CLOSURE

A story of everything

Hilary Lawson

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CLOSURE

We are lost, both as individuals and as a culture. For over 2,000 years we have believed in the possibility of a single true account of the world. Now this age, the age of truth, is coming to a close. As a result there is much unease. In the new relative, post-modern era, there is no unique history, no agreed morality, and no uncontested knowledge. In their place a mass of alternative and sometimes incompatible theories, from 'chaos' and 'string' theory to 'fuzzy logic' and 'consilience', proposing a theory of everything. *Closure* is a response to this crisis: a means to understand our experience and our circumstances in an age without truth. It is a radically new story about the nature of ourselves and of the world.

Instead of seeing the world as a thing, a universe, whose truths we might uncover through for example the procedures of science, *Closure* proposes that we regard the world as open and it is we who close it through our stories. The resulting framework offers solutions to the central questions of contemporary philosophy: the character of language and meaning, of the individual and consciousness, of truth and reality. As a theory of knowledge *Closure* has dramatic consequences for our understanding of the sciences, changing what we think science does and how it is able to do it. It also accounts for why we need and desire both art and religion. It reshapes our understanding of ourselves and the organisation of society, our goals and our capacity to achieve them. But above all it makes sense of where and who we are.

A superb new account of how order is created out of disorder, *Closure* is an exhilarating work of conceptual geography.

Hilary Lawson is a philosopher, journalist and documentary film-maker. He is the author of *Reflexivity: the Post-Modern Predicament* and *Dismantling Truth: Reality in the Post-Modern World*.

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PREFACE

I want to tell you a story. It is not a fictional story, but then nor is it a factual story. Rather it is a story to hold still that which cannot be held at all. It is a story about the nature of the world and ourselves; a story about what it is to be human. It is the story of closure.

The story of closure is a philosophical story in the narrow sense that it addresses questions posed by philosophers such as the nature of language and meaning, of the individual and of identity, but it is also philosophical in the broader sense that it provides an overall account of our circumstances. It offers a framework that can be used to make sense of where and who we are. There was a time when the stories of religion were the primary source for such an overall perspective, now more typically we look to the stories of science. In their place, the story of closure provides a new framework, a new geography, by which to understand ourselves and our world.

This account of closure is a response to the chaos and confusion that surrounds us. For we are lost. Lost in a world that has no map, not because it has been mislaid or forgotten, but because we can no longer imagine how such a map could be constructed. In our post-modern relativistic age we find ourselves adrift in a sea of stories that cannot be fathomed nor anchor found. For we find ourselves in a world without certainties; without a fixed framework of belief; without truth; without decidable meaning. We have no unique history, but a multitude of competing histories. We have no right or moral action but a series of explanations for behaviour. We have no body of knowledge, but a range of alternative cultural descriptions. It is not simply that our thoughts and beliefs are seen to be relative to experience, culture, history, and language, but that without access to facts that are not vitiated by the perspective of the observer we have had to abandon the very possibility of neutrality or objectivity in their traditional sense.[1] Without the possibility of neutrality or objectivity we have in turn lost the capacity to give a description of

things, people or events which is not at once at risk of being overturned or abandoned in favour of an alternative perspective. Without the possibility of being able to give such an account of our circumstances we have thereby become unable to give an account of what we mean by what we say, for we have no fixed point from which to identify any particular meaning.

Faced with this chaos of ideas, the account given of closure does not propose that we return to the false certainties of the past. Instead, it offers a framework that accepts the limitations of the stories that we tell about the world and ourselves, but at the same time offers us a map when we thought no map was possible. In order to find this map we have to embark on a journey away from the familiar categories of our current thinking. It is a journey that is required because from our current patterns of thought there are no solutions to be found. It is not possible to rearrange or reorder our concepts to escape the current confusion because these concepts have embedded within them the source of the malaise. Instead, we have to find a different way of holding the world altogether.

Instead of seeing the world as a thing, a universe, whose truths we might uncover through for example the procedures of science, *Closure* proposes that we regard the world as open and it is we who close it through our stories.

One way to understand this story of closure is to see it as a description of a process that underlies experience, the behaviour of individuals, and the operation of society. This process, the process of closure, is the means by which we are able to identify things from the flux of the world and thereby create a reality which we can understand and manipulate. I will argue that it is this process of closure that makes consciousness and language possible, drives human endeavour, and determines the way we intervene in the world. Seen in this light, the story of closure offers a theory about the operation of the human organism both individually and collectively. It does so not by reducing the mind to a mere mechanism, but by finding in the body that which is not mechanism. It is a theory which as a result casts light on the pattern of human development and the way individuals interact. Furthermore, it accounts for the character of both thought and desire, and as such has the potential to have practical application, not least perhaps in aiding our attempts to build an intelligent machine.

At the same time the story of closure, in addition to being a theory about the biological system that is the human being, is also a theory about the nature of stories. The account given of closure is in this light a description of language and a description of the way stories are created. It is an

account of what these stories can achieve and what they cannot achieve; what they enable us to understand about the world and how they enable us to intervene in it. It is an account that does not rely on our having a special access to the truth, to how things are, to explain the success and the failure of our theories be they scientific or otherwise. For the world is not taken to be a thing which might in principle be fully and accurately described. In this respect, the story of closure could be regarded as offering an account of language that does not rely on the notions of representation, correspondence, or reference to tie words to the world.

Seen as a theory of stories, the story of closure uncovers the underlying process driving the structure of knowledge determining both its limitation and its potential. It shows how it is possible for our theories to enable successful intervention in the world and draws attention to the constraints on that success. It is an account that has widespread consequences for our understanding of science, changing what we think science does and how it is able to do it. It also has implications for those spheres of activity that are traditionally placed outside of knowledge, such as art and religion. For it finds in the practical and down to earth that which is esoteric; and in the esoteric that which is at once accessible. It could as a result be said that it brings to a close the opposition of the factual and the romantic, of the practical and the mystical, of science and art, and in doing so accounts also for why we both need and desire art and religion.

These two aspects of the story of closure are embedded in each other. On the one hand, closure as a description of the operation of the human machine – both individually and collectively – is at the same time a description of the means by which we are capable of generating stories that enable us to understand and intervene in a world that is not already divided into things and is instead open. While on the other hand, closure as a theory about the character of language and stories is also an account of how it is possible that we should be able to provide a theory to describe the operation of the human machine and human society, even though this theory is itself but a story. These two ways of understanding the story of closure are therefore not so much two different aspects of the theory but two faces of the single notion of closure; a notion that is gradually uncovered as the story unfolds.

There is a final, and largely unseen, aspect of the story of closure. For the story of closure is also a theory that seeks to account for its own possibility. This self-referential constraint is a hidden motor driving and directing the story of closure. The account of closure in describing the operation of the human machine and human society is itself the product of such a machine and such a society. Similarly, as a theory of stories, it is

itself an example of that theory for it is itself another story. The story that is told, the account given of the operation of the human machine and the theory of stories, is therefore at the same time a description of how it is that the story can be told at all. Another way of understanding the story of closure is therefore to see it as the story of how the story of closure is itself possible. So it is that the story of closure is a bootstrap theory: it uses itself to account for itself.

It will be apparent that the story of closure has an unfashionably broad sweep. Instead of seeking to escape the conceptual abyss that faces us by a reordering of familiar terms, it proposes a journey into an unfamiliar landscape. Lacking known landmarks, it will require some effort and some sympathy on the part of readers. I would contend however that any theory that seeks to overcome the present crisis in understanding, and the paradoxes in which it is enmeshed, will need to discard not only our current account of the relationship between ourselves and the world, between language and the world – if any such account could be said to exist – but to discard the very notions of language and the world themselves. At least in the sense that they are commonly understood. Any such theory will as a consequence need to offer a new account of what it is for us to describe the world, and therefore a new story of what it is to be human.

The story of closure offers therefore a central principle by which to understand human experience and language, both at the level of the individual and of society. Although grand in design, the story of closure is however modest in its claims. For it is a theory that sees theories as stories by which to hold the world. It therefore makes no pretence to provide a definitive or final account. Not least because from the perspective of the theory no such definitive solution is possible. There will in the future be other solutions and other philosophies; but, for the time being, it does seem to me that the framework of closure offers the only viable response to the chaos of thought and meaning that currently faces us.

PROLOGUE

There are many summaries, many paraphrases, that might be given of *Closure*. It could be said that *Closure* is a theory about how we make sense of the world, in a world that is open and not closed. Or that it is a theory about the operation of the human machine, that identifies a single process enabling both experience and thought. Ot that it outlines a theory of language that does not rely on the notion that language refers to things in the world. Yet although these descriptions are appropriate they are also misleading. For the story of closure is one that requires us to abandon terms such as 'reality', 'language' and the 'world' in favour of a new terminology. These new terms allow us to escape the deep-seated paradoxes of the present in which we are currently enmeshed. In so doing *Closure* uncovers a new landscape that enables us to explain afresh our circumstances and where we are.

