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JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD: THE INTERVIEWS AND DEBATES

Edited by Kiff Bamford
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Mme Dolorès Lyotard for her support of this publication and permission to include material from the Lyotard estate. I would also extend thanks to all the authors and translators who have supported this project, giving permissions and encouragement, in particular Georges Van Den Abbeele for revising and extending his existing translation. Also to Roger McKeon who has not only made new translations of thirteen of these documents and extended his own existing translation, but also offered help, guidance and critical dialogue throughout the process. Financial support is gratefully acknowledged from the British Academy, for research costs, and from Bloomsbury Academic and the School of Art, Architecture and Design at Leeds Beckett University for permission costs.

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'Concerning the Vincennes Psychoanalysis Department' originally appeared as À propos le Département de psychanalyse de Vincennes' in Les Temps modernes, no. 342, January 1975. English translation © 1993 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota.
CHAPTER 22

‘WHAT IS JUST?’ (OU JUSTESSE)

Translated by Richard Kearney

Richard Kearney – Today you are seen as the first philosopher of the 'postmodern' condition. Yet one of your earliest works was entitled La phénoménologie (1954) [Phenomenology]. How would you describe the development of your own thinking – from phenomenology to postmodernism? Is there a continuity between the two?

Jean-François Lyotard – La phénoménologie was a homage to the thought of Merleau-Ponty: a meditation on the body, on sensible experience and therefore – in contradistinction to Hegel, Husserl, Sartre – on the 'aesthetic' dimension which unfolds beneath the phenomena of consciousness. I was also reading at this time what was available of Heidegger's work. The little book on phenomenology was motivated by a concern to address the absence in Marxism of any genuine thinking about ideology. I felt it was important to establish how the possibility, and success, of the revolution depended on the 'consciousness' that workers could and should have of their situation and desire. The work done by both Tran-Duc-Thao and Claude Lefort in this direction was very useful. I was then a committed member of the Socialisme ou Barbarie project (from 1952 to 1966), whose main objects of critique were dogmatic Marxism, Stalinist politics, the class structure of 'Soviet' society, the inconsistencies of the Trotskyist position and post-war capitalism (quite the opposite of 'late' or declining capitalism). Our practical activities included cooperating with workers, wage-earners and students with a view to establishing self-management groups. I left this project in 1966 when I realized that the basis of both our practice and theory was lacking – the alternative figure of the proletariat (Marx's 'spectre') as a labouring-class conscious of its goals. I only began to formulate the idea of the 'postmodern' in the late 1970s, after a long detour. The term, purposefully ambiguous, was borrowed from American criticism and Ihab Hassan. I used it to 'name' the transformation of bourgeois capitalism and its contradictions into a global 'system' ruling, for better or worse, its imbalances (including those in the 'ideological' field, henceforth entitled 'cultural') with the help of growth due to techno-scientific means. Several things were becoming clear: that a new dominant class – the managers – was replacing the private owners without capital, that the work force was no longer of the nineteenth-century kind, that the redistribution of surplus-value was done in a completely different way, and that a structural level of unemployment was emerging even though we were still in a period of full employment. In these changing circumstances, it was necessary to review radically the nature of history and politics.
But is it possible, or even desirable, to do away with every kind of narrative model? Is there a way in which des petits récits [little narratives] might serve an ethical-political task? Is the commitment to a pluralistic paradigm of little narratives compatible, for example, with a basic defence of a charter of universal rights? What I'm really asking is: is it possible to avoid relativism in order to save what is best in the Enlightenment fidelity to shared human values that are non-culture specific? In short, is it possible to reconcile your defence of the singularity of the event with a certain minimal universality of rights and duties — that is, of justice?

