

LYOTARD AND THE PHILOSOPHER CHILD

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Abstract

Jean-François Lyotard's description of the philosopher uses a metaphor comparing the philosopher to the child. This article traces the use of the child metaphor in relation to philosophy throughout Lyotard's work. In general, the historical problem with philosophy for Lyotard is that it has been understood as involving maturity, mastery, and adulthood. While the stereotype of the wise philosopher might suggest a mature expert who knows all, Lyotard rejects this view. For Lyotard, the philosopher is the child who seeks answers, but cannot master them. The wisdom of the philosopher is similar to Socrates' wisdom, in that he is wise because he knows the limitations of his knowledge and does not presume to be a master. Furthermore, the philosopher is the one who listens for what has not yet been articulated and says something new. Philosophical language does not merely report or observe, but it creates expressions of what is new by becoming attuned to something latent in the world (*WP* 95). Therefore, the answers will not be mastered, comprehensive, or settled for good. In Lyotard's later work, the mode or method of philosophy is closer to reflective judgment because the issues it examines are open to further discussion. Lyotard's linking of philosophy with childhood helps avoid an understanding of philosophy grounded in technological rationality in which practical mastery is the goal. Understanding the world exclusively through the categories of means leading to ends, assumes definitive answers, mastery, and expertise. Though many understandings of philosophy stress the practical knowledge conclusively obtained or strive for mastery, Lyotard sees these forces as enemies to philosophical thought, which requires more openness to childhood. Consequently, philosophy is fully political by providing a small voice against the loud and overwhelming push toward practicality, efficiency, and the discourse of capitalism.

Key words: Lyotard, philosophy, child, reflective judgment, knowledge, technological rationality

Lyotard e a criança filósofa

Resumo

A descrição do filósofo que faz Jean-François Lyotard usa uma metáfora que compara o filósofo às crianças. Este artigo retrata o uso da metáfora da criança em relação à filosofia através do trabalho de Lyotard. Em geral, o problema histórico com a filosofia para Lyotard é que ela foi compreendida como envolvendo maturidade, maestria, e adultez. Enquanto o estereótipo do filósofo sábio pode sugerir um perito maduro que sabe tudo, Lyotard rejeita essa visão. Para Lyotard o filósofo é a criança que procura respostas, mas não pode dominá-las. A sabedoria do filósofo é semelhante à sabedoria de Sócrates, que é sábio porque conhece as limitações do seu conhecimento e não presume ser um mestre. Além disso, o filósofo é aquele que escuta o que ainda não foi articulado e diz algo novo. A linguagem filosófica não faz só relatar ou observar, ela cria expressões do que é novo afinando-se a algo latente no mundo (*WP*, p. 95). Portanto, as respostas não serão dominadas, compreensivas, ou assentadas de vez. No trabalho tardio de Lyotard, o modo ou método da filosofia é mais próximo do juízo porque os problemas que ele examina são abertos a discussões futuras. A ligação de Lyotard entre a filosofia e a infância ajuda a

evitar um entendimento da filosofia baseado na racionalidade tecnológica para a qual o domínio é o objetivo. Compreender o mundo exclusivamente pelas categorias de meios levando a fins, leva a assumir respostas definitivas, domínio, e expertise. Quando muitos entendimentos da filosofia frisam o saber prático obtido conclusivamente ou busca domínio, Lyotard vê essas forças como inimigas do pensamento filosófico, que requer mais abertura à infância. Consequentemente, a filosofia é plenamente política por prover uma pequena voz contra a forte e impressionante pressão a favor do prático, do eficiente, e do discurso do capitalismo.

