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Melvin Pollner

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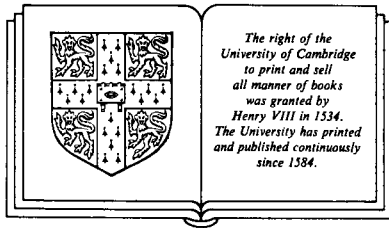
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Mundane reason

*Reality in everyday and
sociological discourse*

Melvin Pollner

*University of California,
Los Angeles*



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*This book is dedicated to
the memory of my parents,
ISIDORE and PAULINE POLLNER*

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Preface

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck him. – And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.

(Wittgenstein 1951: 50)

One of ethnomethodology’s contributions to the understanding of social life is its capacity to produce a deep wonder about what is often regarded as obvious, given or natural. Whether it be the interpretation of documents, the utterance of ‘uh-huh’ or the flow of everyday interaction, ethnomethodology has provided a way of questioning which begins to reveal the richly layered skills, assumptions and practices through which the most commonplace (and not so commonplace) activities and experiences are constructed.

Ethnomethodology’s second contribution is an extension of the attitude of wonder to the discourse and practice of the human sciences (and, more recently, the natural sciences as well). It has striven, with various degrees of success, to make problematic the ways in which disciplines concerned with human behaviour conceptualize, research, and account for human behavior. The resultant inquiries have suggested that the production of ‘objective’ or scientific accounts of human behavior are themselves permeated by rich, subtle practices and assumptions which are typically ignored or unrecognized – just as they are in everyday life.¹

The following research partakes of both dimensions of ethnomethodological wonder. It asserts, argues and at times shows that aspects of both everyday and sociological discourse, practice and inquiry are dependent upon assumptions about the nature of ‘objective reality’, to wit that there is an objective determinate order independent of the acts of observation or description through which it is known. The assumption of an ‘out

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there', 'public' or 'objective' world is a central feature of a network of beliefs about reality, self and others which comprise what I shall call *mundane reason*. For most contemporary Western adults, the assumption of an objective reality is virtually self-evident (and thus truly mundane). Yet a tradition of philosophical skepticism, Eastern epistemology, phenomenological investigations, certain forms of 'pathological' experience and what some purport to be the cutting edge of physics (O'Flaherty 1984) suggest that the epistemology and ontology implicit in everyday and scientific discourse is historical, contingent – and even wrong. These whisperings from other traditions and disciplines are not amplified by me into a voice encouraging a new or 'correct' ontology. Rather, I use them in varying degrees of explicitness as ways of moving 'outside' of mundane discourse so as to grasp it as a folk idiom. The thrust and spirit of part of my analysis is not how limited mundane reasoners are for failing to see the threats and alternatives to mundane discourse, but how ingenious they are in sustaining it.

The analysis, however, is not entirely an appreciation of the genius of mundane reason and mundane reasoners. The claim that the objective determinate order is but an 'assumption' which founds both everyday and social scientific discourse has critical implications for the latter. Specifically, it implies that the human sciences may be naively founded on a problematic supposition and thus may comprise a *folk discipline*, that is, a form of inquiry which is not so much 'about' members' assumptions as it is ensnared by and an expression of those assumptions. The modification of the sociological imagination necessary to disentangle sociology from mundane reason is an extraordinary complex undertaking. As is perhaps already obvious, the assumption of an objective world, what Husserl (1962) characterized as the 'natural attitude', is the basis of a discourse which includes some of the most cherished conceptual possibilities of Western culture. The very distinction between 'truth' and 'error', for example, presupposes an objective reality with regard to which 'descriptions' or 'experience' (themselves terms I shall later submit are derivations from within mundane reason) may be compared. Thus, suspension of the assumption of objective reality may reverberate to some of the primordial terms and possibilities of sociological analysis. Does, for example, suspension of the assumption entail abandoning a concern with 'truth' or 'error'? Does it imply that sociological discourse cannot be 'about' anything? And what of this very discourse through which the structures, antinomies and paradoxes of mundane reason are presented. What is its status in relation to what it purports to talk about?

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These are the kinds of questions which I did not intend to ask at the outset of my inquiry but which thrust themselves in my path as I explored mundane reason and considered its implications for sociology.

