

**The Science of Qualitative Research:  
Towards a Historical Ontology**

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“It is not easy to say something new; it is not enough for us to open our eyes, to pay attention, to be aware, for new objects suddenly to light up and emerge out of the ground”

Michel Foucault, *The archeology of knowledge*, 1969 / 1972, pp. 44-45

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### Introduction

This is an exciting time to be writing about the character of inquiry in social science, for there is a growing interest in and openness to new forms of inquiry. Researchers throughout the social sciences are increasingly working with qualitative data – interview transcripts, verbal reports, videos of social interactions, drawings and notes – whether they view these as “soft data” (Ericsson & Simon, 1984), “messy data” (Chi, 1997, p. 271) or “the ‘good stuff’ of social science” (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 769). Research projects that include such empirical material are increasingly popular. In addition to self-styled “qualitative researchers,” investigators in the learning sciences, in developmental psychology, in cultural psychology, even in survey research, and in many other areas have turned to non-quantitative materials and are exploring ways to collect, analyze, and draw conclusions from it.

At the same time a strong backlash has developed against this kind of inquiry. In the United States, as in England and Australia, the funding priorities of government agencies emphasize “evidence based” research. We are told repeatedly that there is a “gold standard” to research in the social sciences, the randomized clinical trial. Other kinds of research – typically cast as naturalistic, observational, and descriptive – are viewed as mere dross in comparison, good only for generating hypotheses, not for testing them. They are seen as lacking the rigor necessary for truly scientific research, and as failing to offer practical solutions to pressing problems. Clinical trials, in contrast, are seen as relevant because they test treatments and interventions, and as rigorous because they involve direct manipulation, objective measurement and statistical testing of hypotheses. Any suggestion that there might be inquiry that follows a logic of inquiry different from that of traditional experimental research is dismissed. The possibility that complex human phenomena might require a kind of investigation that traces them in time and space and explores how they are constituted is not considered.

In the 1980s there was general agreement that the “paradigm wars” had ended (Gage, 1989). For many, the correct way to proceed seemed to be with “mixed methods” which combined qualitative



techniques with aspects of traditional experimental design and quantification. Arguments against mixing “qual” and “quant” are often dismissed as an unnecessarily belligerent perpetuation of the conflict. But now the “Science Wars” are being fought over much the same territory (Howe, 2005; Lather, 2004). It seems we need to revisit the arguments against applying a naïve model of the natural sciences to human phenomena. Today we are in a much stronger position than at any time in the past to articulate the logic of a program of research that explores a more fundamental level of phenomena than can be studied using clinical trials. Important theoretical and empirical work across the social sciences but also in the humanities, in history, philosophy, linguistics and literary theory, now enable us to define a program of investigation that is focused on “constitution,” a term I shall define in a moment.

Researchers must bear some responsibility for the evidence-based movement. There is, for example, a bewildering variety of types of qualitative research. For some this is a potpourri to be savored and celebrated, but for others social science research has “become unhelpfully fragmented and incoherent,” divided into “specialist domains... that are too often treated in isolation” (Atkinson, 2005). This plurality makes it difficult to establish criteria for evaluating research or design curricula for teaching research methods. It creates the impression that non-experimental research cannot provide genuine knowledge. The enormous number of *How To* books currently published is one indication of the profusion of approaches to social scientific research, and also of the huge appetite for guidance. But at the same time the sheer number suggests that this appetite isn’t satisfied. Readers find themselves left with fundamental confusions and buy book after book in a search for clarification.

In the face of all this the student who wants to learn how to do qualitative research, or the more experienced researcher who wants to try something new, or something better, could be forgiven for being confused. This book is an attempt to bring some clarity. It is not a book on how to do qualitative research – it is not a *How To* book. Instead it raises the question that must come first: *why* are we doing qualitative research? Once we have figured out why we are doing research we will have much more clarity about how research should be conducted, because in any activity we can’t really know what to

do if we don't know what we're aiming for. Only when we are clear about *what* we are doing and *why* can we figure out *how* to do it well.

Qualitative research is, in my view, frequently misunderstood. It is often equated with any kind of investigation that doesn't use numbers, but we will discover that quantification has its place, in the *descriptive* phase of qualitative inquiry. It is often defined as the objective study of personal experience, but we will see that such a view, in, for example, empirical phenomenology, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and grounded theory, gets helplessly tangled in the opposition of subjectivity and objectivity. Finally, qualitative research is often seen as the ethnographic study of culture and intersubjectivity, but here the problem turns out to be the uneasy combination of participation and observation.

How then should we understand qualitative research? It seems to me that fundamental mistakes are made today in many approaches to qualitative inquiry, and that important opportunities are being missed. Researchers are not asking the right questions. We are not asking sufficiently difficult or interesting questions – we are not aiming high enough. At the same time we are not digging deep enough; we are not questioning our basic assumptions about human beings and the world in which we live, our assumptions about knowledge and reality. I have been practicing and teaching qualitative research for almost thirty years, working to make it accessible and comprehensible, and while it is gratifying to see this kind of research becoming increasingly widespread, at times I find myself frustrated that the potential of qualitative research is not being realized. This potential is, I believe, profound. Attention to human forms of life, to the subtle details of people's talk and action, to human bodies in material surroundings, can open our eyes to unnoticed aspects of human life and learning, to unexplored characteristics of the relationship between humans and the world we inhabit, and to unsuspected ways in which we could improve our lives on this planet.

I will try to demonstrate this potential by introducing the reader to debates that often do not cross the boundaries between disciplines, and to historical, conceptual and ethical aspects of qualitative research that have frequently been forgotten or ignored. I will examine the central

practices of qualitative research – interviewing, ethnographic fieldwork, analysis of interaction – in order to tease out the assumptions embedded in these practices and suggest new ways to think about, collect and analyze qualitative material. I will suggest new kinds of questions we should set out to answer, and outline the general form of a program of qualitative inquiry. Qualitative research is sometimes viewed merely as a set of techniques – a toolbox of procedures for the analysis of qualitative materials – but in my view it is something much more important, the basis for a radical reconceptualization of the social sciences as forms of inquiry in which we work to transform our forms of life.

An important part of this reconceptualization is a new sense of who we are. Humans are products of both natural evolution and history. As products of evolution we are material beings, one kind of biological creature among many others, participants in a complex planetary ecological system. The longstanding belief that we are somehow not only different from but also better than other animals has been complicit in an attitude towards our planet as merely a vast repository of raw materials, resources which we can exploit for profit. We are witnessing the dire consequences of this attitude, and running up against the limits of this lifestyle of ‘development.’ A change in attitude will require a change in our understanding of our place in nature and our responsibilities as stewards of the planet, a role which we have forced upon ourselves as a consequence of our efforts to satisfy a craving for power over nature.

As products of history – of cultural evolution – we are cultural beings, and in this regard we *do* differ from other living creatures. We share 99.5% of the genetic material of the Neanderthals who lived 30,000 years ago, but our lives are 100% different. We can shape our environment in ways that Neanderthals never dreamed of and that other animals are unable to compete with, and our environments have changed us in return. Our continuing naïve beliefs in ‘human nature’ fly in the face of important cultural differences and the deep penetration of our being by cultural practices, and they serve to justify our dangerous tendency to demonize people whose way of life is different. Each human group tends to presume that it is internally homogeneous and identical and that the only significant differences are those that distinguish it from others. This attitude fosters a simplistic conception of

good and evil and a destructive impulse to 'civilize' other peoples and impose our values on them. A change in this attitude will require the recognition that humans are not identical, that there is no universal mental apparatus and that different traditions, customs and ways of living have created a variety of ways of living: ways of thinking, seeing, and being.

Thirty years ago, proponents of qualitative research (e.g., Dalmayr & McCarthy, 1977; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979) wrote of a crisis in the social sciences which they linked to an underlying human crisis – the lack of meaning which the failure of Enlightenment rationality had exposed. In the eighteenth century thinkers such as the Austrian philosopher Immanuel Kant – still sometimes described as the most influential philosopher ever – proclaimed the existence of a universal capacity for reason, the same for all cultures and all times, which could provide an objective foundation for knowledge, morality, and ethics. Every book needs a villain, and mine will be Kant. The model of human beings which he defined has caused many more problems than it solved. It is a model in which each individual constructs personal and private representations of the world around them. It separates people from one another, divides mind from world, value from fact, and knowledge from ethics. It is a big mistake!

Today we are facing a crisis more profound than a loss of meaning, the crisis of mounting environmental damage and escalating war between civilizations. It would be naïve to suppose that qualitative research alone could provide a solution to world-wide crises. But we can at least ask that qualitative inquiry counter, rather than bolstering, the attitude of seeking to dominate not only other peoples but the planet as a whole. I will argue that qualitative research has the potential to change our attitude of domination because it is sensitive to human forms of life in a way which traditional research cannot. It can draw upon powerful new conceptions of human rationality, alternatives to Kant's model. In this book I will trace a line of theoretical and empirical work which has developed the proposal that the basis for rationality and order of all kinds is the hands-on know-how, the embodied, practical and social activity, of people in a form of life. This line of work leads to new ways of conceptualizing social inquiry.

It might seem strange to link a form of research to a moral imperative. Yet traditional social science has just this kind of linkage, although it is disguised. As we shall see, the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas (1971) has argued that scientific knowledge is never disinterested and that the sciences, both natural and social, are generally motivated by a “technical” interest, an interest in fostering our instrumental action in the world and increasing our mastery of our planet. To some degree qualitative research has succeeded in adopting a different attitude, one which Habermas calls (rather misleadingly) a “practical” interest: an interest in understanding other people. This is certainly an admirable goal, but one of the points I will make in this book is that too often this understanding has been based on the reduction of others to the status of objects for objective observation. Studying humans as objects – albeit complex and sophisticated objects – is not the same as studying humans as beings who live in particular cultural and historical forms of life, and who are made and make themselves as specific kinds of subjects. What we need is a human science that is able to grasp this “constitution.” Such a science would not abandon objectivity in favor of relativism, either epistemological or cultural. Rather, it would adopt a moral and epistemological pluralism, resting on what has been called a “plural realism” (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 262). Such a science, I suggest, is exactly what qualitative inquiry is, properly understood.

What is needed is a kind of inquiry that is motivated neither by a technical interest, nor by a practical interest, but by what Habermas called an “emancipatory” interest. How can we create this? The imperatives to change our paradigm, to assume a new ontology, to adopt a new view of understanding and knowledge, emerge *within* qualitative inquiry as much as they are demanded by the crisis we face. Much qualitative research is stuck in contradiction and anxiety, and it is crucial to understand why. By refusing to abandon a posture of detached neutrality, much qualitative inquiry today continues to bolster the attitude of domination. Neutrality is equated with objectivity and viewed as genuine knowledge. This kind of research promotes a way of knowing other people which leaves them feeling misunderstood and treated as objects, and fails to recognize either the political and

ethical dimensions of understanding or its own transformative power. When we understand another person we don't merely find answers to our questions about them (let alone test our theories about them), we are challenged by our encounter with them. We learn; we are changed; we mature. Contemporary qualitative research, with a few welcome exceptions, fails to recognize these things, or even to allow space for such recognition in its repertoire of techniques and its methodological logic.

I believe that if we think carefully about what we are doing, if we examine our own conduct carefully, we will see the inconsistencies in our current research practices and we will start to notice where new possibilities lie. We will start to ask new kinds of question, we will become able to see different kinds of connections, different kinds of causality, and perhaps we will view ourselves and our planet in a new light. This book, then, is a wide-ranging review and overview of types and varieties of qualitative research throughout the social sciences. It is selective rather than exhaustive; indeed, the qualitative research literature is now so extensive that trying to cover it comprehensively would be impossible. But in this literature certain issues and dilemmas recur. Studying these can help us envision a new program for qualitative research.

### **What is Qualitative Research Good For?**

So what *is* qualitative research good for? I will be making the case that qualitative research is good for *historical ontology*. I am adopting here a phrase that Michel Foucault coined in an article – *What is Enlightenment?* – written towards the end of his life (Foucault, 1984). Foucault sketched “a historical ontology of ourselves” which, he proposed, would involve “a critique of what we are saying, thinking, and doing.” It would attend to the complex interrelations of knowledge, politics, and ethics. It would foster personal and political transformation without resorting to violence. It would be an investigation that could create new ways of being.

Foucault was, in my view, describing the kind of inquiry that many of us have been looking for. He viewed it as a form of investigation, even a particular attitude or ethos, which would be scientific without being disinterested, because we need knowledge that is relevant, not knowledge that is disengaged. In Foucault's terms it would include both “genealogical” and “archeological” components,

and would have an “ethical” aim. That is to say, it would include a historical dimension, attentive to genesis and transformation without reducing these to the linear unfolding of a unidimensional ‘progress.’ It would include an ethnographic dimension that would be sensitive to power and resistance. It would carefully examine practical activities – “discourse” – to discover how we human beings are made and how we make ourselves. And it would foster social change not through violent revolt but by promoting “a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty” (Foucault, 1975/1977, p. 319), working to change who we are.

Such a program of investigation defines what qualitative research can do and organizes its tools – interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, analysis of interactions – and its tasks – to offer knowledge, provide critique, foster transformation – in powerful ways. But before we can grasp what such a program involves we need to reexamine the way these tools have been used. The first part of this book explores how the qualitative research interview has become a tool with which researchers try to study subjective experience objectively, and suggests that it is better understood as an interaction between two (or more) people, a tool better employed to discover how a person has been constituted in a particular form of life. The second part examines the theory and practice of ethnographic fieldwork, uncovering its tacit ontological assumptions. I explore the popular notion that reality is a “social construction” and distinguish two forms of this claim, one radical, the other not. I suggest that ethnographic fieldwork is an important tool for investigating how a form of life has been constituted, and that interaction analysis is a tool for exploring how this constitution continues. The third part turns to the ethical dimension of research, understood as a critical and emancipatory or enlightening practice. I define the tasks of a research program of historical ontology employing these three research tools to answer questions about constitution.

The natural sciences have investigated the ways the natural world works in order to enable us to manipulate and control it. In doing so they have created the means for great destruction as well as, hopefully, instruments with which we may undo the damage we have caused. The traditional social sciences have investigated the way humans operate as information-processing organisms, and have

helped design better manipulation in the form of advertizing and spin. We desperately need a program of inquiry which can ask questions whose answers would empower us to transform our forms of life, our moral paradigms, our discursive practices, for the better. Qualitative inquiry could overcome its current confusion and fragmentation by adopting a program such as this.

Changing the attitude of seeking to dominate the planet, exploiting its raw materials and exporting one way of life to those who do not share it, will be no simple matter. It is a matter not merely of changing what we believe, but of changing who we are. Finding the freedom to do this will require that we engage in a critique of how we became who we are, to identify the limits placed on us by history and by culture and step beyond them.

### **Overview of the Book**

In chapter 1 I frame what follows by showing how our thinking about science is still influenced by the logical positivism of the early 1900s. The positivists tried to outlaw talk about “ontology” – the kinds of entity that exist – because they considered such talk untestable and unscientific. Science, in their view, should be a solely logical process. The prohibition of ontology is still prevalent today, and proponents of randomized clinical trails have the same vision of science. Yet, as Thomas Kuhn showed, the natural sciences operate within qualitatively distinct paradigms, and a central component of any paradigm is the ontological commitments embedded in its practices. Science is not a purely logical process, it is a social practice in which some aspect of the world is explored systematically. The lesson is that what we need to do is not *avoid* ontology but adopt an ontology that is appropriate.

### **Part One: The Objective Study of Subjectivity**

The first part of the book examines two of the most common practices of contemporary qualitative research, the semi-structured interview and the analysis of interview material by coding. Chapter 2 compares the qualitative research interview with both the traditional survey interview and everyday conversation. The semi-structured interview is more flexible than the survey and makes use of the resources of everyday interaction. But compared with a typical conversation the interview is



asymmetric in its use of these resources, shining all the light on the interviewer and encouraging a particular kind of self-disclosure. This would make sense if an interview provided an expression of the interviewee's subjective experience. But this way of thinking about interviewing rests on a common but misleading metaphor about language – that it is a 'conduit' through which 'meaning' is transferred from one individual to another. This metaphor clashes with the belief that an interview is always a joint production.

Chapter 3 finds the conduit metaphor at work again in the analysis of interviews by coding. Coding involves practices of abstraction and generalization which divide an interview transcript into separate units, remove these units from their context, identify abstract and general categories, extract the content of these categories, and then redescribe this content in formal terms. Language is treated as a collection of words that are labels for concepts, and coding as a process that 'opens up' these words and 'takes out' the meanings they contain.

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) is a key example of this approach to analysis. But a paradox underlies coding, for while it celebrates individual subjectivity it tries to eliminate the researcher's subjective experience. It ignores context, the diversity of participants, and the influence of the researcher. People are assumed to be separate from one another, and separate from the world we live in. Experience is assumed to be internal and subjective, distinct from an eternal, objective reality.

The anxiety behind the insistence on coding and the confusion over how to do it stem from the conundrum that it seems impossible to obtain objective knowledge from subjective experience. Scientific knowledge is assumed to be abstract, general, and formal, and so coding must eliminate what is concrete, specific, informal and personal. Particular things are treated merely as exemplars of general concepts. Specific experiences are viewed merely as cases of general knowledge that can be formally expressed. But both philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and sociologist Harold Garfinkel have questioned the central assumption in coding: that the meaning of a general term is what is *common* to all its exemplars. They recommend instead that the meaning of a word is to be found in its *use*. And certainly, in practice

coders inevitably rely on their tacit understanding of the material they are coding, especially their everyday understanding of how words are used.

There is a gap between the theory of coding and how it is practiced. Coding doesn't do what is claimed. But what is the alternative? Chapter 4 turns to hermeneutics – the theory of interpretation – and the 200-year debate over what it means to understand a text. Wilhelm Dilthey and Friedrich Schleiermacher assumed - like many modern researchers - that to understand a text one needs to reconstruct the author's subjectivity. But Hans-Georg Gadamer argued convincingly that understanding a text always involves its active "application" to a current situation. Meaning is an *effect* of reading a text, and this will be different for each reader. This means that there can be no single correct interpretation of any text, but multiple readings, each of which has relevance to a specific time and place.

In chapter 5 I explore the implications of Gadamer's argument for the analysis of interviews. To cut the Gordian knot of subjectivity-objectivity we need to attend closely to the language of an interview transcript, its rhetorical structures, techniques and strategies. Any text – written or spoken discourse – engages its reader and invites them to see the world in a new way. The work of literary critic Wolfgang Iser and historian Hayden White helps us understand how to study the *effects* of reading an interview transcript. An interview has *ontological* power, the power to change how the world is understood. Analysis should focus on how an interviewee crafts a way of *saying* to invite a way of *seeing*.

Our understanding of what someone tells us in an interview builds unavoidably on factors which are not personal or individual but *intersubjective*. Language itself is an intersubjective phenomenon, and the researcher's knowledge of language plays a crucial role in both the conduct and the analysis of an interview. The interview, which seemed a personal, individual source of data, turns out to be based on shared, public linguistic conventions and practices. At the same time, seemingly simple notions such as 'subjectivity,' 'experience,' and 'meaning' turn out to be surprisingly slippery. This suggests that we

should ask whether qualitative research should be the study of *intersubjective* phenomena, such as language, culture and society.

