

Margaret S. Archer

# Making our Way through the World

Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility



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## Making our Way through the World

How do we reflect upon ourselves and our concerns in relation to society, and vice versa? Human reflexivity works through 'internal conversations' using language, but also emotions, sensations and images. Most people acknowledge this 'inner dialogue' and can report upon it. However, little research has been conducted on 'internal conversations' and how they mediate between our ultimate concerns and the social contexts we confront. Margaret Archer argues that reflexivity is progressively replacing routine action in late modernity, shaping how ordinary people make their way through the world. Using interviewees' life and work histories, she shows how 'internal conversations' guide the occupations that people seek, keep or quit; their stances towards structural constraints and enablements; and their resulting patterns of social mobility.

MARGARET S. ARCHER is Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick. She has written over twenty books including *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation* (Cambridge, 2003) and *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (Cambridge, 2000).



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Margaret S. Archer

*University of Warwick*



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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521874236](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521874236)

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First published in print format 2007

ISBN-13 978-0-511-28714-5 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-10 0-511-28714-3 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-87423-6 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-87423-8 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-69693-7 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-69693-3 paperback

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To the memory of  
Luminița Caibăr

Who made her way lovingly through the world





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## Acknowledgements

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This book was an adventure. After commuting to the University of Warwick for thirty years, I finally got to know the city of Coventry. To do so means unpacking ‘the decline of British manufacturing’ into the painful lived reality of many people: the young without work, the families with first-hand knowledge of redundancy, and the older ones who will try anything rather than say ‘I’ll never work again.’ My first and deep thanks go to those who generously gave hours of their time to being interviewed and shared the good, the bad and the mundane so openly. I sincerely hope that I have given their life stories the respect and understanding they deserve – and not only because these are the book.

Secondly, my thanks go to the ESRC for funding this project and its successor. Without the award there would have been no research team and, without the team . . . Its international mix is what excites me about globalisation – an excitement that remains despite and after reciting its catalogue of errors. In order of appearance, thank you Hazel Rice (UK), research secretary; Andrew Timming (USA), pilot statistician; Man Wing Yeung (Hong Kong), project statistician; Nana Zhang (China), pilot interviewer; Sergey Petrov (Russia), IT assistant; Inga Aleksandravici (Lithuania) and Adina Bozga (Romania), preliminary interviewers; and especial gratitude to Nicoleta Cinpoes (Romania) for checking every chapter, for teaching me some rules of English grammar we don’t learn over here, as well as for correcting the Conclusion at 35,000 feet.

Some good old friends helped, as usual, through discussions, suggestions and much-needed encouragement; thank you again Pierpaolo Donati, Doug Porpora, Andrew Sayer and Wes Shumar. Through various conferences, the book made some new friends. I’m especially grateful for helpful comments from Vincent Colapietro, Dave Elder-Vass and Norbert Wiley, which I hope have been put to good use.

Finally, my apologies are owed to an anonymous female attendant at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, whom I seriously affronted in November 2004 by using my camera to snap the unauthorised version of the cover painting.

# Introduction: reflexivity as the unacknowledged condition of social life

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Reflexivity remains a cipher in social theory. Neither what it is nor what it does has received the attention necessary for producing clear concepts of reflexivity or a clear understanding of reflexivity as a social process. These two absences are closely related and mutually reinforcing. On the one hand, the fact that there is no concept of reflexivity in common currency means that just as Molière's Monsieur Jourdain spoke prose all his life without knowing it, everyone from the founding fathers, through all normal lay people, to today's social theorists have constantly been referring to reflexivity or tacitly assuming it or logically implying it under a variety of different terms.

On the other hand, because the terminology that subsumes reflexivity is so varied – from the portmanteaux concepts of academics, such as ‘consciousness’ or ‘subjectivity’, through Everyman's quotidian notion of ‘mulling things over’, to the quaint, but not inaccurate, folkloric expression ‘I says to myself says I’ – the *process* denoted by reflexivity has been underexplored, undertheorised and, above all, undervalued. Reflexivity is such an inescapable, though vague, pre-supposition and so tacitly, thus non-discursively, taken for granted, that it has rarely been held up for the scrutiny necessary to rectify its undervaluation as a social process. Because reflexivity has been so seriously neglected,<sup>1</sup> redressing this state of affairs means making some bold moves. The intent behind the present book is finally to allow this Cinderella to go to the ball, to stay there and to be acknowledged as a partner without whom there would be no social dance.

Our human reflexivity is closely akin to our human embodiment, something so self-evident as not to have merited serious attention from social theorists until ‘the body’ was ‘reclaimed’ during the past two or three decades. However, whilst all passengers on the Clapham omnibus would

<sup>1</sup> The main exceptions being American pragmatism and social psychology; the former contribution was discussed in my *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, ch. 2 and the latter will be examined in the companion volume to this book, *The Reflexive Imperative*.

concur that, indeed, they have bodies, most would be stumped by ‘reflexivity’ if asked whether or not they practise it. In fact, as will be shown in chapter 2, nearly all subjects agree that they do if the question is rephrased to avoid using the word. Because the term is ill-defined and not in everyday use, let us begin from the ordinary activities to which it refers amongst ordinary people: ones that they do recognise and can discuss if ordinary language is used.

At its most basic, reflexivity rests on the fact that all normal people talk to themselves within their own heads,<sup>2</sup> usually silently and usually from an early age. In the present book this mental activity is called ‘internal conversation’ but, in the relatively sparse literature available, it is also known *inter alia* as ‘self-talk’, ‘intra-communication’, ‘musement’, ‘inner dialogue’ and ‘rumination’. Indeed, it seems probable that some people engage in more internal dialogue than external conversation at certain times in life and under particular circumstances: those living alone and especially the elderly, those employed in solitary occupations or performing isolated work tasks, and only children without close friends. What are they doing when they engage in self-talk? The activities involved range over a broad terrain which, in plain language, can extend from daydreaming, fantasising and internal vituperation; through rehearsing for some forthcoming encounter, reliving past events, planning for future eventualities, clarifying where one stands or what one understands, producing a running commentary on what is taking place, talking oneself through (or into) a practical activity; to more pointed actions such as issuing internal warnings and making promises to oneself, reaching concrete decisions or coming to a conclusion about a particular problem.

