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Book Review

Jean-François Lyotard, *Pourquoi Philosopher?* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012), pp.112 (paperback).

Pourquoi Philosopher? collects Jean-François Lyotard's previously unpublished four-part introductory course in philosophy, delivered to students of the Sorbonne in 1964. The publication of this "new" work by Lyotard is both cause for celebration, and a sign that the late philosopher's fortunes are changing. Relegated as he was to a minor footnote of late twentieth century continental philosophy during the first decade of the twenty-first, something of a Lyotard renaissance is now underway on both sides of the Atlantic. Several factors could account for this (among them, perhaps, the much more popular Alain Badiou's insistence that Lyotard be read as one of his major interlocutors); in any case, scholars are rightly discovering much more to Lyotard than tired debates about postmodernism, and publications by and about the philosopher are steadily increasing. Against this background, *Pourquoi Philosopher?* takes on a double significance: historical and, to the extent that it treats of one of the most basic of all philosophical questions – why philosophize? – meta-philosophical.

The historical value of the text will be readily appreciated by anyone with a basic familiarity with Lyotard's corpus and intellectual trajectory (Corinne Enaudau's concise introduction, though hitting on all of the essentials, assumes more than a passing familiarity and from this perspective leaves something to be desired). It will be recognized among Lyotard scholars that the introductory course marks an important period: having devoted himself for about a decade to the cause of socialist revolution in France and Algeria with post-Trotskyite militant group and journal *Socialisme ou barbarie*, Lyotard would around this time begin to drift from Marxism towards a radical Freudian "accelerationist" philosophy of capitalism. *Socialisme ou barbarie* itself splintered during this period under the weight of objective disappointments and a series of divisive and decidedly non-Marxist theses advanced by Cornelius Castoriadis. Lyotard, though highly sympathetic to Castoriadis's own trajectory, would limp on instead under splinter group *Pouvoir ouvrier* for two more years. In reading the 1964 course in philosophy, however, it is already apparent that Lyotard's Marxism is deeply and perhaps irreparably troubled; Freud (via Lacan) vies

with Marx to be the course's philosophical touchstone. And though he devotes an entire lecture to the topic of philosophy and action vis-à-vis Marx's famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, something of the later Lyotard's political melancholia also comes to the fore.

In fact, historically-minded readers will find much in the lectures anticipating the later Lyotard's better-known concepts and positions, especially and, surprisingly perhaps, as regards the language-based antihumanism that Lyotard would famously sketch in *Just Gaming* and *The Postmodern Condition* before working it out rigorously in *The Differend*. From an archeological perspective (so to speak) it is highly gratifying to find strata of well-considered linguistic antihumanism in the lectures, especially since it is widely thought that Lyotard's linguistic turn occurred after and in response to the aforementioned accelerationist philosophy that would increasingly dominate his thought from the late 60s to the mid-70s. Here we find Lyotard considering meta-philosophical questions from various interdisciplinary perspectives, with the eclectic spirit he would maintain for the rest of his life; in this light, the linguistic turn appears to be more properly a *re*turn to themes and arguments sketched at the very moment of Lyotard's drift from Marxism.

Historical aspect aside, the meta-philosophical questions raised in the text should be engaging to even the most casual or novice reader of Lyotard. The course is broken into four lectures, each of which treats a different aspect or way into its animating question:

- *Pourquoi désirer?* Lyotard considers the question "why philosophize?" in light of the question "why desire?" The move is both rhetorical, and philosophically substantive. It is rhetorical because if to philosophize is in some way to desire, then asking "why philosophize?" is as silly as asking "why desire?" It is philosophically substantive because placing philosophy in the register of desire – specifically, Freud's pulsional theory as sketched in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – is highly contentious. It is also *par excellence* an antihumanist and anti-rationalist kind of move, anticipating Lyotard's later, worked-out libidinal antihumanism (anti-Cartesian, anti-Sartrian; it is not the subject who desires/philosophizes, it is simply the case that "*ça désire*," that "it" does; in a manner of speaking, that desire desires). Philosophy, by nature reflexive, would then be a case of desire desiring itself; this anticipates the better known, postmodern Lyotard's stance that philosophy is a discourse constitutively and perpetually in search of its own rules.
- *Philosophie et origine*. Lyotard denies philosophy an origin, in a double sense. First, contra the young Hegel, he denies that philosophy can be successfully deployed to retrieve a lost unity (by

its very nature, in fact, philosophy exposes the idea of unity as specious). Second, he denies the historical claim that philosophy originates in a particular time and place, for instance, with the pre-Socratics. If to philosophize is to desire, and if desire constitutively eludes completion, then philosophy is timeless; it is older than its emergence in writing in ancient Greece, and it will never be finished. Here again, a range of future questions and themes in Lyotard's corpus is anticipated.

- *Sur la parole philosophique*. As previously mentioned, to my mind the lecture on language is in a sense the most surprising and therefore the most interesting of the four. Lyotard criticizes the communicational ideology of language as an inert material by which to convey messages, locating the supposed subject-who-speaks in the mesh of a language which always already precedes her. All of the substance of the postmodern and late Lyotard is here in embryonic form. Again, antihumanism predominates.

- *Sur philosophie et action*. Lyotard considers philosophy in light of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, according to which "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." Not surprisingly, he sketches a Marx who looks much more like Lyotard than Marx; to change the world, to act within it, requires an active listening, a certain openness to what the world struggles to say but cannot (once again, major future themes – the differend, "passibility" to the event, etc. – come to the fore). This openness being the purview of philosophy, Marxism becomes a critical theory (a critical theoretical practice?) of society (rather than a totalizing, Hegelian or evolutionary explanatory framework) for which philosophy is essential. The aforementioned questions of desire and of philosophical discourse set the agenda. Marx is, in effect, still a major reference; but he is on his way to the nigh-unrecognizable Marx of the postmodern and late Lyotard.

However one judges Lyotard's philosophy of philosophy in these lectures, they put their finger on the pulse of some of the major themes animating French philosophy of the time. Trying to hit upon a radical Leftism critical of the Soviet bureaucratic perversion of Marxism, but also immune to the comparatively abstract, humanistic moralising of much post-1956 European Leftism (cf. Sartre and those in his ballpark), Lyotard and others would turn to a Lacan-ized Freud and other antihumanistic resources – not necessarily towards a "Freudo-Marxist" synthesis, but certainly to find a way out of the impasse. In the bargain, philosophy inevitably takes a back seat – at worst figuring as a system-building, ideological mystification, and at best, as a perennially useful critical weapon, a basic intellectual "style," or an inescapable desire named by critical theoretical practice. Lyotard, in the

lectures and throughout his career, accords philosophy a terribly humble place relative to the grand pretensions of its history – but for all that, defends it tenaciously. In the end he points out, quite correctly, that a legitimate answer to the question "why philosophize?" is simply "how not philosophize?"

In sum, *Pourquoi Philosopher?* will be of considerable interest to Lyotard scholars; but it is also well-placed to capture the imaginations of philosophers more generally. In a climate of economic austerity and general contraction in the humanities, the question "why philosophize?" – perennial though it is – bears a topical relevance bridging the major philosophical traditions and calling more than ever for sustained and, where possible, collective reflection.

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