Palavras-chave: Lyotard, filosofia, criança, juízo refletivo, conhecimento, racionalidade técnica

Lyotard y el niño filósofo

Resumen

La descripción del filósofo de Jean-François Lyotard utiliza una metáfora que compara el filósofo al niño. Este artículo describe el uso de la metáfora del niño en relación a la filosofía a través del trabajo de Lyotard. En general, el problema histórico de la filosofía para Lyotard es que ella ha sido entendida involucrando maduración, maestría, adultez. El estereotipo del filósofo sabio puede sugerir un experto maduro que sabe todo, Lyotard lo rechaza. Para Lyotard el filósofo es el niño que busca respuestas, pero no puede dominarlas. La sabiduría del filósofo es semejante a la filosofía de Sócrates, que es sabio porque conoce las limitaciones de su conocimiento y no presume ser un maestro. Además de eso, el filósofo es aquel que escucha lo que aún no fue articulado y dice algo nuevo. El lenguaje filosófico no solo relata u observa, el crea expresiones de lo que es nuevo sintonizándose con algo latente en el mundo. (WP, p. 95). Por tanto, las respuestas no serán dominadas, comprendidas o acertadas. En el trabajo tardío de Lyotard, el modo o método de la filosofía es más próximo al juicio porque los problemas que ella examina son abiertos a las discusiones futuras. La ligación de Lyotard entre la filosofía y la infancia ayuda a evitar un entendimiento de la filosofía basado en la racionalidad técnica para la cual el dominio es el objetivo. Comprender el mundo exclusivamente por las categorías de medios llevando a fines, llevando a asumir respuestas definitivas, dominio, pericia. Aunque muchas interpretaciones de la filosofía subrayan el saber práctico obtenido de manera concluyente o la busca de dominio, Lyotard ve esas fuerzas como enemigas del pensamiento filosófico que requiere más apertura a la infancia. En consecuencia, la filosofía es plenamente política por promover una pequeña voz contra la fuerte e impresionante presión a favor de lo práctico, de lo eficiente, y del discurso capitalista.

Palabras clave: Lyotard, filosofía, niño, juicio reflexivo, conocimiento, racionalidad técnica.



LYOTARD AND THE PHILOSOPHER CHILD

Jean-François Lyotard's description of the philosopher uses a metaphor comparing the philosopher to the child. Even though Lyotard's language for describing philosophy changes over time, depending upon whether he is discussing language genres or emphasizing the sublime for example, the connections between philosophy and childhood remain. In general, the historical problem with philosophy for Lyotard is that it has been understood as involving maturity, mastery, and adulthood. While the stereotype of the wise philosopher might suggest a mature expert who knows all, Lyotard rejects this view, so much so, that at one time he denied the title of philosopher and only re-claimed it provided that its typical understanding was changed.¹ The philosopher is the one who listens for what has not yet been articulated and says something new. Therefore, the answers will not be mastered, comprehensive, or settled for good. The philosopher is the child who seeks answers, but cannot master them. Consequently, Lyotard's linking of philosophy with childhood helps avoid an understanding of philosophy grounded in technological rationality in which practical mastery is the goal. For Lyotard, philosophy is fully political by providing a small voice against the loud and overwhelming push toward practicality, efficiency, and the discourse of capitalism.

Philosopher and the Child

Lyotard's linking of the child and the philosopher is common throughout his career. His series of lectures to undergraduates at the Sorbonne from 1964 entitled *Why Philosophize?* shed light about the relationship between philosophy and childhood. In these lectures, Lyotard states that philosophy stems from a desire for unity and meaning. Lyotard applies this idea to a social and political context and argues that philosophy emerges in society when it loses meaning and

¹ Lyotard initially denies the title of "philosopher," but rather, claims to be a kind of "politician," (*JG*, 55).

fails to provide a unified and coherent picture of reality. Therefore, philosophy is grounded in desire for meaning which arises due to its lack. The desire for wisdom runs through all of philosophy for Lyotard and there is no particular historical starting point for this desire, since it is always with us, as we seek meaning in our world. However, the purpose of philosophy is not to achieve a systematic, comprehensive understanding of the world that will satisfy the lack. Lyotard rejects the idea that philosophical speech can attain its typically understood goal of mastery and clarity. For Lyotard, the purpose of philosophy is to articulate real problems that exist, but have not yet been articulated. Typical politicians who seek to attain pragmatic goals are not necessarily more successful at changing reality than philosophers, because they often maintain the *status quo*. True transformation seeks to destroy false consciousness, and articulates something in the present that beckons the future (WP 111-2).² Lyotard claims that transformative action cannot occur without theory (WP 113, 120). He states “only if reality comes to thought, if the world comes to speech, can thought and speech be true” (WP 114). Philosophy struggles to bring the signified and signifier together and tries to avoid falling into the trap of what has already been thought (WP 121). Philosophy cannot produce results or a system of thought that unifies and orders everything, but it witnesses the lack of unity and names it.

