Davidson and Husserl on the Social Origin of Our Concept of Objectivity[1]

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1. Introduction

In his later papers, Davidson repeatedly returns to the notion that our interaction with others may have a central role to play in the development of our cognitive abilities. Specifically, Davidson argued that without interacting linguistically with others, we could not recognize that we ourselves have thoughts. And understanding that we have thoughts is essential to grasping the concept of objectivity, since grasping the latter amounts to realizing that the world might not be the way we think it is. So, he concludes, our grasp of objectivity depends on our linguistic interaction with others.

Husserl arrived at a similar conclusion, but via a different line of reasoning. Husserl argued that in order to realize that objects exist independently of our experience of them, we need to realize that there are possible perspectives on those objects that we do not have. The way we come to realize this is by interacting with others. So, again, our concept of objectivity depends on our interaction with others.

Both arguments have been subjected to scrutiny, and found unsatisfying. Nevertheless, research in developmental psychology over the last 30 years has found a remarkable correlation that supports the views of Davidson and Husserl: that only given a significant amount of socialization, particularly only upon the acquisition of

the ability to construct propositional attitude attribution sentences (sentences like 'Sally believes that …'), can children grasp the appearance/reality distinction, or properly understand that others might have false beliefs (see Wellman et al 2001 for an overview). For example, until that time a child will not understand that an object that looks like a rock might actually be a sponge (Flavell et al. 1983), or understand that another child whose toy has been moved without her seeing it moved may have a false belief about its location (Wimmer/Perner 1983). Importantly, in deaf children raised by non-signing parents, these abilities are delayed—suggesting that the acquisition of the linguistic ability is playing a causal role (de Villiers 2005).

This apparent causal relationship has remained difficult to explain, although various proposals are on offer (see de Villiers 2007 for an overview). Here I suggest that by combining the more convincing aspects of Davidson and Husserl's approaches to this issue, an as yet unexplored possible explanation emerges. I will discuss first Davidson's view, then Husserl's, and in the last section how their ideas might be combined to shed light on the empirical results we have found.

2. Davidson's Argument

The overall form of Davidson's argument for the dependence of our concept of objectivity on our interactions with others, distilled from several discussions[2], seems to be the following:

D1: To grasp the concept of objectivity, I must grasp the concept of thought[3]

D2: To grasp the concept of thought, I must interact linguistically with others

D: Therefore, to grasp the concept of objectivity, I must interact linguistically with others

The first premise is defended in “Rational Animals” (1982). Davidson reasons as follows. To grasp the concept of objectivity, we need not only to have thoughts about chairs and tables and trees and the sky, but we also need to have thoughts about our thoughts about these things. To grasp the concept of objectivity, after all, just is to recognize that the way the world actually is might be different from the way we believe the world to be. If we do not understand that we have thoughts such as beliefs about the world, we cannot understand that the way the world is could be distinct from the way those beliefs represent it to be. You can’t think about a relation without thinking about the relata. And so, it is necessary to grasp the concept of thought in order to grasp the concept of objectivity.

We might worry that tying the concept of objectivity to the concept of thought over-intellectualizes it. Masrour (2013, 124) for example argues that instead we should take a grasp of objectivity to be constituted simply by our ability to have experiences that represent the world as remaining constant even though its appearance changes. This is found in the perceptual phenomenon of ‘size constancy’: as we approach a tree, its image in our visual field grows, but we represent the tree as remaining the same size. A natural assessment of such cases is to take the constant size of the tree as belonging to the world, and the changing size of its appearance as belonging to our mental lives alone.

Certainly, in our assessment of such experiences, we ordinarily appeal to our concept of objectivity. But we can also assess such experiences without appealing to objectivity. I can coherently suppose that the constant size I believe the tree possesses

as its image changes, and the changing size of its image, are both projections of my mind. Such experiences can after all be had in dreams – where objects may seem to us as having a size that remains the same even as their image in our dream grows or shrinks as we appear to approach them. But we do not assess our experiences in dreams as objective. Since we can undergo such experiences without applying the concept of objectivity, such experiences of ours cannot be constitutive of our grasp of objectivity. It therefore seems to me that Davidson is right to require our concept of objectivity to depend on a grasp of thought. The concept comes online not in first-order intentional states such as experiences of size-constancy, but in second-order intentional states—our thoughts about our thoughts.