Two things are clear about this (non-exhaustive) list. Firstly, not all of these activities are fully reflexive, because they lack the crucial feature of the ‘object’ under consideration being bent back in any serious, deliberative sense, upon the ‘subject’ doing the considering. For example, a worker tackling a new procedure or someone erecting a wardrobe from a flat-pack asks herself ‘What comes next?’ and often answers this by consulting an external source such as the manual or instruction leaflet. Of course, this could be viewed as weakly reflexive because their question also stands for ‘What do I do next?’ But it is weak because the response is to consult the rule-book rather than thrashing it out through internal

<sup>2</sup> ‘Human beings have a wholly unique gift in the use of language, and that is that they can talk to themselves. Everybody does it, all the time’ (note that the last phrase will receive some refinement in this text). Samuel C. Riccillo, ‘Phylogenesis: Understanding the Biological Origins of Intrapersonal Communication’, in Donna R. Vocate (ed.), *Intrapersonal Communication: Different Voices, Different Minds*, Hillsdale, N.J., Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994, p. 36.

deliberation about subject in relation to object and vice versa. Hence, the dividing line between reflexive and non-reflexive thought is far from clear cut because anyone's thoughts can move back and forth between the two.

Secondly, not all of the mental activities listed above concern social matters because the object over which a subject deliberates need not concern people or society. For example, solo climbers talk themselves through handholds and footholds, and riders ask themselves how many strides their horses should fit in before jumping an obstacle. However, it can always be maintained that sporting activities like these are weakly social; they are usually reliant upon manufactured equipment, often entail human artefacts, such as route maps and fences, and frequently presume some social context, such as the existence of mountain rescue or the right to jump some farmer's hedges. Although it is usually possible to invoke some social element of the above type, neither analytically nor practically are such elements primary to the activity. The dividing line can be fuzzy in practice, although the analytical distinction is clear enough.

The present book deals only with strongly reflexive processes and its concern is with reflexive deliberations about matters that are primarily and necessarily social.<sup>3</sup> Reflexivity itself is held to depend upon conscious deliberations that take place through 'internal conversation'. The ability to hold such inner dialogues is an emergent personal power of individuals that has been generally disregarded and is not entailed by routine or habitual action. Myers summarises the unwarranted neglect of this personal property as follows:

[The importance of] self-dialogue and its role in the acquisition of self-knowledge, I believe, can hardly be exaggerated. That it plays such a role is a consequence of a human characteristic that deserves to be judged remarkable. This is the susceptibility of our mind/body complexes to respond to the questions that we put to ourselves, to create special states of consciousness through merely raising a question. It is only slightly less remarkable that these states provoked into existence by our questions about ourselves quite often supply the materials for accurate answers to those same questions.<sup>4</sup>

Precisely because our reflexive deliberations about social matters take this 'question and answer' format, it is appropriate to consider reflexivity as being exercised through internal conversation.

<sup>3</sup> The Weberian distinction between 'action' and 'social action' is maintained here. Not all of our personal powers or the actions that we conceive and carry out by virtue of them can legitimately or usefully be considered as social: for example, the lone practice of meditation or of mountaineering. See Colin Campbell, *The Myth of Social Action*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 and also Archer, *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*, ch. 1, 'The Private Life of the Social Subject'.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald E. Myers, 'Introspection and Self-Knowledge', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 23, 2, April 1986, p. 206.

The following definition is used throughout the present work: *'reflexivity' is the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa.* Such deliberations are important since they form the basis upon which people determine their future courses of action – always fallibly and always under their own descriptions. Because this book focuses upon people's occupational concerns and patterns of social mobility – in order to have a concrete point of reference for the discussion of reflexivity – the contexts involved are social contexts. However, let us return to the basic question, namely what are people doing when they engage in self-talk?

Some of the subjects interviewed,<sup>5</sup> and also certain social psychologists, respond in a derogatory manner to the idea of 'talking to oneself'. Indeed, this is probably the worst vernacular formulation through which to ascertain anything about their internal conversations from the population at large. At best, it elicits a wary assent, sometimes immediately followed by the qualification: 'But I'm not daft.' Interestingly, in languages as different as English and Romanian, the association persists between talking to oneself and 'being simple' or 'off one's head', and it is not eliminated by emphasising that internal dialogue is conducted silently. Resident English speakers are much readier to assent that they engage in inner dialogue and to amplify upon their self-talk if the activity is described to them as 'silently mulling things over' or 'thinking things through in your own head'. The origins of this negative reaction are obvious, but its duration may have been prolonged by psychologists as different as Piaget and Vygotsky, who held that 'speaking out loud' either disappeared or was internalised with age and, thus, its absence in adults represented a sign of mental maturity. Equally, social psychologists often display considerable negativity towards 'rumination', which is seen as interfering with routinised schemes that are regarded as providing quicker and more reliable guides to action.<sup>6</sup>

Folk wisdom can be recruited in praise of routine action, as in the following verse:

The centipede was happy, quite, until the toad in fun  
Said, 'Pray which leg goes after which?'  
This worked his mind to such a pitch,  
He lay distracted in a ditch, considering how to run.

<sup>5</sup> Details about the empirical framework on which this study is based are found in chapter 2 and in the Methodological appendix.

<sup>6</sup> See the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* from 1970 to date. For example, see Timothy D. Wilson and Jonathan Schooler, 'Thinking Too Much: Introspection Can Reduce the Quality of Preferences and Decisions', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 2, 1991.

The book which approvingly reproduced this nursery rhyme expatiates upon reflexivity as ‘the curse of the self’: ‘[T]he capacity to self-reflect distorts our perceptions about the world, leads us to draw inaccurate conclusions about ourselves and other people, and thus prompts us to make bad decisions based on faulty information. The self conjures up a great deal of human suffering in the form of negative emotions . . . by allowing us to ruminate about the past or imagine what might befall us in the future.’<sup>7</sup> Instead, we would do better to stick with tried and trusted routines. However, traditional routines work only in recurrent and predictable circumstances. Certainly, some newly acquired skills may later become embodied and operate as ‘second nature’, as with driving on ‘auto-pilot’ – until an emergency occurs. But others remain intransigently discursive, defying routinisation (as in writing a book). Where novel situations are concerned, the more appropriate piece of folk wisdom is ‘Look before you leap.’

Contrary to this negativity towards internal conversation, the thesis defended in the present book is that reflexivity is the means by which we make our way through the world. This applies to the social world in particular, which can no longer be approached through embodied knowledge, tacit routines, or traditional custom and practice alone – were that ever to have been the case for most, let alone all, people. Although reflexive deliberation is considered to be indispensable to the existence of any society, its scope has also been growing from the advent of modernity onwards. In the third millennium, the fast-changing social world makes it incumbent on everyone to exercise more and more reflexivity in increasingly greater tracts of their lives. Justifying the decline and fall of routinisation is the theme of the next chapter. The need to incorporate reflexivity more prominently in social theorising is its corollary.