J.-F. L. — I protest, first, against the expression 'Judeo-Christian'. The hyphen signals the annexation of the Torah to the Good News of the Incarnation. This is a traditional usage, I know. But it is nevertheless unjust in the strongest sense of the term; and after the Shoah, it represents an insult to the 'people' who were victims of extermination (when one recalls the role of Vatican politics at the time). That said, I do not know whether the defence of universal valid human rights is 'compatible', as you say, with a proper attention to the event in its opacity (as mentioned above in relation to 'the thing'). To tell the truth, this question of compatibility doesn't really bother me, being neither Leibnizian nor Hegelian. On the one hand, it is evident that rights must be defended by every citizen against the 'cynical' effects of the efficiency demands of the system, and on the other, we are indebted to the 'thing' irremediably. Why seek to reconcile these? That kind of fraternization is always to be feared.

R. K. — Why? Can you give me an example?

J.-F. L. — A notorious example: Heidegger, the author of Sein und Zeit, construing the politics of Mein Kampf as pretext for the manifestation of Dasein's dread.

R. K. — Are you saying that we cannot use 'little narratives' in the cause of universal rights?

J.-F. L. — I am saying that it would be futile to consider using des petits récits. Always and everywhere, in Tibet, the Amazon or Livry-Gargan, they use us to tell themselves. They mock illusions of grandeur: 'The kitchens and stables of Shakespeare laugh at the tragedies of court, just as in Rabelais the bad boys mock the knowing and the powerful. What is little is almost invariably comic. To laugh is to acknowledge that the thing is unsayable — that its tragic dramatization is pure vanity. Beckett is funny in this way also. But that doesn't make up a humanist party.

R. K. — Does your departure from the Enlightenment and Marxist projects necessarily condemn you to 'neo-conservatism' as Habermas and others claim? How do you now consider the political positions you adopted during the Socialisme ou Barbarie period?

J.-F. L. — It is logical to accuse 'postmodernism' (a term I never use to describe my work) of neo-conservatism if one holds to the modern project. Reciprocally, the modernist obstinacy could be taxed with 'archeo-progressivism' ... I never used these kinds of terms to differentiate myself from Habermas and his disciples. This rhetoric of political tribunals had some sense when conflicts of thought were immediately transcribable
to differentiate between the new responsibility of postmodern 'intelligence' and the irresponsibility of irrationalism?

J.-F. L. – Some rationalism is the paranoia of discourse: I will say everything, know everything, possess everything, be everything. Nothing will escape the concept. On the other hand, literature must plead guilty because it is authorized by nothing, as Georges Bataille said (following Kafka). The 'thing' that demands writing or art has no right to demand it. This 'irresponsibility' is the greatest responsibility, that of remaining attentive to another, who is neither an interlocutor nor a party to contractual closure. It is essential to guard over this 'secret existence', as Nina Berberova called it, to protect it against the indiscrétion of the system which wants to see and know everything, have an answer for everything, exchange everything. We need to reread Orwell.

R. K. – What are the implications of your postmodern idea of 'inhumanity' for our understanding of the 'social bond'? Do you think traditional concepts of nation, state and civil society are adequate to the analysis of these implications? Have universalist notions of social progress been altered by the transition to postmodernity?

J.-F. L. – The implosion of the big totalitarian regimes engendered by the modern dream provokes a nostalgia for 'natural' communities, defined by blood, land, language, custom. Fidelity to the demos takes priority here over respect for the republican ideal. The latter is nonetheless the only vester of legitimacy for the system to require all countries in the world to remain open to the free circulation of goods, 'services' and communications. It is in fact essential for the Republic to become universal. In its name, the 'market' is permitted to assume world proportions. That is why, today, the privilege of sovereignty which nation states enjoyed for several centuries (at most) appears an obstacle to the furtherance of development in every domain: multinational transactions, immigrant populations, international security ... It may even be the case, despite appearances, that the unification of Europe is more easily achievable through the federation of 'natural communities' ('regions' like Bavaria, Scotland, Flanders, Catalonia, etc.) than through sovereign states – with all the risks attendant upon the dominance of the demos in each of these communities.