This investigation of mundane reason is both substantive and methodological. Substantively, the study addresses the nature and practice of mundane reason, especially as expressed in the courtroom, a setting of interest because of the extensiveness of mundane reasoning, and in selected forms of sociological analysis. Mundane reason is viewed as an idiom or 'language game' (Wittgenstein 1953) constituted through deep assumptions regarding persons and reality. In a fashion akin to an anthropologist, we examine how members of the 'tribe' of mundane reasoners use their beliefs about reality to make inferences, raise and resolve puzzles and exercise tact and ingenuity. Methodologically, the study explores the implications of mundane reason for the social sciences and sociology especially. Insofar as mundane reason comprises an activity of the 'tribe', to what extent does mundane reason infiltrate the discourse of those who would be students of tribal life? What consequences for sociology flow from naive participation in the mundane idiom? To what extent, if any, can sociology transcend mundanity?

There is an unusual warp and woof to the following chapters and a word on how the loom was constructed will help to discern the pattern I tried to weave. This study began as an ethnomethodological investigation of traffic court transactions. The traffic court was chosen because of the opportunity it afforded to explore central ethnomethodological concepts and concerns (Garfinkel 1967): accounts and accountability, legal and everyday rationality, practical management of activity, the interpretation of indexical expressions and so forth. Moreover, at the time, I had begun to appreciate the ways in which 'truth', the proffering of some determinate version of 'what really happened', was not the province of the scientist but a construction produced in and through practical activity: traffic court was interestingly thick with just such activity. Thus, the initial vision for my research was of a blend of substantive ethnographic description and more formal ethnomethodological analysis of 'practices' for producing the sensible, orderly, intelligible features of traffic court transactions, especially versions of 'what really happened'. At the same time I was intensely aware of one of the few ethnomethodological methodological admonitions: beware of confounding the topics of one's studies with the resources for studying them (Cicourel 1964; Garfinkel 1967). In subtle ways, the warning goes, sociologists have naively employed and taken for granted the self-same

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skills, practices and suppositions as members of the society. The confounding has the consequence, as I indicated earlier, of rendering sociology a folk discipline: sociology becomes naively ensnared in the very practices it ought to be describing. The methodological warning turns into a substantive recommendation: the ethnomethodologist is to search out these hidden resources and describe the ways in which they are used by members in the construction of 'rational', intelligible or 'accountable' action and discourse.

Over the course of observation of several traffic courts, the methodological aspect of my study gained ascendancy. I became intrigued with the way in which I was trying to produce a determinate version of how the judge was trying to produce a determinate version of 'what really happened'. To be sure, the substance of judges' and my concerns was different, as were our practices and the circumstances within which we deployed them: the judge, for example, made decisions in real time with on-lookers immediately present while I made mine in academic time at my carrel with only imagined on-lookers (though real ones would eventuate). Yet we participated in an abstract conceptual 'space' which seemed similar. We were both addressed to entities and events which were presumably possessed of their own determinate structure or orderliness. Could this dichotomy through which we cast ourselves as inquirers over and against 'real' structures be one of the taken for granted resources I had been warned about? The assumption of an objective world seemed so difficult to grasp as an 'assumption' and so deeply entwined in any form of inquiry or, indeed, social activity that I decided it was either a truly foolish or a truly profound topic. The taken for granted character of the assumption, the obviousness (i.e. how could it be otherwise?) of the reasoning which it founded and mundane reason's pervasive presence in the society suggested the possibility of uncovering a major and consequential construction. Thus I elected to shift my focus from the traffic court *per se* to the traffic court as the site of mundane reason. And mundane reason became the primary focus.