### **Part Two: Ethnographic Fieldwork - the Focus on Constitution**

The second part of the book turns to how intersubjective phenomena have been studied. Chapter 6 begins with three calls for a new kind of interpretive social science that were made in the 1970s. Charles Taylor argued that political science cannot avoid interpretation. Anthony Giddens pointed out that the logic of sociology involves a double hermeneutic. Clifford Geertz proposed that a culture should be viewed as a collection of texts that requires an interpretive anthropology. In each case immersion in the social practices of a community – ethnographic fieldwork – was considered crucial, rather than surveys, questionnaires, or even interviews. In each case interpretation – hermeneutics – was regarded as a central aspect of inquiry. In each case the new approach was expected to resolve core dualisms which plagued the discipline. And in each case it was said that we would study the key relationship of *constitution* between humans and world.

The term constitution is rarely defined, but it can be traced back to Aristotle's recognition, more than two thousand years ago, that there is a relation of mutual "constitution" between human beings and our forms of life. He argued in his *Politics* and *Ethics* that a human is naturally a societal animal, *zoon politicon*, whose nature it is to live in communities, and that "the natural outcast... may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts" (Aristotle, 1995, p. 5). Outside society a human being has no game to play. The state is prior to the individual, as the whole is prior to the parts, but society doesn't just regulate and direct its members' conduct, it is concerned with their flourishing as humans. The ultimate end of the state, for Aristotle, is the well being of its citizens, enabling them to develop, to live the good life. At the same time, citizens too play an active role, for it is in participation that they find out what is the human good.

So the citizens of a community "constitute" it: they decide, formally and informally, how they will live together. Sometimes there is an explicit "constitution," but often the decision emerges tacitly.

At the same time, a community doesn't just regulate its citizens' activity, it fosters their flourishing. Only by living together with others can humans actualize their capacities, both intellectual and moral. Communities "constitute" the people who live in them. Constitution, then, is this relationship of mutual formation between people and their forms of life.

How best to grasp this interconnectedness and study it adequately? The notion of constitution is developed in chapters 7 and 8 by tracing the history of two distinct treatments. One has been to make the *epistemological* claim that a human being's *knowledge* of the world they live in is constituted by social practices. I trace this first approach from Kant to philosopher Edmund Husserl and sociologists Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, and propose that ultimately it fails to escape from Kant's individualistic model of human being. With such a model we can only explore how the world can *appear* objective to an individual subjectivity. This kind of "social construction of reality" can never establish a distinction between what is mere opinion and what is valid knowledge.

The second approach has been to make the *ontological* claim that social practices constitute *real* objects and subjects. This approach is much more powerful and has far-reaching implications. In chapter 8 I begin with Georg Hegel's response to Kant, then trace the work of philosophers Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and sociologist Harold Garfinkel. Their work has articulated a *non-dualist ontology* and shifted the focus from *conceptual* knowledge, studied with a detached, theoretical attitude, to practical, embodied *know-how*, studied in an involved way. They have shown how we can see reason and thinking as cultural and historical, as grounded in practical know-how, and how we can see research as thinking that doesn't take itself for granted.

Chapter 9 returns to the debates in cultural anthropology over the manner and purposes of ethnographic fieldwork. Traditional ethnography was wedded to the image of the researcher "alone on a tropical beach close to a native village," as Malinowski (1922/1955) put it, and to the ontological presuppositions that culture is bounded, systematic, and integrated (Faubion, 2001). These imply that a fieldworker must enter a culture and participate as a member, describing a member's point of view of *their* world. A more adequate ontology presumes that a culture is a dispersed, dynamic, and contested

form of life. Ethnographers need to find and trace this form, as newcomers who are representatives of what is 'elsewhere.' Rather than try to describe structures *behind* everyday life they need to focus on the order that has been constituted in a form of life: the *regional ontology*, how people and things 'show up.' And this is not a matter of mere description: ethnographers write accounts to have an *effect* on their readers, inviting new ways to see the world. Malinowski was surely right to see fieldwork as a way of understanding other people in order to better know ourselves and grow a little in our wisdom.

One of the implications of this second treatment of constitution is that the processes of what I call 'ontological work' can be studied by researchers, and chapter 10 compares two approaches to the study of practical activity, in particular discourse practices: critical discourse analysis and conversation analysis. The former turns out still to assume a dualism between person and form of life, and tries to bridge the gap with representation. In contrast, conversation analysis pays attention not to *what* people say so much as to what they *do* by saying. It also attends to the way participants in a form of life *display* their understanding of what they and others are doing.

### **Part Three: Inquiry with an Emancipatory Interest**

But participation in the practices of a form of life can provide *misunderstanding*, and this means that inquiry needs to have a *critical* dimension. Part 3 explores different approaches to critical inquiry. Chapter 11 traces the origins of critique back to Kant, whose exploration of the conditions for the possibility of knowledge in the *Critique of Pure Reason* defined one aspect of the term critique. When Karl Marx's analysis of capitalism showed that the exploitation of workers, their labor squeezed to extract value, is the condition for the possibility of capital accumulation, the term came to mean both the exploration of the conditions that make a phenomenon possible and the exposure of exploitation.

Marx anticipated the new ontology of ethnography when he proposed that capitalism is open, dynamic and contested. He argued that the notion that knowledge and research can be disinterested is a myth, an ideology, and he practiced instead a critical and emancipatory kind of inquiry. He did this by seeking a *historical* perspective that people lack in everyday life.

Marx drew his conception of history from Hegel. The next chapters explore three attempts to base critical and emancipatory investigation on a different kind of history. Chapter 12 focuses on the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, who has considered what is needed for emancipatory research. He suggests that a researcher needs the know-how of a member, but also a historical perspective in the form of a rational, theoretical reconstruction of ontogenesis and societal history. Such a history provides a lens through which a form of life can be studied and critiqued. Habermas has accepted Kant's conception of enlightenment, but he looks for the source of rationality not in transcendental reason but in communicative practices. Research, for Habermas, involves articulating what participants in a form of life presuppose unquestioningly, and questioning what they recognize unthinkingly. In doing so the researcher "deepens and radicalizes" the context of communication that is being investigated.

Chapter 13 turns to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, for whom research is a reflexive enterprise that objectifies its own techniques of objectification. Bourdieu's "reflexive sociology" centered around the relational concepts of "habitus" and "social field." Where Habermas focused primarily on people's intellectual judgments Bourdieu emphasized their embodied and situated practical know-how, and how this often serves to reproduce an inequitable social order. Bourdieu was more radical than Habermas in his insistence that reason is historical and embodied, and that each of us has acquired bodily dispositions to produce strategic action in a social field that is the site of a game, a struggle, which only the researcher can grasp as a whole. It is the reflexive aspect that gives social science its special status among such games and its ability to produce knowledge that transcends a specific time and place.

In Chapter 14 the central figure is French historian Michel Foucault. Foucault criticized the human sciences for adopting the view that humans are at one and the same time objects and subjects, assuming paradoxically that people are both determinate and uniquely free. When we examine the historical record, he insisted, we find a *variety* of kinds of human beings, in multiple forms of life. Foucault developed a way to study how humans are formed, which had three aspects. First is an

*archaeology*: a form of investigation which excavates not bones, pottery and metalwork but official theories or concepts. The second is *genealogy*: tracing the family tree of these official pronouncements to write “histories of the present” which treat historical change as contingent, marked by ruptures and discontinuities. The basis of official knowledge (*connaissance*) must be explored in the power relations (*pouvoir*) of practical activity (*savoir*). The third aspect is an *ethics* which focuses on the techniques for formation and care of the self. If Kant is the villain of this book, Foucault is its hero. His work pulls together the threads of our various concerns. He explored the linkages between formal knowledge and embodied, social know-how. He emphasized the constitution of both objects and knowing subjects in practical relations of power. He emphasized history without reducing it to logic or progress. He practiced a form of inquiry intended to be emancipatory without being authoritarian. He searched for local truths – ways in which an aspect of life is problematized – rather than universal, objective truth-with-a-capital-T. For Foucault, inquiry needs to problematize problematization.

At the end of his life Foucault articulated the three central questions that he had tried to answer, and that defined a broad program of research he called a “historical ontology of ourselves.” The questions were: How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions? This is not a *How To* book, so I do not end with a discussion of techniques for posing these questions, or detailed specifications for the program of a *historical ontology of ourselves*. Instead, chapter 15 returns to the larger question of what science is, in the light of what we have learned about the critical investigation of constitution. I propose that we think of human science itself as a program of research with theoretical, practical and ethical dimensions.

Such a program has three phases: an archaeological phase (fieldwork), a genealogical phase (the study of practice), and an ethical phase (ethology, in its original sense as the study of character). Researchers conducting field work will acknowledge that they can rarely be members of the form of life they study. They are strangers, visitors from the academy, and their fieldnotes and ethnographic accounts - accounts of the *regional ontology* - need to have local accountability. Their detailed analysis

of practical interactions will go beyond the kinds of critical discourse analysis currently available to focus on the pragmatics of interaction, how it is embedded in material settings, and the *ontological work* that is accomplished. Their analysis of interviews will attend to the way rhetorical devices are used to invite us to see the world in new ways and show the *ontological complicity* of the speaker with a form of life. Their research will be reported in texts which offer both a way of saying and a way of seeing, because thinking is a social practice of seeing and saying which exploits the power of language. Scientific accounts can offer *phronesis*, practical /political relevance. Scientific inquiry, practiced this way, can open our eyes to fresh ways of being human. This is the excitement, and the importance, of qualitative research.

One final, parenthetical remark. I wear two hats, suffer from a divided professional identity, with one foot in methodology and the other in child development. Much of what is discussed in this book on the former has relevance to the latter. There simply is no space to mention the brilliant work of Lev Vygotsky in Russia, or the ground breaking investigations of Michael Cole and his colleagues in the US, although this work “studies that zone of proximal development where the cultural becomes individual and individuals create their culture” (LCHC, 1983, p. 348-9). Constitution, in other words.



## Chapter 7

### Dualism and Constitution: The Social Construction of Reality

“Edit and interpret the conclusions of modern science as tenderly as we like, it is still quite impossible for us to regard man as the child of God for whom the earth was created as a temporary habitation.... Man is but a foundling in the cosmos, abandoned by the forces that created him. Unparented, unassisted and undirected by omniscient or benevolent authority, he must fend for himself, and with the aid of his own limited intelligence find his way about in the indifferent universe. Such is the world pattern that determines the character and direction of modern thinking” (Becker, 1932/1961, pp. 14-15)

It seems common sense that each of us has a mind in which we construct conceptions of the world around us. Our ‘subjectivity’ is not merely ideas in our heads, it is the way the whole world appears to us. The ‘mental’ is taken to be something inner, personal, and subjective. In addition, an information-processing model is accepted throughout the social sciences, a model in which the brain is seen as a computer, actively processing data received through the sensory organs, forming complex internal models or theories about the external world, and deciding how to act on the basis of these. This too has come to seem obvious and natural.

The problems with this view are not obvious, but humans have not always thought about themselves in this way. Of course no single person could be responsible for such a model, but one person in particular was a highly influential spokesperson: the 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Although he wrote over 200 years ago some still consider Kant the most important philosopher of all time. The accusation of dualism is usually directed towards Descartes (e.g., Burwood, Gilbert & Lennon, 1999), but the model of human being that the social sciences assume, and the dualisms that they have become caught in, are due much more to Kant. This chapter explores Kant and his influence in order to see how this model arose and why, and how it both requires a process of “constitution” and trivializes it as an individual process, primarily cognitive and intellectual.

### **Kant and the Problem of Grounding Knowledge and Ethics**

To understand why Kant's model continues to have such a strong impact we need to begin with a little historical context. In the eighteenth century, the period known as the Enlightenment, the writings of René Descartes (1596-1650) had a powerful impact on thinkers such as John Locke (see Box 7.1) and David Hume (see Box 7.2). This was a time of political ferment, including the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) and Declaration of Independence (1776), the French Revolution (1789-1799), and the Napoleonic Wars (1804-1815) (Gay, 1969, 1977). It was also the time of a revolutionary reconceptualization of mankind's place in the natural and social world, one which promised liberty from tyranny and mythology and encouraged people to think and decide for themselves what is true and false, just and unjust. The physics of Isaac Newton (1643-1727) was providing a fresh, exciting example of rational inquiry. The medieval view that humans live in a meaningful world created by God was being replaced by the Newtonian vision of the universe as material, mechanical, and lawlike. Now humans became seen as one of the animals – albeit one with a capacity for reason – living in a clockwork universe, and this meant that each individual had to find meaning and value for him or herself.

How was an individual able to do this? One answer to this question was Descartes', that reason is the source of knowledge. Descartes, a mathematician and a monk, had argued that through reason each individual can decide on the validity of their own knowledge, knowledge about self (*Cogito, ergo sum - I think, therefore I am*), about the world, and about God. During the Middle Ages people had believed themselves formed in the image of God, and even for Descartes, poised with one foot still in the Medieval world, God was the final guarantor that he was not deceived.

The other answer, offered by Locke and Hume, was that sensory experience is the basis for knowledge. Sensation seemed an important basis for the new scientific study of humans, for "moral sciences... which relate to man himself; the most complex and most difficult subject of study on which the human mind can be engaged" (Mill, 1843/1987, pp. 19-20). The new view was – and has continued to be – that a human is a creature with an objective and universal nature, the same in all places and times, who can be explained in causal, even mechanistic terms. A "study of the human mind" which will "go

back to the origin of our ideas... and thus establish the extent and the limits of our knowledge" (Locke, 1690/1975) has been the aim of human science ever since.

The new emphasis on science, the discovery of new lands with different cultures and different species of plants and animals, the dawning recognition that humans too are animals, provided an exciting new vision of the world and the place of humans within it. But it contained a problem: the new view of 'man' clashed with the new view of 'knowledge.' Humans have ideas in our minds – but how do we know whether these ideas truly 'conform' to objects in the world?

There was something troubling in this celebration of human liberation from superstition and servitude. The "philosophical anthropology" of the times, "which promoted man from servitude, ironically enough demoted him at the same time – from his position little lower than the angels to a position among the intelligent animals" (Gay, 1977, p. 159). Could such a finite creature as a human being really recognize the true and the good?

Everyone agreed that *matter* and *mind* are two fundamentally different kinds of substance. How then could they relate? Neither the rationalist, Descartes, nor the empiricists, Locke and Hume, had a satisfactory answer.

It was Kant who offered a solution. He recognized the difficulties and he tried to solve them, and in a sense elevate humans again. He added a key element: the proposal that humans draw on *both* perception and reason in order to construct ideas that are *representations* of the world. In doing so Kant unintentionally gave rise to the dualistic image of human being that today has become common-sense and continues to dominate both traditional empirical-analytic research and much qualitative research.

### **Transcendental Idealism: Immanuel Kant**

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was born to a strict Lutheran family in Königsberg in East Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia), from where he traveled no more than 100 miles during his lifetime. He is considered one of the most influential thinkers of modern Europe, and the last major philosopher of the Enlightenment. In 1770, at the age of 46 Kant, already an established scholar, was woken from what he called his "dogmatic slumber" (Kant, 1783/1977, p. 5) by Hume's skeptical empiricism. Hume argued that causality is merely our perception of events that tend to occur one after another. This proposal

horrified Kant, for in his view it undercut the whole basis of science, which he considered a search for *certainty*, for *necessary* truth. If Hume's skepticism was correct the empirical sciences only observe and describe regularities, and offer no way to be certain of anything. At the same time Kant was deeply troubled by Hume's proposal that human action can be explained in mechanistic terms. In a world that was increasingly breaking with religious faith and tradition it seemed that Hume had destroyed the foundation for moral values too. The new scientific account viewed humans as finite creatures, each born to a specific time and culture. Our values and beliefs are limited by the language we speak, the society we live in, our limited life-span, and our personal interests and desires. How we act depends on our desires and the norms and values of our particular culture. In such circumstances, how can we be certain that our knowledge is valid or our conduct ethical? Yet surely what is meant by objectivity and by morality is precisely this certainty!

Kant has been described as "both a typical and supreme representative of the Enlightenment; typical because of his belief in the power of courageous reasoning and in the effectiveness of the reform of institutions...; supreme because in what he thought he either solved the recurrent problems of the Enlightenment or reformulated them in a much more fruitful way" (MacIntyre, 1966, p. 190). Kant treated these problems of knowledge and ethics as philosophical rather than religious, and his response was an analysis in the form of a "critique." ("Critique" comes from the Greek *kritike*, or "art of discerning, or critical analysis.") It had three parts, dealing in turn with our knowledge of the natural world (*The Critique of Pure Reason*), our actions in society (*The Critique of Practical Reason*), and our appreciation of beauty (*The Critique of Judgment*). Kant's conclusion was that there was still a basis for secure knowledge and ethical action, as well as for aesthetic judgment: it lay in the *relationship* between the human mind, with its capacity for rational thought, and the world we experience. Kant proposed that the individual human mind has a natural capacity for reason. By 'reason' he had in mind Newton's mathematical physics: reason lays down principles that are consistent, categorical, and universal. This capacity enables the mind to "constitute" various forms of knowledge.

Kant argued that our experiences are not merely ideas, they are *representations*, related outwardly to objects and inwardly to a subject. He proposed that these representations are governed by

“faculties” of the mind which define the *conditions* for human knowledge. Our knowledge has a sensory basis, but our sensations are organized by the concepts (or ‘forms’ or ‘categories’) that our mind brings to them: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (1783/1977, p. 93). These concepts are innate and universal, the same for all people and all times. They include space, time, causality, and object – each of these seems to be a property of the world but in fact, Kant argued, each is a concept the human mind *brings* to experience. They are “modes of representation” (1783/1977, p. 37), logically necessary conditions for any experience to be possible. When we observe an object, our experience is actively constituted in the very act of perception. Our knowledge of the world is the result of this “*constitution of our reason*” (emphasis added).

Kant called this his “Copernican Revolution” (ref). Just as Copernicus had showed that the sun is the center, not the earth, Kant argued that mind is the center, and the world we experience circles around it. Where Descartes and Hume had appealed to a natural *harmony* between objects and our knowledge of them, dictated by God or by nature, Kant proposed that nature *submits* to human knowing, to innate and universal mental concepts. In effect, subjectivity expands to fill the whole world that we experience around us. “The understanding is itself the lawgiver of nature” (1787/1965, p. 126); “The ‘laws of nature’ are nothing other than the *rules* according to which we *constitute* or *synthesize* our world out of our raw experience” (Solomon, 1983, p. 75, original emphasis).

Kant’s position combined “transcendental idealism” with “empirical realism” (Kant, 1787/1965, p. 346; see Allison, 1983; Collins, 1999). In his view a real world does exist, though we can never know anything definite about “things in themselves.” All we can know are our experiences of these things, how they appear to us; we can know only the “phenomena,” not the “noumena” (from the Greek, *noien*, to conceive, apprehend) which underlie them. Kant was certain that we must infer that “things in themselves” actually exist, but to go any further and try to say anything positive about them would be speculative metaphysics. Equally, the “transcendental” activity of mind is also something which Kant believed we can never be aware of; it will always operate behind the scenes.

