3 Reflexivity and working at social positioning

This chapter acts as master of ceremonies, making the introductions and inviting various guests to take the floor. The proposition introduced is that regular conduct of each kind of internal conversation generates a patterning of social mobility over the life courses of its practitioners.¹ Making that connection entails: (1) defining the three modes of reflexivity to be examined; (2) detailing their linkages to different combinations of ‘social contexts and personal concerns’; (3) delineating how differently the three kinds of internal conversationalists conduct their encounters with constraints and enablements, both structural and cultural; and (4) describing the distinctive trajectories of social mobility characterising their work biographies. Instead of working through these points formally, we will meet a communicative, an autonomous and a meta-reflexive and let their narratives cover the ground.

To engage in one form of internal conversation more than any other is to have a particular life of the mind, which thinks about the self in relation to society and vice versa in a particular way. Folk psychology does not endorse this. On the contrary, most people assume that how they talk to themselves is similar to everybody else’s self-talk. This is not the case.² Therefore, each reader is intimate with his or her own form of inner dialogue but cannot justifiably presume it to be universal or necessarily common even to their friends and colleagues. Instead, to understand other modes of reflexivity we have to enter into the subjective landscapes³ of others. This means becoming familiar with their internal topography and processes of inner

¹ This is not a Humean constant conjunction, which can be detected as a correlation coefficient. During any given period it will not necessarily be empirically manifest because overlaid by contingent interventions, such as illness or involuntary redundancy.

² Both the folk assumption and the evidence running counter to it were discussed in Margaret S. Archer, Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 157f; ch. 5, ‘Investigating Internal Conversations,’ deals with the methodological problems involved and the arguments are not repeated here.

navigation, which choreograph how they also move around our common social world and seek to position themselves within it.

The likelihood is that most readers will find one of these landscapes to be closer to their own than the other two, although they will differ over which one. With the other modes, they may well feel like strangers in strange lands and begin to think that the phrase ‘to be lost in thought’ should be taken literally. Of course these unfamiliar others are not ‘lost’ at all; it is we who would be at a loss were their internal conversations suddenly to be broadcast. ‘A penny for your thoughts’ cannot buy them. These are free gifts from three generous people who have tried to share the lives of their minds with us in this chapter and invite us to see how their life histories require such sharing if they are to be understood.

**Communicative reflexivity and social immobility**

Communicative reflexives are those who complete their thoughts about themselves in relation to their circumstances by talking them through with other people. This makes us all ‘communicatives’ to some degree. When we visit the doctor or car mechanic, thinking that something is wrong but unsure either what it is or what to do about it, then we necessarily engage in communicative reflexivity. In such cases we acknowledge our lack of expertise to solve these physical or mechanical problems. Equally, we accept that it is inadequate simply to present our ailing bodies or vehicles to the expert as objects. Acts of inter-subjectivity are indispensable for bridging the gap between our putatively objective symptoms and the expert reaching a solution which is defensibly objective.

Inter-subjectivity is necessary even if the agent’s inter-subjective contribution is as spare as ‘I don’t know what’s wrong with me/it . . .’, because there is always a ‘but’ after the ellipsis. The ‘but’ can be amplified uncertainly and unhelpfully – ‘I just don’t feel myself’ or ‘Somewhat it’s not running properly.’ Alternatively, it can be expatiated upon at length and with great assurance. Both contributions are, of course, fallible, as will be the eventual diagnosis. Nevertheless, the volunteering of some reflexive statement is necessary for the process to engage at all. They are necessary but rarely sufficient, because they usually usher in a lengthier inter-subjective exchange, intended to home in on or at least towards a diagnosis of the problem. (There can be simple exceptions, often reinforced by ostension, ‘I’ve got something in this eye’ or ‘My exhaust bracket’s loose’, but even these may not be the end of the exchange.) At times – and sometimes with reluctance – we all engage in acts of communicative reflexivity, at least in certain tracts of our lives. Moreover, many people, whose dominant mode of reflexivity is other
than the communicative, willingly tell self-aggrandising anecdotes or jokes against themselves, where approval or approving laughter is what is sought. This is substantiated by the finding that none of the 128 Coventry subjects registered a zero ‘C’ score, however strong their dominant, but non-communicative, mode of reflexivity happened to be.

Yet, these common examples of practical exigencies, knowledge deficits or psychological promptings, which lead all normal people to engage in some degree of communicative reflexivity, do not begin to capture the communicative reflexive. What they fail to portray is the routine nature of the ‘thought and talk’ pattern to them. In describing this mode of reflexivity, it must be emphasised that communicative reflexives are not people who are incapable of initiating a train of reflexive thought when alone; indeed these subjects recount that they regularly do so under their showers, at the steering wheel or ironing-board, and very frequently when dropping off to sleep. However, what is distinctive about their pattern of internal conversation is a need to share these thoughts with others in order to conclude their deliberations. ‘Conclusion’ means receiving confirmation from another before a subject deems that a train of thought constitutes a satisfactory basis for action. The need of the communicative reflexive to supplement intra-subjectivity with inter-subjectivity (or internal with external conversation) is vastly more general than in those common but discrete instances, mentioned above. In those cases, the necessity arises from some particular requirement that cannot be met by the subject drawing upon his or her own mental resources.

Here is how some of the ten communicative reflexives, interviewed at length and to be properly introduced later, express and explain this need for sharing their thoughts with others in order to feel that their ideas are complete. For Jeanette (a 36-year-old unemployed horticulturalist), ‘thought and talk’ seems to be a matter of boosting her own confidence: ‘Mostly [I’m] looking for assurance I would say, to sort of see if – I’m not a very confident person and I think I constantly need assurance off other people . . . I suppose it’s a back-up, just to see if somebody else agrees with what I’m thinking, and also to get input for other ideas that perhaps I haven’t thought of.’ To her, consultation is ‘across the board, I wouldn’t say there’s anything I particularly hold back on’. Jon (a 30-year-old automotive design engineer) reiterates this need for confirmation and, in particular, reassurance that he has taken all considerations into account: ‘I’ll come up in my own head with what I think I want and then I will speak to my parents or sister or friends and see what they think as well. And then I’ll weigh it up in the end and decide which is the best way to go . . . I like to feel I’m getting it from all angles before I finally make the decision.’ Assurance that he has covered all the options, which implies respecting his own limitations, also means that
the ‘thought and talk’ pattern comes into play in his work as a designer: ‘You could get given a brief and it might not be something that I was one hundred per cent familiar with. So, if that was the case, I’d come up in my head with what I thought would be the best route of action and then I would try and find someone else who knew a bit more about it and maybe get their opinion as well before I went ahead with it.’

Similar references to requiring confirmation, completion and enhanced self-confidence recur with other subjects. Thus, Sheila (aged fifty-seven and retired because of ill-health) again picks up on how she and her long-term friend and interlocutor reciprocally provide an independent angle on one another’s problems: ‘I can be worried about things and I can ring her and she’ll put it all into perspective and I do the same with her – like her daughter’s going away travelling for three months . . . She’s straight round here and I’m straight round there if there’s a problem – yes, I do talk it through with her.’ In addition, Sheila is underlining another facet of how communicative reflexivity works; in general, face-to-face contact has to be possible, which highlights the geo-local nature of ‘contextual continuity’.

Alf (a 69-year-old retired miner) emphasises the same theme, but also brings out how the dangerous nature of mine-working reinforced the practice of always seeking a second opinion. He is thus reiterating Jon, but in a context where ensuring that one has covered ‘all angles’ is even more crucial for safety. ‘When I went down the pit I did every job there was to be done, except for shot-firing and, of course, managerial jobs. What I used to do [on] a strange job – I used to sit and look round for maybe ten minutes, just looking – planning in my head what I was going to do, where I was going to start.’ Mining forces his own internal conversation to engage constantly, but the process is not completed intra-personally. Even several years later, when he became the charge-hand responsible for decision-making, Alf would seek second opinions and talk through how to crack problems with his workmates, despite the fact that ‘nine times out of ten they’d agree with me . . . I wasn’t bombastic in forcing my will on them, I did used to listen to people and see what they had to say if I had a problem of any sort – oh yeah, I would listen – and if I thought it would work, I’d do what they say.’ Here, he brings out another facet of communicative reflexivity, namely the ineluctability of deliberation because routine action can rarely suffice in his type of employment. When it does not, then both ‘thought and talk’ engage. This harks back to the point made in chapter 1, namely the paucity of situations in which a non-reflexive response is an adequate guide to action because the solution is a completely routine one. Since subjects like Alf are aware of this, their awareness means that they have evaluated some routine course(s) of action and found it wanting – and thus resort to the exercise of self-conscious reflexivity. Nor is this
practice of reflexivity confined to the special exigencies that Alf and Jon confront in their work; when young daughters first go back-packing, what is the routine response? By definition, it cannot be part of one’s own repertoire, so the response of communicatives is to resort to their friends, even if this means no more than putting their heads together when neither party shares the relevant experience.

The constitution, the consolidation and the consequences of communicative reflexivity are the topics explored in preliminary form during this chapter. Exploration entailed the identification of seemingly clear practitioners of the communicative mode from ICONI; that is, those whose ‘C’ score was 5 or over (out of a maximum of 7), who appeared to be non-fractured (an ‘F’ score less than the mean of 4), and for whom the dominance of the ‘C’ mode of reflexivity was clearly differentiated on the indicator in relation to other modes (by a difference of at least one point). Such scores were used for convenience; they were not held to guarantee that the subjects so identified were communicative reflexives, but only to increase the probability of this being the case and thus narrowing the group targeted for interview. Lengthy interviews were conducted with ten subjects who conformed to the above criteria and also were confirmed as being communicative reflexives on qualitative grounds. It is the rich, long and generous contents of these interchanges which form the qualitative basis for attempting to answer my three core questions – about the constitution, consolidation and consequences of communicative reflexivity.

As an introduction to the lived experience of being a communicative reflexive, we are going to make the acquaintance of a very vibrant practitioner. Joan’s life history has been composed by somewhat rearranging the material she supplied to provide a clear biographical sequence. Maximum use is made of her own words because paraphrasing would have leached their colour. The key themes will be touched upon: acquiring a trusted interlocutor from amongst her ‘similars and familiars’; embracing and extending ‘contextual continuity’; working through the sequence of <concerns → projects → practices>; encountering social constraints and enablements; and, finally, reducing her aspirations and confirming her social immobility. However, these will not be laboured or heavily labelled at this stage. It is much more important to listen to her in order to grasp the out-workings of the life of her mind and to understand that pathos is just as crucial as is logos in this, as in all other kinds of internal conversations.

Joan’s story

Joan is sixty-four years old, partially disabled after two hip replacements, widowed, and now technically retired. She is the eldest of four children, brought
up in a small town outside Coventry by her mother (a housewife) and her father (a builder), who remained together until their deaths. Joan married Tom (1964) and had three children, Simon (1965), Jessica (1968) and John (1970). Simon’s wife is Claire, and their two children, Emma (aged fourteen) and Ben (aged twelve), now live with Joan in Coventry. When invited to list the three most important areas of her life at the moment, ones about which she cares deeply, Joan filled in only ‘my family’. Her ICONI ‘C’ score is a high 6.33 and she recorded a low 2.00 for ‘fracturedness’.

Retrospectively, Joan paints a sunny picture of growing up, accentuating the cloudless golden and blue days and presenting her parents as responsible for the good weather. ‘I had a very happy childhood, my mum and dad were wonderful and I’ve got two brothers and a sister . . . Oh yes, we had a lovely family, wonderful Christmases and two weeks’ holiday in the summer and at Easter, I can still see it as if it were yesterday. My mum and dad always made it happy for us – you do get your tensions but not all the time. I mean everybody has tensions in the family, but without it you’d have nothing.’ Yet, close to the start of the story, these inter-personal tensions seem to be ensnaring Joan and to be at war with her idyllic portrayal. Her self-reminder that without the family one ‘would have nothing’ appears to be an attempt to resolve this contradiction.