The shift in levels entailed a transformation of the underlying organization of the study. Initially, I envisioned a study which would illustrate, apply and deepen ethnomethodological concepts and reveal the taken for granted aspects of the 'accomplishment' of traffic court. While the path of such an investigation was hardly clear, the grass had been pressed by those who went before and there were some guideposts. Mundane reason by contrast is virgin terrain with even fewer guides and guideposts.² Accordingly, the study was transformed from an expedition

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within more or less established conceptual boundaries to a reconnoitering of a new territory. The following chapters, then, probe and delineate what mundane reason might be and experiment with ways and concepts for conceiving and describing its construction and use.³

Because mundane reason is intricated in the discourse through which conventional naturalistic-positivistic inquiry, lay or professional, casts or understands itself, the terms and concepts of positivistic inquiry are unsuited for penetrating mundane reasoning: in important ways these terms and concepts *are* mundane reasoning. Thus, one must struggle to secure a vocabulary and an attitude for moving beyond the positivist discourse. At times this has meant reliance on certain anthropological contrasts and *gedanken* experiments. At other points the pursuit of the basic assumptions pertaining to the subject-object duality backs one into philosophy, most especially the work of those whom Rorty (1979) calls the 'edifying' philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Heidegger. Indeed, as one moves to the limits of mundane discourse, one's entire attitude and analysis may assume a distinctly philosophical even metaphysical tenor. This I suspect is unavoidable if only because analysis of the structures which provide for empirical description will perforce require one to step out of the mundane frame and into 'philosophy' (cf. McHugh *et al.* 1974). There are powerful ideas and insights to be had on the margins of sociology and philosophy. I have occasionally used some of these 'marginal' ideas as wedges to crack through mundane reason or 'ladders' (Wittgenstein 1961) to try to climb beyond it.

The increased generality and abstraction of concern placed a great empirical burden on the materials gathered from observation of traffic court transactions. Initially, traffic court transactions were of interest in their own right: the new focus, however, transformed them into instances of mundane reasoning. Aside from what I might claim to know about mundane reason as a commonsense reasoner and sociological practitioner, the courts were the only sites of mundane reason for which I had extensive and detailed materials. Thus, there is a tension between the generality of my claims about mundane inquiry and reason on the one hand and the empirical materials through which my claims are illustrated let alone substantiated on the other. Although my empirical cup may be less than full, I take comfort from the fact that it is not bone dry – especially given that it is served in a context which has been casual in regard to concrete, actual, ongoing activity. The efforts of Wittgenstein, Heidegger and others to explore the contingent or accomplished character of everyday ontology and epistemology have typically relied

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upon the stock in trade of philosophical analyses – the remembered or imagined example (Heritage 1984). Insofar as empirical attentiveness among philosophical inquirers is used as a standard, the empirical materials here are distinctive rather than deficient.

Chapter 1 argues that conventional sociological inquiry has unwittingly committed itself to certain assumptions about the nature of social reality. Sociological inquiry takes for granted a subject or observer confronting an objective and determinate order shared or sharable with other observers. This network of mundane assumptions is the source of sociological goals (to know the world, i.e. the social order, accurately and comprehensively); methodological concerns (objectivity); and fundamental autobiographical conceptions of self (inquirers inquiring into the world). The mundane assumptions are similar to those made and used by everyday actors as they carry out their own practical investigations. Persons in everyday life also suppose a real and intersubjective domain. The conflation of lay and social scientific epistemology may belie a failure of the sociological imagination. I argue it does! Instead of naively appropriating and operating within everyday assumptions, these assumptions and their use ought to comprise a central topic of sociological investigation.

Chapter 2 begins the exploration of mundane assumptions about the nature of reality. In traffic court, as in other sites of mundane inquiry, intelligible or ‘accountable’ (Garfinkel 1967) inference and interpretation of reality rests upon assumptions about the objective, determinate and coherent nature of concrete events and objects. These assumptions are not explicitly articulated but their force is evident in the ways in which judges, defendants, and others make or refute claims about ‘what really happened’ or assert that claims are impossible or implausible.

Chapter 3 explores the ways in which mundane reason’s suppositions about reality though unfounded and vulnerable when viewed from the ‘outside’ are preserved through mundane reasoners’ unwitting ingenuity.⁴ Mundane reason provides a range of solutions or explanations to puzzles which might be otherwise seen as crises regarding the assumption of a shared objective world. In traffic court, for example, conflicting accounts of what is assumed to be a real and intersubjectively available order of events is not treated as evidence that reality is radically ‘subjective’. Rather, parties to the disjuncture search out and propose the ways in which the world was observed or described was faulted or problematic. Through the artful formulation of these solutions mundane

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reasoners reproduce the 'self-evident' character of mundane assumptions about reality.

