Where is the bakery?
The ethnomethodological conception of social order

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Abstract

The fundamental sociological problem of social order finds a somewhat "unorthodox" solution in the ethnomethodological program, the main responsibility of which is ascribed to Harold Garfinkel. The current thesis rests on the view that the program offers insights that have not been sufficiently recognized, and that it bears a message to sociology that has been somewhat lost. The study aims to investigate and uncover the ethnomethodological conception of social order in a comprehensible way. Comparisons are made to "formal analytical" perspectives, notably that advocated by Talcott Parsons. The result suggests that the ethnomethodological conception of order is closer related to intersubjectivity than to action theory, and that the ethnomethodological view completes rather than opposes that of formal analysis. The deeper ontological and epistemological implications of ethnomethodology are discussed, partly by invocation of the notion of radical reflexivity.

Key words
Ethnomethodology, social order, Garfinkel, Parsons, formal analysis, radical reflexivity
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How is society possible?

The question of social order has been eagerly debated within the sociological field ever since the birth of the discipline. The core of the problem was summed up in the question formulated by Gerorg Simmel in 1910: *How is society possible?* Given the development of the sociological discipline it is relatively clear that “society” in this question is interchangeable with “social movements”, “organizations”, “politics”, “religion”, “the family”, “deviance” or any other social phenomenon, all of which presupposes social order of some kind. Even though interest in the question of social order *per se* has fluctuated over the years, sociology cannot escape its fundamental relevance. As expressed by Hechter and Horne: “*No comparable intellectual rationale for sociological theory has ever superseded the problem of social order*” (2003:xiii). The current thesis is strictly concerned with the classical issue of social order; with “the possibility of society”.

The question of social order can hardly be treated without the inclusion of Talcott Parsons. His magnum opus *The structure of social action* from 1937 greatly spurred the debate, mainly by giving rise to an abundance of critique from all ends of the sociological field. One of the voices raised belonged to one of Parsons’s own students, Harold Garfinkel. It has been suggested that it was merely the modesty of this man that led him to refer to his teacher as a “source of inspiration”, since his own contribution to sociology differs so radically from that of Parsons’s (Heritage 1984:33). It is this contribution, the seeds of which were planted in the late 1930’s and since 1954 going by the name of ethnomethodology (Rawls 2002:4) that will play the leading role in this thesis.

The ethnomethodological program, or what I will sometimes refer to as “the program” below, has been interpreted and elaborated by a number of practitioners. Today it constitutes a subfield of sociology that is alive and well, and some argue that interest in the field is on the rise (Pollner 1991, Kumlin 2011). However, it has never really been in the centre of sociological attention but has rather, as Pollner puts it, settled down “in the suburbs of sociology” (1991:370). One of the reasons might be that ethnomethodology seems to have been radically misunderstood. One of the main factors that have kept interest in ethnomethodology at bay is the apprehension that it operates on a distinctly micro theoretical
level (e.g. Collins 1981), which makes wider and more comprehensive conclusions virtually impossible and thereby renders the perspective unworthy of attention (Hilbert 1990). It has further been accused of being too subjectivist in focus or even psychologically reductionist (Coulon 1995, e.g. Gordon 1976), ignoring institutional factors (Coser 1975), completely disregarding social structures (Gordon 1976), being totally sociologically irrelevant (Coleman 1968) and of being generally obscure, to name but some of the critical points raised. Without liberating the program of all possible aspects of critique, I believe it is fair to say that most of these more blunt objections emanates in the fact that ethnomethodological thinking has a rather peculiar way of conceiving of the social world that does not fit with conventional sociological reasoning, at least not the sociological reasoning of the sixties when Garfinkel’s famous Studies in ethnomethodology was first published. This fact constitutes a pitfall, the evasion of which requires intellectual delicacy. Also within the ethnomethodological field interpretations have sometimes diverged from Garfinkel’s original intention. This makes it all the more interesting to uncover a comprehensible idea of social order based primarily on Garfinkel’s own writing.

Needless to say, the fact that ethnomethodologists have a different way of conceiving of social order is not all bad or problematic. It also offers an opportunity to sociological progress. This thesis rests on the view that this progress has not been sufficiently recognized or utilized, and the hope that further elaboration and comprehension of the program can enrich the sociological field.

The purpose of the current thesis is to clarify the ethnomethodological conception of social order by showing how this view contrasts the sociological field in general. In order to make the contrast clear and comprehensible however, the program will not be primarily compared to some sort of general sociological conception of order but mainly to the specific conception presented by Talcott Parsons in 1937. The choice falls on Parsons partly because his The structure of social action had a great impact on the sociological field concerning the question of social order, but also because Garfinkel started his investigation of social order studying this very text (Rawls 2002:13). Some interpreters even say that ethnomethodology developed as a critique of Parsonian functionalism (e.g. Hilbert 1992, 2001; Pollner 1991), even though Garfinkel would not agree that this was his primary intention.\(^1\) Although comparisons will be

\(^1\) Garfinkel explicitly points out that “being correct [is] a matter of a universal observer’s privileges” (Garfinkel 2007:17) and sees debates over “who is right and who is wrong and just where is the truth of the matter” as “a distraction” (ibid.)
currently made between the ethnomethodological conception of social order and that of Parsons, it will be clear how and what differences apply to sociology in general.

The main question that the current thesis intends to answer is: *How does ethnomethodology conceive of social order?* The contrasting with what Garfinkel calls “formal analytical” perspectives, mainly that advocated by Parsons, will help clarify the ethnomethodological view and elucidate Garfinkel’s fundamental message to sociology.

In science, there is always a time for modesty. I make no claims on presenting an exhaustive review of the ethnomethodological program. My contribution will inevitably be limited by the selection of material studied. By emphasizing that my product is an *interpretation* I also wish to demonstrate an awareness of the fact that the result will, once again *inevitably*, be a product uniquely formed by the fusion of the material studied and the mind that comprehends. In that sense what is reached can not be viewed as a factual account, but rather, in Garfinkel’s own terms, as a *situated accomplishment*.

**Outline of the thesis**

The remainder of this introductory section consists of a few methodological considerations and a very brief introduction of order as understood by some parts of the sociological field that Garfinkel refer to as “formal analysis”.

The second section is a “set-up of the scene”, i.e., it introduces the Parsonian conception of social order and the phenomenological input that have been influential in the development of ethnomethodology.

The third section goes to the heart of ethnomethodology. It starts out by comparing and pointing out the differences between the program and the forerunners introduced in section two. It also points out some differences to formal analysis in general. This is followed by an account of some of the most important parts of the ethnomethodological program and the entailing conception of social order.

A short, fourth section presents the conclusions.

The last section is titled “discussion”. I have taken the liberty to devote this space largely to a slightly deeper look into the ontological and epistemological foundation of ethnomethodology. Parts of this section build on freer interpretation than the thesis at large, but I will also, contrary to how the “discussion-section” is usually designed, introduce a few
new ethnomethodological viewpoints. I consider the points raised here to be some of the most interesting implications of ethnomethodology. Hopefully the reader will agree with me rather than object to the format.

**About the process of studying literature**

Starting an investigation into a previously unknown field and taking literature, or rather the thoughts and perspectives of other sociologists, as ones topic of study, is not unlike any other study at the outset. The initial focus is to get a grasp of the field. My experience in doing a literature study is though that there is a lot of confusion and uncertainty involved before one really knows what to look for. Reading then gradually becomes more and more focused. Only once ones own writing is well under way is it possible to read something knowing what one is looking for, which makes the process a lot more efficient. The very formulation of a research question requires a lot of reading. My belief was that I needed to find at least parts of the answer in order to understand what the question was that the material provided an answer to. There is also, much in the same way as in analyzing interview transcripts or other qualitative material, a need for reading and re-reading; a time consuming business.

I knew very little about ethnomethodology when I took on the task of studying it. One of my most prominent presuppositions was that it has been subjected to a lot of misunderstanding. This necessitated very careful reading and a good grasp of the subject in order to become sensitive to eventual misconceptions. Every new writer taken on was evaluated with the presupposition that the material might have to be discarded as too far off the track, taking my interpretation of Garfinkel’s original intention as the point of reference. As stated above, I wanted to stay as faithful to Garfinkel's conception as possible in my investigation. Though he has been active for an impressive period of seven decades, his literary production is not massive. *Studies in ethnomethodology* and *Ethnomethodology’s program* are the most well known and the most inclusive texts and were therefore given sources to my project. In addition to those, I chose to read some of the more well known articles that are often referred in ethnomethodological literature.

A fortunate condition to anyone who sets out to study Garfinkel is that he had a clear conception of his program already from the start. His ideas are therefore consistent through his writing and one does not have to worry that any important revisions to the program might be missed unless everything he ever wrote is investigated.
The process of working out Garfinkel’s intention has been hermeneutic. The hermeneutical circle as described by Gadamer (1988) sees the process of understanding as a movement between the whole and its parts, where the one continually shapes and reshapes the other. Gadamer also stresses Heidegger’s realisation that the reader’s pre-understanding affects the reading on a fundamental level. The circle of understanding can thus not be detached from the reader and his or her time, context or personal experiences. Reading is rather a meeting between the reader and the text in which the latter becomes something in the eyes of the former, and where the former is always inevitably changed. In order for this change to occur however, one needs to be aware of ones pre-understanding so that one can be truly open to the text. I believe that I can rightly say that on my part, a critical reading was facilitated by the fact that I knew so little about the subject beforehand, and that when I started out reading Garfinkel my presupposition was that I would probably misunderstand him. I can also honestly say that there were times when I could make out neither parts nor whole. A few other interpreters’ texts aided my understanding, particularly texts by Anne Rawls and Tomas Kumlin.

