



# BEING HUMAN

The Problem of Agency

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MARGARET S. ARCHER

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## Being Human: the Problem of Agency

Humanity and the very notion of the human subject are under threat from postmodernist thinking which has declared not only the 'Death of God' but also the 'Death of Man'. This book is a revindication of the concept of humanity, rejecting contemporary social theory that seeks to diminish human properties and powers. Archer argues that being human depends on an interaction with the real world in which practice takes primacy over language in the emergence of human self-consciousness, thought, emotionality and personal identity – all of which are prior to, and more basic than, our acquisition of a social identity.

This original and provocative new book from leading social theorist Margaret S. Archer builds on the themes explored in her previous books *Culture and Agency* (1988) and *Realist Social Theory* (1995). It will be required reading for academics and students of social theory, cultural theory, political theory, philosophy and theology.



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# Introduction

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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 Indeed, it appeared to have been superseded by a new debate between Structuration Theorists and Social Realists.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*<sup>1</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality*, Verso, London, 1989.

*Reality at Risk*,<sup>2</sup> 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 unconvinced 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 emergence 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 repercussions for one of our most distinctive human properties and powers – our reflexivity. Although our continuous sense of self is, I will argue, ontologically 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

<sup>2</sup> 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

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 withholding 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 untrammelled 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

'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 *areductionist*, 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<sup>3</sup> and structure and agency.<sup>4</sup> As mutually constitutive, the two elements 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, particularly in the theorising of Giddens and Bourdieu. Their respective approaches to human practices generically preclude one from disengaging the properties and powers of the practitioner from the properties and powers of the environment in which practices are conducted – and yet again this prevents analysis of their interplay. Instead, we are confronted 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, conversely, 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

<sup>3</sup> See Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, Chapter 4.

<sup>4</sup> 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 distinctions 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 continuous 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 dysfunctional 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 performative 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 defended 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 discursive 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 individuals find themselves, but it cannot be pro-active in selecting this environment. Personal identity, however, hinges precisely upon the emergence 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 predominant 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 achievement 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 commentaries, 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.

Chapter 8 begins the account of the path trodden by all people towards the social identity that they may ultimately achieve. It starts with our involuntary placement as Primary Agents. At birth we are assigned to positions on society's distribution of resources, which means that we become members of *collectivities* who share the same life-chances. As such, the 'I', the subject of self-consciousness, discovers the 'Me' as the object of society, who is involuntarily either privileged or non-privileged. Such positions are entirely objective, but their transformation depends partly upon the subjective reflexivity of Primary Agents in seeking to play an active part in the re-shaping of society's resource distribution. In large part, their success depends upon their capacity to realise collective action and to transform themselves into Corporate Agents. The articulation of aims and the development of organisation to achieve them, is an emergent power which enables Corporate Agency to become strategically involved in shaping social change. However, socio-cultural configurations have their own emergent properties and powers, and the deterrent effects of morphostatic formations constrain the ability of Primary Agents to become Corporate Agents, whilst morphogenetic scenarios positively enable such collective action. The configurations stretching from Pre-Modernity, through Modernity, to High Modernity are presented as increasingly enabling the disengagement of more and more Corporate Agents, which leaves a much reduced and residual category of those condemned to the passivity of Primary Agency – to accepting the characteristics of the 'Me' which they have been involuntarily assigned.

Thus, there is a historical movement from the 'Me', which seeks to make out *within* the confines of the existing socio-cultural structures, towards the 'We' which together seeks strategically to *transform* such structures. Corporate Agency transforms itself in pursuing social transformation. Primarily it does this, in the course of its struggles, by inducing the elaboration of the institutional role structure. New roles are created, and these constitute new positions in which more people can willingly invest themselves. Corporate Agency alone does not represent strict social identity, since participants are still merely members of a group. However, the elaboration of the role structure which it introduces provides the bridge towards attaining social identity for increasing sections of the population.