R. K. – This scenario would seem to support your suggestion that the 'modern' category of 'universal thinker' will be replaced by the 'symptomologist' who responds to singular phenomena of irreducible difference (le différend). But would this not imply the end of philosophy as an academic discipline? What do you believe is the function now of philosophy and the university generally?

J.-F. L. – Philosophy, we should remember, has only recently – 1811, Berlin – been recognized as an academic discipline. The ancients and the medievals didn't teach philosophy; they taught how to philosophize. It was a question of 'learning' rather than 'teaching'. To learn to find one's way in thinking, as Kant put it. Or to borrow Wittgenstein's formula – 'I no longer know where I am' is the basic position of philosophical questioning. To philosophize is not to produce useful servants of the community, as Kant well knew, which is why philosophy faculties never have the same prestige as faculties of medicine, law,
economics (not to mention the exact sciences). The philosopher always has a fundamental difficulty in presenting himself as an expert. This is not a recent phenomenon; in fact, it goes back to Socrates’ struggle with the ‘experts’. One could tolerate the presence (inexpensive) in pedagogical institutions of an inexpert discipline for as long as this aimed at forming ‘enlightened citizens’, capable of coping with complex or unprecedented conjunctures. The contemporary system aims at forming the experts it requires. The capacity to meditate is not much use to it. Even less so when the system has managed to produce more sophisticated automats than digital computers. A considerable part of the academic discipline of philosophy is already geared to research (direct or indirect) into ‘artificial’ languages. And an inevitable consequence of this is that those who continue to think about the unexploitable ‘thing’ find themselves half inside the institution, half out. I think, I hope, that philosophy will manage to limp along like this for a long time, in spite of its growing loss of credibility (which also affords some prestige).

R. K. – Much of your work has focused on the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Why has the notion of the ‘sublime’, particularly as enunciated by Kant in the third Critique, come to occupy such a pivotal position in your thinking on this relationship?

J.-F. L. – What, from Kant to Adorno, has often been called the ‘aesthetic’ is that region where rational thinking encounters something in itself which violently resists it: this is ‘creation’, the way of making that is art, the sentiment of the absolute. Kant elaborates on the latter in his Analytic of the Sublime. I believe we find there a form of recollection (anamnesis conducted in ‘critical’ terms) of the relation of all thought – meditative, literary, pictorial, musical – to the unknown thing which inhabits such thought. This relation is necessarily one of a different internal to thought, at once capable and incapable of the absolute – ‘sentiment of spirit’, not of nature, like the taste of the beautiful. Kant repeats the words: Widerstreit, Widerstand, Unangemessenheit, differend, resistance, incommensurability. The same terms used by Van Gogh, Joyce, Schoenberg, Kierkegaard or Beckett (I cite at random) to signify the ordeal undergone by thought when it opens itself to desire for the absolute. One could even say that such thought engenders ‘symptoms’. This is so for most of us, for whom the desire is no less pressing than for the writers and artists cited. But the enigma of the ‘aesthetic’ is that they make of this engoisse [anguish] a work.

R. K. – Given your readings of Kant, Heidegger, Adorno and Derrida, would you be inclined to the view that the thinker/symptomologist should take his/her lead more from art and literature than from the more traditional discourses of epistemology and ontology?

J.-F. L. – I think so. But I also believe that if there is an ontology – perhaps negative – it would be found on the side of art and literature. Why? Because on that side, being (or nothing) is not situated or posited on principle as reference to cognitive discourse. It is not projected, or ejected, onto the place assigned to that about which one intends to speak, as in the case of the most serious epistemology. On the contrary, it is approached in a ‘poetically concrete’ fashion, experienced and settled like something immediate to be resolved, something present but not presented. Which word here, which colour there, which sound or melodic form? How can we know? It is not a matter of knowledge. Being (or nothing) doesn’t wait at the door you identify. It lives in you already waiting for whatever idiom you offer it to reside in momentarily.