At the outset therefore attempts to summarise the story of closure inevitably operate with the familiar categories of our current thinking and as such are inaccurate. For they seek to describe a new geography with distinctions that apply to our present location. Couched in the landscape of home, the recognisable is offered in place of the unseen, with the result that those aspects of the foreign that are conveyed are also those in some measure already familiar. Yet it is that which makes the foreign unfamiliar which is of significance and which remains undisclosed.

This prologue does not seek therefore to offer an introduction that would be a summary of the story of closure – to attempt to do so would suggest that instead of the journey that is proposed an easy shortcut was available. Instead it aims to demonstrate why such a journey is required. Why our current thinking is in such disarray, and why if a solution is to be found our current terminology needs to be abandoned and a new vocabulary adopted. Having identified why we cannot remain in our current location, it then goes on to propose a starting-point for the journey ahead and to indicate how it might be possible to proceed.

Some readers may feel they do not need to be convinced that the journey is necessary. Others may readily accept that a new framework is required. In such cases little may be lost in turning directly to Part I, for it is there that the story of closure begins in earnest. For those who are more sceptical, who do not recognise our current circumstance as one riven by paradox and confusion, or who are not convinced that drastic manoeuvres are required, the remainder of the prologue is divided into two sections. The first sets out to describe our current circumstances and demonstrates why this location is unsustainable; the second proposes where we might begin our search for an alternative.

THE HISTORY OF A MISTAKE

There is little reason to embark upon an extended and potentially difficult journey to a distant and currently unknown land unless our present location is thought to be at least undesirable in important respects. I will argue that the framework of contemporary thought is not only undesirable but is enmeshed in a predicament so insistent and destructive that it is not sustainable at all.

The cutting edge of this predicament has been apparent in the writings of philosophers, but initial signs of its destructive force can be found throughout our culture. It is found in our acceptance of the perspectival and relative character of our knowledge and beliefs, and at the same time our refusal to accept the consequences of this recognition. In, for example, our desire to uphold moral behaviour despite our acceptance that others adhere to different moral codes; in our desire to believe that science might uncover the ultimate laws of the universe and yet our suspicion that science is not itself value free; in our recognition that there are as many histories as there are points of view, yet our conviction that certain events cannot be denied as having taken place.

In the face of the contemporary predicament many have argued that we should retreat into some supposedly safe haven in the past. Into a less complicated world, a world without perspectives, a world that allows for some elementary observations, some simple neutral facts, into a world that enables objectivity. The case will be made however that such a retreat is not an option. The reason I will put forward is that the origins of the contemporary predicament can be traced to the outset of Western culture. For it can be seen to be embedded in the project to provide an accurate description of reality. Despite the remarkable successes of this project – science

and technology being perhaps the most telling example – I will argue that from its inception the project carried an inherent flaw. A flaw that will inevitably bring about its failure. A flaw that has its mathematical counterpart in Gödel's theorem, and its scientific counterpart in the Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum theory. It is a flaw which stems from our misunderstanding the nature of the world and has now in the form of the contemporary predicament come to threaten our whole system of thought.

If we cannot stay where we are, nor can we retreat to a safe haven in the past, we must seek a way forward. Before proceeding however, as a conclusion to this section, it will be necessary to engage in a brief excursion to examine claims that a mathematical or logical solution can be employed to evade the flaw in the great project of Western culture and thereby remove the paradoxes of the contemporary predicament. It will be shown that these supposed solutions are not solutions at all but mere logical sleights of hand. As a result we have no alternative but to seek an entirely different location altogether.

The contemporary predicament

> The circle of self-reference in which contemporary thought has been increasingly enmeshed, typified by rhetorical self-denials and the use of inverted commas, is not sustainable

The end has been a long time coming, but now it is here it is all of a rush. Truth, in the sense of the possibility of a correct description of an independent reality, has had a good innings, but its time is over. It is not however the abandonment of truth in itself which is of concern, but the threat to meaning with which it is accompanied. It is as if we have fallen into an Alice in Wonderland rabbit-hole that has no beginning and no end. We have become lost, not as an adult is lost in a city that is not known well but which can nevertheless be negotiated, but lost as a child in a world which we not only do not know, but in which we cannot imagine how we might be able to find our way to somewhere that was known. Such is the contemporary predicament. A circumstance in which we have become unable to express what we seemingly wish to say, with the result that it is no longer apparent what could be said at all.

Those who already find themselves caught in this predicament will at once be aware of its vertiginous and unsettling character and the desirability of an alternative. There will however be many who do not recognise this description, either of their own views or more generally the state of our culture, and with this in mind some further explanation is required.

There have been many influences that have led to the contemporary predicament but perhaps the primary one has been the increasing recognition of the importance of context. For if once it was believed that claims could be made that were unequivocally and uncontentiously true it now appears that we wish to express their particular perspectival character – a perspective that is limited by the historical, social, cultural, and above all linguistic context. As a consequence, facts, whose truth is supposedly independent of context, and which provide us with pleasantly reassuring nuggets of certainty, have been in retreat. The retreat from facts can be seen to have been under way for a long time but it is in the last century that the pace has quickened. In the interests of brevity an attempt will be made to offer a very summary account of this broadly based phenomenon.

Amongst philosophers, it was for example still possible for G.E. Moore at the beginning of the twentieth century to propose the existence of moral facts but, in the analytic or English-speaking tradition, it was not long before the notion of moral facts began to look anachronistic. In what can be regarded as an attempt to maintain the sanctity of facts there were those who sought to identify a strict distinction between facts and values: a distinction which left matters of morality, aesthetics, and religion beyond the reaches of truth or falsity. For a while, this distinction, promoted by the logical positivists and encouraged by the writings of the early Wittgenstein, allowed its supporters to argue that through a combination of observation and logical deduction, along with the precise defining of our terms, a body of knowledge could be constructed based on a secure foundation of agreed facts. Such a stance can in retrospect be seen as a temporary respite in an irreversible tide. The next layer of facts to come under attack were cultural and historical facts. These were gradually undermined, no doubt in part by the cultural fallout from Frazer's *Golden Bough* along with stirrings of anthropological relativism with tales of Trobriand Islanders and Hopi Indians.[1] Over the next few decades the advance of relativism became more apparent and with the arrival of Kuhn's account of scientific paradigms[2] the case can be made that the way was open not only for the theories of science to look uncertain but also for the facts and observations on which they rested to be placed in jeopardy.[3] The archetype of a fact, found in the strict and supposedly precise observations of science, was itself to come under scrutiny and came to be seen by some not as an accurate description of an independent reality but as itself the product of a particular model and a particular conceptual framework.[4] Since then it would appear that the relativist momentum has been unstoppable. It is now not uncommon for it to be argued that there are no facts that can be identified independently of culture and society, of perspective

and theory, and increasingly there are those who find in the retreat from the certainties of the past, an opportunity to proclaim the value of alternative traditions and cultures, and a means to denounce what are seen to be the tired and outdated canons of the West.

A case could be made that in the wider European philosophical tradition the importance of context and the resultant erosion of truth began rather earlier. In the mid nineteenth century the historicism of Hegel and Marx already relativised truth to a particular time and a particular society, although both sought a means to ensure that their own philosophy was deemed to have escaped the perspectival character applied to others; and more than a century ago, by explicitly abandoning an attachment to truth in a realist sense,[5] Nietzsche was perhaps the first to adopt the contemporary outlook. In doing so, he also carried through the self-referential consequences of such a perspective. At the time this aspect of his work was largely ignored but in the context of post-structuralism and post-modernism it has come to be centre stage.

These philosophical developments have mirrored, and it could be argued have perhaps to some extent led, a broader cultural awareness of the erosion of truth, in the sense of the possibility of knowledge of an independent reality. As a result there have been those who have inveighed against the growing tide of relativism claiming that it threatens to undermine all that is valuable in our culture,[6] arguing that if we deny the possibility of a viewpoint that is independent of culture, society, and individual preference, we will find ourselves at the whim of prejudice. So the argument runs: we stand at the end of a great tradition, which has provided us with a tolerant, liberal environment that has husbanded the valuable and discarded the worthless. It has done so on the basis of an adherence to empirical, rational thought and endeavour. If it is accepted that there is only perspective, all of this is at risk. For there can be no agreed method for advance, nor any notion of what progress would comprise, and as a consequence we will be at the mercy of those who can shout loudest and longest in the pursuit of their own ends and their own values.