Ironically, according to Garfinkel, I have in fact misunderstood ethnomethodology to a large extent. Garfinkel is very clear on the importance of understanding ethnomethodology as situated practice. A full understanding can never be reached by way of solely reading about it, but involves seeing the ethnomethods take form in real situations. This borders on a call for existential validation (Von Eckhartsberg 1998:25), a requirement the appreciation of which I believe is gravely overlooked in sociological methodology in general. The “truth value” of any description about the social world can only be validated based on our own experiences. This insight is also found in Gadamer, building on Heidegger: “To understand means primarily to understand [oneself in] the subject matter (Gadamer 1988:75). A text is just a text, a map describing a landscape the true existence of which we need to verify through our embodied being in the world. The map drawn has to include the map drawer if we are to somehow escape the representational paradigm (Wilber 2003:75). As we shall see, ethnomethodology goes to great troubles in insisting that it is not supposed to be read as a

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2 A comparable notion is found in ethnomethodology, adapted from Karl Mannheim, under the name of the documentary method of interpretation: "The method consists of treating an actual appearance as 'the document of', as 'pointing to', as 'standing on behalf of' a presupposed underlying pattern. Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of 'what is known' about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other" (Garfinkel 1967:78).
map at all. Only after having spent a lot of time pondering the material studied in order to penetrate the text and reach the underlying factual things talked about have I managed to, on some occasions, actually see them happen just the way Garfinkel suggests.

**Formal analytical views of social order**

It was argued above that the question of social order is inescapable to sociology. This statement offers an idea of the multitude of different conceptions there are to be found. An exhaustive account of these conceptions would require a thorough investigation of its own, if it is even feasible.

The conceptions of social order that are relevant to the current thesis are those that would fall into the category of what Garfinkel calls “formal analysis”. Even such a limitation does not eliminate ambiguities and difficulties though, since Garfinkel does not offer a definition of formal analysis. A comprehension of what is meant is rather gradually acquired by the reader of the program through Garfinkel’s comparisons between the two “positions”. ³ Broadly speaking, all “conventional” or “mainstream” sociology is formally analytical to some extent, which suggests that the invocation of this notion is not much of a “limitation” at all. However, it allows us to highlight a few typical traits underlying formal analytical thinking and consequently the conceptions of social order.

Common to formal analytical perspectives are that they are firmly entrenched in sociological “bibliographies”, i.e., their questions and/or formulations of social order is based on previous literature and theory (Garfinkel 2002:122). An implication of this is that they operate on a theoretical, i.e., *conceptual* level.

The question of social order is often subsumed in a distinction between micro- and macro levels. This is found e.g. in approaches labelled “analytical sociology” and “structural analysis”. These perspectives constitute clear examples of formal analysis. A key issue amongst the advocates of these perspectives has been whether social order or social phenomena in general can be described solely on a macro level (e.g. Blau 1977, Hirsch 2001) or if one has to take the path via the micro level by

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³ This lack of a definition of “formal analysis” should not be interpreted as a shortcoming or negligence. Definitions per se contradicts the instruction of indexicality why Garfinkel deliberately prefers to keep the account “loose” (see 1967:2 for an account of “looseness”). Indexicality will be explained in section three.
...adopting the doctrine that all social phenomena (their structure and their change) are in principle explicable only in terms of individuals – their properties, goals and beliefs (Elster 1982:453)

This approach is known as methodological individualism. Theories of social order building on this notion naturally tie it up with the question of action theory. Social order is seen as the aggregate result of acting individuals. The strategy applied in this perspective is thus to find out what motivates people to act, in order to be able to predict or explain outcomes on the group level. According to “macro-to-macro perspectives” on the other hand, order is largely seen as a consequence of structured systems of social positions and relations.

Most formal analytical theories hold that order is the result of structures that are external to individuals. These structures are often taken to constrain or otherwise influence individual action “from the outside”. A potential objection to this statement is that several thinkers have advocated what we, following Parsons, might call “voluntaristic” theories. Voluntarism states that structures are internalised and thus become part of individuals’ goals and wishes. However, the idea of external structures is in fact held intact in voluntaristic solutions. Internalization is merely an intermediate step in the process of structural influence on individual action. Voluntaristic theories thus position themselves on a scale between structural control and autonomy. Positioning on this very scale is a common feature of formal analytical theories of order, as expressed by Alexander: “The study of society revolves around the questions of freedom and order, and every theory is pulled between these poles” (1987:12).

Alexander offers a general scheme of what is here referred to as formal analytical conceptions of order. According to Alexander, theory of action and social order can be divided into four categories: rational-individualistic, rational-collectivist, normative-individualistic and normative-collectivist (ibid.). Individualistic theories assure more or less complete moral or rational integrity on the part of the individual. They do not deny that there are extra-individual structures in society, but they state that these structures are the result of individual negotiation. The relation between ordering structures and individuals is consequently “loose” in the sense that individuals can autonomously choose to disregard or even change the structures and act according to their free will. This stance is naturally an open target for critique by advocators of collectivist

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4 Max Weber’s types of social action is a classical example of this approach (Weber [1914] 2007:226).
perspectives, who claim that individualistic theories ignore or deny the existence of structural constraints.

Collectivist theories generally hold that social order is the result of institutionalized structures such as economic or political systems. These systems control individual action by sanctioning deviations from the prescribed order. According to rational-collectivist theories, individuals base their actions on calculations of risks with the intention of avoiding punishment. Normative-collectivistic theories hold rather that action is guided by ideals and emotion, such as in the voluntaristic solutions mentioned above. A general observation is that all these theories have been subjected to critique based on where they position themselves on the scale between deterministic control and individual autonomy.

The structuralist conception of order advocated by Parsons is an example of formal analysis. The review of this contribution found in the next section will be used as more elaborated point of reference than the somewhat loose interpretation of formal analysis found in this section.

Setting up the scene:
Structuralism and phenomenology

The current study sets out to investigate the ethnomethodological conception of social order as found in the works of a single creator: Harold Garfinkel. This should not give rise to ambiguities; he is well recognized as the founder and main elaborator of the program. Among Garfinkel’s sources of inspiration one finds Émile Durkheim, Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Aron Gurwitsch, and Talcott Parsons (Coulon 1995:9). The current section presents two perspectives that have been important to the development of ethnomethodology, albeit in different ways. The review of Parsons will give an idea of how the specific question of social order was treated in the late 30’s - although this should be read with certain restrictions which will be clarified below - and serve as a basis of comparison to the ethnomethodological alternative. A very brief and strategically selective introduction of central phenomenological ideas found in the works of Husserl and Schutz will serve the purpose of facilitating the understanding of the ethnomethodological program. Although Schutz is mentioned several times as one of Garfinkel’s sources of inspiration there are
substantial differences in their respective approaches, why similarities should not be overstated. The account below is selective in the respect that it mainly treats the similarities.

**The structure of social action**

Talcott Parsons contributed to the thorough entrenchment of the question of social order in the sociological field by writing *The structure of social action* which was first published in 1937. The purpose of Parsons’s study was to elucidate a scientific motion in the field of action theory, the main responsibility of which is ascribed to Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. These theoreticians traveled different routes and yet arrived at what, according to Parsons, when followed through can be summed up as an equal position in relation to the theory of action. The interconnecting force of Parsons’s theory is better understood in the light of the fact that the four theoreticians under consideration represent radically different strands of sociological thinking. Marshall, Pareto and Durkheim naturally started from Anglo Saxon traditions, the first two from utilitarianism, and Durkheim (supposedly) from positivism, while Weber’s thinking developed in the tradition of German idealism. Parsons’s ambition was to synthesize these four theoretical contributions into one comprehensive system – *the voluntaristic theory of action*. This ambitious undertaking, covered in about eight hundred pages, easily gives the impression that it sums up the most important strands of the field of action theory developed at the time of its writing. That this is not the case however is evident when one considers the rather peculiar fact that Parsons overlooked the American contributions to the field developed in the decades prior to the appearance of *The structure of social action*. The pragmatist perspective advocated by Cooley, Thomas, Dewey and notably Mead offered an action theoretical development that exceeded the old European classics studied by Parsons (Joas 1996:19). In addition, the pragmatists had attacked the rational action model in much the same way that Parsons himself did, and introduced “voluntaristic” solutions to action theoretical problems. The contrasting of ethnomethodology with Parsons’s work in the current thesis should thus not be understood as a contrast between ethnomethodology and action theory or theory on social order *in general*. However, the contrast between ethnomethodology and a substantial part of the sociological field is greatly clarified when the program is put in relation to Parsons’s theory. A short review of Parsons’s book will therefore serve as a point of reference that will make the sociological journey taken by Garfinkel in the development of the ethnomethodological program even clearer.
The utilitarian fallacy

One of the most prominent aspects of *The structure of social action* is a critique of utilitarianism. While there are plenty of weak links in the utilitarian chain of reasoning, the most important for Parsons’s purposes is the fact that it does not contain a base for social order. Utilitarianism is strictly individualistic, and holds that human action is as goal directed. Taken together these notions invite the risk of a society embossed by a Hobbesian state of constant war between egoistic utility maximisers. This raises the question of how people coordinate their goals in a way that make them able to live together peacefully. Parsons carefully demonstrated the problems inherent in the various attempts to come up with such an explanation. In order for the theory to safeguard the idea of free will and autonomy of individuals, goals could not be preset by some standard extrinsic to the human mind but simply had to vary at random, thus leading directly to the problem stated above (Parsons 1968:60). Contract theory, the solution originally proposed by Hobbes, missed the mark in that it required a rationality that exceeded the concept employed in the rest of the theory (ibid. 93). As pointed out by Durkheim, the application of contracts presupposes mutual trust between the contractors, and thereby the very social order it is introduced to explain. Some vital element was clearly missing from the utilitarian perspective and the positivistic versions which branched off of it, a fact the recognition of which united Marshall, Pareto and Durkheim. The vital element was identified as a normative one, the absence of which led to a radically positivistic position in which all human action was reduced to strictly deterministic conditions (ibid. 67).

