1978, 64–65.

brought to coincide sufficiently.³⁵

On my reading, what Habermas describes as the set of ‘formal world-concepts’—objective world, social world and subjective world—represent the most attenuated level of intersubjectivity that is possible, beyond which the possibility of discourse disintegrates altogether.

Formal world-concepts are organizing structures found within worldviews. They provide the “formal scaffolding” that speakers use to organize problematic situations requiring resolution.³⁶ They are something like ‘ontologies’, demarcating domains of reality.³⁷ But, if they are ontologies, they are ‘formal’ ontologies. They do not give us a representational grasp on how things stand; they give us an orientation to domains of reality “freed of all specific content”:

Validity claims are in principle open to criticism because they are based on formal world-concepts. They presuppose a world that is identical for all possible observers, or a world intersubjectively shared by members, *and they do so in abstract form freed of all specific content.*³⁸

Formal-world concepts thus provide a system of reference that secures the *identity* of the object domains in spite of changes *within* them and changing *interpretations* of them. In this sense, formal world-concepts are an identity-preserving conceptual apparatus; and, at the same time, they unburden the specific content from having to serve an identity-preserving function. They make intelligible the possibility that *any belief whatsoever* about the world could be false, without disrupting our self-consciousness as rational beings:

The content of our descriptions is of course subject to

35 TCA 1, 100.

36 TCA 1, 70.

37 TCA 1, 45.

38 TCA 1, 50. Emphasis altered.

revision, but the formal projection of the totality of identifiable objects in general is not—at least not as long as our form of life is characterized by natural languages that have the kind of propositional structure with which we are familiar. At best, we may find out a posteriori that the projection was insufficiently formal.³⁹

This final remark suggests that there is a learning process connected to our acquisition of formal world-concepts, and indeed Habermas describes two kinds of historical learning processes in connection to our world-concepts.

First, he reconstructs what we might call an 'ontological' learning process. In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, he sketches the contours of this learning process through a discussion of the transition from the 'mythical' interpretation of the world to the modern 'rationalized' lifeworld.⁴⁰ (i) Whereas mythical worldviews tend to interpret the natural world in anthropologizing ways, the modern worldview differentiates nature and culture, and learns to oppose the «causal connections of nature» to the «normative orders of society».⁴¹ (This establishes the necessity of the distinction between 'the objective world' and 'the social world'.) (ii) Whereas mythical worldviews tend to conflate words with things, e.g. attributing causal (magical) powers to words, the modern worldview differentiates language and world: «Linguistic communication and the cultural tradition that flow into it are [...] set off as a reality in their own right from the reality of nature and society».⁴² The 'historical' consciousness characteristic of modernity is a consequence of this recognition that culture and beliefs change over time, independently of changes that occur in the world itself. (iii) Whereas mythical worldviews tend to conflate the

39 *FKI*, 98.

40 This process is further described in Habermas, *TCA* 1, Chapter II, and in *TCA* 2, Chapter V. Habermas also presents an ontogenetic analogue which he details in various places, including HABERMAS 1983, 116–94 and HABERMAS 1979, 69–94.

41 *TCA* 1, 49.

42 *TCA* 1, 50.

experiences of the subject with the state of the world, the modern worldview differentiates between the internal world of subjectivity, to which the individual has privileged access, and the external world that is in principle intersubjectively shareable.⁴³ (This establishes the necessity of distinguishing ‘the subjective world’ over against ‘the objective world’ and ‘the social world’.)

Second, alongside this ‘ontological’ learning process, we observe a process of ‘formalization’. The constancy of the objective world, the social world, and the subjective world is less and less secured through the constancy of the *interpretation* of them. Instead, it comes to be secured through ‘formal’ world concepts. «This identity-securing knowledge becomes more and more formal along the path from closed to open worldviews; it attaches to structures that are increasingly disengaged from contents that are open to revision».⁴⁴

It is with the acquisition of ‘world-concepts’ that are sufficiently differentiated and sufficiently formal that the modern worldview finds its rational footings, and this supplies the conditions necessary for a productive and rational ‘innerworldly’ learning process. Hence, Habermas asserts that: «The rationality of worldviews is not measured in terms of logical and semantic properties but in terms of the formal-pragmatic basic concepts they place at the disposal of individuals for interpreting their world».⁴⁵