Kant’s position on ethics was similar to his position on knowledge. Kant was both a Newtonian and a Protestant, and just as he tried to reconcile empiricism and rationalism, he intended to reconcile

science and religion. Newton's clockwork universe, in which everything has a mechanical cause, seemed to leave no place for God. But to call an action *moral* was to say it was not caused but was freely chosen. Here too Kant's critique led him to the conclusion that the basic principles of moral conduct are not based on particular experiences but are supplied by the human mind. Ethical principles are universal and necessary because they are rational. Here too reason has a constitutive capacity. Each individual can, and should, question the norms and values of their cultural tradition and reason about what is truly moral. And every rational being will reach the same conclusions, because everyone has the same innate rational capacity.

Just as transcendental rationality allows humans to have indubitable knowledge of the laws of the physical universe, in the realm of human action, all rational creatures can recognize a universal morality (Soloman, 1983, 77ff). Each person can identify those moral rules which can be formally "universalized." A well-known example is what Kant called the "categorical imperative," which includes rules such as "treat others never simply as means, but as ends." Rational duties such as this are the basis for action that is truly disinterested. Kant believed that an act that is moral must be done for its own sake, not to satisfy the desires of either oneself or another person. The capacity for reason means each individual can figure things out for themselves rather than simply accepting what they have been told, and they can decide for themselves what it is right to do.

Just as we must conclude that there is a world in-itself, in Kant's view humans must logically conclude that a divine, all-powerful God exists. God has a place in the in-itself, standing outside space and time, and so can legitimately play a role in religious faith and human morality. The universal human capacity for reason does not make us moral, but it gives us the *potential* to be moral. We can and must work on ourselves to *become* "universal subjects." People tend to base what they know and value on habit, convention, faith, emotion and authority figures, but Kant insisted that this is not the whole story. He emphasized "rational autonomy" – "the central, exhilarating notion of Kant's ethics" (Taylor, 1975, p. 32). In Kant's view, each person has a capacity for radical self-determination.

In the third critique Kant offered his analysis of judgment: how we judge what is agreeable, beautiful (such as a work of art), sublime and noble, and how we judge goals and purposes. He described

the “genius” that makes possible the creation of a work of beauty. Judgment, he proposed, provides the link between theoretical and practical knowledge. The gulf between what *is* and what *ought to be* is bridged by the faith that nature has a teleology with which our moral projects can coincide.

In a nutshell, Kant offered a new account of the *relationship* between subjectivity and objectivity which he believed preserved the possibility of objective knowledge, ethical action, and aesthetic evaluation. The Enlightenment’s new notion that each individual forms ideas in their mind left important questions unanswered. How can individuals have *valid* internal, subjective knowledge of the external, objective physical universe, and how can we *know* when our knowledge is valid? How can an individual *act* in a way which they can be sure is ethical? Empiricists like Locke and Hume had emphasized perception, rationalists like Descartes had emphasized reasoning. Kant’s answer was that the two are linked. Our ideas are neither *caused* by external objects nor are they *copies* of these objects. They are *representations* of physical reality, products of the mind’s capacity for rational synthesis, and as such are *constitutive* of that reality. An individual can have valid knowledge because there is a universal human capacity for reason which provides universal mental concepts. An individual can act morally because, once again, the universal human capacity for reason allows them to identify those duties that are logically necessary. Reason – and for Kant the best example of reason was mathematics – *constitutes* the world, both natural and moral, in which an individual lives.

### **Kant’s Legacy**

“Before Kant, epistemology struggled with a separation between thought and reality occasioned by essential differences between the two: thought, consisting of concepts that are general and continuous, and reality, consisting of flux. Since Kant, epistemology has had to deal with a separation between thought and reality created by human understanding: natural reality is always perceived in terms of human categories of thought and never in itself... human ways of perceiving and thinking add something to reality that was not there in the original. As a consequence, human knowledge seems not to stand in an empirically valid relationship with reality” (Rawls, 1996, p. 431)

Kant's proposal - that the two fundamental human faculties of perception and reason are intimately linked, and that reason actively synthesizes data from the senses to form mental representations of the world - has become second nature to us. This is the view of individual cognition which, as Kuhn pointed out, has "guided Western philosophy for three centuries" (Kuhn, 1962, p. 125).

For the Enlightenment philosophers, including Kant, humans were fundamentally paradoxical: natural creatures driven by desire but with the capacity to be thoroughly rational and ethical. Humans had the "strange stature of a being whose nature (that which determines it, contains it, and has traversed it from the beginning of time) is to know nature, and itself, in consequence, as a natural being" (Foucault, 1966/1973, p. 310). Kant's attempt to resolve this paradox "was both brilliant and perplexing" (Sullivan, 1989, p. 8). It was brilliant in the way it combined the rational and the natural. It was perplexing because Kant's solution to epistemological and ethical skepticism only works if every individual mind has an innate capacity for the *same* reason. Kant believed that there is only one set of categories that every mind uses to represent the world, and each of us is born with it. This notion of a *transcendental* reason was unacceptable to many people even at the time, but even the critics accepted Kant's basic definition of a human being: they accepted that individuals know the world by forming mental representations. The search for a convincing basis for valid knowledge and ethical action did not end with Kant, but his model of man (Kant's "anthropology") defined the terms of the problem from that day forward.

### **The Search for Constitution**

If it is not satisfactory to claim that the validity and universality of mental representations is guaranteed by an innate capacity for universal reason, as Kant proposed, two alternatives seem to remain. One is that the guarantee can be found elsewhere, perhaps in sensorimotor knowledge (see Box 7.3) or in cultural categories. The other possibility is that no guarantee can be found and that epistemological and moral skepticism are unavoidable. The stakes here are high. For those who accepted the basic terms of Kant's model what seemed to be needed was further exploration, both empirical and conceptual, of the central notion of *constitution*.



In the rest of this chapter I will trace one central line to these explorations. In the chapter that follows I will trace a second line. Both explore what is often now called the 'social construction of reality,' but in radically different ways. The first line considers constitution an *epistemological* process in which each individual constructs *knowledge* of the world. It leads from Kant to Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz, and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. The second treats constitution as an *ontological* process in which the very constituents of reality – objects and subjects – are constituted. This path leads from Georg Hegel to Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Harold Garfinkel (and also Karl Marx and others who we will consider in Part 3). The first line accepts Kant's anthropology and insists on remaining "ontologically mute" (Gergen, 2001). I will argue that it fails to either escape from or resolve the important epistemological and ethical problems that Kant recognized. The second line rejects Kant's model and reconsiders the question, 'What is a human being?' Far from trying to avoid making ontological claims it insists that it is crucially important to get the ontology right.

#### **Transcendental Phenomenology: Edmund Husserl**

"We would be in a nasty position indeed if empirical science were the only kind of science possible" (Husserl, 1917/1981)

The Austrian philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), like Kant, was interested in "the relationship, in particular, between the subjectivity of knowing and the objectivity of the content known" (Husserl, 1913, p. 42). But although Husserl also described himself as a transcendental idealist, he was critical of Kant for what he considered his mysticism. Kant provided no room for a scientific study of constitution. He presumed the existence of things-in-themselves which can never be directly experienced, and a transcendental process of constitution which can never be brought into consciousness, because it *is* consciousness. Husserl took a different view; he insisted that we *can* become aware of the ways in which mind structures experience, if we conduct the right kind of investigation. Husserl called this investigation "transcendental phenomenology." Kant had used the term "phenomenon" to refer to things as they appear to us (the word comes from the Greek verb *phainein*, to appear, or show), and Husserl called his philosophy "phenomenology" to emphasize that it was the study of appearances, not of real entities.

Husserl proposed that we spend most of our time simply accepting one spatiotemporal reality, even if some parts of it may turn out from time to time to be surprising, or doubtful, or illusory, or a hallucination. He called this the “natural attitude”: an attitude in which “corporeal things with some spatial distribution or other are *simply there for me*.” In this attitude we unthinkingly accept that the world is simply *present*, and we experience its existence without thematizing it, or thinking or theorizing about it. This is where any investigation must start: “We begin our considerations as human beings who are living naturally, judging, feeling, willing ‘*in the natural attitude*.’”

But like Kant, Husserl believed that this experience is in fact “constituted” by human consciousness. All phenomena are shaped by the experiencing subject – by what he called “transcendental subjectivity.” Transcendental phenomenology is the kind of investigation which brings to light how subjectivity “continues to shape the world through its concealed internal ‘method’.”

### **Bracketing Ontological Claims**

To study this constituting activity requires breaking with the natural attitude. Husserl declared that “instead of remaining in the natural attitude, we propose to alter it radically.” He believed that we can grasp how we are constituting reality when we reflect, and so Husserl’s phenomenology starts with reflection. It requires a simple but radical shift to the “phenomenological attitude.”

The shift is accomplished by what Husserl variously called “bracketing,” “parenthesizing,” the “reduction,” or the “epoché” (Greek: *εποχή*: the suspension of judgment or the withholding of assent). We need to suspend the naive belief that objects are unaltered by our consciousness of them. We need to “put it out of action,” “exclude it,” or “parenthesize it.” The phenomenological attitude is a “definite, specifically peculiar mode of consciousness” in which the everyday world does not vanish: “It is still there, like the parenthesized in the parentheses, like the excluded outside the context of inclusion” (Husserl, 1931, p. 59). But in this new attitude we resist making any ontological assumptions or claims that the objects or events we experience are real, existing outside our consciousness, and independent of us:

"I am *not negating* this 'world' as if I were a sophist; I am *not doubting its factual being* as though I were a skeptic; rather I am exercising the 'phenomenological' epoche which also *completely shuts me off from any judgment about spatio-temporal factual being*" (Husserl, 1931, p. 56)

The result of this phenomenological reflection is an articulation of "eidetic structures" (from the Greek *eidōs* or 'form'). These are the "essence" of what appears in our consciousness of the world. Objects now appear to us not as independent entities in an outer world but as "unities" of "sense" or "meaning" in the "inner world" of the conscious individual.

At first glance, Husserl's bracketing seems to resemble Descartes' "method of doubt," which questioned all sensory experience and tried to reconstruct knowledge on the basis of the "*cogito*." But Husserl didn't reject sensory experience, he just rejected the assumption that the senses tell us about objects as they really exist:

"Husserl's doubt is sharply focussed: it is aimed at eliminating all ideas related to the *existence* of objects our consciousness tells us about; to be exact – the existence of objects apart from, and independently of, their presence in our consciousness" (Bauman, 1981, p. 118)

Like Descartes, however, Husserl intended to achieve an ultimate, final, objective knowledge – that of pure consciousness.

### **The Sciences are not Disinterested**

Husserl was critical of empirical science because it accepts the natural attitude and merely studies the details of some part of the factual world, then makes a "surreptitious substitution" of mathematical ideals and imperceptible entities for "the only real world, the one that is actually given through perception, that is ever experienced and experienceable – our everyday life-world" (Husserl, 1954/1970, p. 48). Scientific research *presupposes* the everyday life-world but then treats it as a *derivative* of the world of mathematics, which is assumed to be more real. Husserl believed that science, despite its claims to objectivity and neutrality, was driven by human interests and concerns, and he was convinced these needed to be eliminated if truly objective knowledge were to be obtained. Husserl's transcendental phenomenology had no place for theory, either philosophical or scientific, and avoided theoretical preconceptions just as much as ontological assumptions:

“In like manner all theories and sciences which relate to this world, no matter how well they may be grounded positivistically or otherwise, shall meet the same fate” (Husserl, 1999, p. 65)

For Husserl, the investigation of constitution must be free from the distortions of human concerns, worries and interests if it was to put empirical science on a firm foundation. For Husserl, phenomenological investigation disclosed the fundamental structures of consciousness, and so was more objective than science itself. As Husserl saw it, “phenomenology is, in fact, a *purely descriptive* discipline, exploring the field of transcendently pure consciousness by *pure intuition*.” It is “the reflective study of the essence of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view.” It excluded, Husserl insisted, all the social, practical, cultural factors that he felt interfered with the ability to be objective about the formal structure of our human experience:

“with the exclusion of the natural world, the physical and psychophysical world, all individual objectivities which become constituted by axiological and practical functionings of consciousness are excluded, all the sorts of cultural formations, all works of the technical and fine arts, of sciences (in so far as they come into question as cultural facts rather than as accepted unities), aesthetic and practical values of every form. Likewise, naturally, such actualities as state, custom, law, religion” (Husserl, 1931)

### **An Endless Road**

Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, then, was to be a new kind of science, more far-reaching than typical empirical science, which explored the key constituting activity of consciousness. His conception of the way consciousness functions is strikingly similar to the dominant model today in cognitive science (Dreyfus & Hall, 1982), and Husserl’s work provided an influential example for many people who were looking for a new kind of social science, or a new kind of philosophy. But his project to ground knowledge in an indubitable foundation ran into serious problems. The task of turning consciousness on itself, to identify eidetic structures that were objective and certain because they were completely abstract and detached, was more difficult than Husserl anticipated. His effort to cut free from all historical and social entanglements, to find a core to experience that was independent of society, history or culture, turned out to be endless. Husserl himself was continually dissatisfied with

his progress and repeatedly announced fresh attempts to start all over again on the path to “pure consciousness.”

The basic problem with the project of transcendental phenomenology was that to the extent that Husserl was able to escape from the mundane world of everyday life he was leaving behind the natural context of communication, of practical concerns, of social interaction with others. If he found an eidetic structure how could he communicate it without using a natural language which belonged to one culture or another? Who would he share it with, if he had bracketed the social world? Why would people care, if he had excluded all human concerns from his investigation?

“What is epoche, what is the whole series of phenomenological reductions, if not an effort to peel away successive layers of content, to arrive at the end at the tough nucleus which is explicable only from itself, and not reducible any more to either tradition, or culture, or society? But how do we know that such a nucleus exists? What kind of evidence can we ever get that it does?” (Bauman, 1981, p. 121)

To many, Husserl’s work has demonstrated that the search for Kant’s transcendental activity of constitution is futile. He was dedicated to following the path Kant had pointed out, but his dedication showed that the path lead nowhere:

“We can now be sure that there is nothing at the end of the road which – as Husserl hoped and we, tentatively, hoped with him – led to the station called certainty” (Bauman, p. 1981, p. 129)

At least, there was nothing at the end of *this* road, which tried to follow constitution deep into the mind in the belief that it is a *transcendental* activity.

### **Phenomenology of the Social World: Alfred Schutz**

“We have to distinguish between the scientist *qua* human being who acts and lives among his fellow-men his everyday life and the theoretical thinker who is, we repeat it, not interested in the mastery of the world but in obtaining knowledge by observing it” (Schutz, 1970 p. 259)

A different direction was taken by Alfred Schutz (1899–1959), a philosopher, sociologist, and professional financier who drew upon Husserl’s phenomenology to develop a “sociology of understanding.” Schutz modified Husserl’s project in significant ways and avoided some of the

difficulties that Husserl ran into. Like Husserl, Schutz believed that the everyday world is constituted by human subjects. Unlike Husserl he believed that this activity of constitution is carried out not by transcendental subjectivity but by “mundane subjectivity.” ‘Mundane’ here has the sense not of something boring or tedious, but something worldly and everyday: mundane is the opposite of transcendental. Schutz set out to study precisely those “existential” aspects of human life that Husserl believed needed to be put in brackets. Studying phenomena involved “reducing them to the human activity which has created them” (1954, p. 10).

Schutz emphasized the way the complex structures of the everyday “life-world” (*Lebenswelt*) are constituted in and by the consciousness of the individual ego. His form of phenomenology was the investigation of these structures:

“By the term ‘social reality’ I wish to be understood the sum total of objects and occurrences within the social cultural world as experienced by the common-sense thinking of men living their daily lives among their fellow-men, connected with them in manifold relations of interaction. It is the world of cultural objects and social institutions into which we are all born, within which we have to find our bearings, and with which we have to come to terms. From the outset, we, the actors on the social scene, experience the world we live in as a world both of nature and of culture, not as a private but an intersubjective one, that is as a world common to all of us, either actually given or potentially accessible to everyone; and this involves intercommunication and language” (Schutz, 1963a, p. 236)

Central to this, in Schutz’ view, was the ways in which we experience the life world as intersubjective. Social reality “is a world common to all of us” (1970, p. 163); it is from the start, Schutz insisted, an “intersubjective world,” “a preconstituted and preorganized world whose particular structure is the result of an historical process, and is therefore different for each culture and society” (1970, p. 79). This was the world which “the wide-awake, grown-up man who acts in it and upon it amidst his fellow-men experiences with the natural attitude as a reality” (1970, p. 72). People cope somehow with the everyday problem of understanding other people; the phenomenological social scientist can do no better than study how they do this.

### **The Social Sciences take the Lifeworld for Granted**

Like Husserl, Schutz accused the empirical-analytic social sciences of taking for granted the reality of this everyday life-world but then trying to replace it with formal models. Researchers take it for granted that they *understand* what someone is doing and saying, and then busy themselves looking for explanations. But their understanding, and the life-world that makes it possible, ought to be a *topic* of inquiry. A social science which ignores the way the social world is understood and interpreted by the actors within it can only end up imposing the scientists' abstract constructs, because:

“this type of social science does not deal directly and immediately with the social life-world common to us all, but with skillfully and expediently chosen idealizations and formalizations of the social world” (Schutz, 1954, p. 6)

In contrast, a phenomenological social science studies how people – both actors and social scientists – *make sense* of the social world. For Schutz, phenomenology takes up this neglected topic by exploring how social reality is constituted and maintained by human common sense. The study of everyday social reality must be based on the way people understand and conceptualize it. Social science ought to deal in what Schutz called “second level constructs,” interpretations of the “pre-interpretations” or common-sense “constructs” people have of the social world:

“The observational field of the social scientist – social reality – has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the human beings living, acting, and thinking within. By a series of common-sense constructs they have pre-selected and pre-interpreted this world which they experience as the reality of their daily lives. It is these thought objects of theirs which determine their behavior by motivating it. The thought objects of the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the thought-objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of men, living their daily life within their social world. Thus, the constructs of the social sciences are, so to speak, constructs of the second degree, that is, constructs of the constructs made by the actors on the social scene, whose behavior the social scientist has to observe and to explain in accordance with the procedural rules of his science. Thus, the

exploration of the general principles according to which man in daily life organizes his experiences, and especially those of the social world, is the first task of the methodology of the social sciences" (Schutz, 1963a, p. 242)

### **Suspending Belief in the Lifeworld**

Schutz followed Husserl in emphasizing the importance of bracketing ontological claims, "not by transforming our naive belief in the outer world into a disbelief... but by suspending belief" (p. 58) in order to focus on these "common-sense constructs":

"The method of phenomenological reduction, therefore, makes accessible the stream of consciousness in itself as a realm of its own in its absolute uniqueness of nature. We can experience it and describe its inner structure" (Schutz, 1970, p. 59).

Phenomenological sociology differed from traditional sociology in neither taking the social world at face value nor accepting scientific idealizations and generalizations about this world, but instead studying the meaning of social phenomena for actors, their processes of idealizing and generalizing, the activities of consciousness by which people make sense of everyday reality. "The safeguarding of the subjective point of view is the only but sufficient guarantee that the world of social reality will not be replaced by a fictional nonexistent world constructed by the scientific observer" (1970, p. 271).

