Introduction

Twelve years ago, the idea of writing a book about human agency did not strike me as a defensive project. After all, the 'problem of structure and agency' was widely acknowledged to lie at the heart of social theorising. This could only be the case if there were a difficulty about how to link two sets of properties and powers; those belonging to the parts of society and those belonging to the people. Certainly, as I examined this linkage, first for culture (*Culture and Agency*, Cambridge University Press, 1988), and then for the structure (*Realist Social Theory: the Morphogenetic Approach*, 1995), it was very clear that some short cuts were being taken. These I called forms of 'conflation'. They were strong tendencies, rooted in classical sociology, either to let the 'parts' dominate the 'people' (downwards conflation), or alternatively, to allow the 'people' to orchestrate the 'parts' (upwards conflation). However, in terms of the philosophy of social science, these two fallacies were embedded in the old debate between Methodological Holism and Methodological Individualism, which thankfully seemed to be largely defunct. Indeed, it appeared to have been superseded by a new debate between Structuration Theorists and Social Realists. Despite their undoubted antinomy, the central task of both was to advance a framework which linked 'structure and agency'. There were hugely important differences between the 'duality of structure', advanced by structurationists, and the 'analytical dualism', advocated by critical realists, and these will continue to divide practical analysts of society. Nevertheless, they address the same problem of how to link the 'parts' and the 'people'.

Since then, there has been a full frontal assault upon agency itself, in which Modernity's 'Death of God' has now been matched by Postmodernism's 'Death of Humanity'. If one is neither a modernist nor a postmodernist, which these days does tend to mean one is a realist, then we are not funeral-goers. However, we are on the defensive. Just as over a decade ago, realists wrote books with titles like *Reclaiming Reality*[1] and

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[1] Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality*, Verso, London, 1989.

1

2   Being human: the problem of agency

Reality at Risk,[2] so now it is our job to reclaim Humanity which is indeed
at risk. At least, it is at risk in the Academy, where strident voices would
dissolve the human being into discursive structures and humankind into
a disembodied textualism. Outside of Academia, ordinary people act in
undemolished fashion – they confront the world, meaning nature and
practice rather than just society, for, as functioning human beings, they
cannot endorse the 'linguistic fallacy'; in confronting their environment
they feel a continuous sense of the self who does so, for they cannot live
out their dissolution; they have cares, concerns and commitments which
they see as part of themselves, for they cannot accept the 'identity' of
demolished men and women; and they have social positions, which most
of them would like to rectify, in at least some respect, and are uncon-
vinced that social improvements merely depend upon discursive changes.

All this stuff of life needs confirming. This is not because lay agents are
infallibly right about their agency. Indeed they are not, or there would be
much less discrimination, injustice, alienation, oppression, materialism
and consumerism around, and much more emancipatory collective
action. However, they are hanging on to the bare bones of agency, which
are the necessary pre-conditions for human activity rather than passivity.
It is those that need reinforcing. This is not because I think that the emer-
gence of postmodernist beings is a real possibility: far from it, they are
such a contradiction in terms that they could never get out of bed. On the
contrary, given the way in which we are constituted, the way in which the
world is made, and the necessity of our interaction, I believe we are all
realists – naturalistically.

Because of this, we cannot be ontologically undermined, in the same
sense that natural reality never itself needed reclaiming, for it is self-
subsistent. It is prevalent ideas about both which need resisting, because
the spread of an epistemology of dissolution can have serious repercus-
sions for one of our most distinctive human properties and powers – our
reflexivity. Although our continuous sense of self is, I will argue, ontolog-
ically inviolable, our personal and social identities are epistemologically
vulnerable. Both hinge upon our ultimate concerns and commitments.
Both then can be undermined by a reflexivity which repudiates concern
as anything other than ephemeral, and which thus repulses the solidarity
of self and its solidarity with others, which is necessary for commitment.
The reflexive turn towards inconstancy would effectively make us passive:
our instant gratification may give the illusion of hyperactivity, but we
would not care enough, or long enough, about anything to see it through.
There is a default setting on the human being: if we do not care enough

[2] Roger Trigg, *Reality at Risk*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1989.

about making things happen, then we become passive beings to whom things happen.