R. K. – When you contrast ‘reading’ to ‘theory’ (or interpretation) do you believe this better enables us to engage in aesthetic and ethical judgement? If we abandon ‘meaning’ out of fidelity to the irreducible singularity of the event, are we not eliminating the very basis of a judgement that could be shared by others in a socially committed way? How is your position compatible with solidarity – or what Hannah Arendt referred to (again in relation to Kant) as ‘representative thinking’, which she believes is an indispensable tool for ethical judgement?

J.-F. L. – ‘Theory’ is a system of propositions formulated in explicitly defined terms according to a determined syntax. These propositions are supposed to explain all the phenomena which emerge in the field of reference to which the theory applies. (I am not discussing here the serious objections levelled against this axiomatic model by intuitionism or by the theorem of non-closure of discursive systems.) No aesthetic or ethical judgement could ever satisfy the terms of this system. It is often a ‘passionate’ business, often ‘accomplishing’ an unconscious desire, as Freud said. And it is always dangerous. The task is to render such judgement ‘pure’, free of interest, free of ends (conceptualized or not), free of all that subordinates it to something other than the appreciation of the just and the beautiful. It is at the price of such asceticism that judgement of this kind can claim to be shared with others. Everyone tries to argue, for or against, but in truth, one can only rely on the capacity of others to carry out for themselves the same kind of asceticism or ‘destitution’ (‘dénueement’). Arendt unscrupulously transfers Kant’s aesthetic category of sensus communis to the order of solidarity and interpersonal solidarity, as if it were some kind of ‘shared feeling’. But in Kant the sensus communis is laboriously deduced, in the name of a transcendental affinity between diverse faculties of thought, on the basis of the ‘experience’ of a happiness which an ‘object’ can unexpectedly procure. Moreover, Arendt seems to ignore the case – for me even more significant – where thinking profits not from its affinity but its disaffinity or dissent (dissentiment) from itself; this is the case of the sublime, which also demands to be shared by all. As regards ethical decisions, if it had to authorize itself by invoking theories of Goodness or Justice, it would forfeit its ethical character forthwith. Why? Because it would lose all responsibility for what it decides submitting itself to the authority of theory. Decisions are ethical precisely when they are not authorized by a system (intelligible or otherwise), when they take upon themselves the responsibility for their ‘authority’. An SS torturer is not ignoble because Hitler’s ‘theory’ was false, but because he refuses his own responsibility and believes himself justified by obedience. Arendt refers to this as the ‘banality of evil’ – the banalization of responsibility by ‘necessity’. Necessity here is poverty, but it is also theory which is the poverty of morality.

R. K. – If existing politics is defined as a totalitarian model of Grand Narratives, is it ever possible to move from an ethics of the differend back to a politics of communal action? Do you think that hermeneutics, structuralism and critical theory are necessarily
condemned to totalizing paradigms of Grand Narrative? Is there a dialogue possible between these philosophical methods and your own?

J.-F. L. – Such a dialogue is always possible. But the trust one places in dialogue is a hermeneutic prejudice. Can you imagine Antonin Artaud dialoguing with Bill Clinton? Dialogue is an ordinary passion. The true – the rapport with the Real (with the thing) – escapes dialogue. My philosophical colleagues haven’t read Freud. If they had, they’d have at least learnt that dialogue is shot through with unconscious demands, fed on unruly transfers and counter-transfers. And they would have learned that a controlled transfer, which is the most difficult of all in relation to the other, has nothing to do with ‘dialogue’. That said, there is nothing against a politics of common action, and we should lend ourselves to it. As long as we attribute to it a healthy (salubre) rather than salutic (salutaire) value. It is the minimum commitment to safeguarding elementary rights of humanity as it is.

R. K. – Do your claims for the ‘irrepresentable’ and ‘incommensurable’ not confine you to an endedly ‘deconstructive’ practice and thus prevent you from advancing to a rationally coherent model of the just and the good? How would you situate your own thinking here vis-à-vis Derrida or Levinas?