Let's turn to Davidson's second premise. Davidson has two principal arguments for why grasping the concept of thought depends on linguistic interaction. After Bridges (2006) I will call these the argument from object-directedness, and the argument from error.

The first argument is that if I am to grasp the concept of thought, I need to understand that my thoughts are directed at specific objects. Thoughts are individuated in part, after all, in terms of the objects they are directed at. A thought about an apple, that it is tasty, is not the same as a thought about a banana, that it is tasty. What distinguishes the two is that one is about an apple, and the other about a banana. If you don't get that, you don't understand what thoughts are. So how do we come to recognize that our thoughts are directed at particular objects?

The idea that we need to interact with others to realize that our thoughts are directed at particular objects is introduced by considering whether we could understand this object-directedness without any interaction. Take Pavlov's dog. We

all suppose that Pavlov's dog salivates in response to the ringing of a bell. But can we be sure that this is what he is responding to?

> [A]s psychologists have noticed, there is a problem about the stimulus. In the case of the dog, why say the stimulus is the ringing of the bell? Why couldn't it be the vibration of the air close to the ears of the dog—or even the stimulation of its nerve endings? Certainly if the air were made to vibrate, in the same way the bell makes it vibrate, it would make no difference to the behavior of the dog. And if the right nerve endings were activated in the right way, there would still be no difference (Davidson, 1992, 117)

Davidson insists that in fact there is nothing in the dog's behavior taken on its own to allow us to decide which is the right answer. Instead, what singles out the bell rather than any of the other stimuli is our response to the dog:

> What explains the fact that it seems so natural to say the dog is responding to the bell, the child to tables? It seems natural to us because it is natural—to us. Just as the dog and the child respond in similar ways to certain stimuli, so do we. *It is we* who find it natural to group together the various salivations of the dog; and the events in the world that we effortlessly notice and group together that are causally linked to the dog's behavior are ringings of the bell (ibid., my emphasis).

What Davidson is proposing is that because the only thing that identifies the bell-ringing as the object of the dog's reaction is *us*, rather than something about the dog's behavior, then if there is a fact of the matter what the dog is responding to, it is our interpretation that is constitutive of that fact. Generalizing this view to humans, Davidson holds that it is only in the context of interpretations by others that there is any fact about which object a thought is about – our interpretation of each others' behavior in terms of object-directed thought is constitutive of that behavior being guided by object-directed thoughts.

Unfortunately the argument is extremely problematic. First, it's not clear why

producing interpretable object-directed actions or utterances is required to have object-directed thoughts. That is, even if an interpreter is required for actions like salivating or speaking to have an object, it's not clear why object-directed thought could not take place prior or independently of interpretable behavior. Many thoughts have no behavioral output—such as armchair ruminations on how to fix the washing machine that come to nothing. Surely, however, those thoughts have objects.

But let's grant that interpretable behavior is required for object-directed thoughts, and even that only given an observer's interpretation do those thoughts have objects. Now we need to ask how this process of interpretation could endow us with the concept of object-directedness. And here we are confronted with a worrying circularity—the process seems to require the very concept that it is supposed to endow us with (Bridges, 2006, 16; Pagin, 2001, 8). Consider the case of two people interpreting each other's linguistic reactions to a common stimulus: each judges of the other that his linguistic output refers to some object of joint attention—a table, for example. But what does this judging amount to? It would appear to amount to each individual attributing a thought about the table to the other. But if that's true, then each individual must already know what thoughts are, and therefore what object-directedness is, to engage in the 'triangulation' process in the first place. And if that's true, then the very idea of object-directedness could not be conferred upon the actors by the interaction.

