

Reflexivity: The Post-modern predicament  
Hilary Lawson  
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Review by Lee Harvey

In his contribution to the *Problems of Modern European Thought* series, Lawson addresses the issue of reflexivity. He concerns himself with the work of three people, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. He argues that these three have been excluded from mainstream philosophy because their concerns do not reflect the traditional concerns of (analytic) philosophy. It is interesting, then, to note that modern sociology (with its usual time lag) has wholeheartedly, in some areas, and, in others, incorporated them as essential social philosophers of the 'post-modern' age.

Lawson asserts, rather than explicitly demonstrates, a linear heritage from Nietzsche through Heidegger to Derrida. This tradition is underpinned by a common concern with reflexivity. For Lawson, reflexivity is a form of self-awareness; it is 'a turning back on oneself'. As such it has always been part of philosophy. So why is reflexivity a problem of the post-modern era? Lawson argues it is because reflexive questions have arisen anew and in intensified form because of the post-modern recognition of the 'central role played by language, theory, sign and text'.

The heart of the problem, then, is that the modern world, not least through the medium of structuralism, has come to face up squarely to the inability to assert transparent truths. [1] Widespread notions about the cultural relativism of common sense, and the theory-dependence of empirical observation, have undermined transparent truths. But, argues Lawson, they have led to unstable views, for one is then unable to assert as true that 'there are no facts'. He asserts, drawing on a 'straw person' model, that philosophy ignores these paradoxes and that it is in the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida that these unstable views are met head on. However, the resulting irrationalism sits uncomfortably with the essentially, or residually, rationalist nature of social philosophy.

Lawson argues that the 'European tradition' of philosophy since the Enlightenment can be seen as underwritten by an empirico-rationalist approach. The acquisition of facts is what constitutes the (scientists) accrual of knowledge. The philosopher oversees the development of knowledge by separating out values from facts. The former, of course, are disqualified from the objectivist view of knowledge. Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida, Lawson argues, do not regard philosophy as providing any kind of certainty on which knowledge claims can rest; on the contrary, they assert that such claims are illusory. While not assuming that Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida are alone in their assault on rationalist objectivism, Lawson argues that among English speaking critics, from Wittgenstein to Dewey and James, the attack on the foundational role of philosophy has been an attack on reason, empirical method and the fact value-distinction, rather than an attack on the possibility of knowledge.

Lawson argues that denying the possibility of knowledge raises a reflexive problem, viz. how may one know that knowledge is not possible? Lawson sees Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida texts as 'intractable' not least because they contain unfamiliar concepts. Reflexivity is such a concept, and while

pervasive in their works, is largely implicit. Thus making life difficult for the reader who does not appreciate the centrality of the theme. Reflexivity operates in two ways in the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. First, it is a means of critique. Second, it is a 'positive movement employed in the proposed alternative to knowledge.

As a means of critique, reflexivity is not unique. Hegel, for example, uses a reflexive critique in his engagement with Kantian philosophy. Indeed, the type of argument that tries to show that the theory presented in a text itself reflexively denies the possibility of the theory, is familiar to analytic philosophers. The very simple self-referring paradoxes of the type 'this sentence is false' can be overcome by excluding the sentence itself from the realm to which it refers. So a claim that 'there is no truth' could only refer to limited realms, such as aesthetics, religion, morality. Once it refers to all knowledge it also refers to itself and thus becomes paradoxical. Delimiting realms of relevance, of course, is unsatisfactory as it requires the construction of an *ad hoc* hierarchy of types.

The temptation, Lawson argues, has been for philosophy to put such paradoxes away in boxes labelled 'mathematical puzzles' and ignore them. Disturbingly, however, 'these reflexive paradoxes are found at the root of our most fundamental theories'. He argues, for example, that both logical positivism and Feyerabend's anarchism, which he regards as the most prominent philosophies of science in the twentieth century, 'have a reflexively paradoxical starting point'. Logical positivism claimed 'only empirically verifiable statements are meaningful' which itself is not verifiable empirically. The resolution of this paradox by the logical positivists was, in effect, to remove their claim from the realm of meaningful statements that required grounding in empirical evidence. Conversely, Feyerabend, following on from Kuhn, argues that science develops in an irrational way and that there is no such thing as final rational justification, yet attempts to provide just such a final justification in his denial of the supremacy of science, his assertion of the incommensurability of terms in different cultures or epochs, and his advocacy of theoretical anarchism.