The cover of the English translation of these lectures published in 2013 is a picture of a child’s legs dangling from a tree, and this is not without reason. Rejecting the idea that philosophy should involve mastery and maturity, Lyotard makes comparisons between the philosopher and the child. Lyotard describes philosophical speech being like “...an aged, naked child...” that aims at truth, but does not fully obtain it (WP 98). Furthermore, rather than contrasting the philosopher to a confident parent with all the answers, Lyotard describes the fact that philosophy cannot answer every question by stating “...for the child, too, there comes a time when the mother can no longer be the answer to everything”

² Lyotard is adamant that the philosopher is not articulating a pre-determined law of history that must necessarily occur, but is articulating a transformation of the world that has already occurred and needs speech to express it (WP 116, 112). Lyotard does not believe in history being predetermined or that laws of history necessitate certain outcomes in the world. Lyotard thinks that philosophy comments upon losses that have already occurred and need explanations to be transformed through political action.



(WP 96). The idea that philosophy is a humble witness to the lack of meaning and the need to name it contrasts sharply with the idea of the philosopher as master of knowledge.

Liotard's rejection of the mastery and maturity of philosophy is consistent throughout his career and his description of the child-like philosopher is further emphasized in *The Postmodern Explained*. *The Postmodern Explained*, translated from *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* would be better translated as "The Postmodern Explained to Children" and contains correspondence from 1982-1985. In his "Address on the Subject of the Course of Philosophy," Lyotard states that study of philosophy is the "...season of childhood, the season of the mind's possibilities" (PE, 100). The title of this book is a reference to philosophy and the childlike attitude required in order to come to know it. Lyotard contends that one cannot be a philosopher or a teacher of philosophy if "...your mind is made up on a question before you arrive..." (PE, 100-101). What is at the heart of philosophy are questions, and the point is to be open to various possible answers depending upon where the investigation leads. One never masters this type of knowledge, and one would be biased if they had all the answers prior to the investigation. Lyotard distances himself from the idea that philosophical knowledge involves mastery, because the ultimate concern of philosophy is to think what has not yet been thought, and to press beyond the borders of current knowledge. Lyotard notes that the traditional understanding of philosophy as mastery usually involves a notion of enlightening the subject. In that case, "childhood is the monster of philosophers," since it is meant to be overcome, rejected, and outgrown (PE 100). This presumes that the educated master can lead the child monster to greater self-fulfillment and adulthood (PE 100). Yet, for Lyotard, philosophical reading involves being child-like because mastery is rejected. Instead of a mastering a text, philosophical reading is an exercise in listening and being de-stabilized by the text (PE 101). He describes philosophical reading as a type of unreading and his use of the concept of the "child" is meant to underscore the lack of mastery and maturity (PE 101). One needs to be open to otherness in order to do philosophy and cannot come to it with rigid attachments to particular stances.

Given the huge influence of psychoanalytical thought in Lyotard's work, the childhood of thought that philosophy demands is not merely about unthought rational possibilities, but also reflects the childhood that is investigated psychoanalytically in order to understand present psychic life. In *The Postmodern Explained*, Lyotard compares the process of philosophy to a type of anamnesis, or an exercise in listening, that has Freudian echoes (102). He claims that philosophical elaboration "...bears no relation to theory," and is more similar to Freud's anamnesis or "working through" which is based upon listening (*PE*, 102). Lyotard further describes the process of philosophical writing as paradoxical. Philosophers inhabit a paradox by writing before they know what they want to say or how to say it, in order to investigate the possible (*PE*, 103). For Lyotard, philosophy is "...muddled up in the unthought, trying to make sense of the impertinent chatter of childhood" (*PE* 103).