To summarize, even though the world appears to us straightforwardly to be common and singular, this is not an immutable structure of experience. Our relation to ‘the’ world must itself be understood as *an achievement of linguistic beings*, an acquisition that occurs within the *linguistic dimension* itself. Furthermore, it is a feature conditioned by our linguistic practice and the worldview that is embedded within it. As Habermas puts it, the deep-seated structures of the lifeworld background include an “architectonic of the interlocking of the intersubjective lifeworld and objective world”.⁴⁶ But

43 TCA 1, 52.

44 TCA 1, 64.

45 TCA 1, 45.

46 HABERMAS 2003: 158.

several objections to such a view present themselves, and I shall consider some of them in the following section.

3. The roots of the 'presupposition' of the common objective world

In this section, I want to present an argument in three phases that places in question whether Habermas's linguistic-pragmatic theory can provide a philosophically satisfying analysis of our intersubjective world-experience.

3.1 The problem of the origin of the 'presupposition' of the common objective world as a problem of shared meaning

Habermas's reconstruction of the historical evolution of world-concepts from the 'mythical' to the 'modern' is open to criticism on a variety of fronts.⁴⁷ It is not clear that modern individuals relate to the world and reason about it in the fully differentiated and 'rationalized' ways that Habermas describes. Metaphor, narrative and symbol still play an integral—perhaps, ineliminable—role in the lives of us moderns.⁴⁸ Conversely, and more importantly for our purposes, the evolutionary account, even if it were convincing, does nothing to explain the presupposition of the common objective world as such. On the contrary, we can only assume that members of pre-modern societies, even those structured by a 'mythical' worldview, were able to speak with each other about the world and were able to problematize controversial truth claims.⁴⁹ If so, then the presupposition of the

47 See RASMUSSEN 1985, 133-44; JEFFREY 1991, 49-73; and, most recently, ALLEN 2016, 37-69.

48 An extended argument for this thesis has been provided by TAYLOR 2016.

49 Habermas never denies that the linguistic practices of assertion and justification are possible for speakers operating with pre-modern worldviews. He only claims that pre-modern worldviews lack world concepts that are sufficiently differentiated, leaving even participants who engage in an exchange of reasons incapable of reaching properly rational conclusions. See TCA 1, 71-4.

common objective world must already have been operative at the very beginning of the historical evolution that Habermas describes. Whatever 'learning process' has occurred with respect to our world-relation(s), it must have taken place on the basis of an *already existing* 'presupposition' of the objective world. No doubt it is true that our historical acquisition of formal world-concepts makes possible complex and refined forms of linguistic intersubjectivity, including those most demanding forms of intersubjectivity that are achieved in specialized modern discourses, e.g. science. But this does not resolve the question of the origin or status of the 'presupposition' of the common objective world.

To explain the genesis of 'presupposition' of the common objective, therefore, Habermas must refer to the origins of language and to the process of language learning. His primary resources for doing so are the accounts of G.H. Mead and Jean Piaget. From Mead's theory of symbolic interaction, he derives an account of how 'symbols' emerges from the capacity for 'gesture' common to several species of animal.⁵⁰ In Piaget's theory of cognitive development, he finds confirmation of the necessity of the three world-relations and of the necessity of a reflexive relation to one's interpretations of the world (decentration).⁵¹ However, Habermas's own claim that the presupposition of the objective world is 'forced' upon us by linguistic practice is undermined by Piaget's account of cognitive development, and it is questionable whether Mead can save it.

Habermas himself reports approvingly Piaget's view that «the growing child works out for himself» distinctions between internal and external worlds, and between social and physical objects.⁵² It is surprising that he makes this statement without noting the problems that it creates for his own historicizing account. Piaget's theory of cognitive development renders Habermas's own story about the evolution of worldviews redundant, since each child has within

50 TCA 2, 3-42.

51 TCA 1, 67-72.

52 TCA 1, 68.

themselves the capacity and the drive to generate the requisite world-concepts. It also brings into question the claim that the 'system of reference' to the common objective world is transmitted via the acquisition of language, since what the child 'works out for himself' he works out quite apart from having formal world-concepts taught to him via the learning of a language and the internalizing of a worldview.⁵³ In short, Piaget's theory opens the door to the thought that there might be a learning process *apart from the presuppositions imposed by linguistic practice* that occurs in the cognitive development of the child by means of which the grasp of the world as objective and shared is attained. Does Mead's contribution do anything to mitigate these threats to Habermas's controversial claim?