In contrast, the idealistic perspective from which Weber started was subjected to the opposite fallacy: by failing to consider the actual conditions of human action one ended up in idealistic emanationism (ibid 732), a state where individual actions become a process of “‘self-expression’ of ideal or normative factors” (ibid. 82). Thus, none of these theories were apt to adequately explain action in a way that rendered “society possible”. The voluntaristic theory of action, i.e., the synthesis of the action theoretical solutions uncovered in the work of the four theoreticians studied, was fashioned so as to include the importance of conditional and non-normative elements, but to make them interdependent with a normative structure. It thus constituted an attempt to circumvent the above stated problems by offering an adequate theory of action which could also account for social order.
Ultimate values as a social beacon

The most essential aspect of the voluntaristic solution is the introduction of a foundation of commonly held values shared by the members of a community. In building on Durkheim, Parsons writes

Modern 'individualism' [...] is primarily a matter of the discipline to which the individual is subjected by his participation in the common beliefs and sentiments of his society (1968:338).

These “common beliefs and sentiments” constitute a fundamental system of ultimate values, embodied in a set of normative rules with which the individual as a member of a certain society complies more or less. Even though norms are identified as socially constraining to some extent, their influence on human action should not be understood as deterministic in a strict sense. The “obedience” to norms requires cognitive understanding and an act of conscious effort. Normative orientations are further involved in the very constitution of goals, as well as in the choice of means, as expressed by Parsons:

...the constraining factors actually enter into the concrete ends and values, in part determining them. And since normative rules, conformity with which is a duty, becomes an integral part of the individual’s system of values in action, it ceases to be strange to think of them as also desired (1968:387).

Goals thus cease to be random. Neither are they determined by pure adaptation to external conditions such as heredity or environment. People rather act on the basis of their normatively valued wants, formed through their participation in and experience of society. In short, the model describes ultimate values as a sort of social beacon that directs the actions of members towards an integrated unity and thereby offers an understanding of social order.

The action frame of reference

It is of interest to the current study to look into the basic assumptions on which Parsons’s action theoretical revisions rest. These assumptions are incorporated in what Parsons called the action frame of reference (Parsons 1968:731 ff), the most important points of which are summarized below.

1. The action schema and the voluntaristic model builds on an epistemology of analytical realism. This implies that an explanation of empirical phenomena inevitably entails the analytic decomposition and isolation of specific elements of those phenomena, in this case
action, and the important notion that the elements themselves must not be mistaken for concrete reality. \(^5\) Analysis of action must rather be treated on its own level.

Further, not all empirical elements are scientifically important, and those that are will be defined as such in accordance with the analytical system. The theoretical “translation” of empirically observed phenomena must thus always be understood as an interpretation made from within the theoretical system into which new knowledge is incorporated. According to analytical realism, science must always consist of the above mentioned translation of discrete empirical observations into abstract analytical concepts, and the elaboration of general analytical laws.

2. Analysis of action always and inevitably boils down to the “smallest” unit of the action system, which is the “unit act”. This is further composed of four elements: an agent or actor, an end consisting in the state of affairs that the actor wishes to bring about, a current situation defined by the conditions to which the actor has to adapt or possibly circumvent and the means available for her to manipulate the environment in pursuit of the goal, and finally a mode of orientation, a selective standard by which the actor relates the end to the current situation (Parsons 1968:44).\(^6\)

3. The schema is “inherently subjective” in the sense that “the normative elements can be conceived of as ‘existing’ only in the mind of the actor” (ibid. 733). But the scientific observation as such is objective in that it is directed towards phenomena external to the scientist (ibid. 46). The objective view of the scientific observer is characterized by its access to scientifically certain knowledge of circumstances. Action that is executed in accordance with the knowledge of the observer is considered intrinsically rational, since it then consists in the choice of means that are, factually, “best adapted to the end for reasons understandable and verifiable by positive empirical science” (ibid. 58). This conception of rationality is the same as that found within utilitarian and neo-Kantian approaches, as pointed out by Heritage (1984:24).

Finally, it should be emphasized that according to Parsons

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\(^5\) Such a mistake equals, following Whitehead, the fallacy of misplaced concreteness (Parsons 1968:29, 294, 476-477).

\(^6\) It is in this last element - the selective standard - that the action theoretical revision embodied in the voluntaristic theory lies, as evident from the summary above.
...it is impossible even to talk about action in terms that do not involve a means-end relationship [...] This is the common conceptual framework in which all change and process in the action field is grasped (1968:733),

and further that

Action must always be thought of as involving a state of tension between two different orders of elements, the normative and the conditional. As process, action is, in fact, the process of alteration of the conditional elements in the direction of conformity with norms (1968:732).

The phenomenological influence

Though ethnomethodology has its own specific ways of conceiving of social order, there is some phenomenological input the knowledge of which might make the program easier to understand. The purpose of the current very brief sketch of a few phenomenological insights is thus to highlight some of the traces relevant to ethnomethodology.

Though the writings of Alfred Schutz were Garfinkel’s major source of phenomenological inspiration, the program owes its most imperative point of “critique” to Schutz’s predecessor, Edmund Husserl. In 1935, Husserl stated that the European sciences built on an epistemology that emanated in results so far from anything that could possibly be perceived as reality that they were in a state of crisis (1970). The core of the problem can be viewed as dwelling in the scientific emphasis on objectivity, and the consequent misrecognition of subjective experience of lived reality. Science generally holds, just like Parsons’s analytical realism, that in order for an explanation to be scientific or for a phenomenon to be fully scientifically explained it has to be objective, i.e. it has to be abstracted from lived reality by an external observer and elaborated in accordance with scientific methodology. Husserl claimed that the result of such an operation is a fictitious model of reality:

*The contrast between the subjectivity of the life-world, and the ‘objective’, the ‘true’ world, lies in the fact that the latter is a theoretical-logical substruction, the substruction of something that is in principle not perceivable, in principle not experienceable in its own proper being, whereas the subjective, in the life-world, is distinguished in all respects precisely by its being actually experienceable* (1970:127).
The scientific epistemology is thus based on a sort of blindness as to what the world really is as perceived. The world, or rather the life-world, is what we experience every day and all the time. This is the only reality of which we can have true knowledge, a knowledge that presupposes an experiencing subject. Furthermore, the life-world is not passively experienced but actively and constantly made meaningful by individuals. The life-world is the arena in which the fundamental human condition is decided, why every seed of understanding, scientific or lay, inevitably grows out of its earth. The failure of objective science thus lie in the fact that it overlooks the life-worldly base on which it inevitably has to build, as expressed by Aspers: “Husserl’s critique is directed [more] towards the fact that objectivistic science cannot explain its own foundation” (2001:261).

The life-world is where meaning is constantly created in the consciousness of individuals. To the actors, this process is uncomplicated. We normally go through our everyday lives without actively pondering how we make sense out of it. We do not doubt the reality of the world or our perceptions of it. Reality is thus pregiven, it is “just there” to us. This state of consciousness is known within phenomenology as the natural attitude. According to Husserl, sciences that are unknowingly based on the natural attitude are naïve; they do not diverge from the commonsensical perception of reality of the layman. The truly scientific ambition thus has to transcend the natural attitude. Husserl asks: “Now, how can the pregivenness of the life-world become a universal subject of investigation in its own right?” (1970:148). As we shall see, ethnomethodology bears an echo of these words.

Husserl started out as a mathematician and abandoned this track in favour of philosophy. Even though he did discuss the issue of intersubjectivity his perspective was one primarily of individual cognition and consciousness. His ways of grappling with these question anchors his thinking firmly in the discipline of philosophy. Schutz carried his thinking over the border to the social sciences (Aspers 2001:285). His sociology is based on the life-world perspective pointed out by Husserl. The task he set for himself was largely to deepen “the analysis of the meaning structures underlying the social world by the use of phenomenological concepts” (Heritage 2010:45).

An important insight of Schutz’s is the fundamentally social character of the life-world. The world is intersubjectively shared. The understanding that we share reality with the people around us, i.e. that we perceive it in “an identical manner or at least an ’empirically identical manner’, namely, sufficient for all practical purposes” (Schutz 1953:8) is taken for granted by social actors. Schutz also emphasized the importance of social practices and knowledge in the
maintenance of a socially shared reality. The common-sense world is primarily an arena of
social action:

...our initial purpose is not so much the interpretation or understanding of the world
but the effecting of changes within it; we seek to dominate before we endeavour to
comprehend” (Natanson 1962:XXVII).