In addition, reflexivity is a problem for many forms of relativism, be it cultural, historical or social. This is particularly evident in areas such as the sociology of knowledge, which attempts to construct a meta-level in order to show how theories and, indeed, knowledge, are possible. Mannheim, for example, in attempting to avoid self-reference asserted the social determinism and thus relativity of truth and then 'allowed his own theory to escape this description by introducing a meta-level of an intellectual elite who are able to break through social determination'. In dealing with Marx and Marxism, Lawson argues that if Marx claims that the views or ideology of individuals are the product of their social and historical position then this must also be true of Marx.

Lawson points to pragmatism and the later work of Wittgenstein, which, he maintains, avoid general metaphysical claims and thus avoid paradoxes of self-reference. Thus, for example, pragmatists' statements about the essence of truth are about 'attempting to change the way we go about doing things'. Pragmatists do not have any notion of a grand scheme to provide the final account of the world; they simply want to use their theories to convince others and to alter their actions. Similarly, Wittgenstein avoids the paradoxical effects of reflexivity by avoiding any general theory of language. When challenged, Wittgenstein or the pragmatists simply refer to a case in point rather than provide an overall theory. [2] This, however, does not confront reflexivity, but circumvents it. Lawson, apparently, is unhappy about this devious tactic.

Neitzsche, Heidegger and Derrida are not so devious. They do two things. First, they show that reflexivity exists and is inherent in the writings of all other philosophers, despite attempts to eradicate it. [This is hardly surprising if ‘all general theories are self-reflexively paradoxical’.] Second, they endorse reflexivity, rather than attempt to overcome it, because it is intrinsic to all philosophical writing. Thus, Lawson claims, unlike other philosophers, Neitzsche, Heidegger and Derrida do not attempt a definitive theory themselves. What they do address is ‘the problem of writing a text in the light of the implications of its own reflexivity’. Lawson does admit that this is not necessarily an explicitly stated concern of Neitzsche, Heidegger or Derrida but that it underpins their work. Thus, he argues, claiming that Neitzsche, Heidegger and Derrida are paradoxical is not an effective criticism of them because that, essentially, is what they claim to be. [But if they are paradoxical, whether they claim it or not, surely they may be criticised for their paradoxicality?]

Neitzsche, Heidegger and Derrida all argue, paradoxically, in effect, that we are trapped within language and thus we can have no knowledge of the world beyond. [Which surely is a general, paradoxical, theory?] [3] Arguing, for example that the limits of ones language constitute the limits of ones world is, of course, reflexive and, Lawson maintains, Neitzsche, Heidegger and Derrida deliberately include such paradoxes in their work as a form of attack on the ‘Enlightenment dream of knowledge’. Neitzsche, Heidegger and Derrida are indicative of an end of an era. They provide no solutions, but do lead us into unchartered, and perhaps unchartable, reflexive territory. A journey they would claim to have no choice but to make.