### **Knowledge is Practical**

Schutz recognized that an individual's involvement in the everyday life-world is first of all practical. An individual moves from one "project" to another, and the life-world is primarily a place of practical "routine." An "interest at hand" motivates all our thinking, and we experience other people's actions in terms of their motives and goals. All interpretation of the everyday lifeworld is based, in Schutz's view, on the "stock of knowledge" which each individual has acquired. There is a "social distribution" of this "common-sense knowledge" (p. 239); an individual's stock is never complete, and it depends on their position in society, their job, interests, and so on. Each individual's stock of knowledge is, for Schutz, a "system of constructs." "Any knowledge of the world, in common-sense thinking as well as in science, involves mental constructs, syntheses, generalizations, formalizations, idealizations" (p.



272). But it is for the most part *practical* knowledge and as such, Schutz proposed, it will be incoherent, inconsistent, and only partially clear. Frequently meaning becomes apparent only retrospectively, and this is what makes phenomenology necessary:

“we no longer naively accept the social world and its current idealizations and formalizations as ready-made and meaningful beyond all question, but we undertake to study the process of idealizing and formalizing as such, the genesis of the meaning which social phenomena have for us as well as for the actors, the mechanism of the activity by which human beings understand one another and themselves” (Schutz, 1970, p. 269)

Schutz insisted that any description of action needs to refer to the “subjective meaning” it has for the actor. He described how we understand action as spontaneous activity oriented to the future, so the span and unity of an action is determined by the “project” of which it is part. What is projected in action is the completed act, the goal of the action. One isn’t just “walking towards the window” (let alone just “putting one foot in front of the other”), one is “going to open the window.” Schutz called this the action’s “in-order-to motive.” The goal of an action defines its subjective meaning and is a necessary part of any description.

### **Typification and Language**

Our stock of knowledge consists in large part of being able to identify what types of thing we are dealing with. Schutz viewed the process of “*typification*” as an essential part of all social knowledge:

“The world, the physical as well as the sociocultural one, is experienced from the outset in terms of types: there are mountains, trees, birds, fishes, dogs, and among them Irish setters; there are cultural objects, such as houses, tables, chairs, books, tools, and among them hammers; and there are typical social roles and relationships, such as parents, siblings, kinsmen, strangers, soldiers, hunters, priests, etc. Thus, typifications on the commonsense level... emerge in the everyday experience of the world as taken for granted without any formulation of judgments or of neat propositions with logical subjects and predicates” (Schutz, 1970, p. 120)

Each of us has a generalized knowledge of types of things and their typical styles. Language is the “typifying medium *par excellence*” (1970, p. 96). “Language as used in everyday life.. Is primarily a language of named things and events” (p. 117).

Schutz pointed out that the life-world is composed of *multiple* realities, each of which is a distinct “finite province of meaning.” Primary among these is the intersubjective world of everyday life, the “world of the natural attitude with its dominant pragmatic motives,” but there are many others: the worlds of dreams, of fantasy, of science, of religion. Each region requires its own kind of epoché: “Individuals suspend doubt, not belief, in the Lebenswelt.” Each province has its distinct “style of lived experience” or cognitive style, a distinct accent to reality, distinct structures and spatial and temporal relations, and its own systems of relevance and schemes of interpretation. We “leap” among these worlds. For Schutz, the “world of scientific theory” is merely one of these multiple realities.

#### **Reality: Subjective or Intersubjective?**

We have seen that for Schutz the goal of phenomenological sociology was “explaining the thought-objects constructed by common sense” in terms of “the mental constructs or thought-objects of science” (p. 272). The social phenomenologist, in his view, proceeded by a process of “subjective interpretation” which aimed to grasp the “subjective point of view” of the individual. Schutz acknowledged that different people will have different constructs, generalizations, and typifications, but his interest was in the general process of forming these rather than in individual differences. Phenomenology was not a matter of understanding another person in their uniqueness or their specific situation. The goal was “the subjective point of view,” but of subjectivity in general.

Here Schutz ran directly into the contradiction of Kant’s anthropology. Can objective knowledge truly be based on subjective constructs? To his credit he recognized the difficulty:

“Indeed, the most serious question which the methodology of the social sciences has to answer is: How is it possible to form objective concepts and an objectively verifiable theory of subjective meaning-structures?” (Schutz, 1963a, p. 246)

His answer was that it is the “procedural rules” of science that enable the researcher to develop objective constructs. The scientist is “not involved in the observed situation,” because to him or her this

is “merely of cognitive interest” (p. 246). The scientist has “replaced his personal biographical situation by what I shall call... a scientific situation” and achieves “detachment from value patterns” that operate for the people studied. The scientist imagines “ideal actors” to whom he or she ascribes “typical notions, purposes, goals” in order to construct “a scientific model of human action” (1963a, p. 247) that can have “objective validity.” “The attitude of the social scientist is that of a mere disinterested observer of the social world” (Schutz, 1963b, p. 335).

But Schutz had become trapped by the implications of his own criticism of scientific sociology. He was surely correct to argue that the traditional sociologist takes for granted their form of life when they study the actions of people around them, and they should make it a topic of inquiry. But a truly “mere disinterested observer” would not be able to use the life-world as a resource. They would not be able to understand the actions of other people, or communicate their findings.

Kant’s contradiction is evident in Schutz’s phenomenology in a second way. Schutz set out to describe social reality and show how it is constituted. He insisted that social reality is intersubjective, but he viewed it as constituted by individual and subjective processes such as typification and generalization. At the same time he insisted that the “interpretive schemes” with which we understand our ongoing experiences are social and intersubjective, not personal and subjective. He had problems, however, in describing exactly how this was so. Schutz, like Husserl, was searching for universal structures, though they were structures *of* the life-world rather than “transcendental” structures somehow *underlying* the world of everyday life. But the status and character of these structures was unclear. How did individuals come to share the same schemes? Did they not change historically and, if so, how could they be universal? These problems stemmed from the fact that the task Schutz set himself was to describe how social reality is *experienced*, how an individual *knows* it. He was limited to exploring “the social cultural world as *experienced* by the common-sense *thinking* of men living their daily lives” (Schutz, 1963a, p. 236, emphasis added). What social reality actually *is*, as an *objective* reality, lay out of reach, just like Kant’s things-in-themselves. Ironically, Schutz’ study of the constitution of social reality was not able to grasp reality at all.

**The Social Construction of Reality: Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann**

“Only a few are concerned with the theoretical interpretation of the world, but everybody lives in a world of some sort” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 15)

There are now hundreds of books with the term “social construction” in the title, but the first was *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966). It soon became highly influential. Like Schutz (with whom they studied), Berger and Luckmann set out to study the reality of everyday life as experienced in “the commonsense of the ordinary members of society,” not the objective reality described by natural science or by the social sciences as they are usually practiced. But unlike Schutz, Berger and Luckmann insisted that society exists as *both* objective and subjective reality, and an adequate sociology must grasp both aspects. By including both the subjective and the objective reality of the social world they aimed to recast constitution as a truly *social* process, intersubjective rather than merely subjective. To do this, sociology needed to move in and out of the phenomenological attitude, and this was reflected in the organization of their book:

“Thus some problems are viewed within phenomenological brackets in Section I [*The Foundations of Knowledge in Everyday Life*], taken up again in Section II [*Society as Objective Reality*] with these brackets removed and with an interest in their empirical genesis, and then taken up once more in Section III [*Society as Subjective Reality*] on the level of subjective consciousness” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. vi)

The overall task was “a sociological analysis of the reality of everyday life, more precisely, of knowledge that guides conduct in everyday life” (p. 19) which would solve or avoid the problems that Schutz had encountered. Berger and Luckmann insisted that sociology is a science (and can be “value-free”), but it is one that must deal with “man *as* man”; it is a humanistic discipline:

“sociology must be carried on in a continuous conversation with both history and philosophy or lose its proper object of inquiry. This object is society as part of a human world, made by men, inhabited by men, and, in turn, making men, in an ongoing historical process. It is not the least fruit of a humanistic sociology that it reawakens our wonder at this astonishing phenomenon” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 189)

### **Sociology Neglects Members' Knowledge**

Like Schutz, Berger and Luckmann were critical of the idea that sociology can be a science of social institutions and processes that pays no attention to how these are understood by the people who participate in them. They insisted that sociology must pay attention to the "knowledge" that members of society have of their own circumstances. And they directly confronted the problem of the constitution of the social world, remarking on the fact that "the constitution of reality has traditionally been a central problem of philosophy" but "there has been a strong tendency for this problem, with all the questions it involves, to become trivialized in contemporary philosophy" with the result that the problem has moved from philosophy to the social sciences and "the sociologist may find himself, to his surprise perhaps, the inheritor of philosophical questions that the professional philosophers are no longer interested in considering" (p. 189).

Berger and Luckmann insisted that understanding constitution, the social construction of reality, is a necessary part of every kind of sociology. They proposed that "the analysis of the role of knowledge in the dialectic of individual and society, of personal identity and social structure, provides a crucial complementary perspective for all areas of sociology" (p. 168). Their aim was to provide "a systematic accounting of the dialectical relation between the structural realities and the human enterprise of constructing reality – in history" (p. 186). They were clear that "[t]he basic contentions of the argument of this book are implicit in its title and subtitle, namely, that reality is socially constructed and that the sociology of knowledge must analyze the processes in which this occurs" (p. 1).

Berger and Luckmann proposed that "the sociological understanding of 'reality' and 'knowledge' falls somewhere in the middle between that of the man in the street and that of the philosopher" (p. 2). The man in the street takes his specific reality for granted. The philosopher, in their view, aims to identify a genuine underlying reality. The sociologist, in contrast to both, cannot take either kind of reality for granted in part because she knows that different people inhabit different realities. This is why studying the construction of reality requires moving in and out of a phenomenological attitude.

### **Putting on and Removing Brackets**

Like Husserl and Schutz before them, Berger and Luckmann believed that a phenomenological sociology required bracketing the ontological assumptions of everyday life and science:

“The method we consider best suited to clarify the foundations of knowledge in everyday life is that of phenomenological analysis, a purely descriptive method and, as such, ‘empirical’ but not ‘scientific’ – as we understand the nature of the empirical sciences. The phenomenological analysis of everyday life, or rather of the subjective experience of everyday life, refrains from any causal or genetic hypotheses, as well as from assertions about the ontological status of the phenomenon analyzed” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 20)

The products of their phenomenological analysis resembled Schutz’s in several respects. Like Schutz, Berger and Luckmann emphasized the existence of different “spheres of reality.” Among these multiple realities the reality of everyday life is “reality par excellence,” experienced in a wide-awake state with the highest tension of consciousness. Here the world appears already “objectified,” full of objects defined *as* objects “before I arrive on the scene.” It is taken for granted, simply the world of “here” and “now,” an intersubjective world that I accept is shared with others. Generally this reality is routine and unproblematic, and problems are quickly integrated into the unproblematic.

### **Pragmatic, Recipe Knowledge**

Everyday life is dominated by the pragmatic motive, and a prominent ingredient in the social stock of knowledge is recipe knowledge – “that is, knowledge limited to pragmatic competence in routine performances.” People’s knowledge about everyday life is structured in terms of *relevances*: “It is irrelevant to me how my wife goes about cooking my favorite goulash as long as it turns out the way I like it” (p. 45). And “my relevance structures intersect with the relevance structures of others at many points, as a result of which we have ‘interesting’ things to say to each other” (p. 45). Other people are experienced in several different modes: in the prototypical case of face-to-face encounters, and in a continuum of progressively anonymous contacts apprehended by means of “typificatory schemes” (as “an ingratiating fellow,” “a salesman,” “an American”). Knowledge is socially distributed – different people have different kinds of expertise – and knowledge of *how* it is distributed is an important part of that stock of knowledge.

Also like Schutz, Berger and Luckmann considered face-to-face conversation to be the “the most important vehicle of reality maintenance” (p. 152), and they argued that an individual’s subjective reality is constantly maintained, modified, and reconstructed by “the working away of a conversational apparatus.” Much of this work is implicit: “most conversation does not in so many words define the nature of the world. Rather, it takes place against the background of a world that is silently taken for granted” (p. 152). It is precisely because casual conversation *is* casual that a taken-for-granted world and its routines are maintained. The reality of something never talked about becomes “shaky.” Things talked about, in contrast, are allocated their place in the real world. Conversation in face-to-face interaction is the principal way that language objectifies and realizes the world, “in the double sense of apprehending and producing it” (p. 153).

### **Moments in Social Construction**

Berger and Luckmann also agreed with Schutz that a science of the social world should not take its reality for granted, but they went further than he did in emphasizing the *historical* dimension of the construction of reality, and the “active dialectical process” whereby people maintain, modify and reshape the social structure as they are, at the same time, formed and shaped in their identity in social relationships:

“Man is biologically predestined to construct and to inhabit a world with others. This world becomes for him the dominant and definitive reality. Its limits are set by nature, but once constructed, this world acts back on nature. In the dialectic between nature and the socially constructed world the human organism itself is transformed. In this same dialectic man produces reality and thereby produces himself” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 183)

In their analysis, “society is understood in terms of an ongoing dialectical process composed of the three moments of *externalization, objectivation, and internalization*” (p. 129). Each of these moments “corresponds to an essential characterization of the social world. *Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product*” (p. 61, original emphasis). Externalization is how “social order is a human product, or, more precisely, an ongoing human production... It is important to stress that externalization... is an anthropological necessity ... Human being must ongoingly externalize itself

in activity" (p. 52). Objectification is "the process whereby the externalized products of human activity attain the character of objectivity" (p. 60). Internalization is "the process whereby the objectivated social world is retrojected into consciousness in the course of socialization" (p. 61).

To illustrate these three moments in the dialectical process of the social construction of reality, Berger and Luckmann invited the reader to imagine two people who come from "entirely different social worlds" but are marooned together on a desert island. As these two interact they produce "typifications" of each others behavior ("Aha, there he goes again") and they also assume the reciprocity of this typification process. Typifications become the basis for role playing, and these roles over time become habitualized. This is the beginnings of institutionalization, the process of *externalization* in which a micro-society is created as a product of human activity.

If the pair have children there is a qualitative change in their situation, as their "institutional world" (p. 58) is passed along to the new generation and "perfects itself" in the form of historical institutions which, now crystallized, have a reality "that confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact" (p. 58). Now we can speak of an objective social world, "in the sense of a comprehensive and given reality confronting the individual in a manner analogous to the reality of the natural world" (p. 59). The micro-society has become *objectified*, because it already existed prior to the children coming to act within it. The children, growing up in this micro-society and taking it for granted, are socialized into its habitual ways. This is the *internalization* in which humans become social.

### **Objective and Subjective Reality?**

Where Schutz had tried to explain the constitution of the social world in terms of individual consciousness, Berger and Luckmann aimed to bridge the gap between subjective experience of the social world and its objective reality. They introduced new and important considerations: the social relations in which social reality is constructed, the historical dimension of these, and the mutual constitution of person and world. It is not hard to see why their book has had a powerful and lasting impact. But at the same time their analysis moved uneasily between the "subjective" and "objective" aspects of society, aspects they tried to connect by appealing to processes of "externalization" and "internalization." They alternated between phenomenological investigation and objective analysis



without explaining how the two methods can be reconciled, given their criticism of traditional sociology. And as the phrase “sociology of knowledge” indicates, Berger and Luckmann continued to view “reality” primarily in terms of what people *know*, although they included “everything that passes for ‘knowledge’ in society,” including practical and commonsense knowledge:

“It will be enough, for our purposes, to define ‘reality’ as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition (we cannot ‘wish them away’), and to define ‘knowledge’ as the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics” (p. 1)

*The Social Construction of Reality* is filled with rich observations of a variety of phenomena such as schooling, religious conversion, and everyday interaction, and it explores the implications of these for our sense of what is real and who we are. But the conceptual framework of the book still approached the problem of the constitution of reality in Kantian terms, with an emphasis on what we *experience* as real. Unifying the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ aspects of social reality turned out to be a more difficult task than Berger and Luckmann had anticipated. Their account of constitution as a dialectical process of social construction did not end the search that Kant had begun for the basis to valid knowledge and ethical action.

### **Conclusions**

Husserl, Schutz, and Berger and Luckmann all accepted Kant’s proposal that reality as we know it is constituted. They shared the assumption that *knowing* the world gives it sense and order, though they differed on where this process of knowing was located. For Kant it had been the activity of transcendental reason, with universal categories of space, time, causality and object. For Husserl, transcendental subjectivity brings eidetic structures to the “hyletic” (sensory) data of perception, so that *every* object of our experience – trees, cats, tables and chairs – is a mental construct. For Schutz our individual mundane “common sense constructs,” our “typificatory schemes,” define the meaning of social phenomena and enable us to make sense of the world and get along in it. Berger and Luckmann placed two individuals face to face, in a reciprocity of *mutual* typification, but they too emphasized ways of *knowing* – “recipe knowledge” and so on – to explain how the world is *experienced* as real.

None of these approaches was able to make constitution do the work that Kant wanted it to do. None was able to build a bridge between individual subjective experience and objective reality. Each of them was critical of traditional inquiry for taking the objective reality of the world for granted, but none of them was able to demonstrate how this world is actually constituted by subjective experience.

**Insert Table 7.1 Conceptions of Constitution, part 1**

Hand-in-hand with their focus on knowledge and mental representation was the effort by all these people to avoid making any ontological claims. This began with Kant's insistence that although we must infer that things-in-themselves do exist, to go any further and say anything more definite about them would be speculative metaphysics. Husserl found even this limited claim unnecessarily metaphysical (or mystical). Even more stringently than Kant he avoided making any claims about the actual existence of the objects of experience. His interest was limited to bringing to light the mental machinery, the cognitive apparatus, that makes these objects *appear* real.

For Berger and Luckmann too "The phenomenological analysis of everyday life, or rather of the *subjective experience* of everyday life, *refrains* from any causal or genetic hypotheses, as well as from assertions about the *ontological status* of the phenomenon analyzed" (p. 20, emphasis added). But at the same time Berger and Luckmann asserted that society exists as *both* subjective reality and objective reality. These confused claims had the consequence that it was unclear whether the 'construction of reality' they described is an epistemological or ontological process.

The root problem is that, far from avoiding all ontological assumptions, each of these analyzes presumed a basic ontological distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, between the world as the individual experiences it and the world as it really is, between appearance and reality. This dualism of "the two realities" is inscribed in the structure of Berger and Luckmann's book, divided into sections on *Society as Objective Reality* and *Society as Subjective Reality*.

Once one accepts the Kantian dualism of things-in-themselves and things-as-they-appear it seems that one can study only an individual's *sense* of reality, their *experience* of reality. Berger and Luckmann recommended, in fact, that the words 'reality' and 'knowledge' always be placed within quotation marks.

But we were promised an explanation (or at least a description) of how *reality* is constituted (or constructed), not how a *sense* of reality comes about. To be told we are dealing not with reality but with 'reality' is disappointing. Such epistemological scepticism may seem apt when we are talking about *social reality*, because it may seem reasonable to say (as philosopher John Searle does in his book *The Construction of Social Reality* [1997]) that a piece of paper is not *really* money; we just come to *believe* that it is money. The problem is that if we are speaking only about individuals' beliefs, there is no more basis to say that it is *really* a piece of paper.