Part I of this defence (chapters 1, 2 and 3), begins by scrutinising theories about the dissolution of humanity. It argues that the intransitive properties of human beings cannot be dissolved into the transitivity of language. The path followed by postmodernists is one which progressively tries to sever the relationship between language and the world, and then to hold the resulting sign system to be a closed one. People are reduced to nodal points through which messages pass, and the self becomes dissolved into discursive structures. The basic defence against this, which is developed throughout the book, is that the relationship between human beings and the world never can be severed. The way we are organically constituted, and the way in which the world is, together with the fact that we have to interact with the world in order to survive, let alone to flourish, means that an important part of being human is proofed against language. Specifically, to anticipate the argument developed in part II, our continuous sense of self, or self-consciousness, emerges from our practical activity in the world. It therefore cannot be demolished by any linguistic theory, for the simple reason that our sense of selfhood is independent of language.

No one of postmodernist persuasion would accept this primacy which I am defending of practice, because of their 'exorbitation of language'. Nevertheless, the postmodernist project hesitates before the total demolition of humanity. Demolished 'man' is just that, and because of it, 'he' is entirely passive. Yet certain major thinkers wanted signs of life from 'him', which amounted to significant activity. Thus, Foucault held on to the human capacity for resistance, and Rorty to the human ability for self-enrichment. Yet neither resistance nor enrichment could be coherent without a human self who engaged in them. Thus, in their thought, the postmodernist project turns full circle, and acknowledges that the human being cannot be dispensed with. However, if re-humanisation was admitted to be a necessity by some, this was with a grudging minimalism about the human properties and powers allowed back on board. Human beings were necessary, but they were not necessarily very much, in fact just a pouch which held their projects together like loose change.

In the face of this postmodernist onslaught upon humanity, minimalism became the hallmark in dealing with humankind. Just how few properties and powers could be allowed to people, in order for them to function as agents, within any alternative theoretical framework? Thus, even the opposition contributed to the impoverishment of humanity. This is the theme of part I. Firstly, 'Modernity's Man' (chapter 2), as the projection of the Enlightenment tradition, worked strenuously at

4   Being human: the problem of agency

stripping-down the human being until he or she had one property alone, that of rationality. Rationality was treated as pre-given, and therefore none of our relations with the world contributed anything to making us what we are. Yet, this model of *homo economicus* could not deal with our normativity or our emotionality, both of which are intentional, that is they are 'about' relations with our environment – natural, practical and social. These relationships could not be allowed to be, even partially, constitutive of who we are. Instead, the lone, atomistic and opportunistic bargain-hunter stood as the impoverished model of 'man'. One of the many things with which this model could not cope, is the human capacity to transcend instrumental rationality and to have 'ultimate concerns'. These are concerns which are not a means to anything beyond them, but are commitments which are constitutive of who we are, and an expression of our identities. To anticipate part III, 'Modernity's Man', 'who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing', lacked the wherewithal to acquire strict personal identity, which is a matter of determining our ultimate concerns and accommodating others to them.

Standing opposed to 'Modernity's Man', was 'Society's Being' (chapter 3). This is the social constructionists' contribution to the debate, which presents all our human properties and powers, beyond our biological constitution, as the gift of society. From this viewpoint, there is only one flat, unstratified, powerful particular, the human person, who is a site, or a literal point of view. Beyond that, our selfhood is a grammatical fiction, a product of learning to master the first-person pronoun system, and thus quite simply a theory of the self which is appropriated from society. This view elides the concept of self with the sense of self: we are nothing beyond what society makes us, and it makes us what we are through our joining society's conversation. However, to see us as purely cultural artefacts is to neglect the vital significance of our embodied practice in the world. This is crucial because it is these practical exchanges which are held, in part II, to be the non-linguistic sources of the sense of self. Of the many features of human beings which present difficulties to the constructionist, the most intransigent is our embodiment. Bodies have properties and powers of their own and are active in their environment, which is much broader than 'society's conversation'. The resultants of our embodied relations with the world cannot be construed as the gift of society. Constructionism thus impoverishes humanity, by subtracting from our human powers and accrediting all of them – selfhood, reflexivity, thought, memory and emotionality – to society's discourse.