On the one hand, ‘Dad was the old school. He was good to my mum, but he was a hard man sometimes, but when I was a very little girl it was always him I went to.’ When she became a teenager, wanting to fly the nest rather than climb on his knee, her desire to realise her concerns collided directly with his ‘hardness’. On the other hand, Joan admits, ‘I didn’t really get on with my mum until I got married. Mother suffered with her nerves really badly and worried about everything.’ Joan seems to have distanced herself from such anxiety, by defining herself as a non-worrier, one who accepts that what will be, will be. ‘I always think, “Well, whatever’s going to happen is going to happen, there’s damn all you can do about it.”’ This acceptant attitude, developed in contradistinction to her mother, would later lend itself to propitiating her father’s ‘hardness’.

Such a tendency was reinforced by the negative self-image which was instilled in Joan by adverse comparisons with her younger sister. ‘My sister’s really beautiful and people used to say, “Oh isn’t Rosemary beautiful, but whatever happened to Joan?” And you know what kids are like, they used to say, “Ugh, you’re ugly” and I’ve always grown up to believe that. It doesn’t make any difference to me, it doesn’t matter. I got to a stage in my life where I thought nobody can hurt me any more; I will do my best for everyone and do a good turn – and by being like that then I don’t think [anyone] can complain, and so that’s what I did.’ In
determining to repay bad with good, to be uncomplaining rather than assertive, Joan also signals her desire to please people and thus to avert their censure. Simultaneously, she is telling us that she has undergone a lot of pain within the family, without being able to identify a single member to whom she related with trust and confidence. Nevertheless, she continues to idealise this unit. ‘We were a very close family – compared to other people we had a good life, we had a good family background. My brothers and sisters, we’re still in contact with each other. We did, we had a good start in life, a wonderful start.’

Conflict was released precisely because Joan formulated her own project about her future employment whilst still at school: ‘I desperately wanted to be a nurse and my father wouldn’t let me. He said I’d be a servant to other people. He was really, really naughty like that . . . He said, “You’re not going, you’re staying at school till you’re sixteen,” so I did but it was an utter waste of time because all I did was fool about. So then I left school and he said, “You’re not going anywhere, you’re going to learn how to keep a house.” So, I learned how to clean, knit, sew, cook (my mother was a brilliant cook), and the general things that he said a girl should learn. And then I got fed up and said, “I really want to go out to work and I really do want to go and be a nurse.” And he said, “You’re not going, you’ll do as you’re told till you’re twenty-one, you’re not going.” ’

Joan had confronted an extremely domineering man with deep-set gender prejudices and little to restrain their expression in the 1950s; her response was to capitulate and attempt to propitiate.

She went to work on a local farm, but even this was an independent step too far for her father. ‘I worked for six months with poultry. I didn’t like poultry because I was scared of them, but that was another thing dad interfered with. He said to the boss, “Make her work with the poultry, I’ll cure this fear,” and I had to do that.’ I asked if it had ever crossed her mind then that she could stand up to him or get round him. Joan responded, ‘It is weird, but it was just that he thought he could rule us, but he always ruled me more than the others. It’s like when my brother was courting and he had to be in by eleven o’clock. It was ridiculous – he was coming up to twenty and had to be in by eleven – and he never was. I used to go downstairs and turn the clock back so he wouldn’t get into trouble when he came in. It’s terrible, but that’s how it was in those days – and dad never did find out!’ Tricking father in his patriarchal role was fine; confronting him in it was a different matter. For four years, Joan moved laterally, working in the kennels of the local hunt and enjoying it until her development of asthma put an end to that job. She then confronted her father with her continuing desire to become a nurse, and once again he vetoed her project.
I asked Joan if she had later come to understand his opposition to nursing; ‘I don’t know; I think what he really wanted was for me to stop at home and look after them – just so that he could see where I was.’ By appealing to her mother, who now offered to act as intermediary, Joan finally succeeded in negotiating a scaled-down version of her aspirations and went to train as a nanny rather than a nurse. Why her father should have regarded this as a less servile role remains a mystery to Joan, since it entailed washing and ironing for the newborn’s family rather than skilled work on the wards. Perhaps one can surmise that it approximated more closely to his stereotyped notion of an appropriate woman’s role. Although she was happy in her various placements, Joan had actively revised her aspirations downwards in the light of the domestic politics of the possible.

By the time she was nineteen Joan had met Tom, thirty-three years her elder, living in the same road, and in need of child-care because of his marital difficulties and his working in London. Initially, Tom had asked Joan’s mother to care for his son, until he returned in the evenings, but mum soon passed the task on to her well-qualified daughter. Gradually, Joan and Tom drew together, although she continued taking placements as a nanny for two more years, invariably enjoying her month’s work with each family. However, by the time she was twenty-one, Joan wished her relationship to become a married one, as Tom was now divorced.

When marriage was broached, Tom revealed reservations, which were based not upon their age difference per se but on a sensitive recognition of Joan’s ultimate concern – to which children were central, having realised her ‘second-best’ plan and become a nanny. It seems as though he may have had greater doubts about his own fertility than about becoming a somewhat elderly father. The following exchange is also significant because it again reveals Joan’s willing self-sacrifice, reconciling herself to the absence of her own children and to the care of other people’s. ‘Tom said he didn’t want to ruin my life. He said, “What happens if we can’t have a family, because kids are your life?” And I said, “I don’t care, I’d rather have ten or fifteen years with you.”’ He was not convinced and called off the wedding the day before it was to take place. This cast Joan back upon her domineering parents, who sought to make the break final. ‘My mum said she didn’t want him in the house again, and I could see my father sitting there grinning, thinking he’s got his way. But I thought to myself, you haven’t – no way.’ For three more years, Joan and Tom continued to see one another and at twenty-five she presented him with an ultimatum; she needed ‘security’, commitment and to move forward – not to be trapped between domination and flirtation. They were married the next day and Simon was born nine months later. The details of the
negotiations that took place between them and Joan’s parents over the next three years are crucial to how Joan eventually worked through the sequence < concerns → projects → practices >. This coincided with her communicative mode of reflexivity being fully realised because she had acquired a dialogical partner.

Firstly, Joan demonstrates her commitment to realising her concerns: although her precise project remains fuzzy, she knows that any satisfactory realisation of it is predicated upon her acquiring greater independence. Simultaneously, she (and Tom) positively embraced and endorsed their context and its continuity through their reactions to their first – and last – local home. Both elements are clear in her description of events immediately after her marriage. ‘The first thing my mum said was “You’ve made your bed, now you lie on it!”’ And I said I never intended to get married without I stuck with him. No matter what would have happened I would never have left him, never ever would I have left him or deserted him. I married him and I was determined to stay married. It’s the same with this house you know, I’d never leave here, even if I won a million pounds tomorrow, I wouldn’t leave here – I love this house. When we first came to see it, Tom hated it because he’d had his own home and he had to come into rented property which upset him. But then, when you start a new life at fifty-eight, fifty-nine, you don’t expect to have everything, do you? I mean his wife took him for everything she possibly could. As I stood looking at [the house] from the pavement, it was just as if it was saying “come in”, and I knew, as soon as I walked in through the door, that I’d never leave until I go out in my coffin. Ever such a weird feeling and I’ve always been happy here. Tom died here, he died in my arms. All he said was “I want to see our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary” and someone said something about hospital, and he said, “Oh no, I’ll never go to hospital. I’ll die in here and go out in my coffin.” And he did, that’s exactly how he went.’

Secondly, Joan and Tom are now left to construct their own modus vivendi, which is still nebulous in terms of its guiding project and the practices to be established, apart from the arrival of their three children. Then it became clear that Joan might have escaped paternal domination, but that henceforth she could expect no family assistance. In fact, Joan and Tom were being propelled into constituting their own ‘micro-world’ and its contours would be shaped between them. Tough as the beginning sounds, Joan had acquired more degrees of agential freedom than ever before to define her own projects. Although her mother had somewhat relented with the arrival of the grandchildren, she had also developed heart problems. ‘She looked after Simon and Jessica while I went into hospital to have John, because when I had him I was sterilised, so I was in hospital a bit longer. My father fetched me because Tom was at work, he
brought me home. Mum was just rinsing some stuff out to put on the line and my father walked in and looked and said, “Get your coat,” and she said, “No, I’m staying.” And he said, “No, you’re not; she wanted the kids, she can look after them – we’re going.” And I was just left on my own till Tom came in – and that was how it was.’

Thirdly, with the couple now being thrown in upon themselves, Tom assumed the role of Joan’s dialogical partner in her ‘thought and talk’ and, at least to begin with, her mentor. He tried to wean her off her desire to please and to propitiate others, with some success in relation to her parents, but Joan’s need to be needed was ineradicable. Some of this need Tom came to learn and to accept. ‘He used to say, “Stand up to other people” because I was very much, “Well, should I or shouldn’t I?”, and he used to say, “Don’t let people walk all over you for the rest of your life.” I used to get into situations where I’d say, “Yes, I’ll do this, you have that,” and then regret it afterwards. He used to say, “Count up to ten before you answer anything.” I started this with my mum and dad and then I found it was quite easy.’ This is nicely illustrated by the following vignette of how she mediated between her father and young son, child-rearing not being a province in which Tom ever tried to pay Svengali. ‘If my father was there and Simon wanted to show me something, he’d say, “Excuse me mummy,” and dad’d turn round and say, “Be quiet, kids should be seen and not heard.” And I used to say, “Don’t speak to him like that, he only wants to ask a question.” And dad’d say, “Oh go on, make a rod for your own back then,” and that sort of attitude. So I was determined that although they would be brought up fairly strict, there would be a lot of love in it; and if I was there and if they wanted to know something, I’d drop everything. You can go and do potatoes four times a day, but you can’t pick up what that little soul wanted to say to you – and that’s how I worked.’

In Tom, Joan had found a trustworthy interlocutor for her communicative reflexivity: ‘He was such a knowledgeable man and such a clever man, but he wasn’t bossy with it, he was gentle and kind.’ Although the age difference may have made him more influential at the start of their marriage, it did not prevent Joan from continuing to ruminate about transforming her concerns into concrete projects – in which Tom gradually became an active participant as well as a dialogical partner. This began to evolve, not as a grand plan with any long-term strategy, when their youngest child started school at four, which also coincided with Tom’s retirement. It entailed yet a further cut-back on Joan’s initial project. She had begun as a teenager, wanting to be a nurse, had settled as a young woman for working as a nanny, and now, for her remaining twenty years with Tom, she again reduced her socio-occupational status and became a childminder.
Given few restrictions, other than occasional inspections, Joan and Tom were soon taking in up to twelve children, besides their own, and she was deriving enormous fulfilment from this “extended family”. ‘I had such a wonderful career, I really did, it was fantastic, because I used to take them from six weeks to five years, and then when they were five they were supposed to go, but the mothers didn’t want them to go, so I started taking them to school and fetching them. So in the end they didn’t leave even until they went to the comprehensive school.’ Since I had my doubts about Joan being paid pro rata, I queried what satisfaction she derived, and received an unhesitating answer: ‘Oh, the love; the love they give you is fantastic.’ Still, I wondered quite how Tom felt about an additional twelve children crammed into their small house and lunch for fourteen being served every weekday. Joan assured me that this was a joint undertaking, thought and talked out between them. But, at first, she too had clearly wondered about his commitment: ‘he never got fed up. It used to astound me because I would have thought he would have been browned off. I used to say to him, “Do you want me to cut down?” and he’d say, “No, I don’t, they’re fine.”’ By now, Joan had settled for ‘third best’ as a childminder, but here she is again offering to cut down on what clearly gives her huge satisfaction.