The life-world perspective can be seen as the very core of Schutz’s phenomenological
thinking, and is imperative to ethnomethodology. What we need to grasp regarding the life-
world is that it is the world of every-day life; it is simply what is going on around us all the
time. It is the reality we all know so intuitively and master so well, the reality we take for
granted, the reality we wake up to every day. Our experiences of the life-world supply us with
the knowledge needed in order to be able to, under all “normal” circumstances, act in and on
the life-world without constantly stopping to work out what it means (Schutz & Luckmann
1973:100). This is not to say that we never encounter problems in interpreting the social
world. Normally, we apply knowledge of typicality to situations, objects and individuals.
Even though every unfolding situation in principle is new to us, we know just about what to
expect based on its typicality. We recognize a typical meeting with the extended family, a
typical traffic jam, a typical table or a typical Frenchman. This knowledge includes
information about what to expect of others as well as ourselves and the situated possibilities.
The fact that situations and fellowmen generally confirm our knowledge further strengthens it.
In situations where our information is not sufficient to make unfolding situations intelligible
however, or when events resist our normal scheme of interpretation as to what the typical
situation can bear with it, our natural attitude is breached and we have to stop to investigate
the situation further in order to make sense out of it (ibid. 141). Fundamental intelligibility is
thus imperative in order for us to be able to handle unfolding situations. Ethnomethodology is
concerned with how this life-world7 comes to make such perfect, intuitive sense to us, or
rather, how this intelligibility is achieved.

Schutz insisted that the social sciences have to take their point of departure in subjectivity; it
has to investigate the meaning of the world seen from the perspective of the actors themselves
(Schutz 1962:34). More precisely, social science should be concerned with finding out the
motives of actors in order to understand the phenomena in which they are engaged.

7 Ethnomethodology does not use the concept of “life-world”. As pointed out above the program also
differs from phenomenology on certain points, but the influence of Schutz’s writing is clear just the same.
Ethnomethodology does not refute either “meaning” or “subjectivity”, but can not be sorted under this type of methodological individualism. As we shall see, they have a different way of conceiving of this matter.

**Ethnomethodological order**

We will now turn to ethnomethodology itself. This section largely consists of two parts. First, we will look at the specific way in which the program differs from the phenomenological forerunners, from Parsons’s thinking and from “formal analysis” more generally. Then we will look more closely at the ethnomethodological conception of order.

**The contrast to the forerunners and to “formal analysis”**

So far, we have overviewed Parsons’s structural functionalist approach to social order and some important phenomenological insights regarding the social world as found in the writings of Husserl and Schutz. As we shall see, ethnomethodology differs radically from the perspective advocated by Parsons. Regarding the relationship of ethnomethodology to phenomenology, two very general points of divergence can be pointed out. In relation to Husserl, ethnomethodology takes the same route as Schutz in focusing on the fundamentally social character of reality. The focus on individual consciousness found in Husserl is thus abandoned. In relation to Schutz, ethnomethodology can be said to loosen the interest in the subject-object dualism and in cognition. The interpretation found in some writers that the program builds on a cognitive interest to a large extent is a misinterpretation of Garfinkel’s intention. Ethnomethodology does not, as stated above, build on methodological individualism. This is not to say that the program denies all influence of individuals or individual cognitive abilities, but that the question of social order - ethnomethodology’s prime focus - is rather understood on the basis of a fusion between actors (*or members*, see below) and the situations in which this order is enacted. Above all, social order can not be decoupled from *embodied expression*, the emphasis of which exceeds that found in Schutz’s writing.
Parsons and Schutz did not agree on a lot, but they both preserved the notion that social life is basically made up of a congregation of individuals trying to realize their (cognitively) pre-set plans or goals. Individual motives have a big role to play in such models. The interpretation of social order as something emanating from individual cognition however, does give rise to some problems. Indeed it is difficult to deny that the placement of any social phenomenon “in the heads” of individuals does introduce ambiguities as to what “the social” really consists of, or how such a thing as social order is possible. In order to merge all the individual stories expressed through wishes, plans, and goals into one story, the story of an orderly society, one has to develop a generalized trajectory to which every individual more or less adjusts. One has to build a model out of “scientifically valid” concepts, a model that corresponds to actually lived reality. This consequence is found in both Parsons and Schutz.

As we have seen, Garfinkel contrasts ethnomethodology with what he calls formal analysis (Garfinkel 2002, 1996). Even though it largely applies to a great part of the sociological field⁸, the contrast will be clear if we for the time being let Parsons’s thinking represent formal analysis. According to Garfinkel, the research questions that many formal analytic studies of social order are designed to answer rest on presuppositions about normative rule following. Any such questions relentlessly obscure the phenomena under investigation and thus prevents discovery of the order that is actually there. According to formal analytical ways of grasping social order it cannot be seen or in other ways discovered directly. Following Parsons we see that actual human conduct can be seen “at best” as a tendentious and partial manifestation of order in that it supposedly expresses socially shared goals and values. The “full version” of social order, based fundamentally on these metaphysical entities, is a phenomenon that comes into being on a “macro level”, as the result of an aggregate of individuals acting according to society preserving norms. Since this order cannot be seen in its pure form, it is rather added to the scene as a result of scientific analysis. This is why, according to formal analysis, order can only be made scientifically comprehensible and valuable when treated on a theoretical level. It is only here that they can be rightfully

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⁸ The contrast to utilitarian-inspired sociology such as rational-choice theory and network analysis is evident, but Garfinkel claims that ethnomethodology deepens the understanding of "the workings of immortal, ordinary society" as "the origins, sources, destinations, locus, and settings of achieved phenomena of order" further than more social-psychologically or philosophically influenced thinkers such as Husserl, Gurwitsch, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault as well (Garfinkel 1996:11). To some extent, these theoreticians also falls for what Rawls calls the fallacy of misplaced abstraction (Rawls 2002:51).
explained. Theories and concepts are thus made to correspond to actual, lived phenomena, and that is as close to them as we can ever get, scientifically speaking.

Thinking based on assumptions such as these have been encouraged in the general sociological debate. Alfred North Whitehead’s theorem of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness spurred a development within the field based on the epistemological conception that social reality had to be grasped by way of conceptual elaboration (Rawls 2002:56). It simply could not be grasped “in the raw”. According to this way of seeing things, order is simply the result of looking for order; a purely scientific enterprise. Parsons analytical realism is firmly anchored in this notion.

Garfinkel builds on an entirely different epistemology, which brings us to the heart of ethnomethodological thinking. He believes that concrete social reality is fundamentally ordered. Secondly, he holds that this order can and indeed has to be discovered in the situated practices by which it comes into being. It cannot be grasped by way of scientifically elaborated models of reality. The factual existence of social order is constantly made evident in and by the situated practices of members. Social order is thus a constantly realized situational potential. The “unorthodox twist” to ethnomethodology is that even though social order is evidently factual, it is still something that has to be achieved. The factuality of social order is exhibited by member’s ethnomethods, the very methods that ethnomethodology sets out to study.

Ethnomethodology claims that this way of conceiving of social phenomena is exactly what Durkheim intended by his social facts (Rawls, 2002:48-49). Durkheim held that social order and mutual intelligibility cannot be explained either by way of theorized accounts or as rule.

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9 Hans Joas interpretation (1996) of Parsons differs from that of the current writer, as well as that of Rawls (2002) and Garfinkel himself (1988). According to Joas “Parsons never set out to explain the existence of social order: rather, he wanted to make its existence, as a fact confirmed by experience, the starting point for reflection” (1996:15, my emphasis). This seems to suggest that Parsons did believe in the existence of empirical order. The notion that this order could be “confirmed by experience” is though difficult to incorporate into the framework of analytical realism for several reasons. From the acting individual’s point of view, Parsonian order is not evident since it can only be seen “from the outside”, at the supposed macro level. An understanding of this order further involves scientific knowledge to which the actor has no access. From the scientist’s point of view, the experiential confirmation of social order could not be the starting point for reflection since the elucidation of social order presupposes a scientific operation, namely that of transforming empirical elements into analytical ones and merging them into a scientific system. Garfinkel, Husserl and supposedly Durkheim would unite in the claim that this notion of social order presupposes the social order it is introduced to explain.
governed action, but has to be found in the concrete details of social practices. Social facts are observable practices; sounds and movements. These practices are further recognized as practices of a certain kind (c.f. Schutz & Luckmann, “typical aspects of and attributes of objects, persons, and events” 1973:143).

What is being argued is that the coherence of movements is immediately recognizable, or not recognizable, in terms of taken for granted expectations, social expectations, that are yet so far prior to the level of concepts that it is difficult to even express them in conceptual terms after the fact (Rawls 2002:21).

This is how objectivity comes to be socially constructed. The strict labelling of Durkheim as a positivist is thus based on a misunderstanding of his thinking. Any labelling of ethnomethodology as either strictly positivist or constructionist will be equally misleading. In contrast to “formal analytic” approaches, ethnomethodology’s sole presupposition about social order is that it is witnessable. It is actually there in the sense visibly, hearably, senseably or in other ways discoverably there. There is no knowledge or scientific method that can be applied to the scene in order to bring about or to unveil this order. On the contrary, anything added by the observer obscures the phenomenon under study. Everything that is needed in order for the phenomenon to come into being is already there, and what is there is all there is to it. Ethnomethodology is concerned with the discovery of the methods that members use in order to achieve and exhibit factual, intelligible, rational and accountable order in everyday affairs (Garfinkel 1967:vii).

