

I'm Hilary Lawson, Director of the Institute of Art and Ideas,
 Founder of the HowTheLightGetsIn festival and post-realist
 philosopher. AMA!

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Abstract

Hi reddit, I'm Hilary Lawson - post-realist philosopher, director of the Institute of Art and Ideas and founder of the world's largest philosophy and music festival HowTheLightGetsIn. Born and raised in Bristol, England, I was awarded a scholarship to study PPE at Balliol College Oxford. As a post-graduate I came to see paradoxes of self-reference as the central philosophical issue and began a DPhil on The Reflexivity of Discourse. This later became the basis for my first philosophical book Reflexivity: The Post-Modern Predicament. Alongside my more philosophical writing, I also pursued a media career following my studies. Within a few years I had created my own prime time television series 'Where There's Life' with a weekly UK audience in excess of ten million. In 1982, I went on to co-author a book based on the series and was appointed Editor of Programmes and later Deputy Chief Executive at the television station TV-am. Meanwhile I continued to develop my philosophical thinking and had initial sketches of the theory later to become Closure. In 1985 I wrote Reflexivity: The Post-Modern Predicament as part of a series on modern European thought. In the book, I argued that the paradoxes of self-reference are central to philosophy and drive the writings of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. In the late 1980s I founded the production company TVF Media which made documentary and current affairs programming, including Channel 4's flagship international current affairs programme, The World This Week. I was editor of the programme, which ran weekly between 1987 and 1991. The programme predicted the fall of the Berlin Wall, the war in Yugoslavia and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, amongst its other laudable achievements. In the 1990s, I focused on writing Closure. It took a decade to complete and was published in 2001. The book has been described as the first non-realist metaphysics. Having begun my philosophical career as a proponent of postmodernism, latterly I became a critic arguing for the necessity of an overall framework and the need to move on from a focus on language. Closure proposes that the human condition is to find ourselves on the cusp of openness and closure. The world is open and we, along with other living organisms, are able to apprehend and make sense of it through the process of closure. I would define closure as the holding of that which is different as one and the same. Human experience is seen to be the result of successive layers of closure, which I consider to be preliminary, sensory and inter-sensory closure. The highest level of closure, inter-sensory closure realises language and thought. The theory shifts the focus of philosophy away from language and towards an exploration of the relationship between openness and closure. An important element of the theory of closure is its own self-referential character. I founded the Institute of Art and Ideas in 2008 with the aim of making ideas and philosophy a central part of cultural life. Our website IAI.tv, which posts to the sub, was launched in 2011. We then moved to publishing articles in 2013 and free philosophy courses on IAI Academy in 2014. Links of Interest: Tickets and lineup for HowTheLightGetsIn 2018 can be found here - discounts available for students and U25s. Routledge has partnered with the IAI to offer a generous 20% off all their philosophy books and a free giveaway each month. Click here for details. After the End of Truth: A debate with Hannah Dawson (KCL) and John Searle (Berkeley) on objective truth and alternative facts What Machines Can't Do | Hilary Lawson in debate with David Chalmers (NYU) and cognitive scientist and sex robot expert Kate Devlin (Goldsmiths) on the question of machine minds After Relativism: A debate on the pitfalls of relativism and potential solutions with Simon Blackburn and Michela Massimi

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HILARY_LAWSON [R/SCIENCE](#)

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In the 1990s, I focused on writing [Closure](#). It took a decade to complete and was published in 2001. The book has been described as the first non-realist metaphysics. Having begun my philosophical career as a proponent of postmodernism, latterly I became a critic arguing for the necessity of an overall framework and the need to move on from a focus on language.

Closure proposes that the human condition is to find ourselves on the cusp of openness and closure. The world is open and we, along with other living organisms, are able to apprehend and make sense of it through the process of closure. I would define closure as the holding of that which is different as one and the same. Human experience is seen to be the result of successive layers of closure, which I consider to be preliminary, sensory and inter-sensory closure. The highest level of closure, inter-sensory closure realises language and thought. The theory shifts the focus of philosophy away from language and towards an exploration of the relationship between openness and closure. An important element of the theory of closure is its own self-referential character.

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Links of Interest:

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Hi Hilary, thanks for joining us!

I was hoping that you could say a bit about what you take "post-realism" to be. I'm an academic philosopher but solely analytically trained, and so not really in touch with current trends in other areas of philosophy. What is post-realism, and how does it relate to other movements in philosophy?

[ADefiniteDescription](#)

Thank you for your question. Post realism is an attempt to move on beyond the opposition of realism and relativism from the standpoint that realism has failed - there is no decent account of the relationship between language and the world - and relativism is self-referentially incoherent. My own post realist proposal is that we should regard the world as open and understand our thought and perception as the closing of the openness that is the world.

I'd be remiss if I didn't ask about your non-academic work as well. Here's some quick questions that you can merge or answer as works best for you:

1. How did you first get started working outside of academia proper (i.e. outside of a research or teaching position at a university)? What was your motivation in doing so?
2. Do you feel like philosophers ought to spend more time spreading philosophy outside of academia? Michael Dummett famously thought that philosophers had a special duty qua philosophers (as opposed to academics generally) to engage with the public - do you agree?
3. Could you say a bit about how you choose which topics to do videos, panels, etc. about? Is it about which experts you can get, or what you think the public is interested in? Something else entirely?

