



Why
Philosophize?

Jean-François Lyotard

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Translated by Andrew Brown

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Editorial note

The translation follows a typed text preserved at the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet (shelf mark JFL 291/2). This constitutes the second manuscript version of the lectures given by Jean-François Lyotard soon after they had been written. The Bibliothèque Doucet also preserves (shelf mark JFL 291/1) a first typewritten version of the same text – but one that is heavily annotated by Lyotard himself. All these annotations have been carried over, without modification or alteration, into the second typescript, so it has not been thought useful to point out the differences between the two versions. On the other hand, a few minor corrections have been made when they turned out to be necessary (punctuation mistakes,

EDITORIAL NOTE

quotation marks missing); likewise, the quotations indicated by abbreviated references in the original text have been re-established. No notes have been added, so as to leave the oral character of these lectures intact.¹

Corinne Enaudeau

¹ I have added a minimum of notes where I felt they were necessary. [Trans. note]

Introduction

Corinne Enaudeau

Philosophy does not desire wisdom or knowledge; it teaches us neither what is true nor how to behave. People will say that it wears itself out wondering what it is – and *what is* – in a solitude that disturbs nobody. At best, it might sometimes offer us an idea useful for the production of wealth or the dream of a completely different social system or the metaphysical opium of consolation. Philosophers, it would seem, are those crazy chatterboxes whom history carts along with it throughout its history, without profit but without any great loss either. They may well interpret the world, but they stay standing at its door and will never change it. So their discourse may be interrupted, may return to silence, without the

face of the world being changed. After all, their discourse has, in the final analysis, a single thread: a strange attachment to loss, the desire not to lose the loss that undermines all human activity and separates it from itself, the desire not to let go of the lack whose dagger death sticks into life. So, in 2012, we may well ask, as Jean-François Lyotard asked in 1964: why philosophize? What reason was there, is there still, to philosophize, to plunge back down into the depths of the gaps in meaning – each time anew, in a re-found naivety that will be judged childish? Put this way, the question may appear rhetorical. It is self-referential, since its utterance actually gives the answer to the question uttered, for we have already started philosophizing when we wonder whether it's worth the trouble to do so all over again. But it is the lot of language itself, which has to speak so as to worry about its own interruption; it is the lot of wakefulness and life, which must deny in practice the sleep and death that they are investigating. Since we speak, act and live under the threat of loss, we won't emerge from this circle where absence makes itself present and presence is hollowed out by absence. For it is not easy to be a dumb beast, Lyotard tells us, we cannot stun

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ourselves with a wordless given, a perfect plenitude, a dreamless night. So we will philosophize for the simple reason that we cannot avoid doing so: 'attest to the presence of lack by our speech'.

The man who died in 1998, leaving *The Confession of Augustine* unfinished, was perhaps preoccupied by nothing other than this constitutive incompleteness of meaning, which is the knife and the wound of thought, its burning sore and its viaticum. *Discourse, figure* declared that it refused to conclude, *The Differend* interrupted its succession of paragraphs with a few abrupt items on history. Each of Lyotard's books brings a certain disjunction into its object, into its writing, into the gap between it and the other books. His conviction, as early as 1964, was that you can be inoculated with a grain of philosophy only if you let yourself be haunted by absence and find the paradoxical energy to contaminate others with it, to tell them about the 'law of debt', the debit that can never be paid off. His work enabled this grain to spread and grow, but in Lyotard it was accompanied by a vigorous engagement with teaching, and a political commitment in which questioning, professing, and leading the life of an activist went inseparably together. Attention

to the flaw – to the lack of substantiality as much as of meaning – already presupposes that it is other people, even more than things, who make holes in language; that it is through others that unity is lacking in the social totality, through them that opposition comes to split open the unity of meaning. Without them being there to muddle arguments, thwart actions, disappoint passions, lack would never come to the real to turn it into a human world, and this world would not call on speech to reflect its lack, to philosophize. If, however, it is simply a matter of filling an empty space, philosophy can easily build a non-human world in it, a harmonious metaphysical dream. It then encloses itself within an absolute Logos, the mirage of an invisible Whole that paradoxically remains separate from what it unites. Ideology is simply this, says Lyotard – a system of ideas that is all the more easy to profess in that it is autonomous, has sublimated the lack from which it has sprung, and speaks elsewhere, beyond. This is true of all metaphysics, but also of all theory, even if it calls itself Marxist, which attempts to fill needy minds with its overflow of system. ‘To cut oneself away from practice’ doesn’t mean talking about substance instead of