Such a response, however, has the plaintive ring of an establishment under threat. If doubts about relativism were restricted to an assertion of the importance of what is currently regarded as the mainstream tradition they could perhaps to a large degree be ignored. A further argument has been proposed: namely that the problem with the erosion of truth is not so much that it threatens the accepted tenets of the past, but that it offers no stopping place, no point at which a line can be drawn. In its initial phase the relativising of truth can be used to challenge the dominant authority of an established belief, but in due course it undermines the

basis of its own challenge as well. If all is perspective, why should any one perspective prevail, including the perspective that 'all is perspective'? How as an individual, or as a society, can we choose between one perspective and another if the ground on which the choice is made is itself only available from a particular view? While this argument is perhaps more persuasive than the mere assertion of the value of the Western tradition it still relies on the notion that a point of view needs to be defended on grounds that appeal to the notion of an independent reality that can be approached through rational thought. Such an argument need not be accepted by those who wish to endorse the abandonment of truth.

I wish to argue however that there is a more telling argument in response to the erosion of truth. It is an argument that points to the underlying nature of the contemporary predicament. For the problem with the erosion of truth is not that we are unable to find an ultimate ground for our claims, disconcerting though that may seem to some, but that the erosion of truth leads to the undermining of meaning, with the consequence that the meaning of what we seemingly wish to express itself becomes unclear. This undermining of meaning can be seen to follow from the identification of the importance of the context of language and the problem of self-reference that follows in its wake.

A preliminary indication of the nature of the problem can be found in general claims about the nature of truth that typify the contemporary perspective. Such claims may be expressed in a variety of forms such as: 'there is no truth'; or 'there are no ultimate truths'; or 'truth is dependent on context'. In each case the claim is at once paradoxical. As with the ancient liar paradox,[7] the assertion 'there is no truth' if applied to itself denies its own truth, and thus destroys the meaning that we at first attach to it. All of these claims have the characteristic that the self-reference of the assertion undermines its meaning, for what it asserts denies itself. If there is no truth, we cannot know that there is no truth for that after all would then be true. Similar arguments apply to any claim that denies its authority by drawing attention to its general perspectival character. Examples of such claims would include the statements: 'Everything we express is limited by language'; or 'we cannot step outside of language'; or 'we find ourselves within a particular conceptual scheme'; or 'we cannot escape the ideology of our time or our class'; or 'this is only my view or perspective'. As a result it has been argued that the very notion of a view or perspective of the world, or a conceptual scheme, or an ideology, is itself paradoxical and meaningless if the view, perspective, conceptual scheme, or ideology is understood in such a way that it is not possible to stand outside of it.[8]

An all-embracing relativism can be seen therefore to be incoherent for

through its claims it denies its capacity to make those claims. Nor does the paradox simply invade a few general relativistic claims that could be discarded. It is because the paradox applies to claims that characterise the outlook as a whole and are thus a summary of the overall stance, that the impact of the paradox applies to all views held by someone adopting a relativist position. For any individual claim, however limited in character, such as 'snow is white' for example, is from a relativist perspective not capable of asserting a truth about the world independent of context. Instead it is to be understood as if with the parenthesis 'from my point of view'. 'Snow is white is true from my point of view' is however also not capable of asserting a truth and so requires a further parenthesis. There can therefore be no end to the additions and thus no means of determining the meaning of this or any other claim by reference to an independent reality.

Those who adopt a relativist stance get by because they either ignore such paradoxes, or implicitly limit the relativism so that there is an arena from which at least the relativist perspective itself can be stated. A weak relativism is adopted which denies truth in a particular context but retains the notion of truth to give the claim itself meaning. The case I wish to make however is that the underlying conceptual shift which has brought about the gradual abandonment of what were once taken for facts will not allow this as a stopping place. If the attack on truth were limited to a social, or cultural, relativism it could perhaps be contained. It is unsustainable because the erosion of truth is intimately linked to the contextualisation of language and meaning.

The recognition of alternative perspectives to our own as the result of a difference in historical, cultural, or social factors is in itself not a matter that needs to be of concern. It is at once apparent that others have different views to ourselves and the identification of this phenomenon on a social scale is simply an extension of a self-evident circumstance. What turns the identification of alternative perspectives from being innocuous to being a threat to our understanding in general is the abandonment of the assumption that the terms in which these perspectives are expressed are themselves transparent. So long as language is thought to enable a simple description of the world which can be judged to be correct or incorrect, the identification of alternative outlooks merely has the consequence that some views are seen to be closer to the truth than others, or to have identified aspects of the world that others have overlooked. If language refers to things, or the relation between things, a profusion of perspectives merely requires a careful identification of their alternative claims and a determination of those that are accurate and those that are not.

Much of the work of twentieth-century philosophy, particularly in the

English-speaking world, has been concerned to attempt to provide just such an account of language. It is the failure of this project, the failure to provide a credible realist account of the relationship between language and the world which has made the identification of different perspectives significant. For if language cannot be understood to refer in some way to a realm that is independent of language, an alternative perspective no longer simply provides a different version of the world to our own, but is itself the vehicle of an alternative world. This in turn has the consequence that the perspectives are no longer comparable since it is not possible to judge each against an independent reality; and without an independent reality against which to compare the perspectives it is no longer possible to determine the accuracy or validity of the claims put forward independently of the social and linguistic context in which the claims are made. It is therefore the failure of realism and the adoption of non-realist accounts of language that gives the relativist argument its force, and which at the same time has led to the contemporary predicament.

Some will argue that it is premature to claim that relativism and non-realism have become the dominant perspective of our culture. Later I shall in the most general terms indicate why in principle the realist project cannot succeed, but for the moment I will largely take as read the presumption that the project of uncovering what really exists, implicit within the empiricist or materialist strands of analytic philosophy, has been seen to fail. Since arguments to this effect have been powerfully expressed elsewhere it seems pointless to elaborate another version of them.[9] At its most general the case can be summed up by saying that there has been no satisfactory account of the means by which language hooks onto the world nor is there any realistic hope of such an account emerging.[10] Rather than itemising the failures of realism therefore, it is the consequences of non-realism on which I shall focus.

Relativist or post-structuralist positions are frequently adopted either without an awareness of their self-referential problems, or on the assumption that these are minor concerns that can for the present be put to one side. It is because the problems of self-reference are easily overlooked and are only brought to the fore by a determined pursuit of the consequences of the beliefs in question, that it is only in those with a rigorous turn of mind that the full impact of this reflexivity is made evident. It is thus precisely in the writings of those who seek to express a non-realist perspective with some care: the philosophers Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and contemporary figures such as the French post-structuralist, Jacques Derrida, and the American philosopher, Richard Rorty, that it is also easiest to identify the paradoxical character of the contemporary predicament.

The contemporary predicament is initiated therefore by a desire to maintain a relativist or non-realist stance. It consists in the fact that although we have been led to take up this position we can find no means by which such a stance can coherently be expressed. We are relativists. We are non-realists. Yet we can find no means of saying so that is not at once self-denying and paradoxical. As a result we are forced into a series of moves to avoid the failure of self-reference, currently typified by rhetorical self-denials and the use of inverted commas as if to deny, and not yet deny fully, what is at once stated. A case can be made that it is for similar reasons that Wittgenstein, in his later writing, sought to avoid making any general claims about the nature of language and its relation to world, and why Derrida has avoided settling on any single description of the operation of language. Of course there have been followers of these philosophers who have sought to remove the seemingly unnecessary complexity of the texts in question and provide instead a theory that could with relative ease be applied. Wittgenstein or Derrida cannot however be reduced to the belief that we are exploring our language game, or through deconstruction uncovering the undecidability of meaning, precisely because such beliefs cannot be expressed without undermining themselves. If we find ourselves trapped in a language game, there can be no means of stating such a circumstance for the statement will need to step outside the language game for it to have the meaning intended. If meaning is undecidable, this also cannot be stated, since such a statement indicates that meaning is decidable after all. Nor can deconstruction as a method or technique have the purpose of uncovering this circumstance since it is not clear what would thereby be uncovered. Wittgenstein's avoidance of any general philosophical claims, and Derrida's continual reinvention of his own vocabulary can be seen therefore as the means by which each has sought to come to terms with the self-referential consequences of non-realism.

The problem with these and other available responses that have been offered in an attempt to express a non-realist position, if for the moment we allow the notion that such an unsayable stance might have the character of a position, is that however much the texts in question manoeuvre to avoid the aporia of self-referential paradox, the paradox remains as vigorous and insistent as ever. It will be argued therefore that no amount of avoidance or deferment solves the puzzle, but rather serves to make the puzzle ever more perplexing.

