Introduction: reflexivity as the unacknowledged condition of social life

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,[1] 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

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[1] 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*.

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concur that, indeed, they have bodies, most would be stumped by 'reflex-ivity' 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,[2] 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 perform-ing 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 daydream-ing, fantasising and internal vituperation; through rehearsing for some forthcoming encounter, reliving past events, planning for future eventual-ities, 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 con-sulting 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

[2] '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.[3] 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 per-
sonal 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 con-
sequence 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 exis-
tence by our questions about ourselves quite often supply the materials for accu-
rate answers to those same questions.[4]

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.

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[3] 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 medita-
    tion 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'.
[4] Gerald E. Myers, 'Introspection and Self-Knowledge', *American Philosophical Quarterly*,
    23, 2, April 1986, p. 206.

4   Making our Way through the World

The following definition is used throughout the present work: *'reflexiv-ity' 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,[5] 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.[6]

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.

[5] Details about the empirical framework on which this study is based are found in chapter 2 and in the Methodological appendix.
[6] 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.'[7] 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:

[7] 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 (falli-
   bly) trying to achieve by endorsing given courses of action? This entails
   an examination of their personal *concerns* and inner reflexive delibera-
   tions 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 cul-
   tural powers are reflexively *mediated*.
3 What exactly do people do? This requires an examination of the *vari-
   ability* 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',[8] subtracts all but our biological properties and powers from us as
people and accredits them to the social side of the balance sheet. In con-
sequence, each and every sociological explanation can be arrived at from
the third-person perspective because any references to first-person sub-
jectivity have already been reduced to social derivatives and, at most, per-
mutations 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 ver-
sions – 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.[9] Being an 'active agent' hinges on the fact that individuals

[8] Margaret S. Archer, *Being Human: the Problem of Agency*, Cambridge, Cambridge
     University Press, 2000, ch. 3.
[9] 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,[10] the precise constellation of which makes for their con-
crete singularity as persons.[11] No one can have an ultimate concern and
fail to do something about it. Instead, each person seeks to develop a con-
crete 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 inten-
tionally 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 ubiq-
uity 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*,

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[10] 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.   [11] 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.[12] 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 acti-
vated, 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 inappro-
priate action and suspending that which would impede our aims by cir-
cumventory 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 rela-
tion 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 lit-
erally 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,

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[12] 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,[13] 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 fre-
quently 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 enable-
ments 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

[13] 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 renuncia-
tory) 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 concep-
tion, 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'.[14] 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 nec-
essarily 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 ele-
ments 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 objec-
tive 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.

[14] Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, Hemel Hempstead Harvester, 1989, p. 26.