### **Incorporating reflexivity**

The reasons for promoting reflexivity to a central position within social theory are summarised in the following proposition. *The subjective powers of reflexivity mediate the role that objective structural or cultural powers play in influencing social action and are thus indispensable to explaining social outcomes.* This proposition raises three key questions about the nature of human action, which are listed below and will be examined in turn. The argument running through them and serving to justify the proposition is that none of these questions about the nature of human action in society is answerable without serious reference being made to people’s reflexivity:

<sup>7</sup> Mark R. Leary, *The Curse of the Self*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 19.

- 1 Why do people act at all? What motivates them and what are they (fallibly) trying to achieve by endorsing given courses of action? This entails an examination of their personal *concerns* and inner reflexive deliberations about how to go about realising them.
- 2 How do social properties influence the courses of action that people adopt? This involves a specification of how objective structural or cultural powers are reflexively *mediated*.
- 3 What exactly do people do? This requires an examination of the *variability* in the actions of those similarly socially situated and the differences in their processes of reflexivity.

### 1 *The reflexive adoption of projects*

‘Social hydraulics’ is the generic process assumed by those who hold that no recourse need be made to any aspect of human subjectivity in order to explain social action. All necessary components making up the *explanans* refer directly or indirectly to social powers, thus rendering any reference to personal powers irrelevant or redundant. Although few social theorists will go quite as far as that, if only because of the need to acknowledge our biological endowments, the growth of sociological imperialism comes extremely close to doing so. Indeed, the model of agency promoted by social constructionists, which I have characterised elsewhere as ‘society’s being’,<sup>8</sup> subtracts all but our biological properties and powers from us as people and accredits them to the social side of the balance sheet. In consequence, each and every sociological explanation can be arrived at from the third-person perspective because any references to first-person subjectivity have already been reduced to social derivatives and, at most, permutations upon them. In consequence, anything that might count as genuine human reflexivity effectively evaporates. It lacks causal powers and represents only phenomenological froth. ‘Hydraulic’ theorising, which construes what we do in terms of the pushes and pulls to which we are subjected, is resisted throughout this book, in all its reductionist versions – social, philosophical or neuro-biological.

In contradistinction, internal conversation is presented as the manner in which we reflexively make our way through the world. It is what makes (most of us) ‘active agents’, people who can exercise some governance in their own lives, as opposed to ‘passive agents’ to whom things simply happen.<sup>9</sup> Being an ‘active agent’ hinges on the fact that individuals

<sup>8</sup> Margaret S. Archer, *Being Human: the Problem of Agency*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, ch. 3.

<sup>9</sup> For this distinction, see Martin Hollis, *Models of Man: Philosophical Thoughts on Social Action*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977.



develop and define their ultimate concerns: those internal goods that they care about most,<sup>10</sup> the precise constellation of which makes for their concrete singularity as persons.<sup>11</sup> No one can have an ultimate concern and fail to do something about it. Instead, each person seeks to develop a concrete course of action to realise that concern by elaborating a 'project', in the (fallible) belief that to accomplish this project is to realise one's concern. Action itself thus depends upon the existence of what are termed 'projects', where a project stands for any course of action intentionally engaged upon by a human being. Thus, the answer to why we act at all is in order to promote our concerns; we form 'projects' to advance or to protect what we care about most.

If projects were optional, in the strong sense that people could live without them, the social would be like the natural world, governed only by the laws of nature. Human beings are distinctive not as the bearer of projects, which is a characteristic people share with every animal, but because of their reflexive ability to design (and redesign) many of the projects they pursue. If we are to survive and thrive, we have to be practitioners, and the definition of a successful practice is the realisation of a particular project in the relevant part of the environment. The ubiquity of human projects has three implications for the relationship between subjects and their natural environment, which includes the social order.

Firstly, the pursuit of any human project entails the attempt to exercise our causal powers as human beings. Since this takes place in the world, that is, in the natural, practical and social orders, then the pursuit of a project necessarily activates the causal powers of entities which belong to one of these three orders. Which powers are activated (beneficially or detrimentally) is contingent upon the nature of the project entertained and, of course, it is always contingent whether or not a particular project is adopted at all. *The key point is that any human attempt to pursue a project entails two sets of causal powers: our own and those pertaining to part of natural reality.* Generically, the outcome is dependent upon the relationship between these two sets.

Secondly, these two kinds of causal powers work in entirely different ways once they are activated. On the one hand, the properties of objects in the natural order, artefacts in the practical order, and structural and cultural properties in the social order are very different from one another, but nevertheless the exercise of their causal powers is *automatic*. If and when these emergent properties are activated, then, *ceteris paribus*,

<sup>10</sup> See Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, ch. 7. and A. McIntyre, *After Virtue*, London, Duckworth, 1981, pp. 187ff. <sup>11</sup> Archer, *Being Human*, ch. 9.

they simply work in a specific way in relation to other things. Thus, water has the power to buoy up certain entities and it does so by virtue of its constitution in relation to the specific density of objects – logs float and stones sink. On the other hand, most, though not all, human powers work reflexively rather than automatically.<sup>12</sup> We have the power to lift various objects in our vicinity but also the ability to determine whether we do so or not.

Thirdly, when our causal powers as human beings are interacting with those of different parts of the world, the outcome is rarely just a matter of their primary congruence or incongruence. Certainly, once the causal powers of objects, artefacts, or structural and cultural properties are activated, they will tendentially obstruct or facilitate our projects to very varying degrees. Conversely, the reflexive nature of human powers means that actual outcomes are matters of secondary determination, governed by our inner deliberations about such obstructions and facilitations, under our own descriptions. We often have the capacity to suspend both: suspending that which would advance our aims by engaging in inappropriate action and suspending that which would impede our aims by circumventory activities. Generically, we possess the powers of both resistance and subversion or of co-operation and adaptation. Clearly, our degrees of freedom vary in relation to what we confront, but whether or not and how we use them remains contingent upon our reflexivity.

Thus, our physical well-being depends upon establishing successful practices in the natural world; our performative competence relies upon acquiring skilful practices in relation to material artefacts; and our self-worth hinges upon developing rewarding practices in society. It follows that the attempted realisation of any project immediately enmeshes us in the properties and powers of the respective order of natural reality in relation to our own.