The great variety of candidate solutions generated by mundane reason to account for disjunctive claims about or experiences of reality means that there is considerable latitude in the resolution of any concrete disjuncture. In Chapter 4 I develop an analytic characterization of the process of resolution through which some claims/experiences are 'authorized' and others discredited as representations of reality. The resolution of disjunctures involves a 'politics of experience' (Laing 1967) through which one experience is empowered as definitive of the real and others are deemed erroneous or subjective. I use this framework to examine the ways in which sociological analysts are often involved in a politics of experience with those they study or theorize about. Sociological concepts ranging from 'false consciousness' to 'interpretation' to 'subjectivity' itself are the product of a politics in which the analyst has authorized his or her own version of reality by reference to which lay members are found to be deficient witnesses of 'what's really happening'. These concepts suggest how deeply mundane reason permeates sociological analysis.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are concerned in the main with assumptions about the nature of 'hard' or 'material' events such as cars, stoplights and roads. Mundane reasoners, however, may also treat 'abstract', 'symbolic' or 'constructed' orders as objective, that is, as existing independently of reaction, observation or perception. Though from a point outside the system in question mundane reasoners may demonstrably be shown to be constructing a world, they nevertheless experience and describe themselves as 'reacting to' or 'reflecting' an essentially objective domain or world. In Chapter 5 the outside ontology of the 'construction' of deviance (as provided by societal reaction theory) is juxtaposed with the inside ontology of 'reflection' (as expressed in the formulations of judges). The juxtaposition affords insight into how mundane reasoners are able to disattend the constructive or creative aspect of their activity so as to encounter a domain or world which seems to be 'always already there'. An aspect of mundane reasoners' accomplishment is their remarkable and endless capacity to formulate a 'mundane autobiography' and represent themselves as standing over and against an objective field of events and relations.

Not only do mundane reasoners have distinctive ways of formulating their relation to reality, they have distinctive ways of reflecting upon that relation. Mundane reflection, however, is deeply tied to mundane

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assumptions and practices and thus is incapable of grasping the processes through which mundane worlds are constituted. Chapter 6 considers the ways in which mundane reflection is shaped by mundane reason and thus precluded from radical self examination. Mundane reason's incapacity for radical reflection, it is suggested, is not a deficiency or fault but an aspect of the very processes through which mundane worlds are constituted.

Ethnomethodology's precocious claim to stand apart from sociology stemmed from its attempts to move 'outside' of conventional sociological discourse and praxis. To free oneself of deep conventions and convictions requires distance or marginality. The impulse to move to the edge and beyond of sociological discourse, however, dominated the earlier programmatic statements in the form of declarations of difference and disjuncture (e.g. Zimmerman and Pollner 1970). These declarations were not wrong but they were incomplete. The discovery of practice is not the end of investigation but the beginning of a dialogue with and within sociology. Thus, what should also have been said is that ultimately ethnomethodology must bring its insights back to sociology, either to ask substantively how a particular discourse and practice arise or to pursue, at the methodological level, the implications of these practices for the self-understanding of sociology. By virtue of its concern with taken for granted practice, ethnomethodological inquiry must strive to transcend the constitutive and constraining character of the dominant form of life and the practice, language and experience which it cultivates in order to 'see' them at all. But it also must – if it is to contribute to an understanding of social life – return to sociology to understand those practices in their larger social context and to consider their significance for a form of social life concerned with forms of social life. Chapter 7, the concluding chapter, 'returns' to consider mundane reason in terms of structural and historical processes. Mundane reason, it is suggested is not simply the product of the local work of mundane reasoners, for it is also shaped by longer term and larger scale dynamics. I also return to consider several vexatious issues in the study of mundane reason, such as the extent to which sociology can move beyond mundane reason.

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I am indebted to the judges who gave of their time and knowledge to assist me in gathering materials. Judge Joseph Lodge was especially helpful.

As Alfred Schutz noted, the thinker departs from and returns to the world of everyday life. My wife Judy and children Leslie and Adrian made my return the sweetest part of my voyages and lovingly prepared me for the next sojourn. I am thankful for the warmth and concern of my father-in-law and mother-in-law, Isadore and Sylvia Abramson.

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