It seems that Tom meant what he said, since his words were well matched by deeds. ‘Sometimes I’d go out shopping and perhaps wouldn’t take them with me, if it was a wet day, and he’d say, “Off you go, leave them with me, I’m fine.” And when I came back the house was like a pigsty, but at least they’d all be happy and laughing – he was absolutely fine. He used to take them to the toilet and I’d say, “Really, you’re fantastic the way you do this,” and he’d say, “Oh, it’s no sweat, it gives me something to do.”’ Living this life for twenty years, Joan and Tom confirmed and consolidated their social immobility.

Simultaneously, their modus vivendi entrenched them even more deeply in the local context, expanding their social network in the district and winning neighbourhood approval, as they actively constituted their own ‘contextual continuity’. Joan encapsulates it: ‘I used to take them all up to [the precinct] shopping, some walking and some in trolleys, and we’d go round and I made loads and loads of friends because I’d got so many children and they couldn’t believe how good these children were. I got to know the girls on the checkouts and I’d go in of a weekend and they’d say, “So-and-so came in with their parents – you’d never believe they were the same child because of the way they behaved!”’ So, she said, “You must do something right.”’ Joan still hears from parents whose children she once minded, is in touch with many of them herself, one of whom visits most weekends.
Joan insists upon her contentment during this period, although she was fully aware that her work was sub-optimal in its modesty, compared with being a nurse. Nevertheless, she did not regard her *modus vivendi* as one of self-sacrifice: ‘Well, you do make sacrifices, but it was only because I wanted to, I wouldn’t do anything I didn’t want to do. I’m just the sort of person that likes to care for other people. And the way I did that in my early years was to look after other people’s children and to try to give them what the parents – well, sometimes it was better than what the parents gave them. That was my philosophy, really; just to do what I can for people and help them out and look after them.’ I suggested that perhaps she had to relinquish other activities she could have done or would have liked to do, but Joan insisted, ‘I didn’t really want to, there wasn’t really anything.’ Yet, Joan is candid and self-aware about her need to be needed, which probably underlay the contentment she derived from childminding and offset her enduring regrets about not becoming a nurse.

Very openly and against herself she tells a revealing story about Tom’s stroke and hospitalisation, precipitated by Simon being in a coma at the age of ten because of undiagnosed diabetes, whilst she herself was just recovering from a hip replacement. Joan found Tom in a dishevelled state on the ward and negotiated his discharge from hospital. ‘I looked after him, got him up and washed him and dressed him and then as he got over his stroke, I used to make him do the potatoes and Hoover the floor to make his hands more supple. And then one day he’d got himself up and had got himself washed and dressed – and do you know, that really hurt, the fact he didn’t need me to help him any more, that really hurt.’ Although Tom did not die for nearly another decade, Joan’s very self-awareness raises two questions: how does a communicative reflexive cope when they do lose their dialogical partner and how does someone who acknowledges that she needs to be needed re-establish a different *modus vivendi* for herself?

The answers to the two are closely related. Fundamentally, Joan has preserved her practice of ‘thought and talk’ with Tom. ‘I still talk to Tom every night and I always ask him to look after me and not to fetch me until the [grand]children are grown up, until I’m not needed any more.’ She thinks of Tom as an abiding and accessible presence, a view shared by Jessica and John, by Emma, Simon’s daughter, who both sees and chatters to him as he smokes his pipe at the top of the stairs, and by Sandra, one of their charges, who comes in and talks about her day at school with him. Thus, Tom is not an absence but a presence, projected into the next generation, and it is that generation of grandchildren which founds Joan’s current *modus vivendi*.

Simon’s wife has suffered from depression since the birth of her children and it is their care, beginning when Ben was two days old, which has
progressively become Joan’s main concern. Relations with Claire have always been fraught and Joan reports a serious dispute with her over Ben’s nursery schooling as well as, she believes, Claire’s unwarranted attempts to have Simon charged with domestic violence. Joan’s main aim has been to ‘keep the family together’; the grandchildren now live with her, Simon visits daily, but Joan praises him for and supports him in continuing to live with his wife, whilst trying to ensure that Claire remains part of the family circle. She recounts the following story after the three adults had been to watch Emma in her school nativity play: ‘when we came to go home, she [Claire] hadn’t seen the children since March, and of course they’re very, I suppose, cold towards her, you can’t expect anybody to sort of jump in. And she said goodbye to the children and stood back, and I went across to her and I said, “I shall see you soon Claire,” and put my arms round her and just held her tight and she burst into tears. The next morning, Simon came in and said that Claire cried all the way home. I said, “Why?” And he said, “Mum, it’s the first time anyone’s cuddled her, it’s the first time anybody’s held her really tight.” I grieved for her because I loved her, well I still do love her really.’ There is, of course, a serious question mark over what Claire’s interpretation might be, especially when she was told that, as far as the children are concerned, she and Simon ‘don’t have to worry about anything – about the hairdresser’s, the dentist, the doctor’s. Everything’s done, the washing, the ironing, cleaning the shoes, packing the lunches up.’ Is Claire being unduly marginalised by Joan’s need to be needed, or is disabled Joan working at full stretch to provide a stable home life for her grandchildren, or is there something of both?

Whatever the case may be, this ‘third-generational’ family performs the same role of embedding Joan firmly in her neighbourhood context and protracting its continuity, rather than allowing loneliness or withdrawal to become the results of bereavement and disablement: ‘usually I’ve got visitors in and out all day, most days, not every day but most days there is. I’ve got real good friends and a lot of acquaintances. When we go up to [the precinct] the first thing Emma says is “Oh gran, can’t you walk through anywhere without someone knowing you?” But it’s lovely, it’s absolutely lovely they get to know you.’ The frequency of visitors was immediately confirmed by the interruption of Vickie, a young mother of twins from across the road, who benefits from Joan’s baby-sitting; and the two of them proceeded to arrange their next visit.

Such is the density of this ‘micro-world’, which began to be constructed with Tom, more than quarter of a century ago, that Joan feels no need for organised activities: ‘I don’t need to go to clubs and that. I go and see my sister, perhaps once a fortnight. But no, I’m not one for that – we take the kids to the park or go swimming, but not to be with groups of
other people, that doesn’t interest me. I don’t want to go. We go and have a drink with my daughter, sometimes on a Sunday, the kids go with us and they play in the garden, and if she’s not working we go for dinner. But I don’t want anything like that, I’ve never needed anything like that.’ As far as church attendance is concerned, Joan claims not to be religious: ‘None of our immediate family were religious, but they still taught us a prayer to say before we went to bed. And my father used to say, you don’t need to go to church to be religious. If you’re good all your life and you can do somebody a good turn, then that to me is religion.’ Politics is given much shorter shrift: ‘I do vote but I don’t take an interest in it.’ Joan’s views on society immediately reduce to the effects of educational pressures upon individual children, and her overall message to Simon about the grandchildren is: ‘as long as they’re happy and they’re content, that’s all that matters – they’ll get by in the end, I did.’

How Joan ‘got by’ was through settling for ‘third best’, by embracing social immobility and immersing herself in the family and the contextual continuity that she actively developed and maintained after her marriage. Without doubting her life-long contentment, one can nevertheless ask whether or not her modus vivendi for ‘getting by’ was free from regrets, particularly about the frustration of the first project she entertained. The answer is ‘no’, meaning that the agent who has been an active collaborator in their social immobility, as well as the subject of structurally constrained opportunities and culturally enforced gender norms, is also a person with the self-awareness that she has worked hard to obtain her half-loaf – precisely because the full one was withheld from her.

‘No, I’ve never stopped regretting [nursing] even now. I have to go to hospital for blood tests quite regularly and even now the adrenalin gets cracking. I know it’s a terrible thing to say, but I’m ever so happy when I’m in there. I’ve been in to have both hips replaced and when I was there I was so happy. They used to say, for God’s sake stop interfering, you’re always trying to do something you shouldn’t. It’s just something I like to do – I like to be there and on the scene – and I really regret it so much. Oh, it’s awful and of course when I was – I finished childminding when I was sixty and there was a thing on the TV about wanting nurses. And I rang up and the chap said, ‘“Oh yes, we’ll send you a pack, and by the way how old are you?” And I said sixty and he burst out laughing and said you’re too old. I thought, at least if I could have done a bit . . .’

**Autonomous reflexivity and upward social mobility**

Autonomous reflexives are subjects whose internal conversations about themselves in relation to their circumstances are self-contained mental
activities. The courses of action that they determine upon are the products of such lone inner dialogue. When this is the dominant mode of reflexivity, subjects rarely feel a need to share their internal conversations because they are not seeking completion of their ideas, confirmation that they have considered all angles or enhancement of their self-confidence to act upon their ratiocinations. Of course, this does not mean that they never engage in communicative reflexivity because there are many more reasons for doing so than those three – such as consideration for other people affected by their decision-making, lack of requisite technical expertise in a given area, the need to justify their proposed actions in situations of accountability, or simply being dragged into conversations where some degree of reciprocal exchange is expected or hard to avoid. Whilst the autonomous subject may respond readily, articulately and take interest in the reactions of others, none of these interchanges is driven by need.

Equally, every functioning human being exercises some degree of autonomous reflexivity or they would not have been able to get through the past twenty-four hours. Even were one to subscribe to the pragmatist conviction that large tracts of life are governed by routine action and that deliberation is mainly prompted by encountering problems, each day supplies its quota of these and a decision, however trivial, has to be made. The contingencies that can and do arise also necessarily out-strip the repertoire of coping routines that have been developed. Otherwise, no car would speed so fast as to defeat the pedestrian’s safety procedures for crossing the road, thus precipitating an autonomous decision about retreating or advancing; no item would be misplaced, enforcing a decision to make a search or do without it; and no one would make a request, observation or enquiry that called for an unscripted response. Indeed, when people refer to having been ‘put on the spot’, this is a colloquial way of saying that they have had to exercise autonomous reflexivity – quickly and often with discomfort or embarrassment. Nevertheless, everyone can ‘think on their feet’, even if they would prefer not to do so. This is unsurprising because, as was seen in chapter 2, none of the Coventry subjects obtained a zero ‘A’ score on ICONI.\(^4\)

What is distinctive about those who practise autonomous reflexivity, as their dominant mode of internal conversation, is that they initiate their own inner dialogues, conduct lone deliberations and come to conclusions for which they are solely responsible. Subjects express this sometimes as a straightforward lack of need for input from others (except when they are

\(^4\) The lowest score was 1.33 (out of 7) and the only subjects scoring less than 2 were fractured reflexives.
out of their depth technically), sometimes as a desire to maintain their privacy and sometimes both. The following self-observation, offered by Rachel (a 25-year-old hairdressing salon manager), covers all of the above: ‘I don’t particularly need other people’s opinions; I’m happy with my own opinions in things . . . I don’t discuss my private life with anybody really . . . I don’t tend to share a lot really, I just make my own decisions.’

Instead, Nick (twenty-nine and a self-employed builder) places prime emphasis on privacy and a desire to keep his thoughts to himself: ‘I do tend to bottle things up quite a bit and don’t give a lot away to people. Secrecy is the wrong word, but I don’t like people knowing my business . . . I don’t enjoy talking about problems or anything like that. I’d much rather think about problems myself and try to deal with them myself than have a second or third party involved.’ Additionally, he stresses the importance of lack of distraction when dwelling upon something in order to clarify it: ‘The mulling over thing, I’d do something like that when I’m on my own rather than when I’m out with people. It’s not heavy thinking but pretty strenuous thinking. If you’re out with friends, having a drink or something, there’s too much going on to sort of think about it.’ Thus, the presence of other people is a hindrance rather than a help, and far from seeking out interlocutors, Nick prefers to be alone: ‘mulling over, that sort of thing, would be if I was on my own, like driving or doing something a bit tedious – maybe having a bit of a think instead of having the radio on’.