Hence, in nature, the project of swimming, whether conceived of by design or through accident, ineluctably entails the interaction of two sets of causal powers. Of course, if *per impossible*, no one had ever sought to swim, then the natural power, which enables us to float in water, would have been unrealised for humanity. Yet this power is nonetheless real even if it had never been exercised. However, the project of swimming quite literally plunges us into the causal powers of rivers, pools and the sea. We do not instantiate them; rather we have to interact with them and to discover whether accommodation between their powers and our own can lead to a successful practice, in this case, swimming. Some people never do swim,

<sup>12</sup> Obviously, there are many of our bodily liabilities, such as their responses to cancer or falling from heights, which are automatic rather than reflexive.

because reflexively they doubt the water's real powers and also lack sufficient reason for overcoming their frightened incredulity.

Similarly, in the practical world, we entertain such projects as throwing a spear, getting through a door or using a computer. But these cannot become skilful practices unless and until we learn how to interact with the causal powers of the objects in question, powers which are usually termed affordances and resistances. A door latch affords a means of opening a door, if used properly, but reflexivity can leave the power of the latch unexercised if our experience has persuaded us that this door, or doors in general, open by being pushed. Improper usage, such as pushing against a latch,<sup>13</sup> will simply meet with resistance. Successful practice depends upon accommodating ourselves to such affordances and resistances, as we do all the time when driving a car.

Matters are no different in the social order where many of the projects that we pursue necessarily involve us with constraints and enablements. As with the other two orders of natural reality, life in society is impossible without projects; each one of its members has myriads of them every day. Of course we do not usually think of such things as catching buses, going to the pub or taking the dog for a walk in these terms. Nevertheless, a change of circumstances can make us realise that this is precisely what they are, namely successful social practices which have become taken for granted as embodied knowledge. Yet, any rail strike makes getting from here to there a serious reflexive project. Prohibition had the same effect for acquiring a drink, as did foot-and-mouth regulations for finding somewhere to exercise the dog. As in the other two orders, meeting with serious social constraints incites not only reflexive circumvention by some but also resignation to the abandonment of such projects by many.

To summarise, the pursuit of human projects in the social domain frequently encounters structural properties and activates them as powers. In such cases there are two sets of causal powers involved in any attempt to develop a successful social practice: those of subjects themselves and those of relevant structural or cultural properties. The causal powers of structures are exercised *inter alia* as constraints and enablements which work automatically, even though they are activity dependent in both their origin and exercise, whereas human powers work reflexively. Certainly, it is the case that the perception (or anticipation) of constraints or enablements can serve as a deterrent or an encouragement, but this is the same in both the natural and the practical orders and, in any case, this effect is a result of our (fallible) reflexive judgements. Finally, under all but the most

<sup>13</sup> For a variety of practical examples, see Donald Norman, *The Psychology of Everyday Things*, New York, HarperCollins, 1988.

stringent constraints, agents have the capacity to suspend the exercise of constraints (and enablements) through their circumventory (or renunciatory) actions. In turn, these actions depend upon our knowledgeability and commitment. The establishment of a successful social practice is dependent upon the adaptive ingenuity of reflexive subjects. They must necessarily take account of the causal powers of social properties, under their own descriptions, but are not determined by them in the conception, the pursuit or the realisation of their projects.

## 2 *The reflexive mediation of structural and cultural properties*

Whilst resisting 'social hydraulics', it is necessary to allow for a milder form of objective 'social conditioning'. Central to an acceptable account of such conditioning is Roy Bhaskar's statement that 'the causal power of social forms is mediated through social agency'.<sup>14</sup> This is surely correct, because unless the properties of structure and culture are held to derive from people and their doings and to exert their causal effects through people and their actions, theorising would be guilty of reification. Nevertheless, the linking process is not complete *because what is meant by that crucial word 'though' has not been unpacked*.

Vague references to the process of 'social conditioning' are insufficient. This is because to condition entails the existence of something that is conditioned and, since conditioning is not determinism, this process necessarily involves the interplay between two different kinds of causal powers: those pertaining to structures and those belonging to subjects. Therefore, an adequate conceptualisation of 'conditioning' must deal explicitly with the interplay between these two powers. Firstly, this involves a specification of *how* structural and cultural powers impinge upon agents, and secondly of *how* agents use their own personal powers to act 'so rather than otherwise' in such situations. Thus, there are two elements involved, the 'impingement upon' (which is objective) and the 'response to it' (which is subjective).

On the whole, social theory appears to have conceptualised the objective side satisfactorily in terms of cultural and structural properties impinging upon people by shaping the social situations they confront. Often this confrontation is involuntary, as with people's natal social context and its associated life chances. Often it is voluntary, like getting married. In either case, these objective conditioning influences are transmitted to agency by shaping the situations that subjects live with, have to confront, or would confront if they chose to do x, y or z.

<sup>14</sup> Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, Hemel Hempstead Harvester, 1989, p. 26.

Sometimes they impinge as constraints and enablements upon various courses of action and sometimes by distributing different types of vested interests or objective interests to different (groups of) people, which can enhance or reduce their motivation to undertake a given course of action.

However, what this non-deterministic account of 'conditioning' usually omits is why people do not respond in uniform fashion under the same structured circumstances. Subjects who are similarly situated can debate, both internally and externally, about appropriate courses of action, and come to different conclusions. This is one of the major reasons why Humean constant conjunctions are not found between structural and cultural influences and action outcomes. At best, what are detected are empirical tendencies in action patterns, which are consonant with objective influences having affected them. These must remain nothing more than trends, partly because external contingencies intervene, given that the social system is open, but partly because a second causal power is *necessarily at play*, namely the personal power to reflect subjectively upon one's circumstances and to decide what to do in them or to do about them. Such inalienable powers of human reflexivity would generate variations in action responses even if it were possible to achieve conditions of laboratory closure. In short, the conceptualisation of this process of mediation between structure and agency is usually not fully adequate because it does not fully incorporate the role played by human subjectivity in general. In particular, it omits the part reflexivity plays in enabling subjects to design and determine their responses to the structured circumstances in which they find themselves, in the light of what they personally care about most.

Let me now attempt to improve upon this generic account of social conditioning by presenting it as mediated by human reflexivity. The process of 'conditioning' has been seen to entail the exercise of two sets of causal powers: those of the property that 'conditions' and those of the property that is 'conditioned'. This is clearest where constraints and enablements are concerned, the obvious point being that a constraint requires something to constrain and an enablement needs something to enable. These are not intransitive terms because if, *per impossible*, no subject ever conceived of any project, he or she could be neither constrained nor enabled.