The insistence that one is not making ontological claims is diagnostic of a hidden ontological dualism. The key symptom is the appearance of doubles: "subjective reality" and "objective reality"; "noumenon" and "phenomenon"; "appearance" and "reality." With such a dualist ontology we are still in the terrain of Kant's representational model of human being. With this model we can only explore how the world can *appear* objective to an individual subjectivity. We can never solve the problem of how to test the validity of such an appearance. This kind of constitution – a construction of *knowledge* of the world – can never successfully draw a distinction between what is valid knowledge and what is mere opinion.

## Chapter 8

### Constitution as Ontological

“Consider that immortal ordinary society evidently, just in any actual case, is easily done and easily recognized with uniquely adequate competence, vulgar competence, by one and all — *and*, for all that, by one and all it is intractably hard to describe procedurally. Procedurally described, just in any actual case, it is *elusive*” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 8)

In this chapter I want to change your ontology! We saw in the last chapter how Husserl, Schutz, Berger and Luckmann tried to study the kind of constitution that Kant had identified, in which individual perception and reason together form representations of an external reality. We discovered how their ontological dualism prevented them from doing more than study the *experience* of ‘reality’ while, paradoxically, trying to bracket all claims about what actually is real. This chapter follows a different path, one which explores the *conditions* for the capacity to form subjective representations. I begin with Georg Hegel’s response to Kant, then continue with Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and finally Harold Garfinkel. Their work amounts to a different kind of phenomenology, one which explores a *non-dualist ontology*, a “radical realism.” Here constitution is viewed not as a matter of forming concepts or representations but as the forming of objects and subjects, an *ontological* rather than epistemological process. The focus shifts from conceptual knowledge, studied with a detached, theoretical attitude, to practical, embodied know-how, studied in an involved way. Know-how provides a way to *see* the world. By the end of the chapter I hope to have convinced *you* to see people and objects as inextricably one with their forms of life, and to see reason and thinking as cultural, historical, and grounded in practical know-how.

The analyses in the last chapter started from the assumption that we are naturally creatures with minds, an inner space in which representations are formed, and asked how these representations are structured, and under what circumstances they are valid.

Yet these human and social sciences – in both their experimental and qualitative forms – have been unable to escape from a persistent anxiety which makes evident the problems in Kant’s

anthropology. If Kant were correct that individual subjectivity is active – that each person creates their own subjective model of the world – how could this be reconciled with the view that science deals with the ‘objectivity’ of things in the world: physical things (the natural sciences), organic things (biological sciences), or human things (the human sciences)?

Once ‘mind’ and ‘world’ have been located in two separate realms, once we assume that humans are naturally and fundamentally individuals, each with a mind that forms representations, then skepticism about the world, about other minds, about the validity of knowledge and the basis for ethics, becomes unavoidable.

### **What More?**

This question provided plenty of work for those who followed, and wanted to improve, Kant’s analysis. Since the Enlightenment the new human sciences – sociology, anthropology, psychology – have busied themselves studying people’s representations. They have mirrored the work of the biological and physical sciences – those studied objective reality, the new sciences studied, in large part, subjective reality. They didn’t stop to ask whether representation was the whole story, or where the capacity for representation came from.

It should now be obvious that we *cannot* solve the epistemological and ethical problems which troubled Kant within the representational model of man. We need a different model: a different ontology. The more fundamental question that must be asked is, how is mind possible? How is it that we *become* people who can represent the world in an inner space? We must explore ‘what *more*’ there is to human beings, above and beyond the capacity to form mental representations.

The work of the people who have raised this question has been the basis for a completely different exploration of constitution. They have turned Kant’s analysis upside down and explored the possibility that some more basic way that humans are involved in the world constitutes both that world *and* the human capacity for representation. Like the people in the previous chapter they have explored the relationship between mind and world, between representation and represented, but with very different conclusions. (See Box 8.1.)

### The Phenomenology of *Geist*: Georg Hegel

“In pressing forward to its true existence, consciousness will arrive at a point at which it gets rid of its semblance of being burdened with something alien, with what is only for it, and some sort of ‘other,’ at a point where appearance becomes identical with essence, so that its exposition will coincide at just this point with the authentic Science of Spirit. And finally, when consciousness itself grasps this its own essence, it will signify the nature of absolute knowledge itself” (Hegel, 1807/1977, p. 57)

The story begins with the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). At first Hegel intended merely to develop Kant’s philosophy, but he came to see that it had profound difficulties. Kant’s view that the mind constitutes an individual’s experience of an objective world by providing the transcendental concepts of space, time, causality and object seemed to Hegel to effectively *double* both object and subject. The object was doubled into *noumenon* (thing-in-itself) and *phenomenon* (appearance), while the subject was divided into an empirical subjectivity and a transcendental ego. Kant himself was satisfied that he had shown how subject and object are linked at the level of experience, though they appear to be distinct. But at the level of reflection, subjectivity (the transcendental ego) and objectivity (the thing-in-itself) were still completely separate in Kant’s account. Kant’s analysis seemed to imply that we are truly and fully human only when we accept this separation from natural and social reality, and that this is how we best exercise our capacity for reason.

In Hegel’s view, Kant also failed to bridge the gap between knowledge – the realm of science – and action – the realm of politics, morality and religion (Solomon, 1983, p. 77ff). For example, the notion of the world-in-itself permitted Kant to conceive of God as standing outside space and time but still as a necessary figure in human faith and morality. To Hegel, this ended up separating components whose relationship Kant had been trying to explain.

Hegel’s genius was not to try to eliminate these tensions and contradictions but to interpret them as aspects of an evolving unity. They became opposing sides in his famous dialectic of *thesis*,

*antithesis, synthesis* (though Hegel himself never used these terms). The resulting philosophy has had a profound impact on many schools of thought, including existentialism, Marx's historical materialism, and psychoanalysis. Hegel's writing is notoriously difficult and there are many different interpretations of his ideas (e.g., Rockmore, 1997; Solomon, 1983; Taylor, 1975). Here I will give only a brief summary of two of his central proposals: that human reason is a cultural and historical phenomenon, and that consciousness follows a path towards more complex and adequate ways of knowing both self and world. These proposals open up a fresh way of thinking of humans in which the mind is reconceptualized as the way we are involved in the world.

### **Reason has a History**

Hegel proposed that Kant had not been sufficiently critical of his own critique. Kant's error, said Hegel, lay in his appeal to a rationality that lay outside human practice on a transcendental plane. Kant had failed to explain how he could adopt his own critical position. He had claimed that reason provides the conditions for the possibility of experience, but had failed to explore the conditions for the possibility of reason. Hegel's response was to put reason – and the reasoner (the philosopher, the thinker) – back in their proper place, in the tide of human affairs, that's to say in history. Reason, Hegel argued, also has a history. Any investigation of the conditions for knowledge must start from a position *within* this historical process of coming to know.

One simple way to put this is that what we call reason – whether it is logic, mathematics, or the differential calculus – has been figured out over time. It only seems timeless and eternal once it is complete. Mind itself, for Hegel, is not part of a universal, timeless human nature but has developed over history, and will continue to develop. The human mind is worldly and secular, not transcendental or spiritual.

Similarly, Hegel proposed that Kant had failed to grasp the concrete character of moral problems and dilemmas. He shared Kant's view that to be moral we must be rational and make free choices, but he believed that individual ethical choice cannot be separated from social contexts. Self-conscious moral action, Hegel proposed, is based upon social practices and institutions. He developed a

*concrete* ethics in which he described the ethical ideals of his particular society. The morality that Kant had argued was universal was in reality a middle-class, western morality. If values become universal, Hegel argued, it will only be because communities expand and become international.

Hegel insisted that any attempt to base knowledge or morality on the individual will inevitably fail. Such ethical and epistemological theories are possible only because we are members of a community, but because they start from the individual they will be formal and empty. Analyses such as Kant's presuppose a background of social practices which they fail to examine or question. They assume that the individual is merely an isolated atom, outside society and culture, and only reinforce the "alienation" (*Entfremdung*) of the individual in modern society. Hegel argued that knowledge is always the product of participation in a organized, ethical community and the basis of morality is to be found in the "reason" of this community. This organized community life, what he called *Sittlichkeit*, is the practices and customs each of us is born into. "*Sittlichkeit* is morality as established custom, not a set of principles. [It] is shared activity, shared interests, shared pleasures" (Solomon, 1983, p. 534). In modern society, Hegel suggested, these practices are the basis for individualism and a modern bourgeois morality which divides public from private life, personal from community values, and pits each individual's interests against the other's (p. 491).

### **Consciousness Follows a Path**

Hegel sought a way of both recognizing and resolving the opposition and conflict between subjectivity and objectivity and (what amounted to the same thing) the opposition between idealist and empiricist theories of knowledge. He suggested that there is "subjectivity at the level of objectivity" (Hyppolite, 1946/1974, p. 83). What does this mean? Hegel, just like Husserl, saw consciousness as intentional:

"When we experience, say, a table within consciousness, we understand our perception to refer to a table beyond consciousness, in the same way phenomenologists such as Brentano and Husserl use the concept of intentionality as the property of consciousness to be directed towards something. In



the process of knowing, the distinction between what appears and what is, is overcome. At the limit, when we fully know, knowing becomes truth" (Rockmore, 1997, p. 30)

Husserl appreciated that when we experience a table, we understand our perception to refer to a real table that is partly beyond our present experience. It has, for example, a hidden side. But Hegel saw also that experience grows and changes, and he proposed that in the process of knowing the distinction between the table as we experience it and the table as it is can be overcome. Our experience can become increasingly *adequate* to the object. Achieving this adequacy requires being able to distinguish between the object experienced and how we experience it, and this in turn requires self-knowledge and self-consciousness.

So Hegel acknowledged things-in-themselves, but unlike Kant he argued that we can come to know them. Such knowledge is "scientific" knowledge (though science for Hegel was part of philosophy). Where Kant had offered an analysis only of how things *appear*, Hegel argued that we can know how things *are*. The distinction between "our view of the object within consciousness" and "the object of that view within consciousness" is a distinction which we can become consciously aware of. Where Kant had discounted any claim about things-in-themselves as "speculative metaphysics," Hegel maintained that such claims can be rational and grounded:

"Kant illustrates the effort, widespread in modern philosophy, to know an independent external object through an analysis of the relation between the knowing subject and its object. Yet there is no way to grasp the relation of whatever appears within consciousness to an independent external reality. Hegel's solution is to replace this relation through a very different relation between a subject and an object that falls entirely within consciousness. Knowledge is not a process of bringing our view of the object into correspondence with an independent external object, but rather a process of bringing our view of the object within consciousness into correspondence with the object of that view within consciousness" (Rockmore, 1997, p. 28-29)

This difference between Hegel and Kant on our ability to know things-in-themselves is important because, as we have seen, many contemporary constructivists believe they must avoid saying anything

specific about reality. Hegel offered a constructivism in which ontology plays a central role. He offered an ontology in which knowledge is constituted, but in which the knowing subject and the known object are constituted too. Where Kant had taken for granted the existence of the individual subject who represents the world, Hegel studied both the conditions of experience *and* the conditions for the possibility of the subject who experiences.

As Husserl would do, Hegel called his approach “phenomenology.” The term reflected his view that philosophy should examine knowing as it actually occurs, and study consciousness as it actually exists. His *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) was the study of how consciousness or mind appears to itself. The title has been translated both as *Phenomenology of Mind* and as *Phenomenology of Spirit*; the German word *Geist* can mean mind, spirit, or even ghost. Hegel’s working title was *Science of the Experience of Consciousness*. Whatever the translation, *Geist* should be understood as both subject and object, a unified subject/object. For at least one modern commentator, Hegel’s “concept of spirit is roughly a view of people in the sociocultural context as the real subject of knowledge” (Rockmore, 1997, p. 4).

Hegel proposed that there is a reflexive capacity to consciousness: an immediate, noncognitive relation of the self to itself. Consciousness always relates to an object and at the same time *distinguishes* itself from that object: this apple is an object for *me*: it is a being for *my* awareness. Knowing is not a relationship to something outside consciousness, but a relationship *within* consciousness.

If the distinction between subject and object emerges *within* consciousness, it follows that consciousness cannot be something within the *subject* (in the head, or made up of mental states). For Hegel consciousness is a relationship *between* a subject (knowing and acting) and an object (known and acted upon), a relationship which is always social and can only develop fully in specific kinds of social practices and institutions. Hegel insisted, moreover, that to recognize this one cannot find a position *outside* the natural attitude, such as Husserl’s transcendental attitude. We can describe consciousness only from within our natural, everyday experience. And since this experience *develops* there is no single, fixed and unchanging natural attitude; each of us progresses through a series of attitudes. Hegel

believed that he was standing at the end of the process of the development of consciousness, able to look back and describe it.

The *Phenomenology of Mind*, then, offered “an exposition of how knowledge makes its appearance” (Hegel, 1807/1977, p. 49). It was a description (phenomenological) of the way human beings come to know: of “the path of the natural consciousness which presses forward to true knowledge.” It described how “the series of configurations which consciousness goes through along this road is, in reality, the detailed history of the *education* [*Bildung*] of consciousness itself to the standpoint of Science” (p. 50, original emphasis), even though at times it seems “a highway of despair” (p. 135):

“Hegel’s phenomenological self-reflection summons dogmatism by reflectively reconstructing the self-formative process (*Bildungsprozess*) of mind (*Geist*)” (McCarthy, 1978, p. 79)

The historical unfolding of human consciousness is expressed in reason. Hegel described this unfolding as a dialectical process in which understanding moves from certainty to uncertainty and contradiction and then on to certainty again. Limited kinds of understanding are progressively incorporated into a whole. The first kind is “sense-certainty”: immediate sensuous experience of the here and now. This becomes what Hegel calls perception, then understanding. This is followed by self-consciousness, and then consciousness of others. Next comes consciousness of society as an objective reality, and finally consciousness of how society is produced through human activity. Natural consciousness passes through this series of stages or phases, of natural skepticism, doubt, and despair, and finally becomes self-critical consciousness. First, we take things to be just the way they appear to be. Then, we come to experience a distinction between things as they appear and things as they are. We eventually become conscious of the way our own consciousness has been shaped by our biography and by our own society – we come to see society as an objective reality. Then we become conscious of the way society is itself a product of human activity. And finally we become aware of ourselves as a manifestation of something grander, and know that individual consciousness is not self-sufficient or

complete. "For Hegel, the highest form of knowledge turns out to be self-knowledge, or knowing oneself in otherness and otherness as oneself" (Rockmore, 1997, p. 188):

"Beginning with the natural consciousness of the everyday life world in which we already find ourselves, phenomenological reflection traces its own genesis through the successive stages of the manifestation of consciousness" (McCarthy, 1978, p. 79)

Knowing is first "in-itself," then "for-itself," and finally "in-and-for-itself." An object is first (for sense-certainty) mere being, then (for perception) a concrete thing, then (for understanding) a force – always seemingly in-itself. Then, with self-consciousness, this in-itself turns out to be a mode in which the object is for me: the 'I' is a connecting of the object's in-itself and for-me. That is to say, the appearance/reality distinction presumes an 'I' to and for whom reality appears. Self-consciousness has a double object.

In Hegel's view there is both a direction, a teleology, to this process and an end to it. Knowing is a "dialectical movement which consciousness exercises on itself, both on its knowledge and on its object" (1807/1967, p. 55). Knowing is not a single event but a process extended over time. Hegel was "an epistemological optimist" (Rockmore, 1997). He saw consciousness developing from a state of immediacy towards a knowing that is aware of itself, and finally to a knowledge that is "absolute." Hegel maintained that the dialectic would proceed to a point where "the partiality of perspectives can be progressively overcome" (Held, 1980, p. 177). In Hegel's account this "absolute knowledge" is the final working out, the final development, of *Geist*.

As Hegel viewed it, this dialectic is both the way history unfolds *and* the process of individual thinking. It is both because these two – history and thought – are not distinct. Remember that both the human mind and Geist itself are found *in* nature and *in* history. Hegel called the "governing principle" of thought "determinate negation." It is a "continuous criticism and reconstruction of the knowledge of subject and object as their relation to one another" (Held, 1980, p. 176). It "consists precisely in surmounting old forms of consciousness and in incorporating these moments into a new reflective attitude" (p. 176). Understood this way, Hegel's phenomenology is itself an exercise in thinking: it is a

critical reflection that explores the conditions of *its own* possibility – the historical and cultural process by which it has come about. It is reasoning that doesn't take itself for granted, reflection that asks how reflection can be possible. This is the approach, the method, necessary to trace the development of *Geist*.

### **A New Model of Human Being**

At the heart of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is a powerful historical narrative that weaves together cultural history and individual development. Darwin would not publish *On the Origin of Species* for another 50 years, but today we can add evolution to a picture in which humans have evolved from simpler life-forms which themselves developed from insensate matter. We are substance that became first self-reproducing, then sentient, then conscious, then self-conscious, then conscious of the concrete conditions of its own consciousness. Hegel imagined this evolutionary journey ultimately culminating in a consciousness that can know this process of its own formation and self-formation, and which can overcome the apparent distinction between itself as subject and the world as object by *transforming* the world to *make* it rational.

### **Ontological Hermeneutics: Martin Heidegger**

"World is not something subsequent which we calculate as a result from the sum of all beings. The world comes not afterward but beforehand, in the strict sense of the word. Beforehand: that which is unveiled and understood already in advance in every existent Dasein before any apprehending of this or that being.... We are able to come up against intraworldly beings solely because, as existing beings, we are always already in a world" (Heidegger, 1975/1982, p. 165).

Hegel's grand system was not the final word. The philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) objected to what he called Hegel's "onto-theo-ego-logy" (Heidegger, 1980/1988): his treatment of time as basically spatial. This might seem a strange thing to say, given Hegel's emphasis on history. But Heidegger's point was that the historical movement of Hegel's phenomenology comes to an end in timelessness, in the totality of a final system in which no change will be necessary, and so none will be

possible. "Hegelian time lacks what is truly proper to time: contingency, freedom, exposure to the future" (Caputo, p. 18). In Hegel's account:

"The eternal logical structure of Geist is always the same. Appreciating the ceaseless activity of Geist is essential for understanding history, the rise and fall of political and social institutions, the development of the stages of consciousness. However, from the perspective of logic, of Geist as *Nous* or Reason, Geist displays an eternal, necessary, rational structure" (Bernstein, 1971, p. 22)

Heidegger set out to "appropriate" and "radicalize" Hegel (1975/1982, , p. 178). He argued that both philosophy and science have forgotten the *world* in which we live. This sounds like Husserl and Schutz, but Heidegger considered this world to be where human beings *are*, rather than something around us. For Heidegger, the world is the "ground" for all the entities – whether people or objects – encountered within it. Heidegger set out to clarify what it is to be human on the basis of this insight. Human being is not a mind or a self, it is "being-in-the-world," a unitary structure of our complete involvement in the totality of a form of life.