Of course, what emerges in these two approaches as they impoverish humanity, are conventional forms of conflationary theorising. Conflation

in social theory has been the critical target of this whole trilogy. Basically conflationists reject the stratified nature of social reality by denying that independent properties and powers pertain to *both* the 'parts'of society and to the 'people' within it. I have used the term conflation in preference to reduction for two reasons. The first is simply in order to accentuate the *effects* of witholding emergent properties from either agents or society. In Upwards Conflation the powers of the 'people' are held to *orchestrate* those of the 'parts': in Downwards Conflation the 'parts' *organise* the 'people'. Thus, in the cultural realm, in the Upwards version, Socio-Cultural interaction *swallowed* up the Cultural System as a group or groups dominated and directed a completely malleable corpus of ideas. In the Downwards version, Cultural Systems (logical relations between bodies of ideas like theories and beliefs) *engulfed* the Socio-Cultural level (causal relations of influence between groups) through the basic processes of regulation and socialisation. In the structural domain the same effects were encountered. Either the state and nature of 'social integration' upwardly *moulded* 'system integration', or the state and nature of 'system integration' downwardly *shaped* 'social integration'. Now, in dealing with agency, the same two unacceptable forms of conflating two real levels of analysis are readily apparent and have the same effects. 'Modernity's Man' is old-style Upwards conflation, in which the single property of rationality is held to *make* both human beings and also their society. Conversely, 'Society's Being' is old-style Downwards conflation, in which the effects of socialisation *impress* themselves upon people, seen as malleable 'indeterminate material'.

Obviously, since both forms of conflation hold that *either* the properties and the powers of the 'parts' *or* of the 'people' are epiphenomena of the other, then they are reductionist theories. Downwards conflation means that the properties of the 'people' can be 'upwardly reduced' to properties of the system, which alone has causal powers. Upwards conflation means that the properties of the 'parts' can be 'downwardly reduced' to properties of the 'people', who alone have causal powers. This may seem to introduce unnecessary terminological confusion, but these *methodological* procedures for reduction do not really capture the downward weight of the systemic upon the social, or the untramelled freedom of the people to make structure, culture and themselves, which play such a prominent part in conflationary theorising. Nevertheless, conflation and reduction rest upon exactly the same ontological bases. That is *either* the 'parts' *or* the 'people' are held to be the *ultimate constituents* of social reality, to which the other could be reduced. Therefore, were all that were at stake a matter of *picturing* how epiphenomenalism works in actual theories, rather than methodological charters, then the introduction of the term

6   Being human: the problem of agency

'conflation' (and its directionality) might be considered an unwarranted
source of confusion.

However, there is another and more compelling reason for introducing
it. This is because there is a third form of conflation which does not
endorse reductionism at all. There is Central conflation which is *a*reduc-
tionist, because it insists upon the inseparability of the 'parts' and the
'people'. In other words, the fallacy of conflation does not *depend* upon
epiphenomenalism, on rendering one level of social reality inert and thus
reducible. Epiphenomenalism is not the only way in which the 'parts' or
the 'people' are deprived of their emergent, autonomous and causally
efficacious properties and powers, and that in consequence their interplay
is denied. Any form of conflation has the same consequences. Hence,
conflation is the more generic error and reductionism is merely a form of
it, or rather two particular cases of it.

This is demonstrated by Central conflation, where elision occurs in the
'middle'. This directional approach, which is reflowering at the moment,
interprets neither the 'parts' nor the 'people' as epiphenomena of one
another. Indeed, it is precisely their opposition to reduction which is the
prime article of faith among modern proponents of Central conflation.
Instead, what happens is that autonomy is withheld from *both levels*
because they are held to be mutually constitutive. These theories have
been encountered before when examining those who elide culture and
agency[3] and structure and agency.[4] As mutually constitutive, the two ele-
ments cannot be untied and therefore their reciprocal influences cannot
be teased out, which is held to be their major defect and one which
severely limits their utility in practical social research. They will be
encountered again during the present examination of agency itself, par-
ticularly in the theorising of Giddens and Bourdieu. Their respective
approaches to human practices generically preclude one from dis-
engaging the properties and powers of the practitioner from the proper-
ties and powers of the environment in which practices are conducted –
and yet again this prevents analysis of their interplay. Instead, we are con-
fronted with amalgams of 'practices' which oscillate wildly between
voluntarism and determinism, without our being able to specify the
conditions under which agents have greater degrees of freedom or, con-
versely, work under a considerable stringency of constraints.