For example, the mere existence of a centralised educational system does not constrain curricular variations, unless and until somebody advances the policy of, say, introducing geographical or linguistic variants. Only when that project is mooted does centralisation become a constraint, *ceteris paribus*. Equally, in the cultural realm, if there is a

contradiction between two beliefs or two theories it remains a purely logical matter, existing out there in the 'Universal Library',<sup>15</sup> but is inert until and unless someone wants to uphold one of those ideas, assert one of those ideas or do something with one of those ideas. In other words, *for an objective structural or cultural property to exercise its causal powers, such powers have to be activated by agents.*

The proper incorporation of personal powers into the conceptualisation of conditioning entails the following three points. Firstly, that social properties or, more exactly, the exercise of their powers, are dependent upon the existence of what have been termed 'projects', where a project stands for any course of action intentionally engaged upon by a human being. These projects, *as subjectively conceived of by people*, are necessary for the activation of social properties, that is their transformation into powers. Secondly, only if there is a relationship of congruence or incongruence between the social property and the project of the person(s) will the latter activate the former. Congruity or incongruity need not be the case. For example, if someone's project was to engage in regular private prayer, no structural power on earth could prevent it though, of course, socio-cultural influences might be at work discouraging the activity of praying. When congruence prevails, it represents a structural enablement and where incongruence exists, it constitutes a structural constraint. Thirdly, and most importantly, subjects have to respond to these influences by using their own personal powers to deliberate reflexively, always under their own descriptions, about how to act in such situations. What is unique about the reflexivity of human beings is that it can involve anticipation. A constraint or an enablement need not have impinged or impacted, it could just be (fallibly) foreseen. Hence, the efficacy of any social property is at the mercy of the subjects' reflexive activity.

In the case of any such property, outcomes vary enormously with agents' creativity in dreaming up brand new responses, even to situations that may have occurred many times before. Ultimately, the precise outcome varies with subjects' personal concerns, degrees of commitment and with the costs different agents will pay to see their projects through in the face of structural hindrances. Equally, they vary with subjects' readiness to avail themselves of enablements. The one result that is rarely, if ever, found is a complete uniformity of response on behalf of every person who encounters the same constraint or the same enable-

<sup>15</sup> See Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency: the Place of Culture in Social Theory* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, ch. 5. Metaphorically, the Universal Library is where all World Three items of knowledge are lodged.

ment. The deliberative process involved has nothing in common with cost–benefit analysis. It is emotionally charged, rather than being a simple exercise in instrumental rationality, because it is maintained that our emotions (as distinct from moods) are commentaries on our concerns,<sup>16</sup> which supply the ‘shoving power’ leading to action (or the resistance resulting in inaction).

To deal adequately with this variation in subjects’ responses, when agents are in the same social situation, does indeed mean addressing their subjectivity. It entails acknowledging their *personal powers*, in particular their power of reflexivity to think about themselves in relation to society and to come to different conclusions that lead to variable action outcomes. In short, without knowledge about their internal deliberations, we cannot account for exactly what they do. This can be quickly illustrated by considering another potential structural power, namely the differential placement of agents in relation to the distributions of resources and the impossibility of deducing determinate courses of action from such positionings alone. Suppose a collectivity of agents is well placed in terms of remuneration, repute and representation – or ‘class’, ‘status’ and ‘power’. These positionings cannot in themselves be assumed to engender reproductive projects, despite this group having much to lose objectively if they do not adopt them. To begin with the most obvious reason, not all people are guided by their objective interests; they can choose to marry downwards, to take vows of poverty, to renounce titles or to say a plague on the rat-race. Thus, at best, this leaves a probability statement about the doings of ‘most people most of the time’, but to what actual courses of action do these probabilities attach?

Since there is no answer to that question, we are thrown back upon empirical generalisations such as ‘the greater the cost of a project, the less likely are people to entertain it’. Not only is that no explanation whatsoever (merely another quest for Humean constant conjunctions) but also, far from having eliminated human reflexivity, it relies upon a banal and most dubious form of it. Instead, sociologists covertly recognise that subjectivity cannot be ignored. Yet, more often than not, this ‘recognition’ consists in it being smuggled in by social theorists *imputing subjective motives* to agents, rather than examining the subject’s own reflexively defined reasons, aims and concerns. Analytically, the result is the ‘Two-Stage Model’ presented in Figure 1. Effectively, this model transforms the first-person subjective ontology<sup>17</sup> of the agent’s internal

<sup>16</sup> Margaret S. Archer, ‘Emotions as Commentaries on Human Concerns’, in Jonathan Turner (ed.), *Theory and Research on Human Emotions*, Amsterdam, Elsevier, 2004, pp. 327–56. Thus, I do not follow Max Weber in representing ‘affectual action’ as a separate form of action.

### The Two-Stage Model

- 1 Structural and/or cultural properties *objectively* shape the situations that agents confront involuntarily and *exercise powers of constraint and enablement* in relation to –
- 2 Subjective properties imputed to agents and assumed to govern their actions:
  - promotion of vested interests (critical realism)
  - instrumental rationality (rational choice theory)
  - habitus/induced repertoires (Bourdieu/discourse theory)

Figure 1 The Two-Stage Model

conversation into a third-person ‘objectivist’ account proffered by the investigator.

Social realists have often been guilty of putting imputed responses to vested interests or objective interests into accounts of action as a kind of dummy for real and efficacious human subjectivity. There are many worse exemplars, and probably the worst is rational choice theory, which imputes instrumental rationality alone<sup>18</sup> to all subjects as they supposedly seek to maximise their preference schedules in order to become ‘better off’ in terms of some indeterminate future ‘utiles’. Subjectively, every agent is reduced to a bargain hunter and the human pursuit of the *Wertrationalität* is discountenanced.<sup>19</sup> Bourdieu, too, frequently endorsed an empty formalism about subjectivity, such that people’s positions (‘semi-consciously’ and ‘quasi-automatically’<sup>20</sup>) engendered dispositions to reproduce their positions. Such theoretical formulations seem to lose a lot of the rich and variable subjectivity that features prominently in his *La Misère du Monde*. In the cultural counterpart of the above, discourse ‘theory’ simply holds these ill-defined ideational clusters to have gained unproblematic hegemony over the subjectivity of a given population.

The inadequacies of any version of the ‘Two-Stage Model’ can be summarised as follows: (1) the failure to investigate anybody’s subjectivity; (2) the imputation of homogeneous concerns and projects to some given

<sup>17</sup> Internal conversations have what John Searle calls a ‘first-person ontology’ because of their subjective mode of existence: ‘each of my conscious states exists only as the state it is because it is experienced by me, the subject’. John Searle, *Mind, Language and Society*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> See Margaret S. Archer and Jonathan Q. Tritter (eds.), *Rational Choice Theory: Resisting Colonisation*, London, Routledge/Taylor and Francis, 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Hollis, ‘Honour among Thieves’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 75, 1989, 163–80.