Next let's consider the argument from error. Here, the strategy begins in the same way: by identifying an essential feature of thoughts, and urging that the only way we can come to understand that feature is by interacting with others. This time, the essential feature is the fallibility of propositional thought. If we are to grasp the concept of objectivity—that the world might not be as our thoughts represent it to

be—we must understand that our thoughts have contents that can be true or false. We must also understand that the truth of these contents—which we call propositions—is independent of whether we believe them or not. That's just what it is for something to be true or false—not to be believed to be true or false, but to have a truth-value independently of what anyone believes:

> Propositional thought is objective in the sense that it has a content that is true or false independent of the existence of the thought or the thinker. (Davidson, 1997, 129)

If we can grasp this, we must understand what error is, or what false beliefs are. So where do we get the idea of error? For this, Davidson takes us back to triangulation:

> The triangle I have described stands for the simplest interpersonal situation. In it two (or more) creatures each correlate their own reactions to external phenomena with the reactions of the other. Once these correlations are set up, each creature is in a position to expect the external phenomenon when it perceives the associated reaction of the other. What introduces the possibility of error is the occasional failure of the expectation; the reactions do not correlate. (…) if this is right then thought as well as language is necessarily social. (Davidson, 1997, 129)

Unfortunately, once again the argument is obscure. Why does seeing someone else's linguistic reactions failing to match my own introduce to me the idea of error? Two options seem available. First, if the speaker says 'gavagai' a thousand times in the presence of rabbits, I might decide that by 'gavagai' she means *rabbit*. If she then uses the term when no rabbits are around, I might think 'aha, she has a false belief that there is a rabbit present!' But the problem here is that this once again presupposes the concept of false belief, rather than endows us with it. If we don't already know what false beliefs are, how can we use them to explain the observed discrepancy?

Alternatively, perhaps the process is supposed to draw our attention to *our own* errors. If I earlier thought the speaker will only say 'gavagai' when rabbits are around, and now realize that this isn't true, then perhaps I can notice that I had a false belief myself. But if that's all that's required to hit on the idea of false beliefs, then why do I have to interact with someone else? I can discover my own false beliefs all by myself: I expect all red berries to taste sweet, and then discover a sour one; I expect this branch to hold my weight but it breaks when I stand on it, etc. If my expectations simply failing to be met were enough to prompt in me the idea of false beliefs, I should be able to discover this without interacting with anyone (Lepore/Ludwig 2005, 402).

The state of Davidson's discussion of the concept of objectivity seems to me, therefore, to be as follows. We have been given a good reason to think that without understanding what thoughts are, we couldn't grasp the concept of objectivity. And we have been given two important points about thought. First, we can't know what thoughts are unless we realize that thoughts are directed at objects. Second, we can't know what thoughts are unless we understand that the propositions we entertain in thought are in an important sense independent of us—they can be true or false whether we believe them or not, or even think about them. Where the trail runs cold is at the point where these claims are supposed to depend on our interactions with other speakers, linguistic or otherwise. Davidson leaves us, then, without a satisfactory answer to the question 'why does my recognition that the propositions I entertain are independent from me depend on interaction with others'. However, Husserl has an alternative approach that may help to make the connection.

3. Husserl's Argument

Husserl introduces an argument in the *Cartesian Meditations* (CM) that ties our concept of objectivity to our interaction with others. The overall form of Husserl's argument, I suggest, is the following:

H1: To grasp the concept of objectivity, I must recognize that there are current possible perspectives on the world that I do not have

H2: To recognize that there are current possible perspectives on the world that I do not have, I must interact with others

H: To grasp the concept of objectivity, I must interact with others

I will now try to fill out the argument, before considering in the next section how it might connect with the points Davidson has raised.

Husserl's discussion opens by introducing to us the essential puzzle raised by the concept of objectivity: how can an individual thinker come up with the idea of a world that is independent of his own experiences, when all he has available to him to construct that concept are his own experiences?[4] The answer, Husserl tells us, comes from our postulation of the experiences of others. This postulation comes about when we encounter other minds.

The key element of Husserl's account of our encounter with other minds is something he calls 'appresentation'. Appresentation is that aspect of experience whereby features of the world not currently visible to us are included in our experience of the things we encounter. For example, when we look at an apple, we experience it as having a front and rear side out of view: "An appresentation occurs even in external experience, since the strictly seen front of a physical thing always and necessarily appresents a rear aspect" (CM, § 49). When we realize that other

minds inhabit our world, however, our experience includes another kind of appresentation. We imagine the world not only as it would look to us if we changed position, but as it looks from the perspective of the other mind. Husserl thinks this latter kind of appresentation differs in various ways from the first kind, and these differences are key to our acquisition of the concept of objectivity.