Mead's account of the emergence of significant symbols, through gesture to words, proceeds on the basis of an assumption that some non-human animals (i) already relate to objects as *meaningful* components of worlds, and (ii) already possess the capacity to share or communicate meanings to other members of the species through *gestures*. However, animals that make use of gestures do not 'internalize' gestures so as to be able to use them as conventional signs to designate the same referent, i.e. as part of a rule-governed linguistic practice. Animal gestures are not *shared* among conspecifics as symbols designating common objects. But only when signs are held in common in this way, i.e. when they are mutually understood to have the same meaning for each user, can *experiences* of the world be shared as such. The structures of meaning that already saturate the lives of non-linguistic animals thus remain merely 'objective', common to all members of the species but not shared.⁵⁴ The transition from gesture to symbol via the mechanism of 'taking the attitude of the other' is supposed to account for this all important difference.

Habermas finds fault with Mead's theory at a number of points, but it is clear that Mead's guiding problem is Habermas's guiding

53 Piaget does not deny that language acquisition is intertwined with other developmental achievements, but he does not attempt to explain the latter by the former. See PIAGET 1972.

54 TCA 2, 5-15.

problem, how to account for *shared meaning*, and that he accepts Mead's fundamental argument that the sharing of meaning requires conventional signs (symbols) that are used as part of a rule-governed practice.

[...] Two organisms find themselves in the same environment and mutually observe each other having similar responses to some *one* stimulus in their environment. But how are they supposed to be able to communicate to one another that they have in view the *same* stimulus—unless they already have the corresponding concept available to them? Yet they acquire this concept only by means of a criterion they apply in the same way—that is, by means of a symbol that has the same meaning for them both.⁵⁵

Hence, if the 'objectivity' of the world rests upon its being 'given' as 'the same for everyone', then objectivity is *only* attainable through the mediation of linguistic symbols. This is why it is plausible for Habermas to think that it is "linguistic practice—*especially the use of singular terms*—that forces us to pragmatically presuppose such a world shared by all."⁵⁶

Now, if it is true that all shared meaning is conditional upon shared signs, especially singular terms, then even 'the world' as a shared meaning must be linguistically mediated in the same fashion. But it is contestable that shared meanings occur only *within language* (3.2). What's more, it is not clear that everything that is meant by the 'presupposition' of the common objective world can be learned through acquiring linguistic competence (3.3).

⁵⁵ FKI, 118-9.

⁵⁶ FKI, 89.

3.2 The pre-linguistic competencies required for language learning

Phenomenologists such as Richard Cobb-Stevens and Dan Zahavi have questioned whether it makes sense to view our human capacities for making and sharing meanings as co-extensive with our capacities and activities as language users. They point to pre-linguistic cognitive competences that must be in place in order for socialization and language acquisition to occur as evidence that humans possess pre-linguistic abilities to identify objects and to interact successfully with others as co-subjects.

First, the process of language learning relies upon the ability of the learner to identify signs as significant elements in their environment.⁵⁷ This ability implies a competence in perception that is pre-linguistic but nonetheless *intentional* in the classical Husserlian sense.

[...] Recognition of sounds as repeatable tokens of a type is clearly a condition of taking things as signs, and therefore of acquiring linguistic competence. The discernment of phonemes, morphemes, and words within a sequence of sounds is just as intuitive a procedure as the discernment of any other this-such structure.⁵⁸

While it is no doubt true that we acquire more precise and sophisticated competencies *as perceivers* through the acquisition of linguistic terms and distinctions, this does not in any way signify that linguistic ability can be made to explain the 'intentional' performances of perception *as a whole*.

Second, the process of language learning, as the initiation into a social practice, implies a *communicative* form of social interaction that must also function extra- or pre-linguistically:

In order for me to be corrected, I must already be able to

⁵⁷ Admittedly, Habermas does attribute such capacities to pre-linguistic human agents in the accounts of language learning and socialization that he provides. But the significance of this attribution is left unexamined. See, for example, HABERMAS 1992, 27 n.18.

