CLOSURE

A story of everything

Hilary Lawson

London and New York

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.

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CONTENTS

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