Logically, if a subject feels no need for an interlocutor then it follows that there are far fewer restrictions upon when the autonomous internal conversation can take place. Thus, most of the interviewees describe themselves as engaging in it ‘all the time’. One of these is Martin (a 30-year-old dispensing optician), but he also tries to pinpoint regularities in his pattern: ‘I do it a lot, all the time I think. I reflect on things through my mind quite a lot; I tend to ponder things quite a lot. I suppose most often it’s at night when you try to get your head to sleep. With me, I have a big problem sleeping and that would tend to be the time when I’m doing exactly that and mulling through quite a lot of things [that happened] during the day or things for the future in my head – mainly then, but pretty much all the time I’d be kind of – it’s just a thought process all the time in your head.’ Another is Damian (a 33-year-old manager of two shops), who agrees with ‘all the time’ and adds ‘about everything’, including what he is going to have for dinner. This is because, in the exercise of autonomous reflexivity, there is no interlocutor who can place restrictions upon the agenda for internal dialogue. However, Damian sees his most intense deliberations as being work-related: ‘If I’ve got a lot of things going on in my mind, particularly at work, I kind of mull it over in my mind, what do I need to do first, prioritise it. That’s when I do it
most, when I’ve got lots of things and both shops are on my mind the whole time. I’m thinking is the [first] shop OK, they’re going to have a delivery [at the second shop], I need to be over there, so I’m kind of thinking all the time what I’m doing, I’m quite conscious that I’m thinking about it.’

Such self-monitoring is a common theme amongst these interviewees, but Ralph (a 56-year-old car salesman) is currently unemployed and, because he has no work preoccupations, his internal conversation is much more wide-ranging than Damian’s focused concerns. Thus he engages in inner dialogue, ‘[c]onstantly really. I’m a prolific observer; I watch everything that goes on . . . Even when I don’t have a particular subject to consider, something specific that’s sitting there waiting to be done, the grey matter’s still there considering options.’ To Tony (a 36-year-old freelance researcher), the frequency of inner dialogue is something he attributes to his personality. Internal conversations are times when ‘You tend to come to terms with where you are, what you’re doing, who you are, where you will be . . . I sometimes think I may be overindulging in these conversations. I’m less likely to be in a group of people, having a conversation in a group; I’m much more of a loner kind of character so these conversations tend to take place more frequently than if I was more social. I think my life is lived less with others and more with myself.’ Precisely because they are reflexive beings, subjects will have a concept of what they are doing and a notion about why, under their own descriptions. However, the present concern is to describe this mode of reflexivity rather than to explore self-understandings about it.

To return to its distinctive features, autonomous reflexivity is associated with the ability to arrive at quick decisions, uncomplicated by second thoughts. This is not a necessary connection and it is open to the psychological claim that ‘decisive people’ would be prone to adopt this mode of reflexivity. However, that would not be the case unless this modality accommodated rapid decision-making, to the satisfaction of its practitioners – thus encouraging them to persist in it. One of the main reasons why it does so is because there is no need to await the availability of interlocutors before subjects review their options and reach conclusions about them. Moreover, precisely because subjects ‘do it all the time’ their deliberations can be more complex, long drawn-out and far-reaching, covering any number of considerations and reviewing the likelihood of different outcomes. In other words, the process is not truncated or diverted by subjects precipitously sharing their initial ‘gut reactions’. Furthermore, by not sharing their preliminary responses with others, these subjects (unintentionally) protect themselves against the conventionality of ‘similars and familiars’, which reinforces normal custom and
practice and tends to discountenance innovative conclusions. Lone internal conversation facilitates a thorough examination of any issue and, even though information will necessarily be incomplete, it can be supplemented by reference materials rather than being confined to the experience of a few interlocutors.

The decisions reached will tend to be sub-optimal if compared with a situation of perfect information, but deliberations can be concluded within the necessary time-frame and according to a procedure that subjects deem appropriate. Clive’s account of his autonomous internal conversations (that of a 34-year-old business manager) is significant because, effectively, it incorporates a comparison with communicative reflexivity, which he volunteered without prompting at the start of the interview. Self-talk is something in which he engages ‘all the time. Often it’s just a progression of – well, I use a lot of logic, I’m mathematically based in my mind – everything tends to be working through a structure . . . to come out with the answer that I think is the most reasonable.’ He adds that he does not need this to be supplemented by anyone else, but also admits that ‘I don’t mind if somebody comes back and says, “I don’t think that’s necessarily the right way,” because it almost adds to the equation.’ Communication and discussion are subsequent to deliberating and deciding; if relevant, they represent additional considerations needing cross-checking rather than sources of confirmation or completion.

Indeed, Clive finds these external conversations more tasking than his internal ones: ‘explaining to people how I came to the decision is much more difficult than the way I come to the decision. Quite often it’s finding people [with] the same intuitive way of comprehending. To me everything ends up being very black and white, even the greys tend to resolve one way or the other . . . If I feel I’ve got to explain it to somebody, it’s very much as a list of positives and negatives.’ In the exercise of autonomous reflexivity, the conclusions reached are the subjects’ own; Clive’s final comment is that he is fully prepared to take responsibility for them: ‘It sounds very grand or like I’ve put the world on my shoulders, but at the end of the day it’s my decision and it all comes back on me how I make the decision. And I don’t want to say, well, somebody else gave me advice because that would suggest it’s their fault. At the end of the day it’s my fault. And that’s the easiest way to do it. You can always take information on board but . . . it’s always my decision.’

To the autonomous reflexive, inner dialogue is about matching ‘options’ with ‘information’ and is light years away from canvassing opinions or enhancing one’s self-confidence. Here is Liz (a 55-year-old primary school head) trying to determine the reasons for her self-talk: ‘having a conversation with yourself, it’s the conditional isn’t it? It’s
mulling really because there are options open and then you pull out the
one that eventually you decide is the best.' Donna (a 22-year-old bank
service adviser) emphasises exactly the same theme but is as emphatic as
Clive that this is an autonomous and not a consultative exercise: 'I'd tend
to make the decision by myself. I would keep it to myself for a while until
I'd considered all areas and then not necessarily make a decision but sort
distil the information. It would possibly be the case that I'd have ten
options and I'd try to narrow it down to two options and then it would be
the case that I'm sixty/fourty to fifty/fifty . . . I don’t think I’d let anybody
sway me in any way with a personal decision.’

Those subjects who have already been introduced are from a group of
twelve interviewees, identified on ICONI as seemingly clear practitioners
of the autonomous mode; respondents whose ‘A’ score was 5 or over (out
of the maximum of 7), who appeared to be non-fractured (an ‘F’ score less
than the mean of 4) and whose dominant mode of reflexivity was clearly
differentiated from other modes and qualitatively confirmed as such. It was
unfortunate that the twelve who constituted the final group of interviewees
comprised eight males and four females because no association was found
within the sample as a whole between gender and those for whom the
autonomous mode was predominant. This imbalance arose solely from the
availability of those approached and their willingness to be interviewed.

Before beginning data analysis it is important to gain a feel for
autonomous reflexivity. The following narrative attempts to enter into
how a young subject has tried reflexively to steer his life in society to date.
Again, the main themes will be covered but not laboured: the causes
bringing about ‘contextual discontinuity’; the development of lone delib-
erations; the investment of self in the practical order; the importance of
lighting up occupationally; the attempt to cope strategically with con-
straints and enablements encountered in the world of work; and the
resulting trajectory of upward social mobility.

**Martin’s story**

*Martin is thirty years old, divorced with two children aged nine and twelve. He
was adopted when he was eleven and brought up in the northern Shires. His
adoptive father is a joiner and his adoptive mother an office manager. He now
lives in Coventry where he works as a managing dispensing optician. His
ICONI ‘A’ score is 6.00, one of the lowest for interviewees in this sub-group, and
he recorded a low 1.50 for ‘fracturedness’.*

Except for being well maintained and the grounds landscaped, these
alienating blocks of flats with their impenetrable numbering system could
have been found anywhere in Eastern Europe instead of on the outskirts of Coventry. A black jogger materialised under the street lamp and offered his services as guide to the right staircase of the right block, with suitable asides about Kafka. Succinctly he conveyed that this complex was a ‘very safe’ way-station for young middle-class professionals. The inside of Martin’s neat flat was remarkable for the number of detailed black and white drawings, some unfinished, but all executed with confident draughtsmanship and for photographs of two young schoolgirls at various ages since babyhood. So much of Martin’s biography was on view.

Martin himself, with his quiet articulacy, was equally direct in his self-characterisation: ‘I think I’m quite a realistic person; I don’t sort of ignore the facts and think, well, that’s just going to go away and this is going to happen – that isn’t going to be the case. I don’t tend to fluff around things. I try to look at what’s there, what’s real and if I can do something about it – and if some of it’s left to chance, then that’s just how it’s going to have to be.’ This seems a very fair summary of his life too, marked by circumstances and contingencies beyond his control, which he confronts before trying to steer a path around and beyond them. In this context, he presents himself as decisive: ‘it tends to be, that’s out of the way and finished, next problem please!’ Yet, his story did not begin easily nor does it run smoothly and, as we settle into the sofas for what becomes a long evening, some of the pain of this journey starts soaking through the circumspection bandaging his narrative.

During the first ten years of his life, Martin and his younger brother were moved seven times from one form of care to another. What he accentuates from his memories of this period is his complete dependency upon others: ‘I was having to sort of take someone else’s word quite a lot that this is the right thing, this is the wrong thing, and I had to be quite accepting of that.’ Moved around at other people’s say-so spelt his complete dependence upon the social order, yet without him enjoying close or lasting inter-personal relationships. Thrown back upon his own resources, Martin resorted early on to the more dependable practical order, which has remained his redoubt ever since: ‘I draw and I paint and I play the piano. That’s something I’ve always done from a very young age, no matter what, I’ve always liked my drawing. So my main interest was my art, my music has sort of come on since I got older, but when I was younger I would always paint and draw. It’s focusing your mind on something and keeping it off things you may not want to think about at the time. So it kept me very focused and I got a lot of enjoyment out of it.’

‘I was adopted – I went to them when I was eleven, so the time up to then I was in care homes and [with] foster parents and that tended to be quite a journey.’ Although stability followed his adoption, affection and
involvement did not develop within his new family: ‘I think they got a shock when they adopted us to be quite honest . . . a lot of people when they’re adopting, they tend to get this rosy family ideal – which you don’t get at all. Certainly at our age, ten- and eleven-year-old boys who have been passed from pillar to post and had to trust lots of people, the relationship side of it never came really. Certainly, you tend to find the mother–son relationship that never happened! Not that we’ve not been close to them, we get on very well with the parents and I’ve always been able to talk to them to a degree, but there’s something that isn’t there. I can’t even say what it is, but it just isn’t. I’ve seen as I’ve grown up, my friends, my male friends, with their parents, especially their mothers, and I’ve thought no, it’s not the same for me and I don’t know why it is. It just didn’t happen.’