In order to make apparent the insistent and destructive character of the problem of self-reference two general strategies into which the various responses fall will be distinguished. The first of these, which I shall refer to as the structural strategy, is for the non-realist text to seek to show through

the structure of the text itself what it is unable to say directly. This may consist in the text making claims about the nature of language that are successively abandoned, thus suggesting that in the claim and the abandonment of the claim the reader is able to catch sight of the underlying character of language, or rather to catch sight of the impossibility of expressing in language the underlying character of language. Derrida's writings would be an example of such an approach. Alternatively it may consist in the single-minded avoidance of claims that are self-referentially paradoxical thereby presenting a text that appears to make no general assertions at all. Yet the text functions by encouraging the reader to catch on to a strategy which implicitly involves the non-realist outlook that cannot be expressed. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, for example, might be described in this manner. A further version of this strategy is for the text to express evidently opposing views. By doing so the text implicitly denies that its claims are to be taken as statements that set out to describe the world and instead suggests an alternative relationship between the text and its meaning. Some have interpreted Nietzsche in this light.

There is a problem with the descriptions that have been given of these structural strategies. For the nature of these strategies is such that if they are successful the descriptions given are not merely simplistic but actually undermining of the strategies themselves. If it was possible to say what these texts were seeking to do or express, it would not be necessary for their authors to have engaged in the manoeuvres described. For example if one could state that the character of language was inexpressible and that in order to indicate this the text would engage in a series of descriptions each of which would fail, it would not be necessary for the text to undergo such a strategy. For the claim that the nature of language is inexpressible is precisely one of those general claims about language which the theories themselves deem to be inexpressible. Similarly if one could declare that the text was avoiding general philosophical claims about the nature of language and the world because such claims cannot be expressed, it would not be necessary to write the text in the form of a therapy to overcome such concerns. The characterisation that has been given therefore of the structural strategy and its various forms is at once, from the perspective of the texts concerned, a misleading description of their intent. The underlying intent of the texts cannot be expressed for that is the very reason an alternative and structural strategy has been employed.

However I want to argue that the inability to provide a characterisation of the structural strategy which is not misleading is in itself an indication that the strategy is problematic. For at its most straightforward, if the text is able to show something through its structure it will be possible to

describe what is thereby shown, and if it is not possible then nothing has been shown. The texts imply that it is possible to convey something that cannot be said as if we could have some non-linguistic understanding of the nature of language. If however this were the case it would not be possible to say so, nor would it be possible for such a thought to be entertained, for such knowledge would itself be an example of the type of understanding that must lie outside of that which can be stated in language. In order to understand these texts the reader has implicitly to formulate the stance that the text avoids expressing. If this does not take place, the reader is left with merely copying the surface manoeuvring without an understanding of its purpose. Perhaps there have been followers of Derrida and Wittgenstein, for example, who have adopted the vocabulary and textual manoeuvres without appreciating the motivation behind the approach, but if this is the case it could hardly be said that the text has succeeded, or that the philosophical stance has been conveyed.

The avoidance of the presentation of a theory, be it in the form of contradictory assertions, in the manner of Nietzsche, the successive employment of alternative descriptions each of which undermines itself, as with Derrida, or the simple absence of any general philosophical claims at all, as with Wittgenstein, would appear therefore either to be in bad faith – a smokescreen for an underlying theory which is implicit but unsaid – or we have no apparent means of determining what to do with the text and what meaning to assign it. We can offer a whole series of descriptions of these texts, but no one of them can be maintained nor can we endorse all of them in conjunction. We can only provide content to these texts if we illicitly allow ourselves an overview of what the texts are seeking to achieve. Perhaps this overview is that 'we are lost in the web of language', or 'we are trapped in our own language game', or 'we are unravelling the tradition from within' or 'we are at play'. But if we are truly lost we cannot know this to be the case for to know that we are lost is precisely to have escaped from the web of language and ascertained where we 'really' are; if we are unravelling the tradition we cannot have identified this procedure for to have done so would be to take part in the tradition; and if we are at play the play must itself be playful in which case we cannot claim to be at play. We can read these texts and believe that we have identified what they wish to show, but as soon as we have made such an identification it cannot be held. Either we illegitimately imagine that these texts are expressing some view, or it is unclear how we are to determine any meaning or purpose to the text at all.

Each version of the structural strategy attempts to avoid the presentation of an overall theory, with the intended consequence that the texts concerned

do not make claims that are at once self-referentially inconsistent. The absence of such claims does not however mean that the problem is solved. For in order to understand the text, to understand where it is coming from and what it is seeking to achieve, the claims that are not stated in the text must be assumed on the part of the reader. It is no good to pretend that the reader has simply to catch on, as if the non-realist position is akin to riding a bicycle, for it is unclear what the reader is expected to catch on to. Having climbed a ladder to a non-realist position the ladder cannot be thrown away leaving an unproblematic text.[11] For the ladder is the means of determining what the text is seeking to express. No amount of deferring, denial, rhetorical play, or the simple avoiding of general claims, can be sufficient therefore to halt the reader from an attempt to find a meaning, or meanings, in the texts through which to comprehend them. Once however an implicit meaning is provided it is at once undermined through its own self-reference. We understand these texts therefore by not understanding them.[12] We allow ourselves to hold some part of the texts to provide an overview, or to presume an implicit overview, but if we are true to the rigours of the texts themselves there is no part of the text that can be held and no overview that can be implied. As a consequence there is also no means of knowing how they can be understood or used or communicated. The structural strategy appears to have a response to self-reference but it remains deeply mired in the reflexive web.

The other strategy that can be regarded as having been employed in response to the problem of self-reference has been for the text to offer itself in a non-assertoric mode. As with the previous structural strategy whereby the text seeks to demonstrate through its structure what it cannot express directly, this non-assertoric strategy can take a variety of forms. Since the text is incoherent if it is taken to state a non-realist position, for the self-referential reasons that have been outlined, the non-assertoric text explicitly abandons the attempt to state something in favour of an alternative mode of expression. One form of this strategy adopted by the later Heidegger[13] and more recently by Richard Rorty[14] is to propose that the text is poetic. In being poetic the text both seeks to demonstrate its non-realism and avoids the circularity of stating a position which is at once not a position.

The problem with the non-assertoric strategy is similar in form to the problems that beset the structural strategy. If the text is genuinely poetic it cannot be understood to be expressing a point of view, or be translated into a method for acting or intervening in the world, for if such an understanding or translation were possible the poetic stance could be abandoned in favour of simply stating such a position. Yet those who adopt the non-

assertoric strategy are presumably seeking to influence our understanding in some way, in which case a view is being expressed.

If for example we approach Rorty's text in a traditional manner, namely that it is trying to tell us something about the world, we can determine the main points of the argument and the seeming intention and meaning of the text. Rorty cannot however be wishing to tell us something about the world since his 'theory' precisely advocates the abandoning of such a task. Instead we must regard the text as poetically expressing the poeticisation it encourages. Yet if the text is treated as being engaged in poetic expression it then becomes unclear what we are to do with it, or how we are to provide the text with any particular content.

In practice, unlike a poem, Rorty's text has all the appearance of trying to convince us of something. There are certainly a large number of views that are expressed in a manner which is not self-evidently poetic. When, for example, Rorty seeks to defend his abandonment of the correspondence theory of truth he says: 'Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not.'[15] All of which appears to be a very definite description of our metaphysical circumstances, if for a moment we overlook the destructive self-reference in which the claim is at once embedded. If however we accept Rorty's advocacy of a poeticisation that is itself poetic, we are given no guidance as to how we can provide the text with content. If we are to understand that Rorty is not actually asserting that 'truth cannot be out there', but is instead engaged in poetry, what constraints are there that might limit what we could draw from the remark?

The non-assertoric strategy, as with the structural strategy, appears to suggest that there is a way language relates to the world that cannot be said but is to be understood in some other way, as if to hint at a realism that is not expressible in language. It is seemingly caught however, between two unsatisfactory outcomes. The hints and suggestions would appear to have the consequence either that despite denials there remains an underlying theory, a thesis which means that realism has not after all been abandoned; or, there is no such theory in which case it is unclear how the text can have meaning and thus any particular consequence. If Rorty's text is more inclined to raise the suspicion that an underlying theory remains, Heidegger's later texts being more explicitly poetic in character are more open to the criticism that the text lacks content. For if there is no underlying theory, if the text is itself poetic, how is content to be provided? How is the text to avoid the charge that it engages in empty mysticism? It is not sufficient simply to abandon assertoric meaning in favour of poetic

gestures, or any other characterisation of the text such as use, or redescription, for in order to give content to such a characterisation the text will either provide a theory in which case it will remain caught in the cycle of paradoxical self-reference or it will fail to provide a means by which the text can have an identifiable meaning or purpose.