In this way, in chapter 9, the Agent is presented as the parent of the Actor. Strict social identity is achieved by assuming a role(s) and personifying it, by investing oneself in it and executing it in a singular manner. Reasons for incumbency are found within Agency itself, since the roles adopted will narrow the gap between the 'I', whom an individual seeks to become, and the 'Me', whom they have previously been constrained to be. Here, the problem has always been, *who* does this personifying: *who* is

sufficient of an individual to produce a unique performance in a role? Particularly if their social identity is held to derive *from* the role, then this cannot be the source of their unique execution of it. Thus we need to introduce personal identity to supply at least sufficient concrete singularity for this to be brought to the role. People will of course change with the experience they acquire in living out the role, which is why the final consolidation of personal identity and social identity are dialectically related. The moments of their interplay are disentangled, but it is concluded that social identity remains a sub-set of a much broader personal identity. This is because our personal identities are forged in the three orders of reality – natural, practical, as well as social. Therefore, it is ultimately the person who determines where the self-worth, that he or she derives from their social roles, stands in relation to their other commitments in the world as a whole. It is also the person who arbitrates upon the relative importance of their multiple social roles and between their greedy demands. Once again it is the person who strikes the balance *within* their social concerns and *between* them and other concerns. They can only do this by prioritising their ultimate concerns, which will determine *how much* of themselves is invested in their social identities, and therefore *what* they will bring to living them out.

Our commitments, which define us as persons and also define what kinds of social Actors we become, are subject to continuous internal review. Thus we return to the inner conversation which never ceases. In it, the ‘I’ whom I have become, periodically re-visits the ‘Me’ and evaluates its (newly) acquired and objective characteristics. The judgement reached then tendentially influences the ‘We’, with whom one will work in solidarity, to induce further social transformations. Finally, the ‘You’, the maker of the future, is constantly subject to inner deliberation about the continuity of its commitments. Together, the ‘I’ and the ‘You’ may re-endorse, revise or renege on their prime concerns at any time. The self, in solidarity, must determine whether and how to project forward its existing social identity, according to the priority which it is assigned within the overall personal identity. Personal identity is an accomplishment, but it has to be reconstituted from day to day by a re-affirmation and renewal of our concerns. Such active continuity makes us recognisable to others in our concrete singularity and consistent as social Actors through the consistency of our personified conduct in our social positions.

It has been suggested that ‘two stories’ are involved in the subject matter of this book. Some have maintained that there will always be an ‘outsiders’ account, dealing with the external socio-cultural factors which position us and predispose us to various courses of action. On the other hand, there is the ‘insiders’ hermeneutic account of what agents believe



they are doing in their activities. The implication is that we can begin with either agential reasons or social causes, but that at best each story will be filled in from the other side. Because realism does not accept this division between 'reasons' and 'causes', I have maintained that there is only one story to tell. Society enters into us, but we can reflect upon it, just as we reflect upon nature and upon practice. Without such referential reality there would be nothing substantive to reflect upon; but without our reflections we would have only a physical impact upon reality. This is why there is only one story. It is the long account of how human beings are constituted, how the world is made, and of the necessity of their mutual interaction.



*Part I*

The impoverishment of humanity



# 1 Resisting the dissolution of humanity

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Humanity is seen as the linchpin of agency in general and is therefore crucial to how one side of the ‘problem of structure and agency’ is conceptualised.<sup>1</sup> Too often we are presented with reductionist accounts, which either make all that we are the gift of society or, conversely, which claim that all society is can be derived from what we are. Instead, both humanity and society have their own *sui generis* properties and powers, which makes their interplay the central issue of social theory for all time. This book is concerned with the emergence of our human properties and powers. They are relational: stemming from the way our species is constituted, the way the world is and the necessity of their mutual interaction. The relations between the two, being universal, supply the anchor which moors our elaborated human forms as Selves, Persons, Agents and Actors, and thus sets limits to their variability. Humanity, as a natural kind, defies transmutation into another and different kind. It is this which sustains the thread of intelligibility between people of different times and places, and without it the thread would break. It is this too which underpins our moral and political responsibilities to humankind *despite* the socio-cultural differences of groups – for these are never big enough for them to leave the human family and dispense us from our obligations to family members.