**Cohorts vs. populations and the distinction of micro-and macro levels**

Ethnomethodology differs from the commonly used sociological notion of populations as aggregates of individuals united by some certain characteristic or dimension relevant to the undertaken investigation. The ethnomethodological view is instead that it is “…the workings of the phenomenon that exhibits among its other details the population that staffs it” (Garfinkel 2002:93). Garfinkel often use “cohorts” instead of “populations” to indicate the difference. Cohorts are endogenous to situated phenomena, and in order to identify them one has to start with “concerted things” such as traffic flow (see e.g. Herman’s study in Garfinkel 2002:162-165) or “formatted queues” (see Liebowitz study in Garfinkel 2002:165-166). It is the traffic flow that exhibit members as “reckless” or “responsible” drivers for instance. This notion emphasises the specific and persistent ethnomethodological focus on the situation. It is
the situation that exhibits its member’s as such and such in an inevitable process whereby members are fused with the situation.

This way of looking at social life further challenges the common sociological distinction between micro- and macro levels. Ethnomethodology has been interpreted as operating strictly on the “micro level” (e.g. Collins 1981). It might be fair to say that most ethnomethodological studies have been carried out in situations comprised of relatively small cohorts. However, there are also examples of ethnomethodological studies on what would qualify as the “macro level”. The point is though that according to the program, the distinction between micro- and macro levels is the result of a scientific operation aimed at exhibiting accountable order by classification. In the eyes of an ethnomethodologist, the classification is thus a phenomenon in its own right. As pointed out by Hilbert, ethnomethodology cannot participate in the micro – macro debate since it does not subscribe to its premises (Hilbert 1990:795). It does not recognize levels. Order as understood by ethnomethodology is found regardless of the size of the crowd enacting it. A protest comprised of thousands of members exhibits the protest as an orderly\textsuperscript{10} phenomenon, just as it exhibits its members as “protesters”.

**Ethnomethodology’s program**

“The story of ethnomethodology” starts with the young Harold Garfinkel taking a business course called the “theory of accounts” at the University of Newark in the 1930’s (Rawls 2002:10). In learning how to set up accounting sheets, Garfinkel realized that the essence of his practices were not actually mathematical or economic in nature, but rather consisted of making the sheets *accountable*. There was thus a decoupling of the accountability of the records with the reality they were supposed to represent. The gap between accounts of events and the actual events, *accountable in their own right*, is an important insight to ethnomethodology, as well as the fundamental function of accountability per se.

\textsuperscript{10} Note that a protest is ethnomethodologically ordered even if it is completely chaotic since chaos is not the antithesis of social order as understood by the program. There is rather a potential presence of chaos inherent in the phenomenon of demonstrations. This contrasts with Parsons normative order which is characterized by the dualism order – chaos (Aspers 2010:5-6).
Methods and members

In exactly the ways that a setting is organized, it consists of members’ methods for making evident that setting’s ways as clear, coherent, planful, consistent, chosen, knowable, uniform, reproducible connections, - i.e., rational connections (Garfinkel 1967:34)

As mentioned in the last section, ethnomethodology’s prime phenomenon is the “ethnomethods” whereby members reason and express themselves in ways that ensure the orderliness in social settings. Expressions – verbal or otherwise embodied, i.e., sounds and movements - consist of applied methods that actualize a situated order and thereby come across as intelligible, rational, objective and accountable to all members in the setting. Importantly, these properties are consequences of how expressions are fashioned in socially organised settings, not what actual form they take. A verbal account e.g., is understood based on how it is uttered, how it is methodologically fashioned, and in what situation. Its meaning depends on knowledge shared by the members participating in the interaction. It depends on recognition of the order it embodies. Meaning as well as order are thus methodologically achieved.

A method is further a description or an instructed action (Garfinkel 2002:101), which means that the method embodies the claim of its own reproducibility. It bears with it the suggestion that “you can do what I’m doing and thereby you would see and understand just what I see and understand, in a practically identical way”. At the same time, the application of a method is also the “in vivo work of following” (ibid.). These accountable features of methods are what make them instantly recognizable. However, they are not recognizable in themselves as isolated units. As stated above, their intelligibility, their meaning, is rather depending on11 their situated consequences given the order they exhibit.

Garfinkel is, as we shall see in the next section, known for trying to reveal social order by exploring “what can be done to make for trouble” (Garfinkel 1963:187). However, one of his better known studies describes a case where “trouble” came “naturally” (Garfinkel 1967 c. 5). In 1958, Garfinkel had the opportunity to meet regularly with an “intersexed” person at a psychiatric clinic in Los Angeles. The person, who called herself Agnes, was born and raised as a male. However, with the exception of male genitals, she had developed a completely female constitution. At the age of 20 she was now applying for a sex change operation. She

11 “Depending on” not as in “is affected by” but as in “equals”.
was, as Garfinkel puts it, “convincingly female” (1967:119) in physical and behavioural appearance.

Agnes’s peculiar condition made her unable to display the order of sex in a natural and unproblematic way. She was always uncertain as to whether her methods were accountable, i.e., whether her interaction partners would indeed “see and understand” what she “saw and understood, in a practically identical way” as stated above. For her it was obvious that sex is a phenomenon consisting in situated accomplishments. Her existence was characterised by the constant work of “passing” (Garfinkel 1967:163). Agnes was aware of the discrepancy between what is understood as the natural and thereby morally accountable order of things – if you have a penis you are a man – and the order she was inspiring to enact, i.e., her actual sexual membership. Passing should be understood as the constant display of methods deliberately designed to conceal that discrepancy. Agnes developed sensitivity to the information dwelling in other peoples’ methods, i.e., she became explicitly aware of them as instructed action. As such, they could offer her clues as to how she should speak, move, chose, answer and in other ways act in order to pass. She also became a skilled liar and learnt to conceal the fact that, having been raised as a boy, she did not have a female biography to back up her identity as a woman. However, few of these methods could be fashioned as general pre-planned strategies since meaning is continually objectified in unfolding situations. Agnes rather had to learn how to display her practices in accountable ways in every actual situation and while she was doing it. Due to her condition, Agnes was thus unable to routinise her activities in every day settings. She was constantly preoccupied with the normally sexed order. Her case evidences the deep entrenchment of normally sexed appearances in members’ recognition of situations as intelligible. More importantly to the current explanation, her case elucidates the constant application of methods that are normally enacted and understood without further reflection.

“Member” does not refer primarily to a person, but rather to a set of competences (Garfinkel & Sacks 1970:342). It was stated above that meaning depends partly on mutual knowledge. This might be “relationship specific” knowledge, i.e., knowledge based on previously shared experiences. However, according to Garfinkel understanding is fundamentally based on knowledge about the methods that are applied in various situations and the orders they embody. To repeat: it is not what is said and done but rather how it is said and done that is recognised and thereby understood. “Member” refers to this specific methodological competence. A member is thus recognised through his or her skilled enactment of
situationally relevant methods, i.e., his or her ability to display actions that can be immediately understood as relevant, rational, objective, accountable and the rest.

**The assumed constitutive order and the breaching experiments**

*In accounting for the persistence and continuity of the features of concerted actions, sociologists commonly select some set of stable features of an organization of activities and ask for the variables that contribute to their stability. An alternative procedure would appear to be more economical: to start with a system with stable features and ask what can be done to make for trouble* (Garfinkel 1963:187).

This quote is from what is commonly known among ethnomethodologists as “the trust article”, in which Garfinkel examines order as a result of rule-following.¹² His approach, as stated above, is to try to disturb the assumed order to find out of what it actually consists. In one of his famous “breaching experiments”, he let people play ticktacktoe with his students (referred to as “assistants” below) and instructed the assistants to radically break the rules of the game while pretending that this was perfectly normal. When the research participant had started out by putting her/his mark in the middle of the game board, the assistant simply erased the mark and put her/his own mark in the middle cell. This action introduced a potential disruption of ticktacktoe as an order.

Garfinkel explains that the situation, any situation really but in this case a game situation, is framed by a constitutive order of events (1963:209). *The situation itself* tells us what possible events we can expect. Order thus lies in situated social settings, as expressed by Garfinkel:

> The policy is recommended that any social setting be viewed as self-organizing with respect to the intelligible character of its own appearances as either representations of or as evidences-of-a-social-order. Any setting organizes its activities to make its properties as an organized environment of practical activities detectable, countable, recordable, reportable, tell-a-story-aboutable, analyzable – in short, accountable (Garfinkel 1967:33).

¹² The strategy pursued in the study is to turn to the *finit province of meaning* (Garfinkel 1963:200, Schutz & Luckmann 1973:23-25) of games, where rules are formalised and thereby offer a clear view of the mechanisms of rule-following, and then turn to the issue of normative compliance in every-day life. As pointed out by Garfinkel, the extent to which formal rule-following, e.g. in games, can be transferred onto every-day life is somewhat limited. Nevertheless, the example does offer clarity on some points.
Somewhat philosophically we might say that the situation “speaks” of its organization. However, as pointed out above, social order is also an achievement, i.e., it is not independent of members’ actions. Members rather realize the orderly potential dwelling in the setting through their concerted actions. Furthermore, we naturally trust situations to be intelligible, if not instantly then after a methodological adjustment of some kind. We also trust the other members in the setting to maintain the constitutive order, i.e., to through the application of relevant methods - “visible and sounded doings” – continually exhibit the situation as accountable, intelligible, recordable and the rest.