⁵⁸ COBB-STEVENS 1990, 45.

grasp the others as subjects and their statements as statements of correction—hence I must already be able to perform syntheses of identity. To put it another way, if one denies that the solitary subject can follow rules alone, then one must also deny that this subject can meaningfully interact with other subjects. It is precisely for this reason that doubting the possibility in principle of solitary rule-following ultimately leads to skepticism, for the subsequent introduction of intersubjectivity can by no means solve the problem.⁵⁹

In order to be taught, the pre-verbal human child must not only be capable of a relation to the world—or at least to objects and events within it, e.g. signs—but also capable of a *communicative* relation to others—e.g. as beings who are pointing out objects or features as intended for common attention.⁶⁰

We therefore have to reject the limitation of intersubjectivity to the linguistic level. Without in any way diminishing the importance and uniqueness of the forms of intersubjectivity made possible through linguistically mediated communication,⁶¹ we must acknowledge that the linguistic modes of intersubjectivity are necessarily a ‘founded’ strata from a phenomenological point of view. As Zahavi rightly states, this points to the continuing relevance of phenomenological studies into the structures of perception, action, and intersubjectivity that obtain pre- or extra-linguistically:

59 ZAHAVI 2001: 201.

60 The phenomenological bases of language acquisition are discussed in more detail in RUSSELL 2011, 57-8.

61 Elsewhere I have defended Habermas’s insights into the uniqueness of the form of intersubjectivity that emerges from mutual recognition of validity claims: «[...] in raising validity claims we are able to relate to ourselves, others and the world in exactly the same way as others—namely, to the extent that we achieve consensus regarding propositional claims. As such, it becomes comprehensible how we can have (and fail to have) genuine mutuality in our conception of the world and coordination in our purposive action in the world» (RUSSELL 2011, 55-6.)

Correctly understood, communication does not exist either prior to or apart from subjects; rather, it consists in an openness of subjects toward one another. Understanding communication will accordingly require an analysis of the pre-linguistic intersubjectivity of the subject, for the relation to others is exhibited in and across the registers of temporality, corporeality, intentionality, and emotionality. Phenomenology has performed such analyses, and for this reason phenomenology can also make it comprehensible how and why subjects can communicate linguistically, instead of simply presupposing such communication.⁶²

But even if we accept these arguments, as I believe we should, does this imply that human beings can possess a relation to *the objective world* as singular and shared apart from language? Is it still possible that it is first in the medium of language that we become capable of a relation to the world *as* a singular and shared reality, as Habermas maintains? Or are we able to attain a world-experience as singular and shared already in an extra- or pre-linguistic form? If the latter, then we would have reason to reject the assertion that the presupposition of the common objective world is 'forced' upon us by linguistic practice.

We have already alluded to evidence from Piaget's developmental psychology which suggests that as children we are capable of organizing experience into domains of reality along the lines traced by Habermas's three world-concepts without being 'forced' to do so by linguistic practice. But, in the final phase of the argument, I shall supplement this developmental perspective with a slightly more detailed reconsideration of Husserl's phenomenological analyses of the world, since his close analyses identify a series of 'learning moments' *essential* to the construction of the concept of the common objective world that cannot be precipitated by language or linguistic practice, or so I shall argue.

62 ZAHAVI 2001, 204.

3.3 Husserl's phenomenological contributions to a clarification of the origins of the 'presupposition' of the common objective world

Where Habermas speaks of a «pragmatic presupposition» of the objective world, Husserl speaks of a «general positing» of the world which characterizes «the natural attitude».⁶³ As in Habermas, the general positing of the world is not a judgment of any kind, let alone a judgment of (the world's) existence. (It thus respects Kant's transcendental distinction between 'world' and the 'innerworldly'.) The general positing is rather an "attitude" in which we typically find ourselves, a particular way in which we (passively) frame our experience *as* the experience of something 'there' in 'the' world.