Another way of putting this is that human interaction with the world constitutes the transcendental conditions of human development, which otherwise remain as unrealised *potentia* of our species. However, it must be stressed from the start that there is more to the world than society (which until recently would have been unnecessary), and that all of its constituent orders contribute to our human being and to what it is to be human in the world. Indeed, my key argument maintains that it is

<sup>1</sup> Although these large claims were made in the first two parts of this trilogy (*Culture and Agency*, Cambridge University Press, 1988 and *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*, Cambridge University Press, 1995), their justification was postponed until this last volume. This book is intended to redeem the promissory notes scattered through the previous ones.

precisely because of our interaction with the natural, practical and transcendental orders that humanity has prior, autonomous and efficacious powers which it brings to society itself – and which intertwine with those properties of society which make us social beings, without which, it is true, we would certainly not be recognisably human. This book will confine itself to working on our feet of clay, that is our relations with the natural and practical orders of reality, because these are all that are needed for the defence of humanity as *sui generis* within sociology.

My stress upon the transcendental necessity of relations with nature for the possibility of being a human, should clearly serve to separate this view of common humanity from the Enlightenment model of intrinsically rational ‘Man’, characterised by ‘his’<sup>2</sup> mastery over nature. Here the natural relations of people are neither ones confined to instrumental rationality nor ones which can be captured by notions of mastery. Indeed our most basic practices, basic in terms of our physical survival, are better portrayed as our embodied accommodation to the mercy of nature, and not the other way around. As we accommodate, we do indeed learn things, *inter alia*, about means and ends but these come after the event; they cannot be construed as part of our natural attitude in advance.

It should be clear that my objective is to reclaim the notion of common humanity, even if its practical grounding has not yet been explicated. Although the present work distances itself from the Enlightenment concept of man, it does not do so by the radical device of de-centring, dissolving or demolishing the human subject. Because the aim is to salvage a workable notion of humankind, this book is also hostile to the post-modernist mood, where the inclination of theorists is to distance themselves from the metaphysics of modernity by scrapping humanity. I wish to reclaim human beings as the ultimate *fons et origio* of (emergent) social life or socio-cultural structures, rather than subjugating humanity, as if it were the epiphenomenon of social forces.

The following quotations from leading postmodernists ( their immediate predecessors and fellow-travellers) reflect not only the ‘death of Man’ but also the method of his demise. What could appear on the death certificate is ‘asphyxiation by social forces’.

‘I believe the ultimate goal of the human sciences to be not to constitute, but to dissolve man.’ (Lévi-Stauss)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Rational ‘Man’ was the term current in Enlightenment thinking. Because it is awkward to impose inclusive language retrospectively and distracting to insert inverted commas, I reluctantly abide with the term Man, as standing for humanity, when referring to this tradition, its heirs, successors and adversaries.

<sup>3</sup> C. Lévi-Stauss, *The Savage Mind*, London, 1966.

(Humanity) that 'spongy referent, that opaque but equally translucence reality, that nothingness' an 'opaque nebula whose growing density absorbs all the surrounding energy and light rays, to collapse finally under its own weight'. (Baudrillard)<sup>4</sup>

'Man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.' (Foucault)<sup>5</sup>

'With the spread of postmodernist consciousness we see the demise of personal definition, reason, authority, commitment, trust, the sense of authenticity, sincerity, belief in leadership, depth of feeling and faith in progress. In their stead, an open slate emerges on which persons may inscribe, erase and rewrite their identities as the ever-shifting, ever-expanding and incoherent network of relationships invites or permits.' (Gergen)<sup>6</sup>