What realism needs to do is not to re-animate the old debate between
Upwards and Downwards conflationism, although both fallacies will be

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[3] See Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, Chapter
4.
[4] See Margaret S. Archer, *Realist Social Theory: the Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge
University Press, 1995, chapter 4.

found to be alive and well in 'Modernity's Man' and 'Society's Being', respectively. Nor should social realists dally with the ranks of Central conflationists, even though they share a critique of reductionism, because they do so on diametrically opposed grounds. The elision of the 'parts' and the 'people' in Central conflation is *a*reductionist: realism, which stresses the independent properties and powers of both is firmly *anti*-reductionist. Therefore, social realism should continue where it is going, namely struggling on to link the 'parts' and the 'people', without conceding for a moment that their respective properties and powers can be reduced to one another, or should be regarded as inseparable and mutually constitutive .

The direct implication then, is that social realists have to be a good deal more precise about these properties and powers of human beings, and how they emerge through our *relations* with the world, which cannot be narrowly construed as 'society', let alone as 'language', 'discourse' and 'conversation'. This task is begun in part II, which deals with our *continuous sense of self*, or self-consciousness. It has to begin there, because without a continuous sense that we are one and the same being over time, then even the two impoverished models just introduced cannot get off the ground, let alone a more robust conception of humanity. 'Modernity's Man' needs this sense of self if he is consistently to pursue his so-called fixed preference schedule, for he has to know both that they are his preferences and also how he is doing in maximising them over time. Similarly, 'Society's Being' also needs this sense of self, rather than a grammatical fiction, in order to know that social obligations pertain to her, rather than just being diffuse expectations, and that when they clash, then it is she who is put on the spot, and has to exercise a creativity which cannot be furnished by consulting the discursive canon. Unscripted performances, which hold society together, need an active agent who is enough of a self to acknowledge her obligation to perform and to write her own script to cover the occasion.

The realist approach to humanity thus begins by presenting an account of this sense of self, which is prior to, and primitive to, our sociality. Self consciousness derives from our embodied practices in the world. Because acquiring a continuous sense of self entails practices, then it also involves work. This is what sets it apart from the pre-given character of 'Modernity's Man'. Because it emerges at the nexus of our embodied encounters with the world, this is what sets it apart from 'Society's Being'. One of the most important properties that we have, the power to know ourselves to be the same being over time, depends upon practice in the environment rather than conversation in society. Instead, the sequence which leads to the emergence of our selfhood derives from how our

species-being interacts with the way the world is, which is independent of
how we take it to be, or the constructions we put upon it. Each one of us
has to discover, through embodied practice, the distinctions between self
and otherness, then between subject and object, before finally arriving at
the distinction between the self and other people. Only when these dis-
tinctions have been learned through embodied practice can they then be
expressed in language.

Chapter 4 draws upon Merleau-Ponty's account of how our embodied
encounters instil the sense of self and otherness. This is a continuous sense
of self to him, because of the necessary continuity of the relations which
people have to sustain with the natural environment throughout their lives,
that is even after they become fully social beings. To Merleau-Ponty it is our
embodied memories which give us the sense of our own continuity. This is
highly compatible with Locke's conception of the self, where the continu-
ous sense that we are one and the same being over time hinged upon the
body and our memories. Locke has always been vulnerable to the charge
that he made the continuous sense of self depend upon perfect recall,
which is manifestly defective in most of us. However, modern neurobiology
now views memory as a living storage system, which would be dysfunc-
tional if everything were retained, and this therefore means that total recall
is not what we should expect to find in the non-pathological human being.
Instead, neurobiology gives evidence of our durable powers of recognition,
our lasting and distinctive eidetic memories and the indelibility of our per-
formative skills. Significantly, none of these are language dependent, yet
together they are sufficient to supply a continuous sense of self, which is
unique to each individual and thus anchors their strict self-identity.

The primacy of practice, rather than of language, has thus been de-
fended in relation to that prime human power, our self-consciousness. To
possess this power also implies that we are reflexive beings, for to know
oneself to be the same being over time, means that one can think about it.
The final stage of the argument about embodied practice as the source of
the sense of self is completed by seeking to demonstrate the primacy of
practice in the development of thought itself. Here, Piaget's experimental
demonstrations that it is the child's own practical activities which serve to
instil the logical principles of identity and non-contradiction, show our
powers of thinking and reasoning to be neither pre-given nor to be the gift
of society – they have to be realised in and through practice.