As I understand it, Rorty's reply is that we find ourselves at a particular juncture, with a particular vocabulary and its set of literal metaphors, and as such we do not need an explanation to understand what he is saying. Such a reply however has already provided the explanation, has already given us our metaphysics, within which we can interpret Rorty's perspective. As with those he describes as being engaged in ironist theory, Rorty wishes to provide us with a perspective which denies the possibility of authority. Recognising the reflexive problems of such a proposal his solution is to opt out of philosophical or scientific language in favour of literature or poetry. The problem with such an approach is that if such a solution was a solution he could not tell us about it.

These two strategies, the structural and the non-assertoric, which have been employed in response to the problems of self-reference that beset relativism and non-realism, are not incompatible. Elements of each strategy can be found in a number of the philosophers to whom reference has been made. Indeed, it could be argued that the structural strategy is a particular example of a form of non-assertoric expression, and to this extent the two strategies are really one. What I have attempted to briefly demonstrate however is that the destructive cycle of self-reference that these strategies set out to avoid is insistent and pervasive, and that despite the sophistication of the philosophers who have employed these strategies the predicament remains.

The critique that has been offered is not intended as evidence that these strategies and philosophies are simply mistaken. It is because the philosophers in question have worked through the contemporary predicament as thoroughly as they have that the character of the predicament has been brought to the surface. The predicament, which was initiated by the recognition of the importance of context, has become apparent through the attempts to abandon a realist notion of truth. It is because the denial of a realist truth is now so ubiquitous that the predicament can be said to characterise current thinking.[16] So it is that we find ourselves in a hall of mirrors where nothing is as it seems. Where not only is there no bedrock, no ground to our views, but the absence of such a ground is itself unsayable, with the consequence that we face a radical collapse of meaning.

The contemporary predicament, for the reasons that have been briefly outlined, is not a sustainable location. Nor is it clear how any of the currently available theories might be developed to deal with the problem.

The Great Project and its failure

> The great enterprise of knowledge itself, the dream of the Enlightenment and one of the driving forces of Western culture, is flawed from the outset and carries within it the seeds of its own self-destruction.

If the contemporary predicament is not sustainable, and stems from the abandonment of truth in a realist sense, the first and most likely response is to seek to retain the notion of an independent reality that can be accurately described. The attempt to provide a realist account of the relationship between language and the world and implicitly therefore the possibility of uncovering what might really exist may show no signs of success[17] but there would appear to be good reason for seeking to retain at least the possibility of such a theory. I shall argue however, that realism even as a hypothetical goal, of whatever form or however limited, is not an option, for the destructive self-reference that has been identified in non-realism, and which typifies the contemporary predicament, has its roots in the project of uncovering a true picture of an independent reality.

The assumption that knowledge of the world is possible and that new knowledge can be acquired is so ingrained in our culture that one can easily overlook the grandness of the metaphysical story on which it relies. Indeed it has not been uncommon for realists to claim that no metaphysical claims are involved and that the stance is merely an expression of common sense. While realism reflects the widespread belief that language gives us the capacity to describe things as they are, such a belief implicitly incorporates the grand notion that we are capable of uncovering the essential character of the world. I shall describe this notion, with perhaps a hint of caricature, as the 'Great Project' of Western culture. The Great Project in its unmodified form has consisted in the belief that it is possible to make steps, however small and painstaking, towards a true, final, and complete account of the world. Although philosophers have contributed to the Great Project, it is science and its achievements that have been its primary propagandist. Pursuit of the Great Project in the form of science has largely been assumed to consist in the attempt to make careful and gradual progress, through observation and deduction, towards an account which however limited and circumscribed would be a small advance towards a true account of the world.

For many of the philosophers who can be regarded as adherents to the Great Project, the task of the philosopher is to be engaged in an important but second-order activity. The underlabourer metaphor may have a somewhat falsely modest ring to it, but certainly from this outlook the philosopher is the structural engineer rather than the architect of the edifice, engaged in an attempt to prove the foundations and ensure the continuing solidity of the building as new layers are added. As a consequence of these deliberations some have wished to modify the more grandiose aims of the project. A modest modification proposes that while a complete and true account of the world may remain the goal of our endeavours we need not be committed to the view that such a goal is attainable. We may make ever finer alterations to our description of the world in the attempt to approach the goal but we should not hold to the belief that the goal can be reached. Our views about the world can thus be shown to be mistaken but we cannot know that they will always hold true.[18] A more extensive modification involves the limiting of knowledge in some respects thereby abandoning the notion of a complete and true account, even as an ideal, in favour of the possibility of a limited arena of knowledge. These modifications do not however constrain the main thrust of the Great Project, since it is still possible to engage in the successive extension of our understanding.

The possibility of the Great Project is a philosophical dream, but as it has been indicated it is not a dream exclusive to, or even primarily held by, philosophers. Uncovering the true nature of reality has been perhaps the driving motivation behind much scientific work and the characteristic that has been used to distinguish science from technology. In the concluding sentence of his highly successful attempt to popularise contemporary scientific theory Stephen Hawking even comes close to suggesting that a significant portion of the Great Project is nearing completion when he proposes that science is on the verge of providing a complete theory of the physical world, and that when it does so we will have uncovered 'the mind of God'.[19]

Although only infrequently explicit, the Great Project, it can be argued, has until the relatively recent appearance of non-realism, been the dream of the European tradition since the Enlightenment.[20] The case can be made that it has sustained an attachment to scientific progress, and thereby enabled an order of economic change previously unseen. Furthermore, it has been the source of an assumed social and historical superiority. For in addition to military and material success, the assumption of knowledge can be seen to have sustained the belief in 'civilisation'. In the light of the Great Project, Western culture has been able to regard itself not merely as

being more economically successful than previous or alternative cultures but more advanced, having begun the slow acquisition of those modestly eternal truths known as facts and the placing of them within a theoretical framework. In addition, the possibility of social and historical progression, although not a necessary consequence of a belief in the possibility of the Great Project, can be seen to rely on the possibility of a framework of knowledge. For if we have the criteria by which to assess culture against some fixed points and the means to observe it, it then becomes possible for social progress to be discerned.

The case will however be made that there is an inherent flaw in the Great Project. It will be argued that the goal of the Great Project is unachievable because the goal is itself inconsistent. As with the contemporary predicament, the inconsistency in the Great Project stems from a paradox of self-reference. It is a flaw that I shall maintain cannot be obviated and which can be briefly expressed: a complete and true account of the universe is not possible because if it is complete it will be self-referential, and if it is self-referential it cannot also be true.[21]

In order to provide a complete account of the world, such an account must along with an account of everything in the world account for itself. Although therefore the theory that is the goal of the Great Project may distinguish between the observer, the theory, and the universe, any such initial distinction must be subsumed at a more general theoretical level into a single layer in which the observer, the theory, and the universe are each embedded. Without such a manoeuvre the account of the universe, provided by the theory, cannot be complete for the theory is not itself part of the universe which it has described. In order to be complete, the theory, the observer and the universe need at some level to be part of a single whole. Each of the options available have been extensively explored. Materialism involves embedding the observer and the theory in the universe; idealism the embedding of the theory and the universe in the observer; and the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy has frequently appeared to involve the observer and the universe being embedded in the theory. One can argue over whether various perspectives fall into one category or another. Whether, for example, empiricism is a form of idealism or materialism. The principle is however unavoidable: if the notion of the possibility of a complete account of the world is to be retained, dualism or a tripartite division is not sustainable, instead some type of monism must be adopted.[22]

The general principle can be illustrated in the materialist context of science. In order to provide a complete account of the physical world it will be necessary to give an account of how the theories of science themselves,

as part of the physical world, are also the outcome of the laws which the theories express. A complete theory will thus need to be self-referential, so that in addition to providing the laws of the universe, those laws will need to be capable of providing an account of how human observers, as a certain combination of physical constituents on a planet in one part of the universe, will necessarily formulate at a certain point in time, through physical activity in their brain, the true theory of the universe. Such a theory would then be self-referential for the observer and the theory would not be distinguished from the remainder of the universe and would therefore be governed by the same laws.