Mainly, what seems not to have happened was the growth of closeness and concern. There is no hint that these adoptive parents ever proffered themselves as interlocutors, whether or not by then Martin would or could have availed himself of a dialogical partner. As he moved into his teens he seems to have been increasingly aware of their affable disinterest and of the negative consequences of their non-involvement: ‘They were always like, yes, you can do that, that’s good, but that’s kind of where it stopped . . . I think if I’d been leaned on a bit and had a bit more encouragement on certain things, I might actually have been better at certain things. My parents didn’t really go one way or the other. If I said I wanted to do something, I didn’t really get “OK, let’s give it a try.” I tended to be put off for whatever reason.’ In consequence, Martin continued with his lone pursuits, taking up cross-country running and continuing to immerse himself in painting and drawing. However, it is clear that his satisfaction came from the practice of art, from the lone honing of his skills, but that he lacked the backing and motivation to harness these to the school curriculum – to doing art in the social order – despite gaining school prizes. ‘I even disappointed myself at school because I really did flunk my exams big time, even the art one I didn’t do very well in, purely because I didn’t apply myself to the course side of it. I think I got a C in Art and the teacher went mental . . . he said, “There’s no way you should be walking out of here with anything but an A*” – he was mad. It was purely because I didn’t apply myself. I did the pictures, but they wanted a bit of the explanation behind the pictures and the work behind that – I just didn’t do it. I put together a very nice portfolio, which scraped me a C, and the rest of it was history, unfortunately.’ Most of his subsequent history is strongly marked by the theme of ‘contextual discontinuity’, one which, in Martin’s case, is quantitatively measurable but also qualitatively moving in kind.

At home, Martin was not encouraged to make the connections between
his artistic concerns, the school curriculum and his future career, an essential part of beginning to fit together parts of the sequence <concerns → projects → practices>. Instead, he was driven to treat his art reclusively and to rely upon the standards intrinsic to its practice. This was because social approval was entirely lacking in the family and Martin tries to analyse why this was so: ‘This sounds a bit daft, but I actually found that my dad, because of his character, was a bit jealous . . . if I did a particularly good drawing, he was like “Oh yes, that’s all right,” but he wouldn’t be over the top. Whereas, if my children bring something to me, I’m like “Oh that’s really good” and try to build them up and make them feel like they’ve done something really amazing, which is what you want when you’re a kid. It’s certainly what I wanted and I didn’t always get that reaction.’ Martin’s initial comment upon this sad lack of support for his artistic prowess was to say tersely: ‘But it hasn’t stopped me doing it.’ Towards the end of the interview, he was more willing to ruminate on the painfulness of these relational absences: ‘I try not to get too down. Certain things in my past I have not been happy with at all and it’s really bothered me. But I’ve had counselling for that kind of issue and I’ve been through various points in my life and personal things that happened – I think it’s just acceptance of what’s done is done, and it’s getting on and trying to make sure that sort of thing doesn’t happen again to someone else, that being my kids at the moment.’

As a sixteen-year-old school leaver, Martin himself determined to ‘get on’ by turning his artistic concern into a career. The following statement already provides evidence of strategic thinking, of how to balance his intrinsic interest with his extrinsic interest in earning a living, of how to translate skills rooted in the practical order into a job within the social order. ‘When I was younger, I was going to do some sort of fine art or computer-aided design. I like doing fine art but career-wise I thought the money, the financial side of it, would be in the design process and the computer side of it I knew was starting to form at that time – and I thought that’s probably a really good area to get into for the future because everything’s going into computers. So I went to do computer-aided design, started to do a diploma at college in basic art and design rather than fine art – and it just bored me to tears to be honest.’ Such false starts are quite common amongst young autonomous reflexives; they attempt to act strategically but necessarily lack the self-knowledge and societal knowledge to do so effectively and to begin forging a modus vivendi with which they could live.

Usually, this is the point at which they return to the internal conversation and regroup their resources around a redefined project. Martin was deprived of a breathing space in which to replan his future by the
intervention of what he quite rightly sees as contingency: ‘it’s kind of been quite haphazard for me. I certainly didn’t plan to get married, I didn’t plan to have children, the whole process just happened, it unravelled . . . My girlfriend, who then turned out to be my wife, fell pregnant with our first one when I was seventeen – a bit young. So, basically, I had to pull myself out of college anyway and get a job, simple as that.’ Martin immediately enrolled on a Youth Training Scheme and gained employment as a salesman in a large chain of electronics shops. As he puts it unassumingly, after a couple of years ‘I worked my way up a little bit there until I was assistant manager.’ The tendency to become upwardly mobile was already manifesting itself when Martin was still less than twenty and following an unplanned occupational track.

However, contingency again intervened to derail him, this time in the form of twelve to fifteen employees in the retail chain being sacked for ‘gross misconduct’, which in Martin’s case amounted to giving away a small promotional item to a customer making an expensive purchase. That, as he puts it, ‘left me stuck because of the little one – and my wife was basically working part time. She upped her hours and went full time and left me back at home with the nipper, which was great. It was circumstantial; I had taken one route and ended up taking another.’ Yet, above all, this period as a housefather was a time of stock-taking for Martin. He consolidated his relationship, married his girlfriend and they had a second child before he was twenty-one. He returned to his solitary consolation – the art, which had seen him through previous bad times – and he was sufficiently good to be invited to exhibit as a local artist. ‘As much as being at home was OK, I did a lot of drawing and painting then because that was the only thing that I could do that would keep my mind occupied, because I’m quite active.’

But he was also thinking about and working towards a goal that seems almost irresistible to autonomous reflexives – self-employment. ‘I was looking after the kids, taking them to school, but I was doing a business and finance course at night because I thought – I was fairly miffed that I could be dismissed out of a big company so easily, so, I thought I want to find something I can do and set up my own business, and then I went on to this business and finance degree.’ Although Martin did not finish this particular course he was already displaying the start of the pattern, typical amongst autonomous reflexives, of progressively adding to his qualifications. His aim at the time was to open his own computer shop ‘or something along that line’. Since he was clearly not fully committed to the product, I queried his motivation for the venture in the hope of understanding the appeal of sole-trader status amongst this sub-group. Martin replies, ‘It’s a control thing. I think what happened to me wasn’t fair and I
didn’t have any control over that. Obviously, I shouldn’t have done what I did at the time, but it seemed quite a menial thing. I didn’t see it as a big issue and certainly not a reason to sack people. So, it would be in my control, what I say goes and if things go wrong for me then it will have been through my own fault. If I get it wrong then it’s my problem and my fault, but at least I’d have given it a shot. I was quite willing to give that a go because I thought, yes, I’ve got the ambition to do that.’

Simultaneously, Martin is presented with an alternative option, an opening to become an optical technician, proposed by a friend’s wife who works in optics. He now has to weigh ‘being in control’, at the price of considerable risk-taking, against the opportunities of a new career and the benefits of it dovetailing well with his concern for his family and ethic of responsibility towards its members. Strategic thinking comes immediately into play and the two considerations that prompt his final decision are the circumvention of constraints and the availability of enablements. In his own terms, he thinks of this more as being on a ‘snakes and ladders’ board: on his next throw he could take a crashing fall or be back on the way up. But this is not a game of chance, and Martin reveals how he weighed the two prospects against one another and decided to circumvent the snake-pit. What is not yet revealed in his following explanation is the full role that enablements played in reaching his final decision.

‘It was either starting your own business, which really was the harder decision, or take the easy option, which I think I did . . . [having] weighed up the pros and cons. I thought if I was on my own and it was only me that was going to be affected by my decisions at the time, then I would have gone and have a computer shop by now, but the risk of falling flat on my face again, having to go back to not working, I thought no, I’ll just take something that’s there – that I know is stable and balanced and looks like it’s still going to open up a good lot of opportunities, which I suppose it has. It seemed to be a good career move and that was the decision. That was probably one of the biggest decisions I’ve made actually. I don’t ever regret doing it . . . this is not the self-employed age at all, it’s not a good situation to be in . . . there’s too much left to chance and being in the right place at the right time. Everyone’s scrapping for what’s left over from people that have already had businesses established and are able to do silly prices like the Internet.’

Equally important was the fact that entering optics presented Martin with a new opportunity for harnessing his practical skills to work in the social order, which computer retailing would have failed to supply. His friend’s wife was perspicacious enough to put the proposal to Martin as an enablement that would advance his concern in the practical order and he interpreted it in precisely that way. ‘She said, “Why don’t you go for it...
you’ve got the design and you’re good with your hands; it’s quite a manual job, but you’ve got to have quite an eye for detail.” So the art thing came in quite handy because that’s exactly what I had. I tried it for a little while and I was actually quite good at it as well – and carried on from there. My wife went back down to part time and I got myself back on the ladder with the optics career.’

Not only did Martin view entering optics in terms of upward social mobility, he immediately enrolled for the qualifications necessary to secure it. In the process of taking a vocational diploma in optics, he discovered that subjects he had switched off from at school were perfectly manageable now that they were coupled with a skill he sought to develop. ‘When I went on the optics course, they said maths was important, you should have A-level maths, and I haven’t even got GCSE! So, I took a basic maths course alongside the technical course that I did, and did quite well at it. I started to find that I did quite enjoy proving to myself that I could do things that previously I’d not had an interest in doing.’

Martin agrees that he is very self-motivated, ‘if I want to do something’, but also sees the strength and weakness of so being. ‘If I don’t want to do it then I won’t. But if I want to do something then I will get off my backside and do it – which is good and bad because there are times when I should apply myself to certain things. If it’s something that I want or I can see a benefit for me or someone else that I want the benefit for, then I’ll certainly not stop until I’ve got it.’ And once he has got it, he insists he will go with it ‘as far as I can take it’.

At first, the challenge of novelty, of putting his existing practical skills to a new use in an unfamiliar setting, of exploring their flexibility and adding to their range was sufficient to sustain Martin. But boredom is the bogeyman of the autonomous reflexive and it set in as soon as he had gained mastery. ‘When you first start the job, everything’s new, so learning all the new procedures and the routines and how things work, that’s challenging. But then, once you know all that, there’s nothing else coming in that’s any different from what you already know . . . over time I started to get bored, I think everyone does after a while. I don’t like routine very much, so that probably is what it is. It’s just the same kind of situation day in, day out, whereas with certain jobs you can say you’ve experienced something different every week. I started off as a technician just making specs up, that’s basically the path you take, you start off as a technician and then go on to maybe an optical assistant, and then you go on to a dispensing optician and you go up and up and up.’

Martin was then in his mid-twenties, a qualified optical technician who was not content to remain as such and was bored with his present employment. His marriage was also breaking up, despite his great love of
his children, and he had begun a new relationship. Just as his girlfriend was applying for higher degrees in the area, Martin was offered a much better post with greater prospects through a friend who already worked in Coventry. As he puts it, ‘the whole thing just clicked . . . I made quite a bold move from [further north] and coming down here, which again was sort of promotion work wise, it was a step up.’ It was bold because it constituted making another substantial increment in his ‘contextual discontinuity’, a significant geographical distancing from the two people he cares about most and an acceptance that paying child support would preclude his acquiring a mortgage.

The new relationship did not work out but the new job did; the two were not unrelated. After only a few months in post, the most important thing for an autonomous reflexive happened to Martin: he began to light up. ‘I started this new job, got a little bit hooked by it, and then I could sort of see that I need to do this, go on this course, go on that course and build up’ – to becoming a dispensing optician. Rather dryly, for someone who is not at all cavalier about his relationships, he remarks that neither he nor his girlfriend had a lot of time to give one another and that the demands of work won out. Predictably, these latter were treated in supererogatory fashion. Martin has now completed three years of training towards qualifying as a dispensing optician and has only three exams to go, which ‘I can plod through at my own pace and try to do a good job of them . . . just to say, that’s it, I’ve finished, it would be nice . . . That is my next challenge.’