The first difference concerns our access to the content that is appresented. What is appresented in our experience of ordinary objects is something we can 'verify': "Appresentation of [the first] sort involves the possibility of verification by a corresponding fulfilling presentation (the back becomes the front)" (ibid.). To return to the apple, let's suppose that when I see it the first side is presented to me, and the far side is appresented in my experience—as a side that would come into view were I to change position. I can now verify whether the rear side is as I have appresented it by walking around to the other side and taking a look.

But Husserl tells us that I cannot similarly verify what I have appresented of the perspective of another. Indeed he says that the possibility of such verification can be 'excluded a priori'. Why is this? Husserl's discussion is a little elliptical here, but there is a straightforward reason why this might be the case, which he may have had in mind. Although we generally take it for granted that the world looks more or less the same to others as it does to us, it is always possible that it does not, as Locke's inverted spectrum argument famously illustrates (Locke 1689/1975, II, xxxii, 15). For all I know, when others see surfaces we both call 'red', they experience the visual quality I experience when I see surfaces we call 'blue', and vice versa. As a result, we cannot with certainty verify that the world looks to another just as we expect it to, simply by standing in their position. All that we can do is to see how the world looks to *us*, when we stand in the position of the other.

The second difference is that although the first kind of appresentation involves postulating experiences that I could myself have in the future, there is a sense in which I cannot have the experiences of someone else:

> Neither the other Ego, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything else belonging to his own essence, becomes given in our experience originally. If it were, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same. (ibid.)

I think the claim here is that at least insofar as I recognize that someone else has a perspective distinct from my own, I am also recognizing that they are having a token experience I cannot have. I could have a type-identical experience in the future, of course, but I cannot have a token experience that occurs concurrently with and is distinct from my own experience, any more than I can be somewhere that I am not. Recognizing experiences in others that I do not have brings with it, then, the recognition of the existence of token experiences that I cannot have.

So how does this contribute to our acquisition of the concept of objectivity? Husserl insists the recognition of another perspective on the world (the 'other Ego') causes my experience of the world to change into an experience of an objective world:

> [It] becomes the appearance of an objective world, as the identical world for everyone, myself included (…) The other Ego makes constitutionally possible (…) an objective nature, and a whole objective world (CM, § 49)

Why would this be the case? The answer can be seen in the contrast Husserl makes between the two kinds of appresentation. In a nutshell, my experience of the world when it includes only the first kind of appresentation is consistent with solipsism, but

when the second kind of appresentation is introduced, I can no longer coherently be a solipsist.

Consider again the first kind. Here, we represent the world such that if we moved our bodies into different positions, it would change its appearance: if I walk around the apple, my experience will change. But this view of the world is consistent with solipsism. It is perfectly coherent for me to suppose *both* that if I move in such and such a way, my experience will change, *and* that there is nothing more to the world than my experiences. All that we need to suppose is that the projected changes in my experience are future possibilities that depend on my acting to come about (*pace* Zahavi 1997)[5]. I can believe that when I move my body, my future experience will change, without also believing that the world exists independently of those experiences.

However, once my view of the world includes the posited current experience of another, it is no longer coherent for me to suppose that the world might not go beyond my own experiences. These are not posited future possible experiences that depend on my doing something to come about—they are posited current experiences that exist without my undergoing them, and that therefore cannot depend on me. And I cannot coherently believe both that a token experience of an apple exists that does not depend on me, and that the apple is reducible to my experience of it. Once I recognize that there are current perspectives on the world that I do not have, therefore, I cannot coherently be a solipsist. Until that point, however, I can—so it would seem to be necessary for me to recognize these possibilities to be *forced* to reject solipsism.

What about premise 2? Husserl seems to insist that actual interactions with other persons are necessary for our recognition of the possibility of these perspectives. But why is that necessary? Certainly, other people have perspectives that I do not

have. But why shouldn't it occur to me all on my own that there are current possible perspectives on the world that I do not have, for example perspectives I could have had if I were standing somewhere else, but do not have because of where I am standing?