'Identities are points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. They are the result of a successful articulation or "chaining" of the subject into the flow of discourse.' (Stuart Hall)<sup>7</sup>

'A *self* does not amount to much.' (Lyotard)<sup>8</sup>

'Socialisation . . . goes all the way down.' (Rorty)<sup>9</sup>

This displacement of the human subject and celebration of the power of social forces to shape and to mould is the epitome of what I have termed Downwards conflation. For 'a *self* does not amount to much'<sup>10</sup> is a view redolent of the human being seen as 'indeterminate material' by Durkheim. To both, the epiphenomenal status of humankind deflects all real interest onto the forces of socialisation. People are indeed perfectly uninteresting if they possess no personal powers which can make a difference. Of course, if this is the case then it is hard to see how they can offer any resistance, for even if it is ineffectual it has to stem from someone who at least amounts to the proportions of an irritant (and must thus be credited minimally with the personal power to challenge). Foucault was to face the problems set up by this one-dimensional, socio-centric account and there is evidence in his later work that he began to reinstate a more robust self concept, one strong enough to restore the 'problem of structure and agency' which the notion of resistance

<sup>4</sup> J. Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983.

<sup>5</sup> M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York, Random House, 1970, p. 387.

<sup>6</sup> Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, New York, Basic Books, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Who Needs Identity?', in Hall, S. and Du Gay, P. (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London, Sage, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> J-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 185.

<sup>10</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 15.

ineluctably implies. In short the programme of dissolution turns out to be circular in that it returns grudgingly to examine the *two* terms and the interplay between them in order to account for outcomes. Explanation of these is, of course, the charter of the Analytical Dualism<sup>11</sup> advocated here, but there are crucial reasons why there can be no *rapprochement* with post-modernism which goes deeper than the fact that not all postmodernists have followed Foucault's re-turn.

There is a much more profound circularity running through post-modernist thought if it is to be regarded as a contribution to social theorising rather than a prolongation of the fiesta of May 1968: that is as an investigator of events rather than a participator in the *événements*. This circularity concerns the stance taken towards anthropocentrism. Below I will consider three questions about the postmodernists' view of humanity whose answers ultimately tend to a very different conclusion from the brutalist presentation of humankind contained in the cluster of dismissive quotations just given. If we consider sequentially, (a) *why* this de-centring of Man?; (b) *how* was humanity dissolved?; and; (c) *what* personal self this leaves for sociological investigation and theorising?; the progression of answers comes full circle. And this is a vicious circle both for post-modernist consistency and for utility in social analysis.

The basic answer to 'Why de-centre?' was in order to demolish the anthropocentrism explicit in Rational Man as master of all he surveyed, with consciousness thus being the source of history. The answer to how he was dethroned was by installing an anti-humanism which made him the recipient rather than the maker of history. But when we come to what kind of consequences this has for the social 'sciences' there are three possible responses. The first sometimes tells us that we, as sociologists, have perished with humankind, washed away with the face of Man, for 'All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces' now that 'history has stopped.'<sup>12</sup> We can make art but not sociology (who remains to appreciate these aesthetics we will leave to Rorty to tell). Ultimately, author-less texts without referents swing free as the product of disembodied forces, not the cumulative production of succeeding agential generations of critics. What we make of them is our game in the here and now.

The second bids us engage in an idealist reification of process-without-a-maker or discourse-without-a-speaker or texts-without-an-author, which ironically turns out to be anthropocentric for it installs the interpreter in a position of rhetorical authority in place of the absented intentional agent. Perhaps this accounts for its popularity, but it makes it a

<sup>11</sup> See, *Realist Social Theory*, ch. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard, 'On Nihilism', *On the Beach*, 6, 1984, pp. 24–5.



thoroughgoing form of anthropocentricity, even though an intergenerational one, since successive interpreters must endlessly defer to their successors and their successors to their children's children's interpretations.