The problem is that although a monist theory, of this sort, might in principle be capable of providing an account of its own existence, it is no longer apparent how this theory can be recognised as true. If, adopting the materialist form of the paradox, a scientific theory emerged which was itself the product of its own laws in what sense could it be distinguished from any other product of those laws? It would make no more sense to say of this theory that it was true than it would to say of any other product of the universe that it was false. Products of a monist universe cannot be true or false, they merely exist. The brain state of intelligent beings that reflects the true theory of the universe needs to be distinguishable from any other combination of physical states by virtue of its being true, but in a purely material universe we cannot give an account of the relation between any one physical state and the universe as whole, two necessarily different states, which would identify it as being true, or for that matter false. In summary form therefore the materialist paradox is that there can be no means of identifying any one physical state as being a view of the universe as a whole, whether true or false. Correspondingly, the idealist form of this paradox is that if the world is subjective it is not going to be possible to recognise that subjectivity.[23] While in its linguistic form it is that if the world is language it is no longer going to be possible to express this within language.[24]

Another way of expressing the materialist form of self-referential paradox is in the problem of the observer. The Great Project in its general form requires a theory that allows for no observer, since the observer must be part of the system that is being observed for otherwise the project will fail to be a complete account of the world. At the same time however a complete and true account of the world suggests an Olympian or God's Eye View of the universe, a view that would enable an independent observation of how things are. The contradiction in this notion has led some to suggest that it is not so much a view from on high but a view from nowhere.[25] Such a description covers up the inconsistency. It might be more accurately

described as the No View View, for in this description is immediately shown the circularity: the Great Project both demands the observer and must reject the observer. In order to provide an account which is independent of historical and cultural relativism and of the subjectivity of the observer, the Great Project in its materialist form requires an Archimedean point from which to describe the universe. Such a perspective will not however be explained by the theory since the function of the Archimedean point is to distance the observer from the world irrevocably so that an unblemished view of the universe is made possible. If the perspective itself becomes a product of the system it describes it will no longer be a perspective on the universe but a part of it, and if it is part of it how is it to be distinguished as true?[26] A materialist version of the Great Project requires both to assert a distinction between the observer and the system to provide an Archimedean point, and to deny such a distinction in order to allow the Great Project to explain itself as a product of the universe.

The logical inconsistency in the notion of uncovering a true and complete account of the world has direct practical parallels in both scientific and philosophical theories. Quantum mechanics is a central theory in the current body of science. As such it can be regarded as being part of the attempt to provide a true description of the world. In its generally accepted form, namely Bohr's version of the Copenhagen Interpretation, its predictions however rely on a distinction between the observer and the system and thus exemplify self-referential paradox. For as long as quantum mechanics incorporates a distinction between the observer and the system, it is necessarily incompatible with the notion of a description of physical reality which is independent of observers.[27] That a central theory of science incorporates self-referential paradox does not entail the abandonment of metaphysical realism or the Grand Project for there is always the alternative of abandoning this version of quantum mechanics: a strategy which has at least had respectable historical support in the form of Schrödinger and Einstein. It is a problem for contemporary materialists that so central a scientific theory should currently be regarded as 'true', but in order to retain the Great Project one only has to propose variations to the theory, such as hidden variables or possible world interpretations, or that some future theory will prove the current version to be incorrect. The logical inconsistency of the Great Project has however the consequence that any attempt to provide a true story of the universe will necessarily incorporate theories which, like quantum mechanics, are at odds with the goal of the project itself.

To find a philosophical theory that illustrates the inconsistency in the notion of the Great Project we need only identify theories that have sought

to provide a description of the relation between language and the world and that assume or propose the possibility of a true account of the world. The one which, due to its own internal rigour, perhaps most clearly illustrates the paradox in question, is Wittgenstein's early work the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the conclusion of which provides an explicit form of the self-referential paradox with which we have been concerned. The problem with the famous final sentence, 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence', is that the theory outlined in the *Tractatus* itself is one of those things that according to the theory cannot be said. In a more general manner it is an example of the circularity which has already been identified, namely that the attempt to provide in language a total symbolic system that describes the relation between language and the world must fail because language and its relationship to the world is not part of the world and therefore cannot be described by it.

The reflexive problems that have been identified in quantum mechanics and the *Tractatus* are not simply examples of theories that have gone wrong, but can be seen to be products of the underlying paradox that is incorporated into the Great Project from the outset. The paradoxes may not have appeared in this particular way and in these particular theories, but the argument that has been put forward suggests that they will necessarily appear in some part of the theory that would in principle constitute a completion of the Great Project for the reasons that have been outlined.

It would appear therefore that a return to realism as a means of escape from the contemporary predicament is not a possible strategy; but before accepting this outcome it is necessary, at least briefly, to identify why attempts to limit the Great Project do not provide a solution to the problem of self-reference. For if the attempt to provide a complete and true account of the world is not possible it might at first sight appear that the Great Project could be limited in some manner so that reflexive paradox can be avoided. If for example we could abandon the requirement to provide a complete account of the world could we not accept a partial description of an independent reality? Could not the problems of self-reference be avoided by making it no longer necessary for the theory to account for itself?

A summary explanation that can be offered to account for the failure of attempts to limit the Great Project is that either the limitation itself falls within its own limits in which case it succumbs to the paradoxes of self-reference, or it does not fall within its own limits in which case the Great Project has not been limited after all. An example of this further form of the self-referential paradox can be seen to have been held by the logical positivists. In an attempt to limit the arena within which knowledge was

possible, and thereby allow for the possibility of a body of true meaningful statements, it was necessary to provide a definition of meaningful statements. The problem can be seen to be immediate, for any statement that sought to describe the criteria for meaningfulness was itself incapable of fulfilling such criteria. Suggested definitions went through a number of variants of the form: 'all meaningful statements must be empirically verifiable' but none managed to avoid reflexive paradox. The problem being that the statements themselves were not empirically verifiable. The statement of limitation itself therefore fell outside of its own limits and was not according to its own criterion a meaningful claim.

Writing a century before language became the dominant philosophical concern, the great German philosopher, Kant, is another example of a philosopher who sought to limit the Great Project. He did so by seeking to identify limits to our understanding. According to Kant we are only capable of knowledge of the world as it appears to us, not the world as it ultimately is. The task is however doomed to failure[28] for as Wittgenstein succinctly summarised 'in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought)'.[29]

Other attempts to limit the extent of the Great Project by making the goal of a complete and true account an unattainable ideal to which nevertheless progress can be made fall to similar self-referential paradox. If the goal of the Great Project is an ideal how can we know this to be the case, for such knowledge would be an example of a truth the possibility of which is seemingly denied? Either we take the claim that 'the Great Project is an unattainable ideal' as a truth, in which case this element of knowledge is not ideal and has been attained, or we do not take it as truth in which case it falls to reflexive paradox. If the claim is true and this element of knowledge is not ideal, in order to avoid immediate paradox we will require an account of the type of knowledge that is possible and not unattainable. This in turn will require a definition to limit the Great Project in the manner we have already considered and will therefore also fall to the paradoxes of self-reference.

The possibility of a true description of an independent reality, the assumption of realism, would appear therefore to be inconsistent. If we are seeking a solution to the crisis of meaning that follows the adoption of non-realism and the abandonment of truth, we are unlikely therefore to find a solution in a return to realism. Metaphysical realism is faced with the problem that the paradox of self-reference is embedded in the notion from the beginning. The great enterprise of knowledge itself, the dream of the Enlightenment and one of the driving forces of Western culture, is

seemingly flawed from the outset and carries within it the seeds of its own self-destruction.

An illusory solution

> Russell and Tarski's solution to self-referential paradox succeeds only by arbitrarily outlawing the paradox and thus provides no solution at all.

Some have claimed to have a formal, logical, solution to the paradoxes of self-reference. Since if these were successful the problems associated with the contemporary predicament and the Great Project could be solved forthwith, it is important to briefly examine them before proceeding further. The argument I shall put forward aims to demonstrate that these theories offer no satisfactory solution to the problem, and that they only appear to do so by obscuring the fact that they have defined their terms in such a way that the paradox is not so much avoided as outlawed.

The problems of self-reference that we have identified are analogous to the ancient liar paradox. The ancient liar paradox stated that 'All Cretans are liars' but was itself uttered by a Cretan thus making its meaning undecidable. A modern equivalent of this ancient paradox would be 'This sentence is not true', and the more general claim that we have already encountered: 'there is no truth'. In each case the application of the claim to itself results in paradox. Similarly, the theory that is the goal of the Great Project cannot be expressed because when it is applied to itself it can no longer be held as true, and in the same way, the denial of literal meaning at the heart of the contemporary predicament cannot be expressed because when applied to itself it denies the denial of literal meaning.

Both Russell and Tarski have proposed solutions to this paradox, and offer the most important formal attempts to solve the problems of self-reference. Russell's Theory of Types, and Tarski's hierarchy of languages are both based on the principle of introducing a series of levels enabling the sentence to remain distinct from its meaning, or in Russell's case a set to be distinct from its contents, with the consequence that destructive self-reference can be avoided. If these proposals are effective they could be applied to the contemporary predicament and the Great Project enabling a denial of literal meaning that would not include the claim itself and similarly enabling the true theory that is the goal of the Great Project to avoid having to include itself as part of the theory.