The research participants in the ticktacktoe-experiment (1963) were put in a situation where the constitutive order of events was made out to be ambiguous. This demanded some sort of response that could make sense of the situation. If we pause for a moment and ponder what a Schutzian explanation of this situation would be, it would simply state that the participants’ natural attitudes were breached by the order challenging actions of the assistants, and that they had to find a way to restore it. Garfinkel’s analysis however goes a little deeper. The participants showed a range of different responses that could be categorized into three major strategies. One group simply abandoned the order of ticktacktoe in favour of another order, i.e., they assumed that they were playing a different game. The second group also abandoned the order of ticktacktoe but was uncertain as to what order to replace it with. Some of them suspected e.g. that it was a joke or that the assistant was making a sexual pass at them, and some confessed that they did not really understand what was going on. The third group held on to the order of ticktacktoe and thus had to conclude that the assistant was violating the rules of the game, e.g. cheating. This group was the most disturbed by the situation. In contrast to those who saw a number of potential solutions to the situation, group three members were facing a situation where the assistants were openly challenging the supposed constitutive order of the game situation and found no way to “escape” it by redefinition.

The important insight gained from this experiment and a series of other breaching experiments played out in every-day settings by Garfinkel and his students, is that order is not a result of compliance with norms, as suggested by Parsons and a number of other sociological theorists. According to ethnomethodology it is rather the other way around; the actualized norm-set is dependent on the situated order. As was shown in the experiment, the breaking of the rules did not equal a breach of order as such, but rather demanded the reflexive production of a different order or, as in the case of “group three members”, an adjustment to the situation that did not flatter the supposed morality of the research assistants.
In all cases, members trusted that there was an order to be found as soon as they could find
the right methods to make it discoverable, and moreover, that that very order had been there
all along. Order is thus *achieved when evidenced* by the application of methods that make
instances of the social world *intelligible*.

**Formal structures**

The last paragraph might lead us into thinking that ethnomethodology denies the existence of
formal structures altogether or seriously downplays their influence. This misconception is
found e.g. in Gordon 1976. Certain areas of practices prescribe specific norm-sets, sometimes
in the form of formal rules such as in the play of a game (cf. ticktacktoe above) or in certain
institutionalized environments. Members are not indifferent to such structures. The structures
are *there*, and they are *real*. What ethnomethodology demonstrates is though that it is the very
*enactment* of the structures that constitutes them. Just as social order in general, formal
structures do not exist outside of the situated practices in which they are methodologically
displayed. They do not, as stated by Parsons and others, consist of rule-sets that exist prior to
actually situated practices and constrain action by steering it into prescribed trajectories. Such
an interpretation is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, rules *per se* can not be specified
down to a level where they cover every possible instance of contingent unfolding reality.

There will always be situations that resist the application of a certain rule. Secondly, rules can
not tell you *how to actually follow them* (Rawls 2002:42). Rules are generalizations, why a
myriad of possible actions can fit into their frames. Thus, rules are simultaneously too rigid
and too vague to fill the function described by e.g. Parsons. Ethnomethodology, rather,
adopts an argument adapted from C. Wright Mills (ibid.), who held that rule following is a
process of glossing aided by shared expectations i.e., that if an action can be explained as
having been carried out in accordance with the formal rule, it will be taken as such regardless
of what the action was. The invocation of rules is thus rather a rationale; a method in the work
of making action intelligible *per se*.

**Reflexivity**

Ethnomethodology holds that all methods are reflexive. This basically means that they are
“order-maintaining” or “order-evidencing”. Pollner writes that “…*member’s ‘knowledge’ or

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13 The fact that the assistants did not confirm the assumed constitutive order however elicited *distrust*
that needed to be handled by the participants by the application of relevant methods, as described.
descriptions of the setting ‘turns back’ ['reflexes'] [...] into a setting as a constituent feature of its organization” (1991:372). In order to understand this we have to take “knowledge or descriptions” to mean embodied methodological work and/or reasoning. Member’s verbal accounts of what is going on are not a primary means of reflexivity, even though such descriptions or explanations also consist of reflexive practices. The point is that all intrinsic and extrinsic methods, all embodied expressions, are subject to accountability constraints (Rawls 2002:41), i.e., they have to accountably exhibit a social order of some kind to be intelligible. Every expression thus “throws” the order back onto the situation. Note that the situation and its supposed constitutive order of events has a leading role in this drama; one and the same action can take on completely different meanings depending on in what situation it is carried out.14 Just as members display methods that skilfully exhibit the order of the situation, the situation offers the key to what the displayed expression really means, i.e., what really happened. (This point will be pursued further in regards to indexicality below.)

However, reflexivity does not forcibly reproduce any actualized order, which the paragraph above might be taken to suggest. Reflexivity also offers the opportunity to situational change, or to the reflexive actualization of another order. One of the most famous ethnomethodological examples of this is found in Lawrence Wieder’s article Telling the code from 1974. Wieder studied a “halfway house”, a rehabilitative facility for narcotic-addict felons on parole. The social life in the halfway house was largely organized around a “convict code”; a set of rules prescribing the “proper” relationship between inmates and between inmates and wardens. The code generally enforced a clear boundary between the two groups and prohibited any kind of cooperation on the part of the inmates. Above all else, there was a strict rule against informing or “snitching”, i.e., giving any information to the wardens. Wieder describes how relatively friendly conversations between inmates and wardens would often be terminated by the inmate uttering the phrase “you know I won’t snitch” (1974:153).

This phrase reflexively exhibits (or perhaps “throws in” or actualizes) the order of the code in the situation. Up till the very instant when the phrase is uttered “the code” is not a constitutive part of the interaction, but once actualized it is taken to have been there all along (Garfinkel

14 "One and the same" however is a judgement made from outside of any actual situation and is thereby not an ethnomethodological observation. In any actual case, action is what it is recognized to be (c.f. praxeological validity in Garfinkel 2002:115). This is not to be understood as though “the recognition” precedes, identifies, decides or in any other way controls the action, but that they are, as stated, one and the same. There is thus no underlying intention that needs to be interpreted, but action directly express objective, or identifiable, meaning.
In actualizing the order of the code the reflexive phrase further carries with it a whole range of meanings. It states that the warden’s last entry in the conversation was an urge for the inmate to snitch, and that the inmates answer is not to answer. It also actualizes the inmate’s motives for not answering. It further re-establishes the boundary between the two members’ identities as group members: “you are an agent […], and I am a resident-parolee” (1974:153). All these meanings dwelling in the short phrase – the reflexive method - are constitutive parts of the order of the code.

**Indexicality and methods of interpretation**

The ethnomethodological instruction of *indexicality* can be viewed as a necessity in order to understand how the almost infinite variability of social life can be merged into intelligible and accountable instances. In order to understand it we will turn once again to Parsons’s theoretical model which does not build on the idea of indexicality but rather on a “*correspondence theory* of truth” (Heritage 1984:29). Firstly, there is a purely linguistic side to this “indexicality - correspondence dualism”. The structuralist correspondence theory treats language

...essentially as a set of names which can only have intersubjective meaning to the extent that correspondences between ‘names’ and ‘things’ (signs and referents) are already socially established and are adequately reproduced in acts of communication (Heritage 1984:29).

What we are facing is thus a system where words have fixed and once and for all determinable meanings. There is a strict relation between the sign and the referent to which it unambiguously refers. In Parsons’s model this view is also extrapolated onto actions and all knowledge about the social world and its conditions. Assessments about rationality and sense are made by the scientific observer based on the facts of the situation to which she/he has access. This thinking builds on the realistic notion of a fixed system of meaning. The system allows for universal statements and positions as well as absolute truth.

Indexicality thwarts all these statements. It rather instructs us to see how meaning is fundamentally dependant on the situation in which it is expressed:

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15 This understanding of orders or structures as having been there all along once actualized is how we come to conceive of structures as perfectly stable over time.
A sign correctly corresponds to a referent in terms of the assumed constitutive order that itself defines correct 'correspondence' (Garfinkel 1963:195).

All methods that members use – all visible and sounded doings - are indexical in themselves. If decoupled from the situation in which they are displayed they would therefore loose their accountability. On the contrary, they are fashioned just so that they can be accountable given the situation. As we have seen, this is how order is achieved according to the program.

Indexicality is not unknown to “formal analysis”, even though most thinkers who have pondered the issue have taken it to mean that it only concerns parts of the language, e.g. words such as “he”, “it”, “there” etc. (Garfinkel & Sacks 1963:347). The typical attitude has been that indexicality is a nuisance, a shortcoming that needs to be remedied. According to ethnomethodology it is rather a necessity in order to make social life run on smoothly.

However, the situated constitutive order can actually be seen as a sort of remedy. Even though methods are indexical in themselves, they make perfect sense in actual situations. They are immediately understood, i.e., prior to any level of interpretation, when played out in what Garfinkel calls the phenomenal field (Garfinkel 2002:176-178). The meaning of embodied expressions is instantly objectified as features of situations that are just there.