Experience is the performance in which for me, the experiencer, experienced being 'is there,' and is there *as what* it is, with the whole content and the mode of being that experience itself, by the performances going on in its intentionality, attributes to it.⁶⁴

In order to reflect on the enigmatic status and structure of this natural attitude, Husserl's phenomenological *epochē* prescribes a suspending of the 'general positing' that is at its core.⁶⁵ This may seem paradoxical, yet it purportedly allows the phenomenologist to consider the structure of the general positing of the world itself. So, what does Husserl learn about world-experience by undertaking the *epochē*? I shall focus on just two key 'learning moments' in the life of subjectivity that Husserl reconstructs. The first derives from the individual's bodily experience of the horizontal structure of the world. The second derives from the experience of others.⁶⁶

(1) Perceptual experience is implicated in a system of relationships

⁶³ HUSSERL 1982, 56. (Hereafter: *Ideas I*)

⁶⁴ HUSSERL 1969, 233.

⁶⁵ *Ideas I*, 61.

⁶⁶ A more comprehensive and detailed discussion of Husserl's reflections on intersubjectivity and its relation to world-experience is offered by ZAHAVI 2001, 25-61.

between the body and its surroundings. It is in this nexus that the subject discovers the world as horizontal.

The physical thing is a thing belonging to the *surrounding world* even if it be an unseen physical thing, even if be a real possibility, unexperienced but experienceable, or perhaps experienceable, physical thing [...]. It is inherent in the essence that anything whatever which exists in reality but is not yet actually experienced can become given and that this means that the thing in question belongs to the undetermined but *determinable* horizon of my experiential actuality at the particular time.⁶⁷

The 'unthematically given horizon' here is not at all that transmitted by a cultural tradition (*pace* Habermas).⁶⁸ The experience of the 'world-horizon' relates to the bodily 'I-can', the ability of the subject to move in relation to objects and perceive an infinite variety of profiles of any singular thing. Similarly, the visibility and invisibility of the surrounding world of perceptible things is determined by one's position and capacities as a perceiving body. It is on these potentialities of the perceiving body and its relations to other 'bodies' in the environment (broadly conceived) that the sense of the world's structure as a unified 'horizontal' context of experience is based.

The spatiotemporal world-horizon that the perceiving subject is capable of discovering *apart from the presence of others* Husserl sometimes calls 'first nature'.⁶⁹ This is a world not yet endowed with

67 *Ideas I*, 106–7.

68 *TCA* 1, 82: «In the first case, the cultural tradition shared by a community is constitutive of the lifeworld which the individual member finds already interpreted. This intersubjectively shared *lifeworld* forms the background for communicative action. Thus phenomenologists like Alfred Schutz speak of the lifeworld as the unthematically given horizon within which participants in communication move in common when they refer thematically to something in the *world*».

69 Husserl 1969, 240: «My intrinsically first psychophysical Ego (we are referring here to constitutional strata, not temporal genesis), relative to whom the intrinsically first someone-else must be constituted, is, we see, a member of an *intrinsically first Nature*,

the full weight of reality or objectivity since it is not secured in its sense as mind-independent. At most, it represents a thin stratum of world-experience as it is given ordinarily in the natural attitude. Nonetheless, already at this level the world takes shape as a universal and inexhaustible horizon of possible experiences for the experiencer. It contains physical objects, already constituted as spatially and temporally coherent unities, within an infinite horizon of other such objects.⁷⁰ This give us, Husserl says, the 'form' of the world:

[...] An empty mist of obscure indeterminateness is populated with intuited possibilities or likelihoods; and only the 'form' of the world, precisely as 'the world', is predelineated. Moreover, my indeterminate surroundings are infinite, the misty and never fully determinable horizon is necessarily there.⁷¹

(2) If the first 'learning moment' teaches us that the primary 'form' of world-experience is *not* dependent upon intersubjectivity but rather on bodily experience, the second teaches us that the experience of the world *as* an objective and mind-independent reality *is* dependent upon intersubjectivity. (Here we circle back to the post-Kantian theme mentioned in the introduction to our discussion.)

Already at the level of 'first nature' physical objects are constituted as objectivities that *transcend* the acts of consciousness in which they are 'intended'. They are experienced, for instance, as perceivable in

which is not yet Objective Nature, a Nature the spatio-temporality of which is not yet Objective spatio-temporality: in other words, a Nature that does not yet have constitutional traits coming from an already-constituted someone else».