Adding further qualifications and ‘making a good job of it’ in general are characteristics and attitudes prevalent amongst autonomous reflexives, but it is clear that Martin’s superiors were also impressed since he was promoted to managing dispensing optician before finishing his course. Reflecting upon this he says, ‘I’m lucky to be where I am now really without the qualification because you don’t really become manager of a practice until you’ve done a dispensing course and completed it. But I’ve got the position anyway, so I’m lucky – I kind of jumped the gun a bit, jumped the ladder.’ His trajectory of upward social mobility is indubitable, but at the age of thirty, how does Martin look back upon it and forward from it? Retrospectively, he admits, ‘with me it wasn’t my first line of work and it wasn’t ideally what I wanted to do. I’ve just sort of grown into it and still had the enthusiasm to get as high as I can – I’m still not there yet.’

This is an ambivalent statement; does it mean that Martin has made his pact with the social order, will continue to move still higher and establish his modus vivendi within it – or does he continue to hanker after his initial ideal of investing himself in the practical order? When this question is put
to him directly, his response reveals self-knowledge, frankly faced: ‘I still would like to do fine art or be able to make a partial living off doing fine art, but again applying myself. I tend to have stints of being able to concentrate on something for hours and hours and hours to get it finished – or I have an hour’s stint and then bin it, get bored, and then come back in two weeks’ time and do a bit more. If I’m honest with myself, I’m glad I’m in the position I’m in because if I’d gone down the fine art side of it, I probably wouldn’t have been able to do stuff on demand, that isn’t how it works for me . . . I just do it in stints.’ There is also a hint that perhaps Martin thinks he has reached his ceiling with art when he says that he now spends more time playing the piano: ‘the art is something I can just do now and get a result, and still get satisfaction with the end result, but with music, because I’m still learning, I find I get more satisfaction.’ Conversely, Martin has achieved a relatively smooth dovetailing of his concerns and this is the linchpin of a sustainable modus vivendi. Yet, dovetailing can slip and sustainability requires someone who wants to sustain it. On the plus side, his job requirements and the children’s visits fit together harmoniously: ‘the work side has been pretty flexible, so I’ve not had to choose between going to work or having the kids – it’s tended to fit quite well’. Equally, he maintains that in terms of the relationships which matter to him, ‘at the moment . . . I’m quite happy. I’ve got a girlfriend and we get on really well and I can confide in her. We don’t see each other too much but we don’t see each other not enough, it’s just a nice balance. And the relationship with the children is better than it ever was I think. The time we do have together, we have a really good time and I know that they like to come and see me and like me going to see them. That’s important.’ On the minus side seems to stand the unlikelihood of further upward social mobility itself. This emerges as I seek to discover what he would want to be doing occupationally a few years hence: ‘the work side of it – that’s the area I wouldn’t know what’s going to happen in ten years’ time because I probably will get bored with this job and move on . . . I wouldn’t mind if there was a further position I could go to in this company. If I could get higher, then I would, but really the two people above me are the two directors, so either I take over the company from them or stop where I am.’ Yet, until he has his full qualifications, the chances of moving to a bigger company as, say, area manager, are remote. Moreover, in the three years it will take for him to become qualified his daughters will become teenagers and their relationship will be reshaped. As a typical autonomous reflexive, Martin is also typically an individualist: drawing little upon organised activities (preferring his solitary pursuits), having minimal involvement with social institutions (regarding their overall
impact as damaging) and having few significant others (anchoring him to this context). Being highly self-motivated, he is not moored in place by entanglements at the micro-, meso- or macro- levels and is thus unrestrained from making further contributions to his already high level of ‘contextual discontinuity’. Martin supplies his own motto for his life politics: ‘if I’m doing something and I believe in it, for me that’s good enough and I shouldn’t have to try and get it justified by anyone. If that’s my opinion, then go with it – if it turns out to be wrong, then learn from it.’ He is still only thirty; his current dovetailing may slip even if he works hard to make it stick, or the signposts reading ‘boredom’ and ‘challenge’ may lead him to slip anchor and attempt to establish a new modus vivendi in a new social context that he feels could provide better scope for his ultimate concerns.

Pulling away from the kerb, I start wondering what Martin will do with the remnants of his evening. Nothing seems more evanescent than the image of this young man hunched solitary over his piano at the top of a convenience block of flats on the darkened outskirts of Coventry.

**Meta-reflexives and social volatility**

Meta-reflexivity, namely reflecting upon our own reflections, tends to sound an abstruse activity. Alternatively, it strikes some as indulgently narcissistic in its self-preoccupation. Its ruminative nature attracts opprobrium from certain social psychologists because it is viewed as an impediment to the swiftness of routine action. Despite the negative attitudes, excited more by this mode of reflexivity than by the other two, every subject in the present study was found to practise it to some extent: none of the 128 respondents gained a zero ‘meta’ score on ICONI. That is unsurprising because every act of self-monitoring is meta-reflexive in kind and every day is full of such acts.

Meta-reflexivity takes the standard form of questioning and answering ourselves within internal conversations. One of the most common instances to provoke meta-reflexivity is self-puzzlement: ‘Why didn’t I come out with what I’d planned?’ ‘Why can’t I ever get my say in?’ or ‘Why am I always putting my foot in it?’ Its ‘partners’ are self-diagnosis followed by corrective injunctions, which constitute the answers: ‘Just don’t let her rile you this time’; ‘Calm down, deep breaths, panic makes exams

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6 The two lowest ‘M’ scores recorded were 1.33 and 1.67, both by respondents whose scores for autonomous reflexivity were highly dominant and whose ‘F’ scores were low.
worse’; ‘Watch your speed – you can’t afford another endorsement.’ These inner responses can also serve to illustrate how someone obeys popular external exhortations, such as ‘Pull yourself together’ or ‘Get your act sorted out.’ But these commands do not have to be external in origin; ordinary people internally administer their own ‘kicks up the backside’.

Those for whom meta-reflexivity is their dominant mode are considerably more expansive in their self-talk and the lives of their minds embrace all of the ten mental activities examined. As a group, they appear conversant with their own reflexivity. Two subjects avow that (contra Piaget) they continue their childhood practice of conducting some of their inner speech out loud. Here is Maurice (aged sixty-nine and retired) at the start of the interview: ‘As a kid I used to talk to myself so much . . . Actually I do it very often when I’m taking the dog for a walk down the field because it’s just me and the dog in the field and I can think and I can talk aloud to myself and answer myself in a way and come up with some ideas – and remember what I’ve said.’

In practising their reflexivity ‘all the time’, about which this sub-group is unanimous, they resemble the autonomous subjects. However, as Geraldine (a 34-year-old adult basic skills tutor) makes her first response in the interview, she indicates a different texture of inner dialogue and a self-awareness that her self-talk interweaves both imagery and affect. As is common, her internal conversation takes place ‘Everywhere! In the car I do it a lot . . . I go through things I’ve got to do in the day, what am I going to do next.’ As she continues, she imperceptibly shifts gear: ‘what am I doing here, where am I going? All of the time, it’s like your brain’s working overtime – when I’m relaxing as well. I don’t know whether I consciously talk, whether its words that come to my mind or just images, things that have happened in the day – not necessarily that I can see people, but feelings.’ The constancy of self-talk is always underlined, with some meta-reflexives hinting at its burdensomeness, as in Jonathan’s (a 31-year-old information technology team manager) immediate reaction: ‘Oh God, all the time. I find it hard to switch my mind off so I’m analysing everything all of the time, analysing everything I’m doing and saying – thinking “Should I have said that or done that?” It’s a constant thing for me.’

Despite its constancy, these subjects – some of whom apply the term ‘loner’ to themselves – do actively seek to be alone for some of their deliberations. The reasons they give for this make them the polar opposites of those for whom communicative reflexivity is the dominant mode because they reveal a conscious wariness about external influences. As Bernadette (a 56-year-old social development officer) puts it: ‘When I try to think things through in a logical way, it’s when I’m quiet, when I’m on my own. And I do try to do that because I know that outside events can take over.’ Equally,
Anouar (a 24-year-old pharmacist), growing up as a first-generation British Asian, recognised early on the importance of retreating into his own world in order to insulate himself against the local norms: ’Round where I was living, it was basically people who didn’t really have any ambition or drive – going on the wrong tracks with alcohol or drugs. To stay strong in that period, you have to go into your own head or you’ll follow everybody else. In a way, you have to be inside your own head to survive that.’ Gina (a 37-year-old university tutor) makes the same point about deliberately avoiding interlocutors since they would not understand or because to share would be to overburden them: ’I will keep a lot of what I’m thinking to myself, partly because I always feel it’s very complicated and it would be too much for other people to have that kind of conversation. I suppose I try to rein back on that.’

In other words, precisely those factors that draw communicative reflexives into the ‘thought and talk pattern’, with the unintended consequence of reinforcing their normative conventionality, are recognised and resisted by meta-reflexives. The latter do not expect to be readily understood, do not seek confirmation of their ‘first reactions’ but prefer to explore their implications thoroughly, and they do not regard local norms and conventions uncritically. Their withdrawal into ‘aloneness’ strengthens the boundary between the public and private domains for these subjects. This does not mean that they shun all elements of communicative reflexivity, as we know from their ICONI scores. Indeed, many of the twelve interviewees sustained warm and continuous relationships with their families and early friends, but without sharing everything with them. Their subordinate use of the communicative mode is for purposes other than having interlocutors to complete their deliberations: for the self-articulation gained from fully articulating one’s ideas in the ‘longhand’ of external conversation; for ascertaining the needs of significant others, which meta-reflexives take particularly seriously; and often from an interest in hearing others’ views, which also constitutes a respite from their own internal conversations.

Does this mean that they are much closer to the autonomous reflexives, those firmly avowing themselves to be ‘lone thinkers’, confidently arriving at their own conclusions, decidedly in subjective control of their own courses of action and seeking objective social positions of control? Qualitatively, meta-reflexives reveal a more self-interrogative warp and a weft of tentativeness about how to act for the best in the circumstances that weave a different fabric for their life of the mind.

One of the features most clearly distinguishing between the two subgroups is that the meta-reflexives allow considerable free play to their imaginations: most are self-confessed, unapologetic daydreamers, they
tell themselves stories, invent improbable scenarios, envisage themselves in unknown places, compose letters that are never intended to be written and script imaginary conversations in the knowledge they will never be staged. Conversely, the autonomous reflexive clamps down hard, in Protestant ethic vein, upon such an ‘unproductive’ licensing of the imagination. Like everyone else, he may be unable to exercise his nocturnal terrors but he can discipline his diurnal mind-wanderings. Ironically, in exercising this self-disciplined repression he is, of course, making use of his subordinate capacity for meta-reflexivity.

However, this qualitative difference in internal conversational texture forms a prelude to the substantive difference between these two modes of reflexivity. As we have seen, the inner dialogue of the autonomous reflexive is single-mindedly *task-oriented*. He may thoroughly enjoy his music, sport, family activities, do-it-yourself or, indeed, external conversation, but none of these is allowed to engross his self-talk. In contradistinction, the meta-reflexive is *value-oriented*. She is preoccupied by moral issues, about which she feels an obligation to come to some conclusion; she has embraced an ideal towards which she feels a duty to conform herself as closely as possible; and she has a sense of social injustice in relation to which she wants to make some difference, however small.

This substantive distinction is accentuated by the fact that these two dominant modes of reflexivity are both exercised alone and thus the internal conversations of their practitioners are unconstrained in length and uncontrolled in content. Meta-reflexives are aware of devoting long tracts of time to their deliberations, although there is no way of measuring whether or not they devote more time to internal conversation than do autonomous reflexives. They are also conscious that in their inner dialogues they can behave like a dog with a bone. As Eunice (a 57-year-old Anglican vicar) describes her own self-talk: ‘If there’s something going on then yes, that will come back and back until I’ve come to a conclusion, done something about it or moved on.’ Her ability not only to answer the question but immediately to reel off three different conditions which would cause her to terminate that strand of thought is indicative of the greater self-awareness displayed by this sub-group about their reflexivity itself.