However, it could be rejoined that all I have defended is the primacy of
practice in early childhood development. Thus it could be countered that
once we become fully part of society's conversation, it takes over the
baton in directing our lives, and practice falls into the background.
Chapter 5 is devoted to anticipating this objection. Firstly, it seeks to

show that practical relations are life-long because we all have ineluctable
relations with nature and with material culture. In short we never cease,
and never can cease, to sustain relations with all three orders of reality –
natural, practical and social. We are incapable of living life as solely dis-
cursive beings, and what we make of our lives cannot thus be captured on
the Hamlet model. More ambitiously, this chapter seeks to show not only
that practice is enduring, not only that it is indispensable to human
comportment in the world, but also that it is pivotal to the knowledge
which we gain from nature and from society, which have to be filtered
through practice – the fulcrum of knowledge. Thus we remain embedded
in the world as a whole, and cannot be detached from the other orders of
reality to become 'Society's Being'. Conversely, the discursive order, far
from being independent and hegemonic, remains closely interdependent
with nature and with practice.

The fact that, as human beings, we necessarily live out our lives in all
three orders of reality, natural, practical and social, provides the bridge to
part III. This moves on from human beings as the bearers of a *continuous
sense of self*, a property which they acquire early on in life, to their active
acquisition of a *personal identity* at maturity. Our selfhood is unique, but it
can largely be constituted by the things that have happened to us.
Certainly, it entails active interplay with the environment in which indi-
viduals find themselves, but it cannot be pro-active in selecting this
environment. Personal identity, however, hinges precisely upon the emer-
gence of a mature ability to take a reflective overview of the three orders of
reality in which we are ineluctably engaged. Because of our constitution
in relation to the constitution of the world, we cannot ignore any of these
three orders with impunity: nevertheless, we can prioritise where our pre-
dominant concerns lie and accommodate our other concerns to them. It
is the distinctive patterning of these concerns which is held to give people
their unique personal identities.

Thus chapter 6 defends the proposition that we live, and must live,
simultaneously in the natural, practical and social orders. It presents our
emotions as the commentaries made upon our welfare in the world.
Distinctive emotional clusters represent different types of commentary
upon the inexorable human concerns attaching to these three orders in
which we live out our lives. The three kinds of emotional imports relate to
our physical well-being in the natural order, our performative achieve-
ment in the practical order and our self-worth in the social order. Here,
there is a major dilemma for every human being, because their flourishing
depends upon their attending to all three kinds of emotional com-
mentaries, and yet these do not dovetail harmoniously: attention to one
can jeopardise giving due heed to the others. For example, to respond to

physical fear may constitute cowardice in our social roles and incompetence in exercising our practical skills. Because no one can live satisfactorily by simply heeding the strongest emotional commentary *seriatim*, then everyone is constrained to strike a balance between our trinity of inescapable human concerns. This means prioritising our concerns, but without neglecting those pertaining to other orders: these can be relegated but they must be accommodated. Which precise balance we strike, and what exactly features as our ultimate concerns is what gives us our strict identity as particular persons – our personal identity.

The way in which this is achieved is examined in chapter 7, which explores the role of the 'inner conversation' as the process which generates our concrete singularity. The internal dialogue entails disengaging our ultimate concerns from our subordinate ones and then involves elaborating the constellation of commitments with which each one of us feels we can live. The 'inner conversation' is about exploring the terms of a liveable degree of solidarity for the self in its commitments, and the unique *modus vivendi* to emerge is what defines the uniqueness of personal identity. Whereas self-identity, the possession of a continuous sense of self, was held to be universal to human beings, personal identity is an achievement. It comes only at maturity but it is not attained by all: it can be lost, yet re-established.

In short, we are who we are because of what we care about: in delineating our ultimate concerns and accommodating our subordinate ones, we also define ourselves. We give a shape to our lives, which constitutes our internal personal integrity, and this pattern is recognisable by others as our concrete singularity. Without this rich inner life of reflection upon reality, which is the generative mechanism of our most important personal emergent property, our unique identity and way of being in the world, then we are condemned to the impoverishment of either 'Modernity's Man' or 'Society's Being', neither of whom play a robust and active role in who they are. They have been rendered passive because they have been morally evacuated; since they themselves are not allowed to play a major part in the making of their own lives. Realism revindicates real powers for real people who live in the real world.

However, we do not make our personal identities under the circumstances of our own choosing. Our placement in society rebounds upon us, affecting the persons we become, but also and more forcefully influencing the social identities which we can achieve. Personal and social identity must not be elided, because the former derives from our relations with all three orders of reality, whilst our social selves are defined only in social terms. Nevertheless, the emergence of the two are intertwined, which is the subject of part IV.