⁷⁰ In accordance with his method, Husserl makes no reference to the neuro-physiological capacities of the perceiver that make possible the performances or achievements he describes. It could be that, ontogenetically, a reliable sense of object permanence is acquired by the child at the same time as basic elements of theory of mind. Nonetheless, there is no reason to see his account as in conflict with the empirical description of these capacities and of their ontogenesis in human children, since it is a logical (inferential) reconstruction, not a developmental account, of meaning structures and their interconnections.

⁷¹ *Ideas I*, 52.

any number of distinct perceptions. But in each of these acts, the object is still essentially 'subjective' in the sense that it 'is' only ever as a correlate of *my* conscious acts; it is not yet secured as transcendent to *my* consciousness of it. On reflection, it becomes clear that in order to experience the world as we do in ordinary perception, i.e. as a contexture of entities that *transcend our consciousness of them*, something else must be added.⁷² This 'something' Husserl traces to intersubjectivity, the expectation that the entities I perceive are perceivable by others as well: «it is again experience that says: These physical things, this world, is utterly transcendent of me, of my own being. It is an 'Objective' world, experienceable and experienced as the same world by others too».⁷³

The surprising result of these reflections is the conclusion that our *perceptual* grasp of the ontological independence of the world is intelligible only upon our supposition that others perceive the same worldly entities as we do. It is for this reason and on this basis that actual corroboration and 'communalization' of experiences among subjects can serve the goal of confirming or disconfirming *what is the case*.

We may be forgiven for seeing here a simple repetition of Habermas's own point, namely that «To say that the world is 'objective' means that it is 'given' to us as 'the same for everyone'».⁷⁴ And this is true. However, the point of difference is that the anticipation of perceivability-for-others that characterizes our ordinary perceptual experience, for Husserl, is not an anticipation that we must be trained through linguistic practice to embrace. Certainly, our linguistic interactions encourage it, since they provide constant (if not universal) confirmation that our anticipations are well founded; and our linguistic capacities provide our anticipations of intersubjectivity

72 HUSSERL 1960, 105-8.

73 HUSSERL 1969, 233.

74 *FKI*, 89. Also: «The vertical view of the objective world is interconnected with the horizontal relationship among members of an intersubjectively shared lifeworld. The objectivity of the world and the intersubjectivity of communication mutually refer to one another» (HABERMAS 2003, 16).

with much more differentiated and sophisticated content. Nonetheless, we can anticipate sharing perceptual experiences with pre-verbal infants as well as animals, and they with us.⁷⁵ The level of intersubjectivity implicated here is again perceptual, not linguistic.

Habermas would likely object that, while this may be so, a mutual grasp of objects as ‘the same’ among plural observers requires symbolic mediation. But what matters in the first instance—for the purposes of establishing the ‘transcendent being’ of an object—is not whether it is given as ‘the same’ for a plurality of subjects (e.g. under a common description) but simply that the same object is ‘given’ to a plurality of subjects. An object may well be given differently to each subject; indeed, we should expect that a physical object, which only ever shows to perceivers one ‘aspect’ at a time, will be given differently. Nonetheless, that the object is identified as the same object in the domain of bodily action and perception by a plurality of agents establishes its ‘objectivity’ in the sense that it cannot be regarded as a merely subjective phenomenon.

How far away does this take us from Habermas’s own position? Habermas does not deny the possibility of Davidson-style ‘triangulation’, even though he does deny that this mechanism can explain the sharing of understandings.⁷⁶ And he himself acknowledges that the identification of real objects relies upon a practical involvement with them and cannot be sustained through shared linguistic references alone. In agreement with Hilary Putnam, he writes that: «To achieve secure semantic reference, it is important that speakers are, as agents, in context with the objects of everyday life and that they can put themselves in contact with them repeatedly».⁷⁷ (Indeed, this last admission is a sign of a gradual shift that has occurred in Habermas’s late thought. Since the mid-1990s, he has been increasingly willing to acknowledge the indispensable role that *experience* plays alongside *discourse* in intramundane ‘learning

75 Developmental psychologists see the phenomenon of ‘proto-declarative pointing’ in infants as an important marker of this. SIMON BARON-COHEN 1991, 233-51.