Russell can be regarded as the first to formalise the paradox in modern times. In *Principia Mathematica* he sought to provide a symbolic

language capable of describing mathematics and then wished to apply a system of logical analysis to language as a whole. His symbolic language that described mathematics was based around sets and the Russellian form of the self-referential paradox was generated by sets that were able to include themselves. Examples given by Russell of the paradox include the case of a barber who shaves everyone in a town who does not shave himself, or the catalogue of catalogues that do not name themselves. The paradox is made explicit when we consider whether the barber should shave himself or not, or whether the catalogue should name itself or not. In either case there is no possible solution. If the barber does not shave himself, he should do so for he shaves everyone in the town who does not shave himself; yet if he does shave himself he should not do so, since he only shaves those who do not shave themselves. A similar argument applies to the catalogue: if it includes itself it should not have done so, and if it does not include itself it should have done so. The theory which is the goal of the Great Project is thus also an example, for it is a theory which must include itself, but if it does so is no longer true. Russell's proposal is to generate a hierarchy of sets of different types. A set cannot include itself for it would be of a different type than its contents. Tarski adopts Russell's theory but applies it to language as a whole, proposing a hierarchy of languages, each higher layer of which refers to the layer below, thereby avoiding the possibility of language referring to itself.

I argued in *Reflexivity: The Post-Modern Predicament*[30] that the principle of a hierarchy of sets or languages fails to cope with circumstances in which the self-reference of the claim is essential to its expression. Russell wished to outlaw self-reference in order to avoid undecidability in his logic, but in the paradoxes we have considered the self-reference is itself a necessary part of the claim and cannot be simply outlawed. If claims such as 'there is no truth' are allowed only by denying their capacity to refer to themselves, such an outcome is not satisfactory for it would then appear that there is truth after all, only at a higher level in the hierarchy. In order to seek to avoid this outcome one would then be forced to extend the hierarchy of sets or levels indefinitely and still the problem remains. More recently, the American philosopher Hilary Putnam has also sought to contend, and with considerably greater detail and precision, that no satisfactory solution has been proposed to the ancient liar paradox and its modern logical counterpart of set theoretic and semantic paradoxes.[31] The problem as Putnam describes it is where the language used to describe the hierarchy is itself to be placed. The paradox is that one has to stand outside the hierarchy in order to formulate the statement that the hierarchy exists. This

formulation of the problem stems however from the underlying problem outlined above that these supposed solutions do not really allow for self-reference at all.

The next few paragraphs are intended for those readers who would find a technical version of the argument that I have put forward more persuasive.

Adopting Tarski's hierarchy of languages one can formulate sentences that have the appearance of being self-referential. For example, a Tarskian version of 'This sentence is not true' would be:

(I) The sentence (I) is not true-in-L.

So Tarski's argument runs, this sentence is both a true sentence of the language meta-L, and false in the language L, because it refers to itself and is therefore, according to the rules of Tarski's logic and the hierarchy of languages, not properly formed. The hierarchy of languages apparently therefore enables self-referential sentences but avoids paradox.

More careful inspection however shows the manoeuvre to be engaged in a sleight of hand for the sentence as constructed only appears to be self-referential. It is a true sentence of the meta-language that makes an assertion of a sentence in L, but these are two different sentences – although they have superficially the same form. What makes them different is that the meaning of the predicate 'is not true' is different in each case. In the meta-language it applies the meta-language predicate 'true' to the object language, while in the object language it is not a predicate at all. As a consequence the sentence is not self-referential. Another way of expressing this point would be to consider the sentence in the meta-language. The sentence purports to be a true sentence in the meta-language, and applies the predicate 'is not true' to a sentence in L, not to a sentence in meta-L. Yet what is this sentence in L? It cannot be the same sentence for this is expressed in meta-L. The evasion becomes more apparent if we revise the example so that the sentence is more explicitly self-referential:

(I) The sentence (I) is not true-in-this-language.

Tarski's proposal that no language is allowed to contain its own truth-predicate is precisely designed to make this example impossible. The hierarchy of languages succeeds therefore only by providing an account of truth which makes genuine self-reference impossible. It can hardly be regarded therefore as a solution to the paradox of self-reference, since if

all that was required to solve the paradox was to ban it, this could have been done at the outset.

The problem identified by Putnam regarding the description of the theory of the hierarchy of levels can be seen to be the reappearance of the problem of self-reference which is in practice outlawed within the theory itself. The supposed solutions offered by Russell and Tarski to the problems of self-reference that beset set theory and realist theories of meaning, and which also beset the theory that is the goal of the Great Project, thus provide no solution at all. For, the paradox is only avoided by arbitrarily making it impossible, in which case the problem simply reappears in the theory that has been employed to evade the issue.

A WAY FORWARD

Since we cannot stay where we are, and since a return to some form of realism is not a possible strategy, we must look elsew here if we are to find a means to escape the contemporary predicament. But where might we look, and how?

In an attempt to come to terms with the problems of self-reference non-realists have tended to concentrate on the mechanisms of language, and the inability of language to describe the world. Instead I shall propose as a first step the adoption of an alternative notion of the world. A notion in which the world is not held as a thing or a combination of things. For the moment such an outlook will be identified as the holding of the world as not-thing. At first sight this might appear to be an unlikely and unpromising proposal but in due course I will hope to demonstrate that it has value.

To begin with in the first part of this section I will primarily be concerned to show that the familiar and contrary notion that the world is a thing or a collection of things is much more questionable than we usually suppose. The aim of this argument will be to indicate why the converse, holding the world as not-thing, might therefore be a stance worth exploring. Some aspects of the arguments put forward in this part are rather technical in nature and some readers may prefer to skip these elements and proceed to the second part of the section which describes the task ahead given the starting point that has been proposed.

Having identified a starting point and a goal we will be in a position to set out on the project to find an alternative framework that might enable us to escape from the malaise into which we have fallen. It is to this task that the remainder of the book is then devoted.

The world as not-thing

> The world is not a list of things, nor is it itself a thing, no matter how complicated a list, no matter how complicated a thing.

From forest to tree, from beech to oak, from branch to leaf, we have things it would appear for every part and aspect of the world. Although we may not choose to do so, there is in principle, no corner left untouched, no crevice unfilled, no location in which some thing cannot be found.[32] In proposing that the world is held as not-thing, these distinctions are to be seen not as the outcome of distinctions in the world but as the outcome of language. It is not simply that we could have named these things differently, or have made different distinctions, but that the possibility of dividing the world into things at all is itself the outcome of a process of which language is a part. The world is not either divided into things or the result of the combination of things, nor is itself a thing.

I want, at this stage, to put forward two preliminary reasons for adopting this seemingly unlikely starting point. The first of these is that such a stance might provide an explanation of the prevalence of the paradoxes of self-reference; and the second, that since we can give no credible account of the nature of a thing it is unhelpful to consider the world and its contents as consisting of things. These reasons are not intended to function as a proof, but rather to indicate why such a starting point might be productive. A more powerful reason for adopting such a stance is to be found in the capacity of the theory of closure to account for our circumstances, but that reason will only become apparent as the theory itself unfolds.

The first reason for holding the world as not-thing is that the ubiquity of the paradoxes of self-reference can be seen not as some strange and inexplicable accident but the outcome of a mistake. If we hold the world as not-thing, it is to be expected that language cannot uncover the true nature of the world, for language provides a description of things. The method of rational empiricism that has underpinned Western culture, and on which science is based, seeks to ascertain whether its descriptions of the world – its theories – are accurate, by placing them up against reality – by testing them. Although powerful, the method ultimately fails, for any theory offers a description of things and their relations, and the world is always different since it is not a thing or combination of things. Furthermore, the process of rational empiricism in failing to provide a true description of the world has itself gradually brought to our notice the inability to describe the world independently of the language used to make the description. Rational empiricism thus starts with the assumption

that there is a world which can be accurately described and uncovers our inability to provide such a description. Realism has thus uncovered its own mistake and we have increasingly adopted a non-realist stance. The step into non-realism however has been equally embedded in self-referential paradox due to its historical debt to realism. For although non-realism denies the possibility of realist truth we have currently no means of understanding in what such a claim could consist without an implicit reliance on a realism that the claim itself denies. A description of language as non-literal can only have force if we have an account of how such a claim can have content.

Holding the world as not-thing might appear therefore to enable an explanation for the failure of realism and the paradoxical character of the contemporary predicament, but it faces a similar self-referential problem. The empirical failure of realism cannot be explained on the grounds that the world is not a thing, if we are to understand by this that we have thereby described the true nature of the world. For to have done so would be at once reflexively paradoxical. As with similar non-realist claims, the assertion 'the world is not-thing' cannot itself be offered as a description of the world. It is for this reason that this outlook has been described as 'the holding of the world as not-thing'. Only when the theory of closure is elaborated will it become fully apparent what is intended by this formulation.