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977 and *The Logic of Practice*, Oxford, Polity Press, 1990.



group or collectivity; (3) the endorsement of 'passive agents'; and (4) the foundational denial that the personal power of reflexivity needs to be understood. Sociology can neither dispense with reflexivity nor make do with such impoverished acknowledgements of it. If this personal property and power is to be given its due, to do so entails replacing the third-person imputation of subjectivity by its first-person investigation.

It is proposed that 'reflexivity' be incorporated as a personal property of human subjects, which is prior to, relatively autonomous from and possesses causal efficacy in relation to structural or cultural properties. Clearly, this means that only limited tracts of people's subjective lives are pertinent to social theory. For example, I presume no one would suggest that a dislike of spinach has causal powers beyond a capacity to disrupt family tea time. However, I want to defend the much more concrete response, namely that the aspect of 'subjectivity' which should be given its due is our reflexivity. In other words, 'reflexivity' is put forward as the answer to *how* 'the causal power of social forms is mediated *through* human agency'. Our internal conversations perform this mediatory role by virtue of the fact that they are the way in which we deliberate about ourselves in relation to the social situations that we confront, certainly fallibly, always incompletely and necessarily under our own descriptions, because that is the only way we can know or decide anything.

### *3 Reflexivity and the endorsement of different courses of action*

Reflexivity, exercised through internal conversation, is advanced as the process which not only mediates the impact of social forms upon us but also determines our responses to them. Firstly, reflexive mediation is essential for giving an account of precisely what we do rather than a statement about probable courses of action. And, in relation to constraints and enablements, agential responses can vary greatly: from evasion, through compliance, to strategic manipulation or subversion. Secondly, if it is held that agential subjectivity has itself been moulded by social influences, such as ideology, 'habitus' or, for argument's sake, 'discourse', it is impossible to ascertain for whom this is and is not the case without examining their inner dialogue. It cannot be the case for all, because 'the sociologist' has seen through these *attempts* at ideational misrepresentation in order to be able to describe them, but cannot claim a monopoly on this ability.

Certainly, because we are not infallible, it can be maintained that social factors affect agents' outlooks without people's awareness. That would be the case for ideological influences or for members of a social class overestimating an objective obstacle, like those working-class parents who used to turn down grammar school places on the grounds that 'they are not for

the likes of us'. Again, however, we cannot know that this is the case without examining agents' subjectivity, their reflexive internal conversations. Without that we cannot discover what 'ideology' or 'social class' has encouraged one person to believe but failed to persuade another to accept. What cannot be assumed is that every ideological effort will or can be successful in instilling all people with the beliefs in question. Ideologies, however hegemonic, are not in themselves influences, but rather attempts to influence. They too, as a cultural counterpart of structural factors, involve both impingement upon the subject and reception by the subject. Reception is obviously heterogeneous, or no one would ever have accepted a grammar school place for their working-class child and no counter-ideology would ever have been formulated.

In brief, it will be argued that our personal powers are exercised through reflexive inner dialogue and that internal conversation is responsible for the delineation of our concerns, the definition of our projects and, ultimately, the determination of our practices in society. It is agential reflexivity which actively mediates between our structurally shaped circumstances and what we deliberately make of them. There is an important caution here: people cannot make what they please of their circumstances. To maintain otherwise would be to endorse idealism and to commit the epistemic fallacy.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, if people get their objective circumstances badly wrong, these subjects pay the objective price whether or not they do so comprehendingly. To believe incorrectly that one can service a heavy mortgage results in foreclosure, with further objective consequences for obtaining alternative accommodation. What reflexivity does do is to mediate by activating structural and cultural powers, and in so doing there is no single and predictable outcome. This is because subjects can exercise their reflexive powers in different ways, according to their very different concerns and considerations.

Thus, an alternative 'Three-Stage Model' is advanced, one that gives both objectivity and subjectivity their due and also explicitly incorporates their interplay through the process of reflexive mediation.

Stage 1 deals with the kind of specification already developed about how 'social forms' impinge and impact on people by moulding their situations. This I summarised as follows in an earlier work:

Given their pre-existence, structural and cultural emergents shape the social environment to be inhabited. These results of past actions are deposited in the form of current situations. They account for what there is (structurally and culturally) to

<sup>21</sup> The 'epistemic fallacy' is the substitution of how matters are taken to be for how they in fact are, even if we cannot or do not know the latter. See Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism*, London, Verso, 1994, pp. 76–85.

be distributed and also for the shape of such distributions; for the nature of the extant role array, the proportion of positions available at any time and the advantages/disadvantages associated with them; for the institutional configuration present and for those second order emergent properties of compatibility and incompatibility, that is whether the respective operations of institutions are matters of obstruction or assistance to one another. In these ways, situations are objectively defined for their subsequent occupants or incumbents.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Three-Stage Model**

- 1 Structural and cultural properties *objectively* shape the situations that agents confront involuntarily, and *inter alia* possess generative powers of constraint and enablement in relation to
- 2 Subjects' own constellations of concerns, as *subjectively* defined in relation to the three orders of natural reality: nature, practice and the social.
- 3 Courses of action are produced through the *reflexive deliberations* of subjects who *subjectively* determine their practical projects in relation to their *objective* circumstances.

Figure 2 The Three-Stage Model

However, these social features only become generative powers, rather than unactivated properties, in relationship to subjects' projects.

Doubtless, it will be asked, 'Don't these social factors affect people's motivation and thus the very projects they pursue?' There are indeed structural properties, such as vested interests, and cultural properties, such as ideology, which can motivate by encouraging and discouraging people from particular courses of action without their personal awareness. These are the unacknowledged conditions of action, yet, whilst it may seem paradoxical, it is maintained here that they have first to be found good by a person before they can influence the projects she entertains. How is this seeming paradox resolved? The answer lies in being precise about what a subject needs to be aware of in order to be influenced. Let us first take a structural example. For a person to find a vested interest good does not entail that she has full discursive penetration of that property, as if she were endowed with all the qualities of the best sociologist. Subjects do not and cannot know everything that is going on, or there would be no such things as 'unacknowledged conditions'. There are indeed, but all those conditions need to do in order to shape a subject's motivation is to shape the situation in which she finds herself.

<sup>22</sup> Margaret S. Archer, *Realist Social Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 201.