For Lyotard, philosophy is also not a type of rationality that positively accumulates results, or progresses. Lyotard rejects a genealogical method of philosophical investigation because he insists that philosophers begin in the middle and never get at a pure developmental history of philosophy (*PE*, 101). There are always more books to be read, and for this reason philosophy betrays an economy of progress, in which answers are being achieved and accumulated. From the point of view of an exact science, philosophy "...looks doomed to failure" because it does not achieve practical answers that can be added to a column of positive knowledge (*PE*, 101). The philosopher, then, does not claim to have all the answers, and avoids the title of "expert of philosophy" because there is something about the study of philosophy that denies absolute knowledge. The philosopher uses a language game of questioning, and inquires about various topics, while the expert merely concludes, assuming that she has thorough and complete knowledge on a specific topic (*PC*, xxv). The "childishness" connected to philosophy stresses openness and provision claims, rather than firmly conclusive ones. Rather than being the mature adult and master, the better philosopher is more like the child.



Socrates is often referenced by Lyotard as an example or model of the philosopher. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard describes the philosopher as one who knows what he does not know, while the expert does not know the limitations to her knowledge (xxv).³ Clearly, this definition is a reference to Socrates, who denied that he had wisdom to imbue to others. Just as Plato's Socrates is wise because he knows what he does not know, Lyotard describes philosophers as those who know what they do not know. What is at the heart of philosophy are questions, and like the child, there comes a point when the parent cannot answer every question (WP 96). In *Why Philosophize?* and *The Postmodern Explained* Lyotard discusses Plato's *Symposium* in which Alcibiades is willing to give his beauty to desiring Socrates in exchange for Socrates' wisdom. Lyotard thinks that Socrates is skeptical of the exchange, since he has no wisdom to offer and Socrates realizes that wisdom cannot be an object of exchange on the market. The philosopher is one who understands that "to philosophize is not to desire wisdom, it is to desire desire..." since attaining all the answers and satisfying this desire is not possible (WP 38, PE 105). Whereas a more technological account of mastery of knowledge may be able to sell wisdom on the market, a more childish account evades its exchange.

Lyotard contrasts the Socratic model of philosophy with the Platonic philosophy. In *Au Juste*, translated into English as *Just Gaming*, Lyotard describes a problem of justice that is Platonic in origin (JG, 19). Lyotard is disturbed by the way in which Platonic thought dominates political discussion by asserting that there is an essence of justice, which can be thought theoretically, and should be mimicked practically. Lyotard asserts that in Plato's *Republic*, justice arises by conforming to its essence, or its form. The most just state participates in the form of justice and conforms to the true idea of the essence of justice. Lyotard rejects political philosophy that devises theoretical models of the just society in order for them to be practically applied to all political states. Lyotard finds that even with Marx, there is the belief that if the theory or discourse about social justice is correct and true, and social practice copies the theory, then the state will be just (JG, 20). A

³ Unfortunately, the philosopher is sexed as male for Lyotard, underscoring some gender problems within his work.

just state is supposed to be the result of a just and true political idea thought by the “expert” in philosophy that is enacted practically in that state. For Lyotard, such a condition signals that the political realm has succumbed to technological rationality in which an ideal is imitated and copied. In *The Republic*, Plato’s vision of the philosopher is as the philosopher king, the fully mature expert in philosophy trained for decades. However, this contrasts sharply with the image of Socrates who is more limited and humble with his knowledge, much more like a child. Whereas Plato uses technological rationality to fabricate a just and true state prior to its instantiation, Lyotard’s philosopher seeks to articulate what is already the case and beckons for or calls for expression.

Since *The Differend* from 1983 is Lyotard’s book on philosophy, then its conclusions concerning the method of philosophy are very important.⁴ In the Reading Dossier at beginning of the book, Lyotard states that the mode of this book of philosophy is “...philosophic, reflective.” This statement suggests that for Lyotard, philosophy itself may be reflective, linking the mode or the method of philosophy to Lyotard’s appropriation of Kantian reflective judgments of the sublime. Lyotard distinguishes this reflective mode from the theoretical mode by stating that the mode of the book is *not*

“...theoretical (or anything else) to the extent that its stakes are in discovering its

rules rather than in supposing their knowledge as a principle. In this very way, it

denies the possibility of settling, on the basis of its own rules, the differends it

examines...” (*D*, xiv, 12).