### **Being is an Issue for Human Beings**

Heidegger began with the observation that it is only for humans that "being is an issue." Only people ask the questions, 'What is that?,' 'Who am I?' It is somehow fundamental to human being – to the human way of being – that we try to understand (*verstehen*) and interpret the kinds of entities that we deal with every day. It is often said that with Heidegger hermeneutics became ontological. That is to say, he proposed that interpretation is not simply a special way of dealing with texts, it is something intrinsically human. To be human *is* to understand and interpret, so interpretation is not a special method but a fundamental aspect of human being. Understanding is a matter of grasping an entity as a certain kind of being, and at the same time to have a grasp of what it is to be human. (We saw in chapter 4 how Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, drew on this idea that interpretation is grounded in understanding.)

Heidegger seems to have been a thoroughly unpleasant person. He betrayed his mentor, Edmund Husserl, breaking off contact when Husserl was excluded from the university by the Nazi party, and he betrayed his wife by having an affair with his student Hannah Arendt. He not only sympathized with the Nazi regime, he also refused to repudiate either the regime or his own actions after the Second World War. This raises the question of whether a person's work, whether it is philosophy or any other activity, should be judged in terms of how they live. In Heidegger's case the answer is surely yes. Heidegger's philosophy was a philosophy of existence – it was precisely a philosophical exploration of how to live. When its author failed so conspicuously we must consider his philosophy with critical care.

Yet Heidegger was attempting something interesting and difficult, rethinking one of the central questions of philosophy. That he failed should perhaps not cause surprise, though certainly regret. He proposed that philosophy had consistently misunderstood what it is for something to *be*. It had focused on *beings* – individual entities – instead of *being*, just assuming that being has only two possibilities, 'matter' and 'mind.' Heidegger proposed instead that actually there are many different *ways* for both people and things to be, ways that are made possible by history and culture.

### **A Phenomenology Focused on Ontology**

Heidegger's conceptions of phenomenology and of the constitutive relationship in human being were very different from those of his teacher Husserl. In *Being and Time* (1927) Heidegger raised what he called "the question of the meaning of being." This sounds like some kind of existentialist question, but for Heidegger it meant, what makes being possible? What makes it possible for a thing – or a person – to be? Heidegger's answer was that things and people become what they are only against a ground, a taken-for-granted background, of cultural and historical practices. For Heidegger a phenomenological analysis means the investigation of what underlies all particular entities and allows them to show up *as* entities.

Heidegger drew a distinction between existence and being. He was a realist: he didn't believe that if all humans died the universe would stop existing. But when he insisted that being is an issue

only to humans he meant that if there were no humans around, entities would have no being. The being of an entity is made *possible* by the human practices in which it circulates. A dollar, for instance, is constituted by specific economic practices which occur only in certain societies, and developed at a particular historical juncture. Outside such contexts, no piece of paper with printing on it would *be* a dollar. This is an ontological claim, not an epistemological claim. We may in addition *know* things about this dollar, and say things about it. But these beliefs and assertions are not what make it a dollar: an individual may know nothing about it, yet it is still what it is.

There is no way to grasp what something *is* outside of a human context. If all humans were to die, the cup in front of me would still exist, but it wouldn't *be* anything. It wouldn't be a cup, because being a cup is a matter of involvement in practices like drinking, and with no humans there would be no such practices. And it wouldn't even be a piece of "matter," because being matter is also based on involvement in the practices of a culture of scientists. We have learned from Kuhn that the understanding of matter changed dramatically when the paradigm of Newtonian physics was replaced by the paradigm of Einsteinian physics. As Kuhn pointed out, different scientific paradigms understand differently the being of the entities they deal with. It is tempting to think that there is a neutral descriptions of things outside particular cultural practices, perhaps in terms of atoms, or quarks, or some fundamental particles. But this doesn't make sense; there is no 'view from nowhere,' because 'being' is what is an issue for humans. Humans care about what something is. No humans, no concern.

Clearly this is not idealism, either transcendental or naïve. It is not the view that the world which we take to be real is 'actually' just ideas in our minds. Heidegger's view was that what is real is what our public cultural practices define as real. Each culture defines specific ways to be, for example in US culture there is "a market" and "commodities," and "consumers" and "voters." So it is clear that, far from avoiding or bracketing all ontological claims, Heidegger's phenomenology *focused* on ontological matters and undertook an ontological analysis of them.

For Heidegger, the grasp humans have of the entities around us (and of ourselves) comes not from contemplation and intellectual conceptualizations, as Kant and Husserl thought, but from practical



activity. For Husserl the slogan “to the things themselves!” meant adopting the disinterested attitude of transcendental subjectivity. For Heidegger it meant, pick up the cup! It is in our everyday practical activity that we have the most direct access to things, and understand what they are. We experience the world not by thinking about it but in practical engagement, in concrete activities such as hammering. Human beings are *in* the world in the sense not of spatial inclusion but of practical involvement. We are involved; we care. For this reason Heidegger said that human being – the human way of being – is *Dasein* (German, literally “being there”). *Dasein* is “being-in-the-world,” fundamentally part of a world defined by public practices. Heidegger offered “an understanding of the agent as engaged, as embedded in a culture, a form of life, a ‘world’ of involvements, ultimately to understand the agent as embodied” (Taylor, 1993, p. 318).

Heidegger insisted that “adequate treatment of the ontology of *Dasein* is the presupposition for posing the problem whose solution Kant takes as his task” (Heidegger, 1975/1982, p. 56). To understand how humans can know the world we need first to examine our “basic constitution” (p. 59). Understanding begins with practical activity in the world. When we stand back and contemplate with detachment and objectivity the result is a distorted view. Know-how, practical coping, is a concrete grasping in which things are what they are:

“In *Being and Time*, *Verstehen* [understanding] is precisely that knowledge which informs *Dasein*’s most concrete involvement with the world. *Dasein* knows what it is about without having explicit conceptual knowledge to fall back upon. *Verstehen* is the capacity to understand what is demanded by the situation in which *Dasein* finds itself, a concrete knowledge which gets worked out in the process of existence itself. It is the grasp which *Dasein* has of its own affairs but which cannot be reduced to formalized knowledge and rendered explicit in terms of rules” (Caputo, 1987, p. 109)

### **Modes of Engagement**

Heidegger offered an important analysis of understanding and interpretation (Table 8.1). He proposed that understanding is always situated in place and time: it has the quality that Heidegger

called “thrown-projection,” with three aspects. First, humans understand the entities they deal with, and themselves, in terms of a “project,” a tacit practical task or undertaking. Second, understanding always involves projection upon a context: the background cultural practices that provides what Heidegger called “the meaning of being.” And, third, each of us is thrown into a world we did not create or choose. This existential structure of “thrown-projection” shows that *time* is central to being human.

Interpretation develops from this situated understanding. Heidegger distinguished three “modes of engagement.” The first is the understanding we obtain in a practical activity, such as hammering. When this activity is going smoothly, when it is routine, we are absorbed in what we are doing, not at all reflective about our activity – we ‘lose ourselves’ in it. If we are using the hammer to build a fence, for example, the tool will be transparent and we will be aware only of our effort to drive in a nail, or to get a board in place, or even, if all this is going smoothly, simply to get the fence finished. If we are involved in a routine everyday conversation (buying a cup of coffee, perhaps) then the words, the turns and moves of the dialog, are transparent and we will be aware only of the aim of the conversation: getting our coffee. In this first mode, Heidegger says that entities are “ready-to-hand” for us. In smooth activity the world is an invisible background to what we are doing, taken for granted and unnoticed. Our understanding is tacit and unreflective, as much a matter of emotion (which Heidegger viewed as a aspect of being-in-the-world) as of thinking. In this mode we encounter not objects but tools and equipment which have practical relevance for our projects.

### **Table 8.1: The Relationship Between Understanding and Interpretation**

But humans do, of course, have reflective and explicit ways of knowing the world and knowing ourselves. Understanding can be “developed” as interpretation. Interpretation, according to Heidegger, is “the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding” (1927/1962, p. 189). Interpretation is an explication, a making thematic, of what has been understood in practice. Activity never goes completely smoothly; there are always repairs to be made, in human conversations just as much as with tools. When there is a *breakdown* (or when something is missing, or when there is a hitch of some kind, or when we make a mistake) various aspects of the world-person-tool relationship become apparent.

The broken tool now becomes noticed, and an aspect of it now stands out. The marker for the white-board is 'dried out'; the hammer is 'too heavy'; the book we wanted to buy is 'not cheap enough'; the lecture we are listening to is 'too long.' In each case the aspect that stands out depends on the context; it is defined by the activity or project we are engaged in. The hammer is too heavy for *this* particular nailing task; the lecture is too long for *this* sunny day in wintry Ann Arbor. In this second mode of engagement, entities become "unready-to-hand." *What they are* becomes apparent. That's to say, their *being* is evident.

When there is a breakdown we look around, surveying our circumstances, noticing the project or course of action we are engaged in, in order to start to work out alternatives and begin repair. Heidegger called this looking around "circumspection." Noticing ones project he called "reflection"; working out alternatives is "deliberation." The way the tool was grasped in practice now becomes evident as one possibility among many. The "equipmental totality" in which we are operating, and which has provided an invisible background for our activity, now becomes apparent. And the setting is now lit up, as we become aware of other tools that may be helpful.

Occasions of breakdown involve a shift from the first to the second mode of engagement with things and people, a shift from "participation" to "circumspection." The relationship between those two modes can be seen as a hermeneutic circle: the way tools were grasped and understood in practice is now articulated and interpreted.

This means that interpretation is never free from presuppositions. It is never a detached, objective or neutral observation of an object, event, or text. Interpretation is always based on what Heidegger called a "fore-structure" of interests and tacit assumptions, a fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-grasp (Table 8.2). I have already cited Heidegger's criticism of those interpreters who claim to have no preconceptions, and to report only what "emerges" from the text:

"If, when one is engaged in a particular concrete kind of interpretation, in the sense of exact textual Interpretation, one likes to appeal to what 'stands there,' then one finds that what

'stands there' in the first instance is nothing other than the obvious undiscussed assumption of the person who does the interpreting" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 192)

A *true* interpretation is one which uncovers and points out some aspect of the current situation that has relevance to the practical task at hand. The claim that "this hammer is too heavy" can be perfectly true, though of course it will be a *local* truth, relevant only to a specific situation. Heidegger argues that *all* truth claims are of this kind. Truth cannot be viewed as a correspondence between a mental representation and a material object. Heidegger proposes instead that truth be conceived as "uncovering."

A third mode of engagement is possible, one of detached contemplation. In this attitude entities *seem* to be self-sufficient objects with specific, independent properties. We seem to be completely separate from objects like the hammer, and to be a completely different *kind* of being. It seems that we know objects only by forming mental representations of them. But it is only in this mode that the apparently distinct realms of 'the mental' and 'the material' appear. This estranged kind of non-relationship between subject and object can arise only on the basis of the more fundamental understanding characteristic of practical involvement.

Heidegger argued that the principal error made by philosophers since the ancient Greeks – including Descartes, Kant, and Husserl – had been to give priority to this third mode of engagement, when in fact it is "privative" and derived from the other two. Descartes' efforts to "rid myself of all opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation" (1637, 1641/2003, p. 66) and Husserl's efforts to adopt a transcendental attitude avoiding everyday involvement and so gain access to "the things themselves" both illustrate this mistake. This way of knowing has been taken to be 'objective,' but Heidegger argued that this is an illusion. Contemplation always takes for granted the cultural and historical practices that define both objects and the person contemplating them.

### **A Basic Relationality**

Heidegger proposed that the cognitive processes that Kant described are constituted in and by this more fundamental level of human being, our engagement in and relatedness to the world. Kant's reconstruction of knowledge and ethics took this practical involvement for granted:

"When Kant talks about a relation of the thing to the cognitive faculty it now turns out that this way of speaking and the kind of inquiry that arises from it are full of confusion. The thing does not relate to a cognitive faculty interior to the subject; instead, the cognitive faculty itself and with it this subject are structured intentionally in their ontological constitution" (Heidegger, 1975/1982, p. 66)

Kant had ignored the fundamental involvement of humans in the world, involvement that is practical, emotional, and concerned. Intentionality – the way perception is always a relationship to something in the world – is fundamental to being human. Kant cheated: he "has to make use" of this basic relationality in his analysis of perception and knowledge "without expressly recognizing it as such" (p. 67).

Heidegger reminds us that humans are involved and caring. We are not detached observers of the world, we are always embedded in a specific cultural and historical setting, and our understanding of ourselves and the entities we encounter is grounded in our practical activity in this setting. We have here an ontology that emphasizes a "contextualized" relationship between subject and object: both people and the various kinds of objects they deal with are always situated in a world that provides a background against which they can stand out. In *Being and Time* Heidegger generally treated language as a tool, something ready-to-hand. But in addition to this instrumental treatment of language he also at times used a "constitutive" view of language as "not so much a tool on hand for our use as a medium in which man dwells" (Guignon, 1983, p. 118). "On the constitutive view, language generates and first makes possible our full-blown sense of the world" (p. 118). Heidegger would develop this notion of the constitutive power of language in his later writing. Ultimately, in Heidegger's analysis, we will come to understand that we have no fixed nature, that we will die, and in this sense that we are "homeless" on this earth. Facing up to this existential challenge and finding the resoluteness to go on is what

Heidegger viewed as coming to have an authentic relation to oneself. It is here, in his analysis of what he considered authentic existence, that we find the most troubling aspects of his philosophy. Here, he claimed, each human being must face the future as a matter of fate or destiny, live each moment with resolve, and seek to retrieve and hand down its heritage. But even if we do not accept his conclusions about how we ought to live, Heidegger's analysis moved along the path towards a new non-dualistic way of thinking about *constitution*.

### **A Phenomenology of Embodiment: Maurice Merleau-Ponty**

"Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 203)

The next step on this path was taken in the philosophical writing of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), who also focused attention on what Kant forgot. Merleau-Ponty noted how "Kant's conclusion... was that I am a consciousness which embraces and constitutes the world, and this reflective action caused him to overlook the phenomenon of the body and that of the thing" (1945/1962, p. 303). Merleau-Ponty focused on the embodied character of human action, perception, and knowledge. For most philosophers and social scientists the body has been irrelevant (Fraser & Greco, 2005, p. 1). After all, the body is stuff, matter, and surely what is important to explore is mind? But Merleau-Ponty emphasized that our material embodiment makes us *one with* the world. He proposed that conceptual representation and thought are ways of *perceiving*, and perception is a way of *being*. Like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty conceived of phenomenology as an effort to study a level of experience of the world that is *prior* to that of explicit knowledge. But like Heidegger, he viewed this level as that of practical activity, of an embodied subjectivity, the "body-subject." By showing the dialectical relationship between the body-subject and the world his phenomenology avoided the dualism of subjectivity and objectivity. And he offered a new conception of rationality; he argued that reason and meaning exist not in the head but in the world.

### **Forms of Behavior**

Merleau-Ponty started to explore “the relations of consciousness and nature” in *The Structure of Behavior* (1942/1963, p. 3). Kant and his followers, as we have seen, considered the objective world as a mental construction: “an objective unity constituted vis-à-vis consciousness” (p. 4). Scientists tend to view consciousness as a natural phenomenon and look for its causes and effects. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology provided an approach to the problem that was “underneath” both positions (which he referred to as “intellectualism” and “objectivism”) allowing him to inspect their foundations. Like Hegel, he started “from below” (p. 4) by looking at contemporary research in psychology and physiology and showing that its findings contradict its implicit ontology. He began with the notion of behavior, “neither thing nor consciousness” (p. 127), which takes place within a natural world yet in some sense emerges from an organism. Merleau-Ponty distinguished three fundamental organizations or “forms” of behavior – the “syncretic,” the “amovable” and the “symbolic” (p. 93). These are increasingly sophisticated in their capacity to generalize and transform the concrete situation into a *typical* situation (p. 125). Syncretic behavior is “imprisoned in the framework of its natural conditions” (p. 104). A toad will persist in its efforts to grab at a worm placed behind glass. At the amovable level we see the emergence of *signals*: a chicken can learn simple distinctions, such as between dark and light corn. But the symbolic structures of behavior show flexibility and a “multiplicity of perspectives” (p. 122) that are absent from animal behavior. A chimpanzee “manifests a sort of adherence to the here and now, a short and heavy manner of existing” (p. 126), but symbolic behavior is able to incorporate and restructure the simpler structures of behavior. This is a “third dialectic” (p. 184) in which, again following Hegel, Merleau-Ponty proposed that the freedom to change perspectives gives a new dimension to the structure of behavior and makes possible a new “existential order.” Culture emerges in the temporal gap between stimulus and response, and language transcends concrete facts. The human subject, *conscious* of nature, is the product of a dialectic which is part of nature.

Merleau-Ponty’s radical conclusion was that consciousness is not something intellectual but is practical and perceptual. He proposed that “The mental, we have said, is reducible to the structure of behavior” (p. 221). Human action contains an intentionality prior to representation, and a kind of understanding prior to cognition. We need to “define transcendental philosophy anew” because it turns

out that the meaning that “springs forth” in things “is not yet a Kantian object; the intentional life which constitutes them is not yet a representation; and the ‘comprehension’ which gives access to them is not yet an intellection” (p. 224). Kant had reduced all our connection with the world to an intellectual, conceptual contact. He had appealed to a kind of reflection in which the thinking subject discovers that they are free. Merleau-Ponty insisted that this consciousness of self “is not given by right,” it requires “elucidation” of ones “concrete being” (p. 223). Kant had failed to penetrate to the profound truths of our embodied existence. His philosophy had claimed to “lay bare only what was implicit” but could it not better be said that it had merely entered “as into a lucid dream, not because it has clarified the existence of things and its own existence, but because it lives at the surface of itself and on the envelope of things?” (p. 223).

### **Slackening the Threads**

In the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1962) Merleau-Ponty explored this uniquely human kind of organization to behavior in more detail, in a dialog with rationalism and empiricism and especially with Husserl. He argued – on the basis of detailed descriptions of everyday experience – that rationalists are wrong to maintain that we construct the world in thought. But the empiricist is equally wrong to believe that our knowledge of the world is simply a product of the data of our senses. Both approaches detach the conscious subject from the world. We have seen how Husserl, bracketing the natural attitude, retained the world only as *thought*. Merleau-Ponty tried instead to practice a phenomenology which “slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world” rather than undoing them entirely, and which “reveals the world as strange and paradoxical” (p. *xii*). The metaphor doesn’t seem entirely apt - we are not “attached” to the world, we are in it and of it. But certainly for Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is a matter of learning to look closely at one’s own existence within the world, and phenomenological analysis shows that we both create and are created by the world. He insisted that we “need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body” (p. 206). By disrupting our everyday absorption in the world we find that the world is not something that



one *thinks* but something one “lives through.” Perception is not so much an act of consciousness as an act of the whole body, the living body. For the human body the world is a system of possibilities, a ground on which are *constituted* all forms of human knowing. Each of us is an “opening into the world” in which our perception is both general and anonymous, grasped by the “habitual body.” Things are what we can get a grip on, but our grip stems from the fact that our body too is a thing of the world. We can only grasp the world from within in. At the same time the world always precedes, outlives, and in the end transcends every attempt on the part of human analysis to grasp and understand it fully.