It is not clear from Husserl's texts what his answer to this might be. But the question invites us to consider what the difference is between my postulating an actual perspective in another observer I have encountered, and postulating a possible perspective I could have had if I were standing somewhere else right now. The salient difference is that the latter requires counterfactual reasoning—it requires me to think about how things would look were I standing somewhere I am not actually standing. But counterfactual reasoning itself already requires the concept of objectivity – understanding that the way the world is can be distinct from the way it could have been. If that's right, then we could not acquire the concept of objectivity by engaging in counterfactual reasoning, since such reasoning will require us already to have the concept. For what it's worth, empirical evidence gives fairly strong support to the claim that we do not use counterfactual reasoning to acquire the concept of objectivity, since on many accounts counterfactual reasoning only emerges well after 4,5 years, that is, well after the time at which we grasp the appearance-reality distinction or pass the false-belief task (Beck et al. 2013).

If recognizing the possibility of current perspectives on the world I do not have is required to grasp the concept of objectivity, then, it will only be through recognizing *actual* perspectives on the world that I do not have that I could grasp the concept of objectivity. And the only source of evidence for such actual perspectives will be in encounters with others.

With that rationale for premise 2, we have a reconstruction of what may have been Husserl's thinking: to recognize that the objects we encounter go beyond our experience, we need to recognize that there are current possible perspectives on those objects that we do not have; and to recognize *that* we must encounter others with actual perspectives that we don't have.

But has this given us the concept of objectivity? Recall Davidson's first point: what is required for the concept of objectivity is grasping the notion of thought, and the possible mismatch between how my thoughts represent the world and how it really is. But Husserl's story gets us only as far as postulating alternative *visual* perspectives on concrete objects—objects of joint visual attention, for example. This kind of visual perspective-taking is accomplished by children at around 3 years of age, well before they are able to pass the false-belief test or the appearance/reality tests (Moll/Meltzoff 2011). It would seem that the story Husserl tells is not sufficient, therefore, to get us the concept of objectivity. But perhaps Husserl's insights can be applied to Davidson's, as I explore next.

4. A Husserl-Davidson Argument

Let's lay out the arguments as they appear so far. Davidson's persuasive claim is that in order to grasp the concept of objectivity, I must recognize that what I believe needn't be true—that whether *it's raining* is true is independent of whether I believe it's true, and that it could be true that *grass is green* even if I believe it's false. What this amounts to is realizing that the propositions I take attitudes to are in an important sense independent from me: they can be true even if I believe they are false, they can

be true or false, indeed, independently of whether I think about them or not. Let's call this Davidson's Thesis:

DT: In order to grasp the concept of objectivity, I must recognize that the propositions I entertain in thought are independent from me

Husserl's discussion does not provide us with a fully satisfying account of the concept of objectivity, since he does not address the essential belief-truth contrast. Rather, the compelling aspect of Husserl's discussion is the claim that to recognize the independence of objects from my experience of them, I need to recognize the existence of possible perspectives on the those objects that I don't have, and for that I need to encounter others with actual perspectives that I don't have. This claim of Husserl's, if true, can be generalized to apply to any object whatsoever. We can call this Husserl's Thesis:

HT: For any X, in order to recognize that X is independent from me, I must recognize that there are actual perspectives on X that I do not have

We can see now that Husserl may now have provided the premise that was missing from Davidson's argument. The question Davidson left us hanging on is 'why does my recognition that the propositions I entertain are independent from me depend on interacting with others?' And Husserl has provided us with an answer. Supposing it is the case that for any X, to recognize that X is independent of my perspective I must recognize that there are actual perspectives on X that I do not have, then to recognize

that the propositions I entertain in thought are independent from me, I must recognize that there are actual perspectives on those propositions that I do not have.

But what is an actual perspective on a proposition that I do not have? Simply the attitude of another person to a proposition that I believe is true, that it is false, or vice versa. And just as in the case of concrete objects considered above, recognizing that others have perspectives on the propositions I entertain that I do not have will force me to recognize that these propositions are not reducible to my perspective on them, and hence are not reducible to the attitude I take to them. With that comes the possibility that these propositions have properties that go beyond what I take them to have—including being potentially true when I take them to be false, and vice versa.