Take a young academic, whose mother tongue is English. What she recognises and takes for granted about her situation are aspects of its ease: books are quickly translated into English, which is also one of the official languages at conferences, is used in the best-known journals and so forth. What she does not need to possess is discursive penetration about *why* her situation is so comparatively easy and rewarding. She does not need to acknowledge that she is a beneficiary of neo-colonialism, which has given English the academic status it has today. In order for her motivation towards her academic career to be enhanced and for her to follow courses of action to this end, all she has to recognise consciously and to find good is, for example, the ease and fluency with which she makes interventions at her first international conferences.

Unacknowledged cultural conditions work in exactly the same way, by shaping situations. This same young academic might rapidly be appointed to the editorial board of a journal and regard this as a further indication of her success. However, at successive board meetings she finds her interventions being interrupted, her suggestions ignored and her reservations overridden. What she feels in this situation is unease, and her motivation to participate or even to attend declines accordingly. Her discomfort is all she needs to know in order for her to back out of this potential opening. It is not necessary for her to understand that she had been an instance of female 'tokenism' in order to explain her increasing silence and gradual withdrawal.

Structural factors also operate as deterrents – capable of depressing agential motivation and discouraging certain courses of action. They do so by attaching different opportunity costs to the same course of action (such as house purchase) to different parts of the population. This is how 'life chances' exert causal powers, but it must be noted that their outcomes are only empirical tendencies. And what no tendency can explain is why  $x$  becomes a home owner and  $y$  does not, when both are similarly socially situated. That is a question of the subjects' own concerns and their internal deliberations, which govern whether or not particular people find the cost worth paying. The simple fact that somebody is faced with a deterrent, in the form of an opportunity cost, does not mean that they are necessarily deterred, any more than does the fact that people inherit vested interests mean they are bound to defend them – Tony Benn renounced a title in order to sit in the House of Commons.

In short, there are a number of ways in which both structural and cultural factors can affect people's motivation and, hence, the projects that they will formulate. However, for such social factors to be influential, they *do not first have to become internalised as part of a subject's dispositions*. Indeed, some of the ways in which they work – such as giving (situational) encouragement or discouragement – are incompatible with the notion of prior internalisa-

tion. Someone's projects cannot be discouraged, and thus reduced in the light of their circumstances if their expectations had already been adjusted downwards. In that case, discouragement would never occur.

Certainly, an accumulation of discouraging (or encouraging) experiences *may* become internalised as expectations. Once again, it is impossible to know for whom this is or is not the case without examining the form that their reflexive deliberations have taken during the course of their biographies. And subjects are not uniform in this respect. Thus, we will later meet Billy, an unskilled worker who had been made redundant four times as a victim of the progressive decline in manufacturing industry. On each occasion, his response was to pick himself up and resume the struggle to 'work himself up'. Equally, those who 'accept' discouragement do not simply give up and become 'passive' victims of their circumstances. Instead, they actively use their reflexivity to devise 'second' or 'third' best projects for themselves, as will be seen with Joan in chapter 3. These are not 'passive agents', dispositionally reconciled to their experiential lot. They are reflexively aware of unfairness, regretful about foreclosed opportunities, but continue to do what they can about what they care about most in circumstances not of their making or choosing.

Stage 2 examines the interface between the above and agential projects themselves for, to repeat, it is not personal properties that interact directly with structural or cultural properties, but subjects' powers as expressed through the pursuit of their projects that activate the powers of social forms. The generic questions posed by a subject over her lifetime and the answers she gives herself during her life course can be distilled into two: 'What do I want?' and 'How do I go about getting it?' The answer to the first question is undoubtedly influenced by what a subject knows or finds out, because such information is not evenly distributed throughout society. Nevertheless, an active subject is still required to actualise such influences, which are not hydraulic determinants. The readiest way of activating these social powers is when a subject can answer the question 'What do I want?' from within her natal context and does so without looking any further. She thus confirms her context by confining her subjective deliberations to it. However, the majority of interviewees could not and did not do so. Some temporised (usually by staying on at school), whilst others actively courted experience and sought information from beyond their social backgrounds.

In other words, the fact that there are indeed socially inegalitarian distributions of information does not generate a uniformity of response from those similarly situated in relation to them. How individual people answer the above two questions involves a dialectical interplay between their 'concerns' – as they reflexively define them – and their 'contexts' – as they

reflexively respond to them. The answers that they give to themselves are arrived at through internal conversation. To explain their actions entails understanding their intentions – as arrived at through external ‘inspection’ and inner dialogue.

In relation to the question, ‘What do I want?’, I have earlier conceptualised the internal process of answering it as the ‘DDD scheme’,<sup>23</sup> representing three significant moments that can be distinguished as phases of the life-long internal conversation: discernment, deliberation and dedication. (1) Discernment is fundamentally about the subject putting together reflective, retrospective and prospective considerations about the desiderata to which she is drawn through an inner dialogue that compares and contrasts them. It is an inconclusive moment of review; at most, this self-talk begins to clarify our relationship to our reigning concerns because, as ‘strong evaluators’,<sup>24</sup> we cannot be lacking in concerns. It does so by clarifying our predominant satisfactions and dissatisfactions with our current way of life. Thus, the moment of discernment serves to highlight our positive concerns without discriminating between them. It is a process of book-marking in which actual and potential items of worth are registered for further consideration. Sifting of a negative kind is involved because, out of the plenitude of possible concerns available to anyone, only those that have been logged in constitute topics for further deliberation.

(2) Deliberation is concerned with exploring the implications of endorsing a particular cluster of concerns from those pre-selected as desirable to the subject during the first moment. This is performed by disengaging the demands, the merits and the likely consequences of that constellation of concerns were the subject to embrace them. This phase of the inner dialogue ranges from the one extreme of discarding projects, through comparing the worth of contesting concerns, to the opposite pole of preliminary determination. Deliberation produces a very provisional ranking of the concerns with which a subject feels that she should and can live. Often, this phase of the process entails a visual projection of scenarios seeking to capture, as best the subject is able, the *modus vivendi* that would be involved, whilst listening to the emotional commentary that is provoked and evoked when imagining that particular way of life. Such musings are still inconclusive, but as Peirce insisted: ‘every man who does accomplish great things is given to building elaborate castles in the air’.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Archer, *Being Human*, ch. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Taylor, ‘Self-Interpreting Animals’, in his *Human Agency and Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, esp. pp. 65–8.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, cited in William H. Davies, *Peirce’s Epistemology*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1972, p. 63.

We should be cautious about restricting acts of the imagination to ‘great things’ or ‘golden deeds’, because there is nothing necessarily heroic or idealistic about deliberation. What subjects warm to during this dialogical phase might be ‘concerns’ that are ignoble, associated ‘projects’ that are illegal and ensuing ‘practices’ that are illegitimate.