For Merleau-Ponty, perception is the “primordial matrix” for the everyday world, and also for science and philosophy. He argued that perception is a modality that is neither empirical nor rational. What we perceive is neither simply ‘present’ nor ‘inferred,’ it is the result of our body’s “polarization” of the world, the “correlate” of our body and its sensory systems. For example the characteristics of time and space, which we normally assume are in the world itself and which Kant argued are in the mind, emerge, Merleau-Ponty proposed, from our ways of existing in the world. We are certain that an object has a side that is hidden from us, and this hidden side is given in its own way, without being either directly present to the senses or inferred logically. An object “is given as the infinite sum of an indefinite series of perspectival views in each of which the object is given but in none of which is it given exhaustively” (1964, p. 15). Perception is perspectival, open, and indeterminate: as we move, fresh perspectives open up and objects disclose themselves in new ways. We are an opening to the world, but each object too is in its own way both an opening and a way of hiding.

Reflection and cognition are possibilities for this human way of being-in-the-world. Thought is a taking up of what has been seen. Cognition never replaces perception; the two work always together. Ideas flow from a *sublimation* of perception, and all cognitive operations presuppose the body’s motion and its capacities for gesture and language. Cognition depends on the body (1945/1962, p. 127). Thought is grounded in prereflective activity, and dependent on symbolic behavior. It both preserves and transforms perception, “distilling” its sense while reconstituting its “substance.” Cognition seeks to articulate the world thematically in linguistic structures but it leaves much behind, especially our

opaque and indeterminate bond with the world. The thinker “fixes” and “objectifies” life, but a part of existence always escapes. Where traditional philosophy insisted that perception is fallible and thinking indubitable, Merleau-Ponty argued that the truths of thought are always dependent on the ways the real is evident in perception. Propositional truths are always based on situational truths (Mallin, 1979, p. 199). Our knowledge is always contingent, but this stems from the uncertainty and finitude of life and of the world itself and it doesn’t mean that we experience merely ‘appearances.’

### **Visible and Invisible Intertwined**

The title of *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964/1968) refers to the way an object of perception is given both in the senses, as a partially-grasped *particular*, and in the invisible realm of concepts, as an abstract *universal*. In this unfinished book Merleau-Ponty explored how humans are “inherent” in the world in a way which cannot be reduced to essences or categories. He wanted to find a dimension that “offers us, all at once, pell-mell, both subject and object – both existence and essence – and, hence, gives philosophy resources to redefine them” (p. 130). He struggled to find a way to write about human being as a part of the world, as the “flesh of the world,” in a language that would completely break free from the subject/object dichotomy. The “flesh” is the element in which both my body and things themselves are given – an “element of being” like earth, air, fire and water. To perceive is to be drawn into the tissue of being. When I touch something, my hand is itself touched – sensible things do not exist *within* space and time, they *organize* space and time in a “dimensional sensuality.” An object is a field of forces, unified by a particular style. The recognition of its style, along with its variations, is the recognition of the universal in the particular.

Both rationalism and empiricism treat the world as completely opaque and consciousness as completely transparent, but Merleau-Ponty insisted that neither is the case. Perception, like existence, is a dialectical process in which a single existential fabric underlies both subject and object, so that these are mutually complicit. In perceiving an object we orient our bodies in the world, assuming a position before the tasks of the world. Body and world are “intertwined”; my body is “folded into” the sensible object. The world and people share a fundamental corporeality:

“the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication” (1964/1968, p. 178)

This same intertwining holds between the visible and the invisible, between the seen and the thought, the sensible and the ideal, the concrete and the abstract. The body is touching/ touched, but not at the same instant. There is a difference between the body and itself which offers an “infrastructure” for thought. The invisible – the thought, the conceptual – is not in some separate realm; it is the invisible *of* and *in* the visible. Thought is a transformation of perception, “an ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axis, its depth, its dimensions” (1964/1968, p. 152). Perception is primary, but the degree and manner of our openness to perceptual contact can be altered. Thinking and seeing are mutually transforming. Merleau-Ponty proposed that the thinking and seeing body-subject is where being becomes visible to itself.

Language plays a special role in this transformation of perception that is thinking. Merleau-Ponty rejected the conduit metaphor, the idea that language is an “envelope or clothing of thought” (1945/1962, p. 211). Language is not thought’s clothing but its body; language accomplishes or completes thought. “The spoken word is a gesture, and its meaning, a world” (p. 184). This is why we sometimes struggle to find the right words. Like Saussure, Merleau-Ponty viewed language as an abstraction from the primacy of speech but he did not accept Saussure’s notion that language is a system of arbitrary conventions. “The spoken word is a genuine gesture, and it contains its meaning in the same way as a gesture contains its.... What I communicate with primarily is not ‘representations’ of thought, but a speaking subject, with a certain style of being and with the ‘world’ at which he directs his aim” (1945/1962, p. 213). Language is a public cultural system which can level individuality to the impersonal “one.” And language reverses sublimation to provide perception with new structures that organize our dealings with the world: “Silent vision falls into speech, and in return, speech opens a field of the nameable and sayable..., it metamorphizes the structures of the visible world and makes itself a gaze of the mind” (1964/1968, p. 178).

### **The Flesh of the World**

Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty rejected the assumption that the knowing subject is the center of knowledge or existence, and tried to create a language to communicate a fresh understanding of the mutual constitution of subject and object within what he called “the flesh.” His focus on embodied activity drew attention to the materiality of the conscious subject, and the corporeality of objects and the world. We are *of* the world, not in some separate ontological realm. For Merleau-Ponty, as was the case with Heidegger, both subject and object *emerge* from a more primordial way of being in which the distinction between them does not yet exist. There is an “intentional life... which is not yet a representation” and a form of comprehension “which... is not yet an intellection” (Merleau-Ponty, 1942/1963, p. 224). My body has an intelligence and intentionality which does not require deliberate thought and decision:

“In so far as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent upon my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way which I do not choose” (1945/1962, p. 440)

This “constitution,” this bodily know-how, is both used and ignored by science. Kant took it for granted and then ignored it:

“the numerical specifications of science retrace the outline of a constitution of the world which is already realized before shape and size come into being. Kant takes the results of this pre-scientific experience for granted, and is enabled to ignore them only because he makes use of them” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 301-2)

It follows that the task for investigation – and for Merleau-Ponty this would be a phenomenology – is the study of this neglected constitution.

### **Ethnomethodology: Harold Garfinkel**

“EM is concerned with ‘What More,’ in the world of familiar, ordinary activities, does immortal, ordinary society consist of as the locus and the setting of every topic of order, every topic of logic, of meaning, of method respecified and respecifiable as the most ordinary Durkheimian things in the world” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 6)

Harold Garfinkel (b. 1917), Professor Emeritus of sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles, is responsible for another exploration of constitution: a form of sociology he named “ethnomethodology” (Garfinkel, 1967; 1996; 2002). The focus of this “eccentric, original phenomenology” (Manning, 2004, p. 279) is the ongoing work of social interaction in which people create and recreate social order. Ethnomethodology is not a method of inquiry; rather, the “ethnomethods” are the *topic* of inquiry. It is the study (*logos*) of the methods used by folk (*ethnos*) in their commonsense everyday activity. Garfinkel was dissatisfied with the tendency in sociology to view people as merely acting out predetermined social roles. Traditional sociology takes the member of society “to be a judgmental dope of a cultural and/or psychological sort” or a “cultural dope” (Garfinkel, 1964, p. 244) whose behavior is determined by preexisting norms or motivations, by the “stable structures” of ‘culture’ or ‘society’ or ‘personality.’ Such approaches fail to ask of the people “What is *their* game?” in the sense of Wittgenstein’s language games.

In contrast, ethnomethodology sees human activity as skilled, intelligent, and improvisatory: like good jazz, social action is artfully made up on the spot from available resources, rather than following prescribed rules. Garfinkel proposed that “persons discover, create, and sustain” the orderly character of society. Society is not an objective structure standing behind this activity, it is a *product* of “members” skilled activity. Garfinkel (1964) said he wanted to solve the problem of the “moral order” of society, which “For Kant... was an awesome mystery” (1964, p. 225). “A society’s members encounter and know the moral order as perceivedly normal courses of action – familiar scenes of everyday affairs, the world of daily life known in common with others and with others taken for granted” (p. 225). This common sense world is the topic of sociology, yet sociologists rarely ask “how any such common sense world is possible.” Its existence is either taken for granted, or settled by theoretical mandate.

Garfinkel called for the “rediscovery” of this moral order. His central argument was that “a concern for the nature, production, and recognition of reasonable, realistic, and analyzable actions is not the monopoly of philosophers and professional sociologists” (p. 250); members of a society are themselves equally concerned with making recognizable social order. The task for the researcher is to treat as problematic “the actual methods whereby members of a society, doing sociology, lay or professional, make the social structures of everyday activities observable” (p. 250). These methods have been a *resource* for sociology; now they must become a *topic*. Garfinkel proposed that these methods are found not in the individual mind, but in social practice. We see order whenever we look at traffic on the freeway, a jazz quartet, the science laboratory, or ordinary conversation. Rather than searching for its underlying causes (or motivations) or overlaying concepts (or functions), we can and should study just what people do to create this order. The aim of ethnomethodology is to examine, discover and describe this work, and the methods used. Hidden causes and abstract functions are hypothetical and unobservable; more importantly, they are irrelevant to the practitioners themselves. They are part of the game of worldwide science, not the game(s) of everyday life. Ethnomethodology avoids appealing to hidden factors, and instead conducts careful and detailed study of the methods and practices that provide “the routine grounds of everyday life.”

Garfinkel’s work has been called “as revolutionary as the work of Darwin, Einstein or Crick and Watson. It has fundamentally changed the way that sociologists think about their discipline and about the way that they do their research” (Dingwall, 1988). But ethnomethodology has often been misunderstood. It has been accused of being “sociology without society” (Mayrl, 1973), a “microsociology” that fails to pay attention to the larger structures that are make up a society, a method without substance, and as lacking all methodology. It has been accused of being conservative in its lack of attention to power structures, liberal in its focus on individual agency, and positivist in its attention to empirical detail. It has been characterized as inherently subjective, and as lacking attention to experience. Even its supporters have misunderstood it, describing it, for example, as aiming “to elucidate the arena of commonsense experience and to ‘understand’ life-world situations as perceived by concrete social actors or participants” (Dallmayr & McCarthy, 1977, p. 222). It is true that

Garfinkel's 1964 paper was couched in terms of the beliefs, expectations, and attitudes of an individual actor – the sense that an actor makes. But since then he has made it clear that the emphasis in ethnomethodology is not at all on how things are *perceived* but how they are *produced and accomplished*. Garfinkel “inverted the phenomenological primacy accorded to subjective experience in favor of studying public activities and common practices through which members achieve the apparent reality of those objects” (Maynard, 1986, p. 348). Ethnomethodology seeks:

“to treat practical activities, practical circumstances, and practical sociological reasoning as topics of empirical study, and by paying to the most commonplace activities of daily life the attention usually accorded extraordinary events, seeks to learn about them as phenomena in their own right” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 240)

The basic premise is that this practical reasoning cannot “remain the unexamined medium of ones discourse” (Sharrock, 2004) but must be studied. Like Schutz, Garfinkel has been interested in the mundane reality that Husserl believed should be bracketed. But like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Garfinkel emphasizes that this mundane reality is created in public practices, not in mental activity.

### **Society as a Product of Members' Activity**

The fundamental phenomenon that ethnomethodology aims to study, Garfinkel insists, is exactly what sociology has always set out to study, namely “the objective reality of social facts.” But this “fundamental phenomenon” of sociology must be seen not as given or natural but as a “*practical achievement*,” the result of “members' work”:

“For ethnomethodology the objective reality of social facts, in that and just how it is every society's locally, endogenously produced, naturally organized, reflexively accountable, ongoing, practical achievement, being everywhere, always, only, exactly and entirely, members' work, with no time out, and with no possibility of evasion, hiding out, passing, postponement, or buy-outs, is thereby sociology's fundamental phenomenon” (Garfinkel, 1988, p. 103)

The objective reality of everyday life is a matter not of shared knowledge but of a “background texture of expectancies,” the “expectancies of everyday life as a morality” which is first of all the result of *practical* enterprise:

“everyday social life, he tells us, and social life on extraordinary days as well, is a practical enterprise and every man is a practitioner” (Swanson, 1968, p. 122)

To understand social reality, then, what is needed is not formal analysis but a focus on the details of everyday practices, for “The witnessably recurrent details of ordinary everyday practices constitute their own reality” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 8).

Social facts have an objective reality that is achieved, in every society. This achievement is local, ongoing and practical. It is the work of the members of a society - “with no time out!” Garfinkel’s central insight is that “The expectancies that make up the attitude of everyday life are constitutive of the institutionalized common understandings of the practical everyday organization and workings of society as it is seen ‘from within’” (p. 249). Modification of these expectations will “transform one perceived environment of real objects into another environment of real objects” (ref?). Play, religious conversation, and scientific inquiry are such modifications, as is psychosis, brain injury, and neonate learning.

In an interview Garfinkel explained, “We have to talk about practices which, as vulgar competence, are necessary for the constitutive production of the everyday phenomena of social order” (Jules-Rosette, 1985).

### **Actual Events, Not Underlying Patterns**

Garfinkel distinguishes ethnomethodology from “the worldwide social science movement” with its “ubiquitous commitments to the policies and methods of formal analysis and general representational theorizing” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 5). Demographics, definition of variables, quantification, statistical analysis, causal explanation and so on are “available to all administered societies, contemporary and historical” (p. ). Without disputing the achievements of “formal



analysis," ethnomethodology "asks 'What More?'" What more does this formal analysis depend on (p. 6)? Garfinkel's answer is that 'what more?' "has centrally (and perhaps entirely) to do with procedures" (p. 6). *Procedures* in the sense not of processes but of work, of labor: labor such improvising jazz at the piano, typing thoughtful words, collaborating in the workplace: "procedural means labor of a certain incarnate methodological sort" (p. 10). Ethnomethodology is about the work of producing a phenomenon and "coming upon" the phenomenon in and through this work; it is a matter of describing how people produce and display, how they demonstrate, the local phenomena of order – "the unremarkable embodiedly ordered details of their ordinary lives together" (p. 11), the "commonplace, local, endogenous haecceities of daily life" (p. 7) – where *haecceities* means "thisness."

Garfinkel has no place for the techniques of formal analysis because it aims to reconstruct a *hidden* order that precedes or underlies society in the form of causal mechanisms or rational functions. Like Kant, it takes for granted the work of producing order, using this work itself as a resource but never stopping to consider it. It assumes that order can be accounted for only by adopting a transcendental perspective and using the objectifying techniques of statistical analysis. Garfinkel insists instead that an order is *visible* in the mundane details of everyday interaction, if only we will look. Ordinary society is easy to do, yet it is "strange," "elusive" and "intractably hard to describe." How on earth is society "put together"? The answer to this question cannot be imagined, it must be "actually found out" in concrete, first-hand investigations of every specific occasion. The statistical and formal models built by formal analysis "lose the very phenomenon that they profess" (p. 7). Even though they are "exercising the privileges of the transcendental analyst and the universal observer" (p. 8), they still don't show how society is made. Formal social science produces its *own* order, not the order of everyday practice. Ironically, their formal work itself becomes part – an "enacted detail" – of the way ordinary society is put together. These analysts, with their "generic representational theorizing," plan and administer, and make signs which they then have to "interpret" because "the phenomena they so carefully describe are lost" (1996, p. 8).

Garfinkel is especially critical of what he calls “the documentary method of interpretation” (1967). Karl Mannheim and Alfred Schutz both used this phrase; for Garfinkel it is the common practice in formal analysis of seeing some everyday event of action or talk as evidence for an underlying, hidden organization: “treating an actual appearance as ‘the document of,’ as ‘pointing to,’ as ‘standing on behalf of’ a presupposed underlying pattern” (1967, p. 78). What ‘appears’ is treated as only a sign of the ‘real’ phenomenon, which is accessible only through interpretation. This is clearly what Kant did; both sociologists and ordinary folk do it too, and the process goes both ways: the underlying pattern gains credibility from the document, while the document is read in terms of the underlying pattern. Whether the underlying pattern is claimed to be culture, social structure, a value system, occupational categories, interactional functions, or roles and rules, it is assumed to be more real, more stable and enduring, than the actual events which are observed! The lay or professional sociologist appeals to “a correspondence of meaning” (p. 79) to “epitomize” the underlying, hidden pattern. Clearly this correspondence is “a product of the work of the investigator and reader as members of a community of cobelievers” (p. 96), but it is treated as ‘what everybody knows.’

This doesn’t mean that ethnomethodology is indifferent to social structures. It has “a concern with structure,” but “as an achieved phenomenon of order” (1996, p. 6). Nor is it “changing the subject” for sociology. Our “immortal, ordinary society” (here Garfinkel cites Durkheim) is the “locus” and “setting” of all our activities. It is here (and now) that any order, reason, logic, typicality, classification, standardization are achieved. Whereas formal analysis finds no order in the circumstantial concrete details of everyday life, only in the products of its own “analyzing devices” and practices of objectification and analysis, ethnomethodology sees the basis of *all* order, both commonsense and scientific, in concrete everydayness. Garfinkel insists that “there *is* order in the most ordinary activities of everyday life in their full concreteness” (p. 7). In place of the “generic” descriptions that formal analysis provides, ethnomethodology explores the “unexplicated specifics of details in structures, in recurrences, in typicality.” Consequently:

“Ethnomethodology’s fundamental phenomenon and its standing technical preoccupation in its studies is to find, collect, specify, and make instructably observable the local endogenous production and natural accountability of immortal familiar society’s most ordinary organizational things in the world, *and provide for them both and simultaneously as objects and procedurally, as alternative methodologies*” (1996, p. 6)

Garfinkel insists that ethnomethodology is not critical of formal analysis but “indifferent to (independent of)” it. But as Manning (2004, p. 281) says “This is an artful ploy, for if this version of social life is accurate and valid, FA cannot be.” The two are “incommensurably different *and* unavoidably related.” The question of their relationship, as two different technologies, is of central interest to ethnomethodology. It offers “alternates” to formal analyses, “not alternatives.” Wherever a formal analysis has been conducted, an ethnomethodological alternate will be “findable.”

If ethnomethodology is not formal analysis, Garfinkel also insists that “It is not an interpretive enterprise” (p. 8). His point here too is that what people do and say are not “representations” of something else. “Enacted local practices are not ‘texts.’” They have no inner or hidden ‘meaning’ which the analyst must reconstruct. What an element of such a practice *is* is a matter to members, and a matter which they will often negotiate. The analyst’s task is not to decide what an action means, or even what it is, but to describe what it is *taken to be* in members’ work. Attempts to explain social phenomena in terms of consciousness, theory, and representation will *always* lose the phenomena they are interested in:

“The lessons are clear: In order to lose the phenomena that the devices describe, give them over to the intentionalities of consciousness. And in order to assure their loss in any actual case, do so with the methods of generic representational theorizing” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 18)

### **Becoming a Member**

Ethnomethodologists speak of “members” rather than people or subjects. The notion of membership is central (ten Have, 2002), and many ethnomethodologists insist that “researchers

themselves become the phenomenon” and that one “must become a full-time member of the reality to be studied” (Mehan & Wood, 1975, p. 225, 227). Garfinkel has defined the “unique adequacy requirement”:

“for the analyst to recognize, or identify, or follow the development of, or describe phenomena of order in local production of coherent detail the analyst must be vulgarly competent in the local production and reflexively natural accountability of the phenomenon of order he is ‘studying’” (Garfinkel & Wieder, 1992, p. 182)

From this point of view, having “vulgar competence” is necessary to gain the “membership knowledge” which enables the researcher to recognize the relevant phenomena. “Vulgar” is used here in the old sense of ‘belonging to the people.’ This knowledge is the “common sense” of membership, and to obtain it one needs “embodied presence as a competent participant in the field of action” (Pollner & Emerson, 2001, p. 127).