However, this objectivity is not absolute but rather a “practical objectivity” (Kumlin 2011:184, c.f. Schutz “for all practical purposes”, 1953:8). Sometimes we are aware of this fact. Sometimes people do or say things that we are not quite able to make sense of, in which case we often think “I’ll wait and see what comes next, it will make sense in a moment”. This is an example of what Garfinkel calls glossing (e.g. Garfinkel & Sacks 362-366). Glossing devices are methods of interpretation, the main purpose of which are to merge sequences of unfolding events and methods into coherency. This means that the practical objectivity that methods were instantly awarded sometimes is revised at a later point in time, and taken to have had this “new” objective meaning all along. Thus, methods are continually determined by the unfolding events.

In conclusion, the instruction of indexicality contrasts the view advocated by Parsons in that meaning is not dependant on a fixed relation between symbols and referents, but rather on the constitutive order of events and mutually shared methods for sense making.
Conclusion

The last section described the ethnomethodological conception of social order and accountability by somewhat intermittent comparisons to Parsons’s theory. As can be seen, the two approaches are radically different in virtually all aspects. To sum up, Parsons’s answer to the question of social order is that it lies in institutionalized norms that steer people’s actions towards mutually valued goals. Recall his insistence that “...it is impossible even to talk about action in terms that do not involve a means-end relationship” (1968:733), and that “…action is, in fact, the process of alteration of the conditional elements in the direction of conformity with norms” (1968:732). The ethnomethodological break with this conception is definite. The program holds rather that order rests in our fundamental need to make situations, our fellowmen and ourselves intelligible in order to be able to share social reality, and that we have a great variety of skilled methods in order to do so. It is further these methods that are ethnomethodology’s prime phenomenon.

Parsons also held that knowledge is the result of analysis on a theoretical level. Empirical elements need to be translated into conceptual mechanisms. As we have seen, the opposition of this axiom can be formulated as the heart of the ethnomethodological enterprise. It should be noted that Garfinkel was early in challenging the representational paradigm in this way. The Parsonian analyst is further put in a universal position and awarded absolute knowledge of the social processes in which actors are embedded. “Universal” however does not mean neutral in this case, but the position rather depends on the theoretical system into which new knowledge of action theoretical elements is to be incorporated. The property of rationality is assessed from this theoretical position. According to ethnomethodology on the other hand, there is no such position. Rationality is a methodological achievement whether it is displayed by a “scientist” or a lay person. It comes about as a fact in the form of a methodologically fashioned intervention in a given situation. This denial of universal positions also overturns the pure objectivism - subjectivism dualism found in Parsons.

If we were to search in ethnomethodology for a few fundamental points of divergence from “formal analysis”, it seems justified to say that one of them would be methodological in nature. Where formal analysis has a range of different methods in store for the analyst to choose from, ethnomethodology’s advice is not to use a method at all. While formal analysis operates on a conceptual level, ethnomethodology holds that theoretical descriptions
inevitably entail the loss of the factual phenomenon under investigation. It seems justified to say that these advices have more to do with what social order is conceived to be than what sociology is or should be.

Another important point of divergence lies in the interpretation of the question of social order per se. In the past the tendency has been to couple order with action theory and thereby placing great emphasis on the question of what motivates people to act. This has further given rise to the problem of connecting micro- and macro levels (e.g. Coleman 1986). Ethnomethodology can be said to give priority to the social part of order. Social order is not simply what comes about as a result of an aggregate of individual intentions. It is rather an emergent, embodied concert where people are fused with the situated setting by the need for intelligibility and meaning. Using well known sociological terms and distinctions, we can thus say that the program’s notion of social order is not anchored in action theory but rather in intersubjectivity. Social order is simultaneously a presupposition for and a result of mutual intelligibility. As we have seen, this way of conceiving of the question makes the distinction of micro- and macro levels irrelevant.

This might lead one to wonder what people do with their lives according to the program. Is life all about reproducing social order as an end in itself? Naturally not. Garfinkel stresses that ethnomethodology is not a critique of “formal analysis”, and it does not dispute formal analytic achievements. Thus, it is perfectly reasonable that people e.g. make plans and pursue goals. Perfectly reasonable. The difference here lies rather in the fact that ethnomethodology sees every account of a plan or a goal as a situated achievement, just as the evaluation of a series of actions – the answer to the question did I achieve the goal? – is a glossing of previous methodological displays of orderly situations. The answer to the question is thus depending on the rationale by which what happened is retrospectively decided. Goal achievement or intentions are thus not denied, but according to the program they do not provide an answer to the question of social order.

Regarding the results that formal analysis achieve, Garfinkel writes:

*EM asks, ‘What More?’ is there that users of formal analysis know and demand the existence of, that FA depends upon the existence of for FA’s work-site-specific achievements in carefully instructed procedures that FA uses and recognizes everywhere in and as its lived work-site-specific practices* (Garfinkel 2002:123).
Though ethnomethodology bears an important message to sociology it holds that there are virtues in formal analytical perspectives as well, and that the different ways of seeing rather complete than oppose each other.

Discussion

This thesis has been about the specifically ethnomethodological way of conceiving of social order. The current section is focused on the relation of ethnomethodology to what Garfinkel calls “formal analysis” on the level of ontology and epistemology. Above all, it will discuss what I have called the “ethnomethodological paradox”, a plunge into the fundamental consequences of ethnomethodological “thinking”.

Ontology and epistemology – pondering the fundamentals

It was stated in the conclusion above that one of the contrasts between ethnomethodology and “formal analysis” has to do with what the social world is conceived to be. This suggests that it might be fruitful to explore the ontological roots of the program in search of the source of the contrast. Interestingly, an attempt at placing the program in the commonly agreed upon frame of ontological positions gives rise to some confusion. As we have seen, according to ethnomethodology worldly phenomena boil down to concrete things – visible and sounded doings as objective entities in the world. Traditionally we refer to conceptions about the world as fundamentally objective as positivistic or realistic. However, there is also a construction logic to ethnomethodology. The concrete things along with all their properties from which the things themselves are inseparable, are achieved, enacted, displayed in and through members’ methods. This would lead us to want to place one foot in the positivist camp and the other in the constructionist camp, an acrobatic exercise that due to the incredible or even definitive
distance between these positions runs the risk of tearing us apart. The only way to solve this theoretical or abstract dilemma seems to be to transcend the boundary between the two.

As suggested above, the ontological stance has implications for our means of understanding social order, which is where the program’s break with large parts of the sociological field becomes evident. As pointed out by Rawls,

*Garfinkel has stood essentially alone among contemporary sociologists in his insistence that social orders consist primarily of things done and recognized, and only secondly of conceptual orders* (2002:57–58).

This implicates e.g. that the program is separated from all perspectives that maintain a conceptual division of micro- and macro levels of analysis (Hilbert 1990). Furthermore, most sociological perspectives operate on a conceptual level out of supposed necessity. Parsons, though heavily criticised on numerous points, is a prime example. As noted above ethnomethodology does not criticize, but on the contrary, affirms formal analysis as ways of exhibiting orderly, rational, accountable phenomena. The conception that ethnomethodology’s original prime concern was a critique of Parsons is a misunderstanding (Lemert 2006, Rawls 2002). For the ethnomethodologist however, “formal analytical” perspectives and the scientific investigations carried out within them are phenomena in their own right. They are not the ethnomethodologist’s answers, but rather her “data”.

The issues of “ontology”, “epistemology”, “empiricism”, “constructionism” and “positivism”, all classical concepts in sociology, are not explicitly used by Garfinkel. He does not discuss them in particular. In this respect, Garfinkel’s writing does not take a classically sociological form, which is most likely one of the reasons why he has often been misunderstood and accused of disregarding such issues all together. However, as is hopefully made clear in this thesis, the specific ways in which all these issues are treated can be extracted from ethnomethodological thinking by any theoretically interested researcher who finds it in their interest to adapt the program to a more recognizable sociological form. Hopefully it is also clear that Garfinkel has very specific reasons for not treating these issues, and that any such transgression betrays the program and in fact, ceases to be ethnomethodological. The program is not intended as a theoretical enterprise. Theoretical classifications are simply the result of the

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16 Note that the question of ontology itself leads us onto a theoretical track. This could be seen as grounds for arguing that the question itself can not be solved ethnomethodologically, which does not mean that there is no solution or that there is no such thing as an ethnomethodological ontology but rather that the concept does not in itself satisfy the question. There is only and all that which is, in every given situation.
classifying gaze. Social order is there regardless of weather we call it “objective” or “constructed”. It is thus truly independent of these concepts.

The ethnomethodological paradox

As the reader may have sensed, there is something in ethnomethodology that does not quite “add up”. How can we possibly escape the application of concepts in describing a phenomenon such as social order? “Indexicality” and “reflexivity” are inexorably concepts in that they claim to be generally applicable. And yet, Garfinkel argues that social order can not be explained via the application of concepts. It thus becomes evident that the full implication of Garfinkel’s program in effect can not be conveyed by lingual means at all. His attempt at doing so is, inevitably, a compromise. Garfinkel warns us about this on several occasions in insisting that ethnomethodology is a practical endeavour. Ethnomethodology is not an explanation but instructed action that can only be taught by the actual exercise of tutorial problems (Garfinkel 2002:149). Imagining the described events is not enough. No matter how clearly we understand a description, its full meaning will inevitably be lost unless we actually perform the tutorial exercises. Garfinkel also insists that ethnomethodology should not be read, but rather misread (Garfinkel 2002:146) as instructions. He would thus object to the statement above that “indexicality” and “reflexivity” are concepts. He would state instead that they are advisories as to how to look at social phenomena.