J.-F. L. – I repeat: there is no ‘rationally coherent model’ of justice and injustice. Such a model is the dream of the system, which someone like Rawls proposes to realize innocently(?). Look at history, at least it has the force of nihilism: abortion, divorce, homosexuality, corporal punishment (guilt itself), child education, old age, death of course, but also birth, hospital care and hospitality, war and murder, the body and competition (the first Olympic Games and Atlanta 1996). The Yes and the No have managed to accommodate each of these situations one by one, and they’ve always managed to rationalize them. Have my colleagues ever heard that ‘rationality’ is related to ‘rationalization’? This can lead to scepticism. And to this I would oppose the difficult anamnesis which decision demands: ‘in my soul and my unconscious …’ As for those who think, along with Spinoza and Hegel, that there is no room for judgement, I don’t think they realize that God (including the Natura naturans) is dead. This is something Levinas clearly signals: the risk undertaken in understanding the Other (Autre) in the other (autrui). That isn’t an everyday occurrence like the transactions of the Wall Street Stock Exchange which a good Rawlsian reads in his evening newspaper. Finally, as regards ‘deconstructive’ thought, which I respect and which is also the thought of the undecidable, it has problems of necessity with decision and judgement (Urteil). This is as it should be; and I have reason to think it is concerned by this.

R. K. – Is the politics of the differend inevitably a politics of rhetorical dispute without finality – without solution or resolution? Paralogism and paradox as the last word? Anarchism as the last stance? Dissidence as the last cry?

J.-F. L. – There is no ‘politics of the differend’. Definitely not. The differend can only give rise to a terrible melancholy, a practice of meditation, a poetics.

R. K. – Can a postmodern politics do anything more than problematize the political as an order of representation (the function of the political in the West since Plato) from the inside? Is there any alternative, in your view, to the prevailing system of commodification and exchange other than a defeatist internal critique which exposes our incarceration in the labyrinth but offers no paths leading beyond it?

J.-F. L. – I honestly don’t think there is anything ‘beyond’ the system. There is something ‘beneath’ it, the ‘thing’ which Freud called infantile. Any work derived from it will itself be made into ‘cultural merchandise’: mistaken, misappropriated, méprisé as of no importance. Its quality as a work – wrestling with the absolute – will perhaps be acknowledged one day by a reader, listener or spectator.

R. K. – And the charge of ‘defeatism’?

J.-F. L. – ‘Defeatism’, as you understand it, has always been the fact of the serious, le fait du sérieux. Every true thought knows itself to be defeated. Aristotle’s episteme knew itself to be incapable before the polemikos that Being opposes to it. The same goes for Platonic idealism before the chora. Relieved of doctrinaire ornament, Western thought has always been a resistance. Resistance is the way of the defeated who does not acknowledge defeat. But the claim to triumph – in the Roman sense – is the worst kind of folly. The ‘beyond’ does not allow itself to be approached without burning you up (vous fouroyer). There is nothing ‘romantic’ in this: it is ‘realist’ if anything, the relation to the res, the thing. That is why it is so severe and so humble to ‘learn to philosophize’ or to paint, to make music or a film. The apprenticeship is without end and without solution. One can make some progress, but how could one ever be satisfied? There is no defeatism in this recurrent disappointment, except for those who hold to the fantasy of full accomplishment which the system exhibits: you shall be fulfilled.

R. K. – Finally, if the politics of the differend offers no project of forward advance, would you claim that your notion of the Immemorial (as that which is irrepresentable to memory yet will not be forgotten) provides us with a critical task of anamnesis, as you call it, motivating a resistant reading of our culture? Is there a certain postmodern strategy of looking back without representation, a strategy which might offer more effective potential for change than the Enlightenment obsession with future progress?