At first Garfinkel proposed that EM required a “posture of indifference,” a refusal to judge the value or validity of members’ common sense. In this regard the researcher clearly differs from those whose practical activity is being studied, who presumably hold their knowledge to be valid. But now Garfinkel emphasizes “hybrid” studies, “studies of work in which the analyst is uniquely and adequately competent to produce the phenomenon” (1996, p. 13), such as Sudnow’s study (1974) of playing jazz piano. Garfinkel has gone so far as to suggest that the results of research should be presented not to other researchers but to members, using their vernacular. He has proposed that ethnomethodology is an “applied” kind of inquiry which offers its “expertise” in the form of a “remediation” for phenomena “whose local, endogenous production is troubled in ordered phenomenal details of structures” (1996, p. 8). Troubles are local, and their solutions too will be local, not abstract or general.

It should be clear that ethnomethodology doesn’t try to produce overarching theories or models. Garfinkel has suggested that the products of ethnomethodological studies have the form of “pedagogies” – methods and practices of teaching. Descriptions of how order is achieved can provide the basis for teaching how to achieve it. As he puts it: “EM’s findings are described with the questions

'What did we do? What did we learn? More to the point, what did we learn, but only in and as lived doings, that we can teach? And how can we teach it?'" (1996, p. 9).

Garfinkel explains, "In endlessly many disciplines, as local occasion demands, practitioners are required to read descriptive accounts alternately as instructions" (p. 19). This "praxeological reading" is done in practices "chained bodily and chiasmically to places, spaces, architectures, equipment, instruments, and timing" (p. 19). Diagrams, recipes, even freeway signs, are both instructions and descriptions of the work by which the instructions are to be applied. The instructions and instructions-in-use are related as "Lebenswelt pairs." Descriptions *are* instructions in how to produce the order described.

These "pedagogies" are not abstract formalizations but "tutorial problems" which are "learned in settings in which teaching and learning being done in concert with others were locally and endogenously witnessable" (p. 9). Studies by ethnomethodologists of science, work, and professions have shown that "The praxeological validity of instructed action *is* (i.e., 'exists as,' 'is identical with,' 'is the same as') the phenomenon" (p. 9). Activities of which instruction is a part offer opportunities for ethnomethodology. Equally, ethnomethodology offers instruction to members.

### **Disrupting the Familiar**

But ethnomethodology has used other ways gain access to local phenomena. One strategy has been to employ "trouble-makers" in the form of "Heideggerian uses" of inverting lenses, disability, and other kinds of breakdown to overcome the transparency and reveal what is "relevant to the parties" (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 12) among the details of "phenomenal fields." In such investigations the concern has been with "practices that are chiasmically chained embodiedly to the environment of ongoingly ordered phenomenal details" (p. 13). By arranging "breaches" and "making trouble" the sociologist is able to "produce reflections through which the strangeness of an obstinately familiar world can be detected" (1964, p. 227). With this strategy of defamiliarizing the ordinary Garfinkel has drawn on both Schutz and Heidegger. The echoes of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty should be clear when Garfinkel writes of "reflexive body/world relations," and of "the accomplished transparency and

specifically unremarkable smoothness of concerted skills of 'equipmentally affiliated' shopwork and shoptalk" (1996, p. 12).

### **Accounts and Reflexivity**

Garfinkel emphasizes the *reflexive* character of practical activity. "Reflexivity refers to the simultaneously embedded and constitutive character of actions, talk and understanding" (Pollner & Emerson, 2001, p. 121). Action is "bound up with the capacity of human agents for self-reflection, for the rational 'monitoring' of their own conduct." Members are continually monitoring their own actions and those of others and are able to provide "accounts" of these actions when called upon. Often this reflexivity is treated by social scientists as a nuisance, as Giddens noted. But ethnomethodology sees it as a central part of everyday life, another continuity between sociological activity and everyday activity.

For ethnomethodology the location of action in place and time is of central significance. Formal models ignore something crucial, "the temporal 'succession' of here and now situations." In Chapter 3 we mentioned Garfinkel's interest in indexicality. Indexical expressions demonstrate their properties only in local settings. In context they are able to achieve "coherent sense, reference, and correspondence to objects" (1996, p. 18). They do this not as cognitive functions, nor as "transcendentalized intentionalities of analytic consciousness," but as practical activities with "procedural relevance" to people, settings, equipment, architecture, and so on. The exploration of these "rational properties of indexical expressions" is central to ethnomethodological inquiry. Occasionality, indexicality, "specific vagueness," "retrospective-prospective sense," temporal sequencing of utterances – these are "sanctioned properties of common discourse" (1964, p. 229). They are conditions people use to be understood and understand others in conversation, conditions which are usually "seen but unnoticed."

Garfinkel recommends that we notice that accounts are *part* of the actions that they make accountable. He has written that his "central recommendation is that the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with member's procedures for making these settings 'account-able'" (1967, p. 240). Accounting practices are not descriptions of a

separate reality but are *constitutive* of the order they report. They are recommendations or instructions in how to see what is happening. Just as for Heidegger interpretations articulate the practical understanding of involved activity in order to inform that activity, for Garfinkel giving an account has a “‘incarnate’ character” (p. 240). It is in this respect that “knowledge” and “rationality” are themselves practical social accomplishments: people construct reality – not just moral order; all kinds of order – in and by means of their social interactions. At the same time, and as *part* of this work, they construct *accounts* that are taken as rational and objective by their fellow participants. Accounts are *part* of mundane reality, constructed and understood by people as they engage in concrete, practical tasks:

“When Garfinkel refers to behavior as being *accountable*, the word can be understood in two senses. First, members can be (and are) responsible for their actions and are accountable to their interlocutors or utterances and actions which may appear to be without reason or rationale. Second, and more obliquely, Garfinkel is contending that all behavior is designed in ways to give an account of the action as an instance of something or the other” (Koschmann, Stahl & Zemel, 2004)

This means that every account is indexical: it has intrinsic links to its setting. And this in turn leads to the important insight that ordinary language and its ‘ambiguity’ cannot be replaced by a scientific language that is ‘more precise’: less ambiguous or less context-bound.

This is yet another way in which “practical sociological reasoning” is placed by ethnomethodology on the same level as any other everyday practical activity. The scientist does not have a special status; sociological accounts are on a continuum with all the other kinds of accounts that are a continual accomplishment of everyday life. Giving accounts – accounting – is an endless process, too: there is no final point at which an exhaustive, objective accounting has been completed. Garfinkel rejects – or is indifferent to – attempts to translate the situated events of the social world into a neutral and objective scientific terminology. There is no valid basis for the notion that a researcher can, or should, adopt the stance of an *external* observer of a social world. In the multiplicity of life-worlds the

life-world of professional sociology is just one among many, with no special claim to objective knowledge. On the contrary, 'knowledge' and 'rationality' are themselves always practical social accomplishments.

### **A New Model of Language**

Ethnomethodology pays attention to language as a dynamic, social phenomenon, and to speech not as an inert vehicle - the expression of inner meanings - but as fundamental to the constitution of social life. Social reality is "talked into being" (Heritage, 1984, p. 290). Words are viewed as indexes, not as symbols or representations - or not necessarily these. Garfinkel (1967) pointed to the *multiple* ways in which language is used. Language "is conceived, not simply as a set of symbols or signs, as a mode of representing things, but as a 'medium of practical activity', a mode of doing things." Ordinary language and its 'ambiguity' cannot be ignored or replaced by a scientific language that is 'more precise.' "[T]o study a form of life involves grasping lay modes of talk which express that form of life" (Giddens, 1977, pp. 167-169).

We saw in chapter 3 that Garfinkel rejects the typical model of language in research. This model amounts to a theory of signs: it assumes that language works by linking words and things through concepts. The word "tree" and the object '*tree*' are linked by a concept made up of features: 'trunk,' 'leaves,' etc.. It assumes that these features require no interpretation, and that the concepts are the common property of all of us who speak a language, a shared background knowledge. This model skips over what has been said and tries to elaborate a 'meaning' that is assumed to lie 'within' the words, their hidden content.

Garfinkel proposes a different model of language, in which understanding what someone says is seen not as a matter of reconstructing the inner meaning of their words, but of recognizing *how* they speak. Common understanding is something that must be achieved by the participants in a conversation, and there is not one single way to do this. People speak in countless ways, and *multiple* sign functions can be accomplished by speaking: "marking, labeling, symbolizing..., analogies, anagrams, indicating..., imitating..." (1967, p. 258) and many more. Understanding what someone says



is a matter of recognizing which of these was done, the *method* of their speaking. Explaining what was talked about is a matter of describing this method, *how* they spoke jokingly, etc.. This description will provide instructions in how to see what was said, how to recognize what was done by the speaker. But these instructions can never be fully spelled out, and will never be complete in themselves. They remain “organized artful practices” that we must study. The job of the researcher is not to explain what talk means, but to describe how people can come to agree on what they mean (and can lose that agreement).

### **Table 8.3: Garfinkel’s Model of Languages**

#### **Embodied Know-How**

Ethnomethodology places emphasis on *embodied* know-how. “It is Garfinkel’s position that the knowledge of the practices he is trying to introduce is not a conceptual or cognitive knowledge but, rather, an embodied knowledge that comes only from engaging in practices in concerted co-presence with others” (Rawls, 2006, p. 5). The distinction between embodied and cognitive knowledge is crucial, and:

“approaches which reduce the detail of social life to concepts, typifications, or models lose the phenomena altogether. They end up focusing on the self as a carrier of concepts, instead of the situations in which they are given meaning. Learning to see differently sociologically means learning to see social orders in their details as they are achieved in real time by persons through the enactment of these details, instead of through conceptual glosses on those details after the fact” (Rawls, 2006, p. 6)

A contrast can be drawn between Garfinkel and sociologist Erving Goffman (1922-1982), one which directly parallels the distinction I have made between ontological and epistemological constitution. Goffman conceived of interaction as dramaturgical, like a theatrical performance. He proposed that people engage in “impression management” and the “presentation of self.” Rawls notes that:

“For Goffman the world of action was essentially messy and lacking order. It was the actor’s job to create the appearance of order – a thin veneer of consensus. For Garfinkel, by contrast, the world of embodied practice – created and lived in by groups of actors working in cooperation with one

another – was ordered in and through their efforts and had coherence and meaning only in and through – or as – recognizable orders of practice.... To view things otherwise was to allow conceptual reduction to hide the achieved coherence of events: to render social order invisible, as Garfinkel would repeatedly say” (Rawls, 2006, p. 4)

In short, ethnomethodology undertakes “studies of shared enacted practices” using “a detailed qualitative approach” (Rawls, 1997, p. 5). Traditional social science has followed Kant in assuming that individuals have only cognitive knowledge, and that researchers too must work principally with this kind of knowledge, conducting investigation in an attitude that is entirely theoretical. Ethnomethodology moves in a different direction, for “Garfinkel argues that the theoretical attitude is responsible for many of the problems with social research” (p. 4). Ethnomethodology focuses on constitution - on the problem, the seeming mystery, at least to Kant and Kantians, of the orderly character of society. It asks, ‘What more?’ It is the study of the work people do to produce epistemological and moral order. The promise of these investigations “is that they might shift the gestalt of theoretical perception such that we could be enabled to ask new questions about the world” (p. 6). Garfinkel has said that what ethnomethodological investigations can do is make evident a “territory of new organizational phenomena.”

## **Conclusions**

We have examined four explorations which reject the story about ‘constitution’ that Kant told. Each proposes that there is more to human beings than Kant’s model captured. Kant emphasized individual mental representation, a rational synthesis of perceptual data, as the basis for valid knowledge and ethical action. The work in this chapter has emphasized practical understanding, embodied comportment with tools and equipment, our absorption in everyday social interaction, and our unavoidable entanglement in the material world, as the basis for epistemological and ethical order. For Hegel, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Garfinkel, theoretical knowledge is made possible by a more fundamental relationship between humans and our world. Representing the world is secondary, and in some ways distorting. What is more fundamental is the practical involvement – historical, embodied

and social – which is prior to the subject-object distinction but which remains invisible to the traditional human sciences.

For Hegel, Kant failed to see how tensions *within* experience can propel it forward to achieve a grasp of things-in-themselves, and the underlying relation between subject and object.

For Heidegger, experience is grounded in, and derivative of, a practical involvement in the world in which subject and object have not become distinct. When practice is suspended for practical circumspection, understanding is articulated as interpretation. Only in the complete detachment of philosophical reflection does 'representation' seem primary. The central characteristic of practical involvement is its *temporality*: human beings are 'thrown' into the public, social world of human affairs, grasping it and understanding themselves in terms of its history and projecting their practical activities into its future. This social world provides the ground for human beings and the entities we encounter. It defines the possible ways entities can be.

For Merleau-Ponty, the bodily character of human involvement in the world is primary. Consciousness is embodied perception, not representation. Our world is not constructed in representational thought, it is constituted through being 'lived through.' Bodily consciousness offers an infrastructure for thought; concepts are a way of seeing, a gaze of the mind, that is invited by the gestures of speech.

Finally, Garfinkel explored how the order of social reality is constituted in and through everyday social interactions. Rejecting formal programs of investigation Garfinkel argued that we need to attend to the details of concerted activity, the work in which every kind of order is produced. Ethnomethodology shares with Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty the view that this order is assembled through embodied practice rather than conceptualization; that formal analysis does not adequately characterize this work; and that investigation requires a radical attitude:

"firstly, the idea that the experienced social world is composed not of discrete 'variables' of one sort or another but of gestalt contextures that are assembled in and through actors' intrinsic

ordering activities. This intrinsic ordering activity includes the lived way in which percipient bodies initially bring the world into being and only secondarily conceptualize it. Secondly, the ordering of the world does not occur through following rules or roles or other abstractly formulated proscriptions. Such proscriptions are themselves usable resources for 'doing' nameable activities and providing for a visible, sensible social environment. Finally, the experience of an objective world, whether in everyday or scientific settings, depends upon practical adherence to a set of idealizations or presuppositions that require a radical investigative stance for proper inquiry" (Maynard and Clayman (1991, p. 292)

The analyses in this chapter cut deeper than the studies of epistemic constitution in the previous chapter. For epistemic constructivists such as Husserl, Schutz, and Berger and Luckmann, our representations constitute what we *take* to be reality, but reality 'in itself' is unknowable. Our capacity for representation is not questioned, it is taken to be natural. We can call the approach of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Garfinkel an *ontological* constructivism, because for them objects and subjects, not just ways of knowing, are formed in practical activity. It is a non-dualistic "radical realism" (see Box 8.3).

### **Box 8.3 Radical Realism**

#### **Table 8.4: Constitution II**

Although this explicitly ontological approach to constitution avoids the problems of the epistemic approach, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty can be accused of failing to be specific enough. They went too quickly (Deleuze, 1986/1988, p. 112). For Heidegger, human understanding is based on a general and universal Time rather than on the specific times of a particular society. Merleau-Ponty's focus is Body conceived in general terms, rather than the different kinds of body that are shaped in different circumstances (compare a weight-lifter and a housewife). These analyses are empirical but each rests on an abstraction, with the result that their efforts to overcome dualism and explain how humans can validly know our world lack concreteness. They value practical activity, but they don't foster it. Garfinkel has come closest to an exploration of the ethno-methods specific to particular forms of life, and to seeing that inquiry can only produce accounts that have practical, local relevance.

Language plays a central role in these new analyses, which see that its role is not simply representing the world. As Merleau-Ponty put it: “speech opens a field of the nameable and sayable.” Thinking isn’t a liberation from perception, from mere appearances, it is a *transformation* of perception, of visibility: “a *metamorphosis* of the flesh of the sensible into the flesh of language” (Carbone, 2004, p. 39). For Merleau-Ponty, thinking “shows by words”; concepts, generalities, abstractions, are transformations *of* the visible, not some separate realm. A concept is the *style* of a collection of things in general. Thought and reason can never completely possess the world, intellectually, and no language ever rids itself of all sensory material.

Language is a multiplicity of sign-relations; *how* language is used is multiple, and we instruct each other in how to see what was said. Accounts are features of the settings – the places and moments – in which they are given. They too have to be ‘seen’ in the right way. And the objects and regions and times to which they refer depend on the speaker’s position, as well as the hearer’s relation to the speaker. Language doesn’t describe the world from outside; it is implicated in the world, and it participates in the contingencies of the world. Language is not representation imposed on things from outside. What is reasonable (effective, clear, consistent, objective, etc.) is what is *accountable*, and making circumstances accountable is something people do all the time.

I hope that by now you are questioning your assumptions about what kinds of things exist in the world. This chapter has thrown cold water on the common-sense assumption that humans form representations of the world around us. For Kant the ‘concept’ was the way an individual intellectually grasps the essence of perception, the abstract and general character of what is seen. Thinking was how we actively make what is ‘real’ from what is passively given to us. This chapter has explored a very different view, that the world is a place of activity in which each of us is but one small part. The sensible world is rich, complex and baroque, and any way of talking about it grasps just a part, is just one way of participating in it, one style of perception, one way of being. The term *concept* originally meant being hollow and so able to accept and contain something (think of *conception*), and thinking can be seen

as an activity of creating space for a thing to *be* something (Carbone, 2004). Language discloses how things can be. More broadly, speech can change the world and change the people in it; language has an ontological power. When I speak, I produce an utterance in order to invoke a way of seeing the world, to pick out an entity in this sight, interpret that entity (e.g. make a claim about it), and act on other people, *move* them, and perhaps *change* them.

So although Garfinkel has recommended that researchers should talk primarily with members it is clear that he, like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, is offering a new kind of discourse to social scientists, one which enables us to see old things in fresh ways and see new things that had previously been invisible. Escaping dualism, in particular, is largely a matter of seeing in new ways, and this in turn is facilitated by using language in new ways. Metamorphosing ones ontology involves changing how we talk and write - including how we talk and write about language.

The most important thing we have learned in this chapter is that constitution itself is *visible*. Embodied, practical and concerted activity in the material world can be seen; it is not hidden away on some transcendental level of the mind. And if it can be seen it can be studied. We can envision a form of qualitative inquiry that asks and answers questions that the 'objective study of subjectivity' cannot frame, questions about the kind of subjects we become, and the different subjects and objects of different places and times. But how, exactly? How can we best investigate the constitution – the *ontological work* – that has been pointed out in this chapter? What is needed are concrete and specific investigations of the actions of particular bodies, in specific times, as they interact together practically. Can ethnography - immersion in a way of life - do this, as Giddens, Taylor, and Geertz promised? In the following chapter we will explore this issue.