The fact that Garfinkel’s writing has become more unconventional, and to some minds incomprehensible or obscure with the years might be interpreted as a growing realization of the inadequacy of writing as a means to convey something that is inexorably reduced or even lost when accounted for in a conventional way. As ethnomethodology teaches, an account is always decoupled from that to which it supposedly refer, and as such constitutes yet another way of achieving intelligible order. In other words, it ceases to be an answer to the question of social order and becomes a methodologically achieved part of the phenomenon itself.

To clarify, the problem we are looking at is this: According to Garfinkel social order can not be grasped by conceptual means. Order is factual, not conceptual, not theoretical. It is emergently revealed in actual unfolding situations. This should entail that its features can not be generalized or decoupled from the actual situation in which they are revealed without loosing parts of their actual meaning or function. The account of order can only be conceived of as another, orderly situation. Factual order can thus not be conveyed, but only experienced
i.e., reflexively enacted. It can be lived but not told. The description of situations has to be a
to be a reduction, in Garfinkel’s terms, a “glossing” of the factual. There is thus no transcendental
position from which pure factual order or its properties such as its intelligibility or rationality
can be assessed or conveyed. This is all coherent. But it does give rise to a question: Does not all this comprise a universal statement of the order of things? Garfinkel states for instance that

*In exactly the ways in which a setting is organized, it consists of methods whereby
its members are provided with accounts of the setting as countable, storyable,
proverbial, comparable, picturable, representable – i.e., accountable events*

(1967:34, my emphasis),

a statement which is coupled with the inescapable question: *Who is saying that?* Or maybe
rather: *From what position is this statement uttered?* From what position does a setting
consist of anything in a way that can be stated as “fact” independent of the very concertedly
enacted situation in which it is revealed? According to the program itself, there is no such
position. Even if one were to ask the members in a situation of what the setting consisted,
their verbal accounts of it would reflexively turn the situation into a new one; one of “trying
to explain what is actually going on” or perhaps one of “stopping to meta-analyze the social
situation we are (were) currently in”. What we realize at this point, is that any act of
explaining or describing inevitably loses the phenomenon it is fashioned to explain or
describe. It tarnishes the perfectly factual situated order of things which Garfinkel points at
from a position that can not exist. This is why he has devoted such considerable effort not to
point. I believe that the awareness of this very paradox is reflected in Garfinkel’s writing and
throughout his career. It is seen in his invention of words in order to evade the use of well
known concepts (particularly in Garfinkel 2002), and in his “unorthodox writing”. In 1948 he
wrote a manuscript (Garfinkel 2006) that, although he was encouraged to publish, did not
make it to the print shop until Anne Rawls was given his permission to have it published in
2006, all because Garfinkel was afraid that the text and ethnomethodology in general was
going to be misinterpreted as a theoretical enterprise. He was afraid that it was going to be
read. Further, in his later publications Garfinkel seems to be trying to distance himself even
clearer from anything that could be interpreted as universal statements. In writing about
literatures and their (lived) “alternates” he does not make claims at all but rather suggestions:
“Think of this; don’t settle for it, but relations can work like this…” (Garfinkel 2007:19, my
emphasis). In this text he also refutes claims to scientific status:
At times I’ll describe them in a fanciful way, even a seemingly scientific way. Don’t believe me on that score. The relations are not described scientifically (ibid.).

The question remains as to what we can make of ethnomethodology as a non-theoretical enterprise. The problem is, as it usually turns out to be, one dwelling in the question with which we set out from the beginning. What is social order? is a theoretical question. It will not find a non-theoretical answer. Order does not question itself. If we believe Garfinkel, order is quite unproblematically enacted and exhibited all the time in social settings. Now it seems that the only way to keep it factual is not to question it, but to leave the knowledge of its factuality and its “nature” to our embodied existence in the world. This solution however, in addition to putting all ethnomethodologists out of work, leaves an itching feeling that some important insights have been lost. Ethnomethodology offers a very specific way of conceiving of the social world that does, or so I argue, enrich the sociological gaze. Perhaps the dilemma born out of this very special approach does not necessarily have to constitute a problem, but rather a resource. Melvin Pollner goes to the heart of the paradox and tries to answer this question (1991).

**Radical reflexivity**

According to Pollner, ethnomethodology is situated in a field of epistemological tension between subversive radical reflexivity and mundane epistemology. The latter is actualized in perspectives that are based on “settled discourses” (1991:374), while the former

...enjoins the analyst to displace the discourse and practices that ground and constitute his/her endeavours in order to explore the very work of grounding and constituting (1991:370).

As pointed out several times, Garfinkel’s constant exhortation is for us to do ethnomethodology. In order to see ethnomethodologically one has to develop the unique adequacy needed in order to become member, to “take on the EM task of looking to the practitioners to teach you what you’re talking about” (Garfinkel 2002:186). As a situated practice, ethnomethodology is thus (relatively) unproblematic. This is, following Pollner, reflective practice. We are following Garfinkel’s advice in asking ourselves “what did we do?”, “what did we learn?” and possibly also, “what can we teach?” (2002:115), i.e., we reflect upon our own situated practices in the world. However, as soon as we engage in the activity of describing, explaining or making claims about these activities themselves, we situate ourselves outside of these practices and our account becomes referential in character.
The radical reflexivity comes into play in the realization of the reflexive character of our own account, i.e., in the realization that our act of pointing out the reflexive character of member’s practices is itself a reflexive, endogenous achievement. This happens when ethnomethodology so to speak “turns on itself”. As pointed out by Pollner, this action is truly subversive: “In their consummate form, radically reflexive inquiries cannot produce descriptions, accounts, or hypotheses” (1991:374). From a scientific point of view, radical reflexivity thus leads to a paradox in stating the impossibility of the stated. Or perhaps rather by reducing the own (scientific) achievements to achievements on the same level as those that were explained and thereby, according to conventional science, achieving nothing. Ethnomethodology, when theorized, comprises (nothing but) another intelligible account.

However, as pointed out by Pollner, radical reflexivity is a virtue per se.

*Left to its own dynamic, radical reflexivity would unsettle ceaselessly. When deployed as an analytic tool, however, it provides a purchase on deep and novel levels of practice. Though it is pointless, groundless, and subversive, radical reflexivity delivers to epistemologically settled communities the work through which points are made, grounds established, and versions of reality secured against subversions* (1991:378).

Thus, it might be argued that the consequence of not unsettling our own position at least temporally but rather fending for the notion of universal positions is a blindness to our own achievements and the workings of our own practices. This insight was further spurred in the sociological field at large after the decline of the structural functionalist hold, mainly by post modern perspectives and notably by the introduction of deconstruction. The question though is what to do at the point when the claim to universal positions has been discarded, when discourse has been “unsettled”. Jacque Derrida apparently crossed out his own words to indicate that his text was not about anything (Pollner 1991:374-375). Another strategy would be to give up all attempts at deepening the knowledge of the human condition all together. Ethnomethodology constitutes yet another solution.

**The ethnomethodological potential**

A final and most imperative insight is that the “paradox” stated above is a consequence of pointing out actual, lived reality as a “subject”. It is the result of letting sociology be the actually experienced reality rather than being about that reality. Herein lies the core of
ethnomethodological potential. It offers an understanding of how socially organised orders come into being on a level of fundamental intelligibility seen from a position that oscillates between “settled” – as is the case whenever a “claim”, “description” or “explanation” is made or when correctly misread, an instruction 17 - and “unsettled” in its awareness of its own status as an achievement; its recursive tendency to overview the own work of grounding and constituting (hence, “don’t settle for it…” Garfinkel 2007:19). As such, I argue that ethnomethodology constitutes one of the most self-conscious perspectives within the sociological field.

The program offers insights into the actually lived reality we all know so instinctively well and thereby an important key to the understanding of social change. Ethnomethodology holds that members can effect changes of social order (Kumlin 2011:180), but change has not been a primary focus of the program. My belief is that this area lies open to future generations of ethnomethodologists, and that the insights dwelling in this field can award the program a higher degree of sociological applicability in the world of Durkheimian things.

To clarify, the “problem” as discussed above, is only a problem when theorized, i.e., when seen from the angle of conventional sociology. It becomes a “problem” the instant we actually lose the phenomenon of social order. In short, the “problem” is - really - the core of Garfinkel’s message to sociology.

Suppose any and all the gorgeous topics of order that we have inherited in our social sciences in received assurances in intellectual history – i.e., the topics of logic, meaning, method, reason, rational action, order, temporality, space, place, placement, consciousness, evidence, observation, proof, demonstration, collection, comparison – suppose that those topics are to be found in and as of the local workings of ordinary organizational things: the coffee urn, the formatted queue, crossing the street, playing chess, the availability on the street in a quick gesture: ‘Where’s the bakery?’ (With a pointing chin.) ‘Over there.’ (Garfinkel 2002:217).

17 When correctly misread as an instruction, the position is in fact unaffected or ceases to exist and understanding is postponed to a point in time when the instruction is followed through.
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