From the time of his origin in ancient Greece the questions that Western man has put to his world and to himself have been dominated by essentially two interrogatives: what and why. As a consequence he knows better than anyone else what there is and why what there is is. Francis Bacon proudly proclaimed the motivation behind this enterprise when he equated knowledge with power. That this is so, that Western man knows and that in his knowledge he is powerful, we need look no further than yesterday. At exactly two thirteen in the afternoon seven billion pounds of thrust was put behind a rocket thirty stories high, blasting it to the moon some several hundred thousand miles away. Husserl was one of the first philosophers to take a step back and ask after the meaning of all this. In this easy assimilation of knowledge to technique Husserl diagnosed the malaise of his culture, calling it a veritable crisis. Husserl knew, like everyone else, that there was more to reality than what is disclosed through the project of the scientific enterprise, and that man could not longer afford to ignore it. Thus the task of his life became the exposition and articulation of this "what more" with a view to giving it legitimate philosophical status. Titling it the Lebenswelt, or the life-world, it is easy to see the optimistic character of the expectations Husserl had for his newly proclaimed realm of discourse and interrogation.

In this paper we would like to make the life-world thematic in terms of a threefold, inter-related articulation. First, we will
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advance the thesis that the life-world is for Husserl an operative rather than a thematic concept. Then we will argue that that to which the title life-world refers and illuminates, as essentially horizontal, corresponds structurally to the operative character of the life-world concept. And finally, we wish to weld together these first two theses in a third which holds that knowledge of the life-world, and therefore any knowledge, entails something like an existential a priori, in the form of a more or less blind commitment.

LIFE-WORLD IS AN OPERATIVE CONCEPT

We begin with our first thesis that the life-world functions as an operative instead of a thematic concept. This claim, together with its exposition, is taken directly from an essay of Natanson on the Lebenswelt. The distinction between operative and thematic concepts is one which Natanson has adopted from Fink and carries the following characterization. Constituting the bulk of any thinker's conceptual apparatus are those concepts to which he draws attention through their elaboration and devolution. These are the concepts which he makes thematic, and they may be so entitled. However, in focusing his attention on certain concepts by calling them into question and turning them over to see their hidden implications, the thinker must leave some concepts unquestioned in order that he might have a place to stand. Neurath provides us with an illuminating image of the situation we are speaking about. Any thinkers conceptual system bears him like a ship at sea. If it needs repair, and it always does, the thinker as captain of his ship cannot simply dismantle and rebuild his entire ship, lest he and his ship go to the bottom together. So he is left with no choice but to leave part of the ship untampered in order to work upon the part he would repair and improve. There is no way in which the captain can start from scratch to rebuild his ship according to an ideal plan; to remain afloat he must content himself with a patch-work effort, aesthetically unappealing as this may be. Thus, the thinker must leave certain of his concepts unexamined that he may address his attention to others. He must, in other words, assume implicitly the very concepts which illuminate the material he is making explicit.