This seems to be a straightforward consequence of the different purposes with which the two sets of interviewees conduct their lengthy deliberations. The *task-oriented* autonomous practitioners are relatively unconcerned about their own contributions to the deliberative process; what preoccupies them is becoming as sure as possible that they have factored in all necessary considerations and examined the matter from all relevant angles. Because meta-reflexives are *value-oriented*, they cannot
divorce questions of doing and being from one another. If they are to ‘make a difference’, in line with their values, they also have to become the kinds of people who exemplify their commitments – otherwise they will be incapable of realising anything of what they care about most.

Thus, whilst the problems upon which the autonomous reflexive dwells are about technical proficiency and the adequacy of personal qualifications, meta-reflexives are concerned with the moral worth of their undertakings and their own worthiness to undertake them. Self-examination thus becomes an intrinsic part of the life of the mind when meta-reflexivity is dominant. Yet, its practitioners know that self-awareness is not autoveridical and that there is no unvarnished news about themselves. They readily acknowledge that they are just as affected as anyone by subjective bias, wish-fulfilment and distorted perception. Equally, many acknowledge that they have been academically trained to recognise this and to work at counteracting it. This combination can readily lead to an over-scrupulousness of which several subjects are acutely (meta-)aware. Geraldine provides her own self-diagnosis of the two sides of this unwieldy coin and the resulting difficulties in handling it: ‘I suppose [mulling over] is a way of gaining clarity, but I think there’s a danger as well that you take away with you things that have happened, and things that you think have happened, and then blowing them out of proportion because you haven’t got all the information . . . you can get it wrong because you’ve got your own biased opinion of what’s actually happening.’ Conversely, she is also aware that, from her school days onwards, ‘you’re trained to think about both sides of a situation. There isn’t a right or a wrong but there is a bias and you try . . . to look at both sides and work out why the bias is there.’ Then she draws the personal consequences, ones which are not confined to her alone: ‘because I’ve been trained like that in my academic life you put it on your own life as well. But it’s not terribly healthy because you find it hard to find your own way – because you’re too busy concentrating on what the two sides of the story are.’

Such self-criticism is part and parcel of meta-reflexivity. Jonathan says in the simplest of terms that ‘sometimes if you think too deeply you can just end up getting a bit tangled up in knots’. However, the process preoccupied him to such a degree that he wrote two hundred pages of a novel about a character who became so absorbed with the life of his mind that it obliterated awareness of anything beyond it. Before going to university he concluded that the unfinished manuscript was completely ‘egotistical and threw it away’. Having just completed her PhD, Gina voices the same self-criticism that in trying to think her way forward, she deliberates ‘to an excessive level where I almost feel that I’m setting up scenarios I don’t even need to be worrying about’. But
Siobhan (a 25-year-old environmental economist), who is fully in accord with this self-diagnosis, gives the reason why meta-reflexives must nevertheless engage with their scrupulousness – one that can stand for her fellow interviewees even though some do not share her articulacy. In coming to a decision, ‘I think about permutations and combinations of things and rehash them probably more than is good for me because sometimes I just end up going round and round in circles and spending a lot of time on a decision that’s probably fairly straightforward. I do think through all the “ifs” – if I did this and then that happened and if that then happened as well, with tiny probabilities . . . But, with every option there’s a choice that you don’t make!’

Morally, meta-reflexives take responsibility for the consequences of their inaction just as much as for their actions. In contrast, autonomous reflexives are people of action and what they seek are personally desired outcomes rather than right action despite one’s imperfections. Of the latter, meta-reflexives are acutely aware and attribute the shortcomings in their self-talk to personal deficiencies: to worry, anxiety and frustration, to fear of the unknown, to a need to give internal vent to censored feelings and to being unsuccessful and unhappy with how one is. Yet, self-critical as they are, meta-reflexives do not take all the blame and all the responsibility upon themselves. Much of their pondering over right action is about how to act so as to make some difference in a social world that is far from being right – or just, or fair or caring.

Those whose voices have been heard so far come from a group of twelve interviewees, identified on ICONI as seemingly clear cases of people for whom meta-reflexivity was their dominant mode. The lowest ‘M’ score was 5.67 (out of a maximum of 7) and all had scores for ‘fractured reflexivity’ below the mean of 4. As usual, these were subjects whose scores were clearly differentiated from other modes and whose dominant mode was confirmed during the long interviews. Their high mean ‘M’ score of 6.4, contrasted with the lowest mean ‘C’ score (2.6) recorded, supplies some justification for regarding these as polar modalities.

Again, prior to analysis, let us make the acquaintance of a meta-reflexive whose biographical narrative spans half a century. The key points to be covered are: her experience of ‘contextual incongruity’; the emergence of a value-commitment as her ultimate concern; her unwillingness to compromise her values when she encounters occupational constraints and enablements, but rather her resistance to their influence by paying the price of moving on; the repeated clashes between her value-commitment and her working contexts; resulting in renewed contextual critique followed by lateral mobility, which weaves the pattern of social volatility into her work history.
Bernadette’s story

Bernadette is fifty-six years old, married with four children, all of whom have been to or are at university. She grew up in the north of England, in a family of seven children, all but one of whom entered the ‘caring’ professions. Her father, a secondary school head, died when her mother was thirty-five. The latter became a school secretary when the children were older. Bernadette lives in Coventry where she has recently taken a new job on a social development project. Her ICONI ‘M’ score is a high 6.67 and she recorded a low 1.75 for ‘fracturedness’.

Modes of reflexivity are not personality types, so it is contingent that Bernadette happens not to be very outgoing. As she says of herself: ‘I think I’ve always been a fairly quiet person and a thoughtful person, quite a shy person too.’ (Indeed, she has one of the very lowest ‘C’ scores.) Unlike a handful of meta-reflexives, who respond with a torrent of reconstructed deliberations, and others, who are still seeking the ideal articulation of their thoughts whilst being recorded, Bernadette’s responses are forthcoming but seem to aim for functional adequacy, with each sentence being pared to the bone. Consequently, it was all the more important to be attentive to each word and its connotations, for the words were carefully chosen and sometimes proffered handles to be turned if they were grasped. Accepting such words as quotidian encouraged her to employ more of the personal shorthand in which she reflects on her own reflections.7

Significantly, the examples she provides about each of the ten reflexive activities – and she practises all of them – almost uniformly revolved around the new development project (outreach work with prostitutes) on which she has been working for less than a year. For instance, ‘mulling over’ is exemplified by ‘the work I’m doing currently. We work via a management committee and I’m the proactive person pushing the project forwards and there’s a certain resistance amongst people to moving forward. Possibly it’s a question of pace rather than anything else, I’m not sure. I have to come home and think about that resistance and the reasons for it. So, yes, a lot of that goes on, trying to look at things from the other person’s view as well.’ This response includes most of the themes running through Bernadette’s occupational history: commitment to a project involving the underprivileged, striving to make a real if small difference,

7 I see interviewing (of this kind) as an inter-personal exchange and do not try to assume the role of a cipher-with-a-recorder. Since there were enough cues on her pre-interview biographical data sheet to indicate that she was a practising Roman Catholic, we shared Catholic references just as with other subjects we discussed having children and dogs, DIY projects, Val McDermid’s three female detectives and so forth.
encountering resistance, attempting to understand it and weather it, but often becoming frustrated by and critical of obstacles to making progress.

Her dedication to this project is so manifest that I enquire directly if she would call it a ‘vocation’. Bernadette’s response is: ‘I suppose anything you do is a vocation,’ and she specifies that this covers her past forms of employment and also her future activities. Ten years down the track, she envisages being ‘retired but doing something similar in a voluntary capacity’. I press her on what underlies this sense of vocation by questioning whether her expectation of a ‘working retirement’ turns on a need to keep busy or a need to feel useful. Her reaction is revealing because of the speed with which it covers those meta-reflexive characteristics of self-awareness, motivation by an ideal rather than by the approval of others, self-monitoring and self-criticism. ‘That’s a good question. A bit of both really. I don’t know whether you’ve ever done the Enneagram⁸ – I’m definitely a “Two” on there. I definitely need to do this [project] and I hope it’s no longer for anybody’s appreciation. There is something in me that has a need to be helping people, which you’ve got to be careful of as well . . . Anything I’m involved in does tend to take over! . . . It’s something that I’ll have to learn to discipline myself a bit more about.’

In an explicitly Christian text of the Enneagram – of the kind Bernadette most likely encountered – ‘Type Two’, called ‘The Need to be Needed’, is described as follows: ‘TWOs employ their gifts for the needs of others and care for their health, nourishment, education and welfare. They impart a measure of acceptance and appreciation that can help others to believe in their own value. TWOs can share generously and . . . stand by others when they have to endure suffering, pain or conflict, and in this way they give them the feeling that someone . . . accepts them.’⁹ Bernadette does appear to endorse this characterisation of her value orientation. However, what I want to bring out is the emergence of ‘contextual incongruity’ between her adoption of these values and her natal context. This incongruence was between her ultimate concern, as reflected in the formation of her first nascent project, and her mother’s needs and views, with which it clashed.

Bernadette’s early childhood has the same objective features of ‘contextual discontinuity’ that have been presented as typical of autonomous

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⁸ Opinions differ about the origins of the Enneagram, with the majority attributing it to medieval (Sufi) Islamic sources, but others, like the authors in note 9, tracing it back to fourth-century Christian origins. It purports to differentiate nine cognitive types on a socio-psychological basis. It became popular in Catholic spiritual direction in the early 1990s, since which time secular versions have proliferated for management training, etc.

reflexives and she herself held these to have been ‘very disruptive’. Born in the north-east of England, at the age of seven she moved and changed schools when her father gained a headship in the north-west. Two years later he died, leaving seven children under the age of ten in the care of their 35-year-old mother. Interestingly, Bernadette also has the highest ‘A’ score in this sub-group of interviewees as well as having invested much of herself in the practical order when growing up by becoming a proficient pianist. One difference that distinguishes her from the autonomous reflexives is that she never considered making any kind of career out of music, though she and her children continue to be instrumentalists. So, what did the teenage Bernadette come to value more than her playing and why did it represent a source of ‘contextual incongruity’?

She was brought up as a cradle Catholic and gained a place at a direct grant convent, which she describes as being a very happy secondary education. However, around the age of fourteen or fifteen her faith, which today she lists as her ultimate concern, began to assume an importance disproportionate to her upbringing. Not long afterwards Bernadette conceived of her first project, which was encouraged by the school but rebuffed and vetoed by her mother: ‘there was one particular Sister at school that I got on extremely well with, so at the age of fifteen to eighteen I also wanted to join the religious order. But my mother would have nothing of it at all and so I didn’t. She thought I was too young and I think at the time my oldest sister went over to France. My mother was quite close to me, as the second child in the family, and she depended on me rather than my older sister who was more flighty than I was. I certainly did try to make my case from the age of fifteen. She said, “Wait until you’re eighteen,” and when I was eighteen she had to go into hospital because she had a lump on her breast and she said, “Wait until that’s all over,” which I did. Then it turned out to be non-malignant, so I thought, “Great, I’ll be able to go now,” but when I brought it up again she still wouldn’t have it.’