J.-F. L. – This last question would appear generous. But the alternative backward/forward is, in fact, extremely miserly with regard to temporality. It reduces the latter to the opposition of before and after. By the term ‘immemorial’, I try to express another time, where what is past maintains the presence of the past, where the forgotten remains unforgettable precisely because it is forgotten. This is what I mean by anamnesis as opposed to memory. In the time set out by concept and will, the project is only the ‘projection’ of present consequences on the future (as in ‘futurology’). This kind of projection forbids the event; it prepares, preconceives, controls it in advance. This is the time of the Pentagon, the FBI, Security, the time of Empire. By contrast, what I call anamnesis is the opposite of genealogy; understood as a return to ‘origins’ (always projected backward). Anamnesis works over the remains that are still there, present, hidden near to us. And with regard to what is not yet there, the still to come (là-venir),
it is not a matter of the future as such (which shares the Latin root, *fuit*, meaning it *has been*) but that which is still awaited with incertitude: hoped for, feared, surprising, in any case unexpected. It will come; but the question is: *what* will come? One can't really talk therefore of a 'postmodern strategy'. If there is an enemy (the obscure primitiveness of the thing, indifferent perhaps, a power both threatening and cherished), that enemy is inside each one of us. The labour of 'working through' is to find the idiom that is least inappropiate to it. One is guided here only by an obscure sentiment of *rightness* (*justesse*). But one is never satisfied with the idiom chosen and, more often than not, the other (*autruit*) doesn't understand anything. You only have to read the letters of Van Gogh. Artaud or Kafka, Augustine's *Confessions* or Montaigne's *Essays*, the life of Angelo de Foligno or the studies of Henry James – you see how the 'postmodern' is not confined to a single period – to witness the kind of resistance they encountered. One must not traduce, in the sense of translate (*traduit*), what in itself remains ciphered (*crypté*). Instead of making the ciphered common currency, we must try to do justice to its insignificance. That is what is right. That is *justesse*.

Atlanta, Georgia, 1994

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CHAPTER 23
RESPONDING QUESTIONS
*Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas*

Eberhard Gruber – In your recent volume *Postmodern Fables*, which consists of fifteen notes on – and against – postmodern aesthetization, there is a passage concerning all those who participate in an activity similar to ours: you say there that 'the majority of interviews, discussions, roundtables, debates, colloquia for which our world has such an appetite. They serve to assure us that we are indeed "on the same wavelength" and that it's going to be OK.' Such a process never ceases to "confirm what is well known", that is, what the speakers assume, presuppose, or already know more or less clearly.

A true 'dialogue' would, therefore, be pushed or would have to be pushed to a somewhat paradoxical extreme: neither a conversation for two nor a directed communication. For any position of a preconceived knowledge that is to be confirmed or applied by one or many interlocutors would go against dialogue, which would touch upon the singularity of what makes for an event. Without wishing to question the genre of the 'interlocution or interview' in terms of the possibility of an 'event for two' (*?, one can, at least, note the following: in 'interlocuting', something resists, remains 'in the way' (*dix*), 'across' the throat or tongue, a *remainder*, precisely, that is unpronounceable, that bars the way (*vote*) and the voice (*voix*) to conversation and to directed calculations. Neither an exchange of words, therefore, nor a mere flux of words: there is some unnameable, some unrepresentable, to put it in Lyotardian terms.

In acknowledging such an interference that keeps at a distance what one means to say from what one says and what one designates from the designation itself, I suggest leaving here, as a sign of the displacement that has been irremediably undergone, a *blank*.

And yet! The scope of the argument against the communicational practice of the 'interlocution' turns out to be limited: the critique concerns only 'most' interlocutions, not all. Moreover, the argument is developed in a chapter written entirely in the form of a dialogue between 'She' and 'Hé'. Should we infer from this that the only justification for 'interlocuting' (with someone) arises out of *incomprehension*? Or, more precisely, out of *certain* incomprehensions between 'She' and 'Hé', on the one hand, and what is *incomprehensible* for everyone, on the other?

And let me add (since the choice of feminine and masculine voices is not innocent): How are we to understand this intertwining of 'sexual difference' (which makes the dialogue between human beings irreducible and therefore constitutive), 'incomprehensions' (which appear to be intermittent as long as there are at least two