(3) Dedication represents the culminating moment of experimentation between thought and feeling that has occupied the preceding phases. In it, the subject has to decide not only whether a *particular modus vivendi* is, in her view, worth living, but also whether or not she is capable of living such a life. Thus, the moment of dedication is also one of prioritisation because the very accentuation of someone’s prime concern is simultaneously the relegation or elimination of their others. Within internal conversation, dedication is a phase of inner dialogical struggle because the completion (*pro tem*) of the dialogue has to achieve both prioritisation of and alignment between the concerns endorsed, but also resignation to those relinquished.

It is Stage 3 that has generally been neglected in social theorising, but which appears essential in order to conceptualise the process of mediation properly and completely. In Stage 3, by virtue of their powers of reflexivity, people deliberate about their objective circumstances in relation to their subjective concerns. They consult their projects to see whether they can realise them, including adapting them, adjusting them, abandoning them or enlarging them in the deliberative process. They alter their practices such that, if a course of action is going well, subjects may become more ambitious, and, if it is going badly, they may become more circumspect. It is this crucial Stage 3 that enables us all to try to do, to be or to become what we care about most in society – by virtue of our reflexivity.

This final stage of mediation is indispensable because, without it, we have no explanatory purchase on what exactly agents do. The absence of this purchase means settling for empirical generalisations about what ‘most of the people do most of the time’. Sociologists often settle for even less: ‘Under circumstance *x*, a statistically significant number of agents do *y*.’ This spells a return to a quest for Humean constant conjunctions and, in consequence, a resignation to being *unable* to adduce a causal mechanism. Equally wanting is the procedure in which subjectivity is not properly investigated, but is improperly imputed, precisely because it cannot be eliminated.

In contradistinction to both of these unsatisfactory conclusions is an approach which gives the personal power of reflexivity its due. It is to this end that the present book is devoted. To accord reflexivity its due entails fully acknowledging three points about how we make our way through the world.

- 1 That our unique personal identities, which derive from our singular constellations of concerns, mean that we are radically heterogeneous as subjects. Even though we may share objective social positions, we may also seek very different ends from within them.
- 2 That our subjectivity is dynamic, it is not psychologically static nor is it psychologically reducible, because we modify our own goals in terms of their contextural feasibility, as we see it. As always, we are fallible, can get it wrong and have to pay the objective price for doing so.
- 3 That, for the most part, we are active rather than passive subjects because we adjust our projects to those practices that we believe we can realise. Subjects regularly evaluate their social situations in the light of their personal concerns and assess their projects in the light of their situations.

Unless these points are taken on board, our way through the world is not a path that we ourselves help to chart and the various trajectories that we describe remain without explanation.



*Part I*



# 1 Reflexivity's biographies

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This chapter is devoted to two macroscopic considerations about reflexivity – taken to be the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa.<sup>1</sup> The first issue concerns the proposition: ‘no reflexivity; no society’. In other words, reflexivity is held to be a transcendently necessary condition of the possibility of any society, though one that is rarely acknowledged. The second consideration takes up the bulk of this chapter and defends the proposition that some forms of social organisation foster greater reflexivity amongst their members than others. It is maintained that reflexivity has increased in scope and in range from the earliest societies to the one global society now coming into being. This latter proposition is contentious. It is denied from opposed viewpoints: by Ulrich Beck, announcing subjective freedom as a *rerum novarum* of ‘reflexive modernization’ (now we have it; then we didn’t) and by Pierre Bourdieu, maintaining that reflexivity has always played a minor role in the guidance of social action, in the past as in the present.

## **No reflexivity; no society**

Through those inherited dichotomies between the primitive and the modern, mechanical and organic integration, *gemeinschaft* superseded by *gesellschaft* and, most general of all, tradition versus modernity, early forms of social organisation became stereotyped as ones in which reflexivity was neither known nor required. Instead, culture, generically defined as a ‘community of shared meanings’, fully orchestrated the doings of primitive ‘cultural dopes’. This view was epitomised in Evans-Pritchard’s characterisation of the Azande, the life of whose minds derived from their coherent tribal culture:

<sup>1</sup> This definition is not intended to cover every aspect of reflexivity (such as checking one’s arithmetic), but concerns only those reflexive processes which are explicitly social. As a distinction, it parallels that between ‘action’ and ‘social action’.

In this web of belief every strand depends upon every other strand, and a Zande cannot get out of its meshes because it is the only world he knows. The web is not an external structure in which he is enclosed. It is the texture of his thought and he cannot think that his thought is wrong.<sup>2</sup>

It became conventional to accept that the members of 'old and cold' societies blindly followed traditional norms, beliefs and practices, making all action routine action and thus giving no quarter to reflexive deliberation.

Elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> I have called this the 'myth of cultural integration' and traced its origins from the early anthropologists until it became canonical for generations of sociologists. Specifically, this myth has led to generalised beliefs about the nature both of 'individuals' and of 'culture' in early societies, the effect of which is to exclude reflexivity or any need for it. Conversely, 'no reflexivity; no society' is reinforced by a minority of anthropologists, such as Ernest Gellner, who doubted that the minds of tribespeople were thoroughly orchestrated by tribal culture and who allowed them a much more generous quantum of self-reflexive thoughts. Gellner's Berbers could indeed reflect upon themselves in relation to their circumstances: they 'long ago sized each other up: each knows what the other wants, the tricks he may get up to, the defences and counter-measures which, in a given situation, are available, and so on'.<sup>4</sup> Far from being unable to think that his socialised 'thought is wrong', an individual Berber, with an ounce more gumption than his fellows and an eye to the main chance, may well have concluded that he could do far better for himself by thinking otherwise.

Equally, Gellner was no believer in a seamless web of consistent belief that characterised primitive society. Sometimes, an individual Berber had to exercise his ingenuity if he was to square the contradictions inherent in his role, such as the holy man (*agurram*) who must be generously hospitable but also appear unconcerned about the wherewithal for his openhandedness.<sup>5</sup> Such activities are supremely reflexive ones, entailing consideration of the self in relation to the social context and vice versa, but are also indispensable to the very working of that society.

<sup>2</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1937, p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency: the Place of Culture in Social Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, ch. 1; also in *British Journal of Sociology*, 36, 3, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964, p. 154.

<sup>5</sup> '... an *agurram* who was extremely generous in a consider-the-lilies spirit would soon be impoverished and, as such, fail by another crucial test, that of prosperity'. Ernest Gellner, 'Concepts and Society', in Bryan R. Wilson (ed.), *Rationality*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1979, p. 44.