This account of how her dream had been quashed was given flatly and factually, so I query whether this had been or remains a source of great regret. For the first time there is a flash of emotion and Bernadette becomes quite heated as she continues: ‘It has, yes, and certainly with my children I said when they’re eighteen they will do whatever they want to do because you are old enough. Even if you make a mistake, it’s better to let them make a mistake than force them into doing something that they don’t want to do.’ She is so emphatic because she does not believe that she herself was mistaken about her vocation at that age. She had been trapped in ‘contextual incongruity’ between her own vision, backed by her school, and her mother’s opposition, which was hard to resist when expressed as a
need for support. The latter prevailed. Thus, bowing to her mother and responding to the need to feel needed – because in those days entering the novitiate effectively severed one from any contact with one’s family – Bernadette went to university to read French. The flatness with which she describes becoming an undergraduate and then proceeding to a diploma in education indicates the tepid, almost somnolent, manner in which she took this course of action: ‘so I ended up going to the university that my father went to. I suppose I probably modelled what I thought I wanted on memories of my father.’

Of course, had Bernadette entered the particular religious order she desired, she would anyway have become a teacher and appeared happy with that prospect. So, in preparing to teach French, was she not acting like Joan who, as a communicative reflexive, seized half a loaf rather than no bread? There is an important difference. By making their constrained choices and scaling down their aspirations other communicative subjects also became materially worse off – as with Joan working as a childminder rather than a nurse. This was not the case for Bernadette. As a qualified secondary school teacher, she was objectively much better off than she would have been as a young Sister living on a tiny personal stipend. However, at fifteen and at eighteen she had been willing to pay this price – by taking the vow of poverty – in order to live out her vocation. Its incongruity with family demands and its consequent abandonment set the pattern for the rest of her volatile occupational life.

In the new context of her first teaching post Bernadette shelved her disappointment, began with enthusiasm (‘I loved teaching when I started’) and appeared to be constructing an alternative modus vivendi for herself by marrying a fellow teacher during this five-year period. Seemingly, by her marriage she had closed the door on her broken dream and had embraced her new occupational context. However, this dovetailing was imperfect – always a problem for meta-reflexives who seek organic integration between their concerns¹⁰ – and the proposed modus vivendi did not stick. Initially, she diagnosed the discordant factor as her subject specialism: ‘My first teaching job was in [a northern city] and at the end of that I remember thinking I will not go back into teaching French in this country because people are so insular and they can’t understand the reason for learning another language. So there was this disenchantment, not with teaching but with teaching French.’

This is the point at which the socially unsettled pattern of the meta-reflexive was unambiguously revealed, if in miniature. It consisted firstly in contextual critique (of attempting to teach French in that northern

¹⁰ See Archer, Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation, pp. 278–88.
city), followed by a determination to undertake different work in a different context, entailing alternative training and, most distinctively of all, at a cost paid for by the subject. Bernadette and her husband undertook Voluntary Service Overseas, went to North Africa as teachers of English, lived on a pittance but found the two-year experience very rewarding. This period of VSO had not been intended to be indefinite and when the couple returned to England, with Bernadette expecting their first child, the underlying need to establish a lasting way of life re-confronted her.

The couple changed context, moving to Coventry where David obtained a post in a Catholic secondary school. They decided to go ahead with the large family they wanted and this signalled a fourteen-year break from paid employment for Bernadette. Although she viewed it as ‘a real luxury to be able to stop at home with the children’, she soon began voluntary work in their new parish church and was up to her eyes in it before her fourth child was born: she became the church organist and a member of the liturgy group; she founded a youth club and another for children with disabilities, meeting at weekends; she became involved in catechetics, and after five years was serious enough to take the certificate and was then appointed as parish catechist.11 For approximately six years it sounds as though Bernadette achieved a satisfying and smooth dovetailing between her three main concerns: her faith, her family, and working for the disadvantaged in a Catholic context: ‘I was very happy in that work, really enjoying being a lay person who was involved in what was happening in the parish as my children grew up.’

Financially it was not easy going for the family living on one teacher’s salary. When her youngest child was six, Bernadette decided to take a half-time post but showed her uncertainty about resuming teaching by applying for administrative work in the local university: ‘I wasn’t thoroughly convinced I wanted to get back into teaching, and having got back in I found it pretty difficult.’ Simultaneously, she continued as parish catechist, and with her other church activities was, effectively, working full time. However, within a couple of years Bernadette found herself equally critical of both her paid and her voluntary work contexts.

Although she did not have great expectations when taking up teaching again, even in a Catholic comprehensive, she found that job satisfaction had completely evaporated. I ask her to pinpoint what had deteriorated and instead of a list of discontents receive an analysis of the destructive interplay between educational institutions which perpetuates social

11 Usually, as in this case, an unpaid position whose main duties are preparing children for First Communion and sometimes for Confirmation.
inequalities in Britain: all children do not ‘achieve what they’re capable of . . . I feel very strongly about private education because I feel that it deprives a whole lot of people of the education they deserve. Taking the better teachers and taking the better-motivated children away from the classroom, I think has a real negative effect on comprehensives.’

Her full critique is so damning that Bernadette could not reconcile herself to attempting to ‘make a difference’ within her own comprehensive school – to her, the structural context was too strongly opposed. Obviously, given her educational views, teaching in the private sector was not an option. Confronted with these structural and cultural constraints, I wondered whether, after seven years of accumulating discontent, she was ready to quit – forfeiting both the convenience and the salary – or whether her voluntary church work provided sufficient compensation.

As she remarked earlier, she sees all work as part of a vocation. Therefore a ‘trade-off’ in personal satisfaction between the two forms of work did not seem very probable. However, it was not even possible given the attitudes of her new parish priest. ‘He would not entertain me at all as a woman who’d been working, who’d been making some positive contribution in the parish. He really would not speak to me . . . I was still the organist at the church and he wouldn’t have the fact that we had a liturgy group that organised the hymns and the rest if it. He didn’t like that, he came in with his list of hymns which we had to have and we could make no contribution at all. So things were not looking good but I clung on for five years . . . I gave up playing the organ because he wanted someone to do what he wanted – there was no compromise at all in his approach – very authoritarian, totally uncompromising. So in the end I had to give up and move away from the church for my own sanity because I was actually feeling very angry about it. That was something I was very happy in and had to give up – that cost me dearly.’

Eventually she left the two contexts in which she felt unable to realise her values by ‘making some difference’. Doing so entailed a price she was willing to pay, emotionally, financially, and in terms of job security and socio-occupational status. To begin with, when much of her time ceased being invested in her home parish, she became an unpaid volunteer worker in Birmingham, alongside a couple of Sisters, doing ‘outreach’ work amongst prostitutes. She enjoyed it from the start and I asked whether she could put her finger on what gave her such satisfaction: ‘I think it’s dealing with, relating to a group of women who despite the crushing difficulties in their lives remain very resilient and very upbeat and able to enjoy the present minute without worrying about what’s going to happen in the future . . . which is really quite inspiring given the deprivation they have undergone in their earlier years.’ Soon, as well as acquiring a counselling
certificate, Bernadette assembled a group of co-workers in Coventry to launch a parallel project with the help of the Birmingham Sisters.

This ran for five years on a voluntary basis with Bernadette’s role being to organise the local group of volunteers. Towards the end of that period, ‘I was spending so much time doing it I then felt there had to be a paid worker.’ To cut a long story short, Bernadette pressed for the designation of a post whose occupancy was to represent her own downward social mobility (financially) or, at best, lateral mobility (in terms of status). She footed the bill herself, thus acting subversively towards structural constraints in order to advance her value-commitment: ‘working with women who are marginalised, who are very vulnerable, who’ve had very difficult backgrounds of neglect and abuse . . . That troubles me and that’s really why I do this job.’

Bernadette finds her new work extremely worthwhile but is far from being blind about the objective costs it has entailed: ‘Oh, I’m loving it, really enjoying it. It was a good decision in the end, it makes me wonder why I didn’t leave teaching long ago. But it wasn’t easy either to leave the safety of teaching; that was an established job which I knew I had until I retired. To leave at the age of fifty-six was a daunting thing because we’ve only got funding for a year. If our future bids for funding aren’t successful, I’m going to find myself at fifty-seven out of a job and no safety net at all. But I don’t regret having left teaching . . . I’m currently working forty-six hours and being paid for twenty-eight! I’m hoping that next year it will be full time and that there will be funding. I’m an optimist! I really enjoy that work . . . I’m convinced the need will be there and we’ll apply for funding and just hope we will get it. If we don’t I’ll be searching through the [local paper] for jobs! ’

Thus, a cut in salary, a big increase in working hours and a complete lack of job security have been the prices paid in the attempt to live out her vocation. The rewards have been in terms of ‘internal goods’. When pressed about the satisfaction Bernadette derives from her involvement, she returns to the theme of ministering to a manifest need of specific individuals at a particular place and time: ‘We’re getting them to develop – well, to build up their own confidence first of all, their assertiveness.’ This signals a readiness to work in terms of intangible goods, without objective returns even in the form of ‘success stories’. Without questioning that each of these inter-personal encounters is important, it remains to clarify why Bernadette herself has chosen this hands-on work amongst the marginalised in preference to ‘making more of a difference’ through involvement in national or local politics.

Her responses are revealing because they show that the typical meta-reflexive has not abandoned either type of political action, unlike the vast
majority of the communicative and autonomous reflexives interviewed. It is not that Bernadette is any less critical about the lack of integrity of government leaders or of her own constituency MP, or any less disaffected from national politics than many of the subjects examined in later chapters. It is rather that she sees ‘politics as a vocation’ too, one where the decision to participate is unrelated to the probability of achieving a desired outcome. Because of her own disaffection from parliamentary politics, her political activities are focused on social movements. These range from her early involvement in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament to her most recent participation in the Stop the War in Iraq movement, the latter being of signal importance because of her own experience of working in Algeria: ‘I do feel very sensitive to questions that involve Muslims, having known them as a very peace-loving people, peaceful in a way that we aren’t.’

I ask her how effective she feels these and other peace movements in which she has been involved have been, still hoping to gauge where she believes one can make ‘more of a difference’. Her initial response fits neatly enough with my intentions when she asserts that the Stop the War campaign had not been efficacious because national politicians tended ‘to use it for all sorts of political ends which had nothing to do with the war’. However, as she continues to think out loud, Bernadette produces a pure statement of ‘politics as a vocation’ and one that she herself links directly to the nature and outcomes of her own vocation: ‘I’m not sure that’s what’s important. Actually, I think you do it because you know that it’s right. And what comes of that – I don’t expect the questions to be solved really, in the same way that I don’t expect prostitution will come to an end. You just do what you can to fight what you see is an injustice.’

Does this mean that Bernadette is reconciled to the fact that any form of social movement is nothing more than expressive action – without impact? In that case, her work amongst a small number of prostitutes would reflect a realistic investment in the practical politics of the possible. Her views are more complex than that dichotomy, as became clear when we started to talk about local political action. She is conversant with three on-going urban development schemes in the vicinity and approves of their ‘giving ordinary people a voice’, improving police liaison with the public, providing community centres and funding other resources, but also regards their dynamics as damaging to those who are socially marginal: ‘from our own point of view it means that the women involved in prostitution are just further marginalised. These schemes very much work for the residents – and the interests of the residents are certainly not to have women working on their street corner. It is double-edged.’
Therefore, in terms of her own analysis, Bernadette is engaging directly in practical politics by working with one of the most marginalised groups whose members are not served by government or opposition and who suffer the perverse effects of social movements in the community. It is not simply that her stance towards society represents a generalised form of subversion because of her manifest indifference to social constraints and enablements. Instead, Bernadette is concretely subversive in seeking to empower a pariah group and to include them in the local demos. By working for the values that she has culturally endorsed, which are in opposition to the prevailing social structure, her vocation is literally transformational. She is amongst society’s critics, as is the case for metareflexives in general. Having embraced a vocation, Bernadette wishes it to be synonymous with her full-time employment in society, precisely in order to ‘make a difference’ to the social order. In the process, her biography has revealed contextual unsettlement, institutional unease and occupational volatility. Right now, whilst I am finishing her story, she may be consulting the adverts for ‘posts vacant’.