That gives us a fairly abstract account of what it might take to recognize the independence from us of the propositions we entertain in thought. But we now need to ask, in practical terms, how it is that we might recognize that another has an attitude to a proposition that is distinct from our own. The mechanism by which we recognize that another has a visual perspective on an object that we do not have is known as 'joint attention', and its role in our acquisition of the recognition of conflicting perspectives on objects around us is well studied (Tomasello 2014, 33–76). In joint attention to an object, each party attends to the object, recognizes that the other is attending to the same object, and each attends to the reactions of the other. In this way we come to recognize that others don't always react to these objects as we expect them to (reacting with surprise to what seems like a familiar object to us, for example), and that they can have distinct perspectives on those objects to our own (they can see a side of the object we can't, for example). But this, again, is at the level of visual perspective-taking. How are we supposed to engage in joint attention to a proposition? A proposition is an abstract object. We cannot see, hear, or smell a

proposition. Due to their abstract nature, indeed, several theorists have suggested that in order to have thoughts about propositions, we may need language (Clark 1998; Bermúdez 2003). By thinking of a proposition as the content of a sentence, they have suggested, we are given a 'mode of presentation' for the proposition: a way of thinking about it in concrete terms that would be unavailable without language, which in turn makes it possible for us to think about the propositional contents of our thoughts. But whatever about the claim that we need language to *think* about propositions, it is surely all the more plausible to suppose that the only way that we can engage in *joint attention* to a proposition with another is via language. How else, after all, are we to evaluate other people's reactions to the very propositions that we are entertaining in thought? We need some means by which we can observe the reaction of another to a proposition. The obvious facilitator for such joint attention to propositions is language—allowing us to observe the reactions of others to the propositions we assert. Not just any language, however, but a language that contains the expressive power to represent conflicting attitudes to propositions, or, propositional attitude attribution sentences—in which Sally can say, for example, 'I believe that it's raining', while Anne can say 'not me—I don't believe that'. With these linguistic resources, we can directly evaluate each other's attitudes to the propositions we are thinking about, and come to recognize that others may have distinct attitudes to those propositions to our own. That is, the very linguistic resources that have been found to correlate with the ability to pass the false-belief tests, and the appearance/reality tests.

We now have a complete 'Husserl-Davidson' argument:

HD1: In order to grasp the concept of objectivity, I must recognize that the propositions I entertain in thought are independent from me

HD2: In order to recognize that the propositions I entertain are independent from me, I must recognize that there are actual attitudes to those propositions that I do not have

HD3: In order to recognize that there are actual attitudes to those propositions that I do not have, I must interact with others linguistically

HD: In order to grasp the concept of objectivity, I must interact with others linguistically

Davidson has given us a rationalization for premise 1. Husserl has given us a rationalization for premise 2. And premise 3 seems highly plausible given the abstract nature of propositions and what it might take to engage in joint attention to them.

The story told here ties together the three phenomena the apparent causal interrelation of which developmental psychology is in need of an explanation: passing the appearance-reality task, passing the false belief task, and the mastery of propositional-attitude attribution sentences. It ties the latter two together, since on this account it is necessary to have the linguistic resources required to recognize that others have distinct attitudes to the propositions we entertain in thought in order to recognize the independence of those propositions from our attitude to them, and hence the possibility that our beliefs about them may be false. And it ties the passing of the false-belief task and the appearance/reality task together, by highlighting that it is necessary to understand that we have beliefs that can be false in order to understand that appearance and reality might be distinct. Whether or not this will turn out to be the true story of our acquisition of the concept of objectivity, it would, if true, go

some way toward explaining the developmental data we have; and it may also serve to highlight the relevance of Davidson and Husserl's thoughts to these puzzles.

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[2] Davidson 1982, 1984, 1991, 1992, 1997.

[3] Davidson also defends the converse—that the concept of objectivity is required for us to have the concept of thought, as the concepts of thought and objectivity are interdependent in Davidson's view.

[4] Or, in Husserl's inimitable prose, the challenge is to explain how the objective world "can occur as experience and become verified as evidence relating to an actual existent with an explicatable essence of its own, which is not *my* own essence and has no place as a constituent part thereof, though it nevertheless can acquire sense and verification only in my essence" (CM, § 48).

[5] Zahavi (1997) argues that the content of these apperceptions could not be simply future expectations, since in ordinary experience we represent objects as having both front and rear sides at the same time. This is only true, however, if 'we' are adults who already have a grasp of the concept of objectivity. It needn't be the case that infants who have not yet grasped the concept of objectivity understand that objects around them afford multiple perspectives at the same time—indeed, it must be a part of a Husserlian developmental theory that they don't.