⁴ In *The Differend*, Lyotard states that the main problem of the book as a whole concerns “...how to save the honor of thinking,” so the book has a strong relationship to thinking, and to the field of philosophy (*D* xii, 10). Rodolphe Gasché argues that Lyotard is focused upon what Gasché calls the “self-disgrace” of thinking when thinking investigates itself (279). In other words, Lyotard’s concern is the fact that philosophy cannot legitimate its authority by itself, without recourse to another language genre. Therefore, philosophy cannot truly be a universal genre of language because it cannot ground itself metaphysically or hierarchically.



The difference between “reflection” and “theory” is a crucial difference throughout Lyotard’s later works. Theory, for Lyotard, is associated with universal discourses that seek to ground themselves hierarchically and place their discourse above all others, such as in the case of Platonic discourse, or the sciences. Theory of this type demands mature experts. However, Lyotard thinks a differend arises, which is a conflict that cannot be settled justly, because there is no rule applicable to both parties involved (*D xi*). The language genres are incommensurable and to assert the dominance of *one* way of understanding the world does an injustice to the others. Philosophy, construed of as reflective, does not claim to be a universal theoretical discourse that is capable of answering all questions. If philosophy presupposes that it is theoretical or cognitive, it will miss precisely what it is supposed to be examining according to Lyotard, which are differends. While theoretical knowledge demands memorization of facts and other practical skills, the resistances to philosophy involve putting aside the demand for practicality.

One of the reasons that Kant’s theory of reflective judgment appeals to Lyotard is that it remains open to various answers, and does not presume a position of mastery. Kantian reflective judgments of the sublime concern instances for which a universal concept is lacking. Lyotard describes the sublime as overwhelming, involving both pleasure in the excitement of the encounter with the new and pain from being unable to currently express it. The sublime is the feeling of a differend, and philosophy requires listening for differends. Thus, philosophy entails more passivity and less autonomy and mastery than is usually associated with it. Rather than being an active, fabricating force that utilizes knowledge as a means to practical ends, Lyotard believes philosophy should be more passive, more receptive, and less totalizing of the conversation, and thus, far more connected to the child.

While I am focusing specifically on the relationship between the child metaphor and the philosopher, it is clear that the metaphor often extends beyond the philosopher in Lyotard’s work into a broader metaphysical sense. In “Mainmise,” Lyotard discusses how political emancipation often uses infancy as

its theme, in that the repressed subjects gain control and master themselves in a maturation process. Yet, for Lyotard, infancy extends beyond childhood into adulthood. Lyotard understands infancy as "...the condition of being *affected*..." which he connects to the impact of otherness upon us (M 420). Rather than thinking of humans as maturing into total self-reliance and control, Lyotard understands that otherness affects us and cannot be separated from us or controlled by us. In that sense, adulthood is an illusion if it is understood as complete independence and self-control. Lyotard also discusses childhood in his essay on Hannah Arendt, called "The Survivor." In it, Lyotard discusses childhood as the name of the faculty of radical newness that is possible with the emergence of each human being (TP 151). Rachel Jones stresses Lyotard's use of childhood in an overarching metaphysical sense, extending it beyond merely being a comment upon philosophy, but an observation about our metaphysical condition. Jones believes that Lyotard's references to childhood are closely tied to his concept of "the event" (153). The event is something that challenges current knowledge paradigms, and as such is what philosophy concerns. For Jones, infancy is not properly found in the subject, but during the encounter which opens one up to the *Other* (153). As such, infancy occurs for all whenever there is "...the exposed openness that both permits this precarious movement of initiation, and that is itself renewed in and as the initiatory movement of the event" (153). According to Paul Smeyers and Jan Masschelein, the concept of the child refers to "...never ending indeterminacy, unmanageability, or wildness..." in Lyotard's thought, particularly in what cannot be put into speech (149). Even though these are broad metaphysical uses of notion of the child, it seems that philosophers may be particularly attuned to infancy and childhood as Lyotard understands it, since they are the ones who seek out the encounter with what cannot yet be thought.