76 FKI, 112–20.

77 FKI, 89.

processes'.⁷⁸ In this respect, he has moved closer not only to the classical pragmatists, whose influence he has long acknowledged, but to the phenomenological tradition, which has ever since Husserl emphasized the foundational ('constitutive') role of the active-passive bodily subject.)

But Habermas has not noticed just how significantly the perceptual (or 'pragmatic') dimension of world-experience changes the game when it comes to the 'presupposition' of the common objective world. In its bodily experience, the acting-perceiving subject *learns practically* what the spatiotemporal horizontality of the world amounts to in a way that will become foundational, even paradigmatic, for its life as a meaning-making being. In its bodily experience of others, alongside whom ('strategically') and with whom ('communicatively') it interacts in the world, the acting-perceiving subject learns that the world is 'given' not merely to itself but also to others. In these two regards, at least, the 'form' and 'sense' of the world as it is 'presupposed' by communicative subjects is founded at least as much upon experiential learning processes as it is upon the constraints imposed by language games of reference, assertion, and justification.

4. Conclusion

Husserl's 'phenomenological' reflections are endorsed and incorporated into Habermas's own account of the 'lifeworld'.⁷⁹ But only in part. Habermas rejects those aspects of Husserl's philosophy that he takes to be bound up with the problematic presuppositions of the philosophy of consciousness. This leaves him with a revised lifeworld-concept that is «represented by a culturally transmitted and

78 See, in particular Habermas, «Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn (1996)» in HABERMAS 1998, 343-82; and Habermas, «From Kant to Hegel: On Robert Brandom's Pragmatic Philosophy of Language», in HABERMAS 2003, 131-73, esp. 150-5.

79 Habermas, «Actions, Speech Acts, Linguistically Mediated Interactions, and the Lifeworld (1988)», in HABERMAS 1998, 239-46.

linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns».⁸⁰ But the linguistic-pragmatic revision of the concept of lifeworld relegates to the dustbin precisely those aspects of Husserl's analysis that are essential for spelling out in more detail what Habermas himself identifies as the 'pragmatic presupposition' of the common objective world. That 'presupposition' consists, or so I have argued, in a complex background of practical knowledge and expectation that inheres in the 'natural attitude' that we take up as perceivers, actors, and thinkers—not just as speakers.

However, it seems to me that these 'phenomenological' contributions on the theme of world-experience should be seen as congenial from the standpoint of Habermas's own project. First and foremost, they underscore a basic claim that Habermas himself wants to advance: namely, that the presupposition of the common objective world is foundational for our basic concepts of truth, reason, objectivity and reality. At the same time, they do not signal a fall back into an objectifying and overly naturalizing account of human agency (the error Habermas accuses Davidson of committing), nor do they preclude the incorporation of Wittgensteinian or Heideggerian insights into the distinctive normativity and intersubjectivity of language and discourse.⁸¹

Furthermore, to acknowledge the extra-linguistic dimensions of *world experience* is not to suggest that fully-formed *world concepts* can be secured apart from language. There is no doubt that the acquisition of a *concept* of world makes possible a new form of world-relation. Indeed, I would defend the importance of formal world-concepts for making intelligible the distinction we draw between what is objectively correct and what is merely taken to be objectively correct.⁸²

80 TCA 2, 124.

81 TAYLOR 2016 provides a recent impressive case study in how phenomenological perspectives can be successfully married with a thoroughgoing hermeneutic approach. See especially the discussions of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and motor intentionality in Chapter 5.

82 LAFONT 2002 has argued for the importance of Habermas's formal concepts of world in this connection.

But these conceptual acquisitions *rest* upon the very 'presupposition' of the common objective world that Habermas identifies, a presupposition that cannot be explained by linguistic practice alone, for the reasons we have discussed. The intersubjectivity of world-experience must therefore be established and sustained at two different levels, at the level of bodily perception and action, and at the level of the mutual recognition of validity claims. Husserl recognized as much when he wrote that:

World-experience, as constitutive, signifies, not just my quite private experience, but *community-experience*: The world itself, according to its sense, is the one identical world, to which all of *us* necessarily have experiential access, and about which all of *us* by 'exchanging' our experiences—that is: by making them common—, can reach a common understanding; just as 'Objective' legitimation depends on mutual assent and criticism.⁸³

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83 HUSSERL 1969, 236.

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