[ADefiniteDescription](#)

1. I did not want to spend my whole life arguing against an institution that I felt was locked into a framework I thought mistaken. So I began a journalistic career.
2. I don't think there is any requirement on philosophers to specifically set out to engage with the public. More important is that they seek to address central and important questions and don't get lost in trying to look sophisticated to their peers.
3. We are also trying to be at the edge of cultural thought.

What does it look like for philosophy to 'move past language' in the short and long term?

[GayPeavey](#)

The linguistic turn often made it look as if language was the framework within which all experience took place. It seems to me that language is one of the many different ways that we close the world and that it does not have a unique place, even though it is immensely powerful.

I find that many people have a knee-jerk reaction in opposition to post-realism. I think that's because post-realism is fundamentally opposed to a lot of religious and scientific models that people use to make sense of the world, consciously or not. How do you effectively challenge the instinctive tie people have to realism and break through to real, effective discussion?

[inakar](#)

Really interesting thought. You are of course quite right that there is an instinctive knee jerk response to post-realism and a deep underlying attachment to the real. It is very hard to shift this because it is so embedded in our culture. I have increasingly come to think that it is important to address the reasons that people are attached to realism and in particular the commonly held belief that realism is the only way to explain the success of our accounts of the world. In addition perhaps it is important to show the potential of post-realism to encourage and enable new and better ways of holding the world, so that it does not come across as being a denial of something many cherish.

1. Which philosophers, living and dead, have influenced your thought the most?
2. I would define closure as the holding of that which is different as one and the same.

This sounds a bit Hegelian to me. Could you explain what this means?

1. Why do you think it's important to move away from language-first philosophy?
[aushuff](#)

1. Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Derrida 2, I define closure as the holding of that which is different as the same in a very specific and concrete sense. Through the process of closure we close the openness of the world and are able to hold openness as some thing or combination of things. Closure therefore starts out with something that is not one and holds this difference as something particular.

Closure does not all take place on the same level. I would argue that the human organism, along with other living organism, consists of layers of closure. The first layer I refer to as preliminary closure and is the process that takes place at the first interaction of ourselves with openness. Preliminary closure is the first step therefore to sensory closure which is the way our senses hold the world. If you take the example of the visual sense, the neurons in the eye response to the openness of the world. They do so by either firing or not firing. So they turn all of the complexity of openness into a specific single outcome, namely the firing of the neuron. Now you will note that the firing of the neuron is not the same thing as the world nor does it describe the world. It is instead a response to the world. It is a closure.

Higher levels of closure hold lower level closures as a new 'thing'. So a collection of neurons firing in the retina are held as the sensation of, say, the colour blue. Blue holds the difference found in all of the neurons as one thing. It is important here again to note that the new sensory closure 'blue' is not a description of the lower level preliminary closures but is a something in addition to them. Through this addition, that I refer to as 'material', we are able to hold difference as one and the same.

Perception is not therefore a gradual sifting of extensive initial data but the hold of that initial response as something else.

I argue that there are only three fundamental levels of closure, preliminary, sensory and inter-sensory. Inter-sensory closure is the holding of one sense, say vision, with another like touch.

These two senses have nothing in common but we hold them as one and the same through thought and language.

Perhaps I have said enough here !

How did you feel about the recent article that said women that don't agree in philosophy tend to leave it?

Personally I have topics that I prefer and therefor don't see lack of diversity in what I choose to consume.

Edit : I read it here on Reddit and the search function isn't working for me to link it.

[Michalusmichalus](#)

I'm afraid I've not read it, so wouldn't be able to comment meaningfully

Clinical research is starting to find positive results from psychedelic drugs such as LSD and psilocybin in treating depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Do you believe there is a connection between these mechanisms and the idea of "closure," as you define it?

[NomadSlim](#)

I think there is possibly a link between the idea of openness and the extent to which psychedelic drugs can loosen attachment to conventional closure and have discussed this thought with David Nutt in a public debate.

Thank you for your time Mr. Lawson.

What is a non-realist metaphysics? Is it an idealism?

What problems does thinking of metaphysics in terms of openness and closure help us solve?

How does your approach to a move away from language differ from the similar move in analytic metaphysics or, in the case of continental philosophy, speculative realism?

What are the ethical and political consequences of your philosophy? Do you have thoughts on the increasing prevalence of technology and the development of AI (e.g. along Heideggerian lines)

Finally, I'm also a journalist that studied philosophy and would like one day to return to the university, even if only for myself. Any recommendations?

Ps need any volunteers for your festival?

[orgyofdolphins](#)

Thank you for your many questions and thoughts here. I can't do justice to all of them here I'm afraid. But as a start: When Russell first put forward a philosophical realism in response to the dominant philosophy of the time, namely Hegelian idealism, it was a radical and exciting strategy. It was so successful in fact that to charge that someone is an idealist is at once to be critical. Now, I am not an idealist in the sense that I want to escape from the traditional metaphysics of subject/object, language/world, and I certainly do not wish to adopt a psychological account of the world. But I am also not a realist. So if you see idealism as the opposite of realism perhaps there is a sense in which I am an idealist. It is not though a description I would encourage!

It is a little too open ended to answer your question about how my account of language differs from other contemporary approaches. Suffice it to say that I see language as one form of closure and that the process of closure as a whole is a more productive focus of research. In particular I would argue that the account I give of language and thought is likely to be more effective in developing AI than a traditional realist approach. We are always looking for volunteers at the festival - please let us know your details there is a page on our website I think in the About section.