The Enemies of Philosophy: The Grownups

Lyotard discusses the internal adversary of the study of philosophy as coming from the academic discourse of mastery and the impatience with study that does not lead to such mastery. Lyotard asserts that philosophy is



fundamentally “...an exercise in patience. The long course of philosophical reading is not just learning what has to be read, it is learning that reading is never finished...” (PE, 101). While the adult seeks practical answers quickly, the child has less pragmatic concerns. The demand for patience in the philosopher may not fit well with the need to be “child-like”, since children typically lack the patience which Lyotard is describing. Yet, Lyotard’s concern with childhood and patience is strongly connected to openness and willingness to explore without a pragmatic goal in mind, which many adults lack. Studying philosophy goes against the demands in society for visible progress, development, and practicality (PE, 102). He states:

The idea that we could put up with not making progress (in a calculable and visible way), that we could put up with always doing no more than making a start – this is contrary to the general values of prospection, development, targeting, performance, speed, contracts, execution, fulfillment (PE 102).

Lyotard thinks that the main difficulty with teaching philosophy to others in the university setting is this problematic demand for patience. Lyotard admits that there is a differend between the competitive and capitalistic world of success that teaches narcissism and fulfillment, and the patience demanded of philosophy where the teacher has nothing to teach because they are always beginning anew (PE, 106). Students may ultimately reject the burdensome demand for patience that does not guarantee significant progress in attaining philosophical knowledge. In fact, Lyotard states there will be students who never enter into philosophy at all because they speak the idiom that the world has taught them concerning success, competition, and fulfillment.⁵ Under such conditions, the student and teacher become victims of one another (PE 60). Lyotard describes the childhood of thought as something that must be endured and the teacher of philosophy is included within this framework. Rather than mastering particular knowledge sets, philosophy follows different rules, timelines, and has different concerns. Once the

⁵ In *Why Philosophize*, Lyotard claims that it is impossible to completely avoid the issues of philosophy, since the questions it focuses upon do not go away by merely seeking to avoid them.

demand for progress and practicality is pushed to the side, then philosophy from Lyotard's perspective can begin.⁶

While Lyotard describes the internal adversary of philosophy as the academic discourse of mastery, he describes the external adversary to philosophy as the genre of economic discourse and global capitalism. Reflection wastes time and is considered to be good for nothing, and the success of various philosophical texts are determined by economic factors such as how quickly the books are sold, and how quickly new books can be written (*D*, xv, 13-14). Knowledge becomes a product to be sold, and the goal is exchange (*PC*, 4-5). Philosophical knowledge does not exclusively correspond to sales figures and economic popularity. Lyotard believes that capitalism undermines philosophy by measuring its effectiveness in economic terms. Like Alcibiades, it seeks to exchange wisdom on the market, even when wisdom is not a product to be exchanged.

Overall, technological rationality demands experts, practitioners, and mature grownups that have a practical purpose for what they do. Understanding the world exclusively through the categories of means leading to ends, assumes definitive answers, mastery, and expertise. The main problem with philosophy as it is traditionally understood is that it often presupposes a type of mastery. According to Lyotard, the actual mode or method of philosophy is closer to reflective judgment because the issues it examines are open to further discussion and cannot be settled for good. Philosophical language does not merely report or observe, but it creates expressions of what is new by becoming attuned to something latent in the world (*WP* 95). While theoretical mastery requires expertise, maturity, and adulthood, philosophy requires more openness to childhood. As such, it evades technological rationality and points toward what has not yet been thought. While forces like the academic discourse of rational mastery and progress and the practical discourse of capitalism push against philosophy, Lyotard thinks philosophy resists. Currently, academia is producing more and

⁶ Similarly, Stephanie Mackler argues that the search for meaning has been lost in the university setting, in favor of knowledge production, following a more pragmatic model of job training.



more grownups to enter the work force. Lyotard suggests that “maybe there is more childhood available to thought at thirty-five than at eighteen...” and that we should “...search out its childhood anywhere and everywhere, even outside of childhood” (PE 107). For Lyotard, what needs to be preserved and nurtured is the voice of the “child.”

Enviado em: 05/01/2015
Aprovado em: 15/01/2015

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