Yet there is a third answer, forthcoming externally from those disinclined to shake their sandals free of postmodernism and yet who seek instead a rescuable account of reason, truth and self embedded in it which can still sustain the sociological enterprise. The paradox is that this version recommits the anthropocentric fallacy with a vengeance. It concurs with the 'Death of God' at the price of resurrecting Man. For if a 'God's eye view' can provide no knowledge of the world, told in disembodied world speak, then our only recourse is to knowledge generated from our own human perspectives – incarnational and perspectival knowledge which has to reinvoké the human point of view. Both the circularity and the fallacy consist in now over-privileging people's emergent properties (PEPs), for our access to the social is via what human beings can tell us of it. Since they are not merely fallible (as we all agree) but necessarily limited in their perspectives, then structural and cultural emergent properties (SEPs and CEPs) are under-privileged because they can only be grasped through what people say. This is quite a different statement from the activity-dependence of social forms stressed by social realists. That never presumes full knowledgeability on the part of agents (we cannot discover the nature of social structure by administering questionnaires), whereas this does assume full agential discursive penetration. Or if it does not, it condemns the investigator to the same ignorance of social processes as their subjects. The reason is that we shall find this analysis to be confined to the Humean level of the event, for only the actual rather than the real is accessible to direct human perception from the human perspective.

As a social realist, I would seek to rescue social theory from both the postmodernists and their charitable humanistic defenders. For we must neither under- nor over-privilege human agency in our analytical approach. In contesting both the original and the derivative positions on humanity and its role in society and sociology alike, the realist does not seek to prop-up modernity's model of Man. We are just as critical of such attempts, represented by the Rational Choice theorists' model of the utility maximising bargain-hunter, as of demolished Man. Such latter-day proponents of the Enlightenment model are fully anthropocentric in their Upward conflation, for it is some property of people (usually their in-built rationality, though sometimes modified by social additives such as normativity) which is held to account for the entirety of the social context – by a process of aggregation. The deficiencies involved in reducing structure (SEPs) and culture (CEPs) to aggregate properties, rather than

emergent ones with their own causal powers, have been rehearsed in *Realist Social Theory* (ch.2 ), but it is the sourceless, fully asocial, rational abstraction which stands for agency which is criticised here (see chapter 2).

Instead of rehabilitating Enlightenment Man with his incorporeal consciousness, or any equally mentalistic portrayals of humanity, social realism makes our real embodied selves living in the real world really load-bearing. It constitutes a naturalistic account of consciousness rather than taking the latter as an *a prioristic* endowment. Nevertheless, contra postmodernism, this is an account of consciousness with a real history which, in turn, ultimately accounts for there being real world history. Far from being groundless, it is firmly grounded in the natural praxis of humanity; ways of being in the world without which the species would not survive as a natural kind to develop its potential properties – all of which at conception only exist *in potentia*. These natural relations are the source not only of consciousness but also of our distinctive self reflexivity, whose origins are equally practical. It should be noted, to complete this aerial view, that this insistence upon natural praxis does not align the humankind conceptualised by realists with the ontology of praxis held by Central Conflationists, such as advocates of Structuration Theory.<sup>13</sup> For their ‘ontology of praxis’ would deny the autonomy, priority and causal efficacy of natural relations, since every practice is held to draw upon socio-structural properties. It therefore also denies questions about the interplay between natural and social practices, which cannot even be addressed from within that framework.

## **I Social imperialism and linguistic terrorism**

However, to return to postmodernism as the *apogée* of Downwards conflation, let us trace through my contentious claim that this most avowedly anti-humanist stance actually does come full circle to advocate an unacceptably anthropocentric position. We begin by returning to the three questions listed above.

### *Why de-centre humanity?*

Postmodernists usually pay their intellectual respects to Nietzsche. In particular they align themselves with him in attacking the Enlightenment for having allowed the ‘death of God’ to issue in titanic Man (as if thought abhors a vacuum in the cult of personality). Thus with the secularisation

<sup>13</sup> See *Realist Social Theory*, ch. 4.