Lawson looks at the work of Neitzsche, Heidegger and Derrida in some detail to draw out and explain their thoughts on reflexivity. Lawson argues that these are not definitive accounts, for to characterise the processural nature of their work is to mislead. That being the case, Lawson’s analysis will not be summarised here, readers should reflexively examine it for themselves. In conclusion, in a chapter tantalisingly entitled ‘The Rabbit’, Lawson writes, ‘to remain in the self-denying chaos generated by the paradoxes of reflexivity is not merely uncomfortable, but unsustainable’. Although reflexivity cannot be directly avoided, this does not mean that the paradoxes of reflexivity have to be endorsed. Reflexivity must not be allowed to destroy meaning. Neitzsche, Heidegger and Derrida have attempted to harness reflexivity as a positive force and if successful, then apparent paradoxes cease to be destructive. Indeed, they cease to be paradoxical. Neitzsche, Heidegger and Derrida defuse reflexivity by moving from subject to text. This progression is visible in the development Nietzsche through Heidegger to Derrida. They offer different resolutions; Nietzsche advocates anarchistic assertion; Heidegger suggests endless postponement; and Derrida suggests perpetual unravelling. [4] Each proposes a new mode of language and with it different notions of truth and value. The processural nature of their enterprises denies the possibility of ‘truth’ or ‘falsity’.

Lawson warns at the beginning that the text he is producing is not definitive and ends with a few words on the reflexivity of his own writing. Lawson includes the ‘Gestalt’ picture of the duck/rabbit, hence the title of the conclusion. Despite enjoying the book, the reviewer felt frustrated by it, and not simply as a result of the internal conundrum posed by the author. The reviewer felt a lingering dissatisfaction that so much thought and reflection on the part of the author, and that of the reader, simply confirmed a sense of abeyance. The discontent arose, more specifically, from a feeling that too many preconceptions, which allowed the conundrum to be teased out to the end, were not confronted. Lawson tends to rather simplified accounts of the production of (scientific) knowledge, and seems to rely heavily on schematic analyses that draw on ‘straw person’ characterisations. While making some excellent, and thought-

provoking points about reflexivity in the post-modern era, he tends to disengage them from any materialist consideration of the process of knowledge production. Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida may confront reflexivity and harness it as a positive force: in so doing transmuting knowledge from a 'thing' to a 'process'. Their relativism is worked out through the processural nature of knowledge, but in that they are not unique. Arguably, both transcendental phenomenology (of Husserl) and historical/ dialectical materialism (of Marx) construe knowledge as a process and are as disinclined as Nietzsche, Heidegger or Derrida to base their analyses of knowledge on paradoxical premises (despite Lawson's characterisation of Marx). Unlike Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida, Marx is concerned to establish a materialist not an idealist epistemology underpinning his processural methodology.

## Notes

[1] I would suggest that Marxism and transcendental phenomenology have also raised doubts about transparent truths. Lawson addresses his subject in a manner that suggests that only Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida have seriously engaged the mainstream objectivist approach to philosophy. Also the complexity of the world and the lack of such truths may be at root of the attempt to assert moral values (conservative ones) as something to hang on to as 'truths' and also at root of the fundamentalist revival in religion, which clearly makes an unreflective adherence to assertions of truth a principle tenet.

[2] It seems to me that this implies that all general theories are self reflexively paradoxical - no wonder philosophers have buried the construct. Further, a statement that 'no general metaphysical claims are implied by any statement' is also reflexively paradoxical.

[3] This implies that not only is communication constrained by language but that conceptualisation is too. It is a general epistemological thesis that says that, prior to language acquisition, we have no concepts.

[4] Are these idealist? The essence of pragmatism: Pragmatists attempt 'to change the way we go about doing things. We use our theories to convince others, and to alter their actions. We are not part of a grand scheme to provide the final description of the world.' (Lawson, 1985, p. 22)

On Marx: Marx's epistemology—Marx is providing a way to address the social world and how we know it; not a theory about either what the social world is and what our knowledge of it amounts to, or about the possibility of knowledge. Marx starts from a base that asserts not only the possibility of knowledge but its material base and then examines how the social world and our knowledge of it is changed through praxis, which is critical practical activity. There are no assertions of relativity; simply that knowledge is historically grounded. Arguably such an assertion is reflexive [but only if you step out of history!]; but as knowledge is rooted in a process of critique, there is the possibility of critiquing the foundation, *viz.* material grounded knowledge. Arguably one needs a start point; an epistemological or ontological base. Reflexivity can run to absurdities if a start point is denied altogether; then one has extreme scepticism and endless labouring over the nature of existence.