The second reason for holding the world as not-thing is at the same time a reason that obliquely provides a clue as to how the descriptions provided by language might themselves be interpreted. For while we take the notion of a thing for granted, the closer it is examined the more elusive it becomes. Although there are countless examples of things, as soon as an attempt is made to define a particular thing with precision we can neither empirically find a physical example, nor on further examination can we in principle envisage in what it could consist. The purpose in pursuing the nature of a thing will be to demonstrate this point: that the familiar notion of a thing which we take for granted is riven with problems and potential inconsistency. The seemingly simple proposal that the world is a thing, or consists of things, turns out to be highly questionable and certainly one that cannot be assumed will make a credible starting point for an account of ourselves and our relation to the world. As a result we should consider the unlikely alternative of proposing that we hold the world as not-thing. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, there will be an indication that the division of the world into things by language is itself in the limit not successful, and that as a consequence an account of language needs to provide for this outcome.

A first attempt to define the nature of a thing might propose that for something to be a thing it has to be one and it has to be the same: it has to be this singular thing and it cannot also be something else. Everyday material objects do not however satisfy these apparently elementary criteria. In the first instance everyday objects are not uniquely identifiable as some one thing: a particular example of a house, ostensively defined by pointing to it and saying 'that house', for example, is not uniquely a house. The house in question may also be a building, an environment, a structure, a habitat. If each of these 'things' was equivalent to the others we could retain the notion that objects were uniquely identifiable by regarding the various terms as synonyms. Such a trivial rejoinder is not possible. 'House' means something different from 'building' or 'structure', and when used to identify a particular object as in 'that house' it seeks to identify a different thing from 'that structure'. It certainly cannot be assumed that these different words have the same meaning, or refer to the same thing. Nor can examples be found of particular things that cannot be described as some other thing, for things are a function of the role they serve and the context in which they are found. However, if every particular thing is potentially an unlimited number of other things, the defining character of thinghood would appear to have been lost, since nothing could be said to be uniquely anything in particular.

Then again, not only can everyday material objects be described as alternative things, but it is equally the case that any material thing can be sub-divided into further things. While a cup is at the same time a container, it is also a handle and a bowl. However, if each material thing can be divided into further things, the thing is either something in addition to the combination of things of which it is constituted, or there must be elementary things of which all other things are constituted. Neither of these conclusions looks attractive. If the cup is something in addition to the handle and the bowl, what is this something that is other than its constituents? If, on the other hand it is proposed that everyday material objects are made of elementary things which are not themselves made up of anything else it is not possible to provide an example of such a material simple.[33] Nor as I shall later demonstrate is it possible to envisage a circumstance in which such a material simple could be identified.

It is widely believed that problems of this sort have been largely overcome by the development of modern logic. In this context one likely response would be to argue that the case presented has engaged in an elementary confusion between the thing and its identification, between reference and meaning. While any particular thing may be identified in

innumerable ways, and can be described as consisting of innumerable other things, the thing in question is unique and could not be something else. The subject of a proposition need not uniquely label a thing with the consequence that there are as many things as subjects of propositions. The subject of a proposition is not a name for an individual thing but a set of criteria whose solution is found in the thing to which they refer. Thus 'that house' and 'that structure' can both refer to the same material thing, because each offers a different set of descriptions which in each case is satisfied by the physical entity in question. It can be argued therefore that the thing, the particular, is identified only as the solution to an abstract variable, x. Within such an account what appears as the name of a particular is instead understood as a function of x with a particular as its solution. The Quinean doctrine 'to be is to be the value of a variable'[34] can be understood in this light; a conclusion made possible by the original Fregean symbolism that introduced quantification and founded modern logic. As the result of such arguments the proliferation of things would appear to be contained. Instead of being committed to an array of different particulars each of which might be said to exist, we can say there exists an x such that x satisfies the conditions of being a house and a building and an environment and a structure and a habitat. Or there exists an x such that x is a cup, and a handle and bowl. Although in such an account we still use words which seemingly name things, these are not names of the object but are hidden descriptions. Thus names such as 'the house' and 'the building' can be considered as predicates of the abstract variable. 'That house' when analysed in this manner is understood to mean 'that thing which satisfies the conditions of being a house'. To propose that this thing might also satisfy a whole range of other conditions, does not therefore lead to a proliferation of things but merely a proliferation of descriptions of the one thing. We are thereby apparently able to maintain the notion that a thing is this thing and not something else.

There is however a cost to this response. The everyday objects with which we began have ceased to be things. In their place we have an ideal notion of a thing, the particular or object which is understood as that which satisfies the requisite criteria. Although everyday material objects imply a theoretical thing which lies behind the implied description provided, we are unable to give an account of the thing itself nor to indicate what makes it one and the same thing. Inevitably such a philosophical standpoint will face epistemological difficulties, since the logical simple recedes from view in much the same manner as a Platonic idea.[35] The epistemological difficulties associated with a retreat from

everyday material objects to logical objects is not however the matter which shall concern us here. More salient to the question of the nature of a thing is the problem that the move from material objects to an underlying simple makes it no clearer what makes this notional logical, or material, simple a thing. It can be proposed that behind the material object called a house, building, and so forth, there is a thing which satisfies these descriptions, but in so doing we are left no clearer as to the nature of a thing nor what possible characteristic enables this thing to be identified as one thing and one thing only. Why is such an underlying simple incapable of being further subdivided? What is it that makes it unitary? The notion of the underlying simple merely supposes that it cannot be so subdivided, that it is just one. Yet not only do we not understand how this is in practice possible we are no clearer to understanding how this outcome is in principle imaginable.[36]

The proposal of a material simple that underlies everyday objects is reflected in the physical account of matter provided by science. The notion of smaller physical units that in combination make up familiar material objects is perhaps the commonplace understanding. A table is thus made of its relevant elements such as the top and legs, and these in turn are made of a material, such as wood, which in turn consists of a complex lattice of atoms. This hierarchy of things does not however get us any closer to understanding the nature of the thing. For it is always possible to ask of the thing in question, no matter how small, of what it is constituted. The atom is thus no closer to being one and the same, than the table with which we began. The same is equally true of the subatomic particles of physics. Whether the elementary particles are seen as quarks, leptons, strings, energy packets or force fields, it remains possible to ask of what this particle consists or to question the make up of the energy packet or force field.[37]

In proposing a material or logical simple we rely on an extrapolation from our everyday notion of material objects in order to determine what might be understood by such an account. It is thus supposed that the material or logical simple is itself and not anything else, in the same way that we usually suppose that one material object is not something else. As we have indicated however everyday material objects do not in fact have such a character. We cannot therefore understand material or logical simples by extrapolation from our experience of material objects. If elementary simples were to have the same characteristics as material objects they would in a similar fashion be capable of alternative descriptions. However in such a case, the elementary simple would no longer

serve to solve the initial concern with the nature of a thing, for the problem re-emerges one layer further back.

The purpose of a logical or material simple is to provide a basis for our general understanding of a thing. Since this basis takes as its assumption the very issue that is in question, namely the nature of a thing, the matter is hardly brought to a conclusion. The elusiveness of that which we take for granted, the thing as material object, is not solved by providing an endpoint which assumes the character of a thing but fails to explicate what is involved in such a notion. Rather than assume as a consequence that we can replace our everyday things, material objects, with idealised elementary things, either as logical or material simples, we need to examine in what such an idealised notion might consist.

It has been argued that the criterion that a thing should be one thing and not something else does not apply in the case of everyday material objects but could it not apply to ideal simple objects? It is because simples are defined in such a manner that an example cannot be provided, that we can entertain the possibility that such simples have some undefined, and it begins to look undefinable, characteristic that makes them one and the same thing. The nature of material objects that makes it impossible to identify something that is both one and the same must however apply equally to material and logical simples.

If we consider the requirement of singularity, it has been argued that we are unable to give an example of a material thing that is one, because any material object can both be divided into smaller things and is itself part of something else. It can be seen that a similar conclusion applies in the context of supposed material or logical simples. In order for a material or logical simple to be uniquely one thing it could neither be divisible nor could it be part of some other simple thing. It must therefore be unrelated to all other simple things for otherwise it could be regarded as being made up of other things or itself as being part of something else. However if it is unrelated to any other simple thing it cannot be combined with any other simple or combination of simples to form a complex unit unless the complex is merely a combination of the simples. Material objects do not appear to satisfy this criterion. A chair, for example, is not fully described by being a combination of leptons, quarks and forces; to be a chair it also has to fulfil a certain function in human society. It is not clear how such a characteristic could be derived from the elementary particles alone. It can equally be argued that in order to be uniquely one, the thing must be indivisible, for otherwise it would be capable of being more than one. However, if something is to be indivisible it cannot have any spatial dimension, for otherwise a line could be drawn through it. It might be