

The Philosopher à la Jean-François Lyotard – Is what he suggests against the rules?

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Abstract

What does it mean to say, as Lyotard does, that philosophy is a genre of discourse in search of its own rules? How does the philosopher differ from the intellectual? What does it mean, what can it mean, to be an “expert” in philosophy? Can the philosopher affect society? If so, how? And another, more pressing, question for us philosophers today: if we can affect society, can we measure our effects? Put differently, (how) can the philosopher respond to the demand for demonstrable results without becoming an intellectual? Must we pass off philosophy as expertise; or can we pass between the intellectual and the philosopher? Finally, what institutional expression of philosophy might allow for such a passage between expertise and love of wisdom?

Philosophy à la Kant and Lyotard

The range within which we can use our power of cognition according to principles, and hence do philosophy, is the range within which *a priori* concepts have application. (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Ak. 174)

Philosophical discourse has as its rule to discover its rule: its *a priori* is what is at stake. It’s a matter of formulating this rule, which can only be done at the end, if there is an end. (Lyotard, *The Differend*, §98)

What does it mean to say, as Lyotard does, that philosophy is a genre of discourse in search of its own rules? In what follows, I offer a reading of Lyotard’s notion of philosophy and its place in the Academy, as well as of the place of the philosopher, both in the Academy and in the world.

The first point of interest is that Lyotard reads Kant against Kant. This will become clearer, perhaps, when we explore the domain of philosophy according to Kant.

For Kant, as is clear from the first quote, above, doing philosophy is a matter of *cognition according to principles*. Put differently, for Kant, doing philosophy is a matter of following rules to acquire knowledge. Accordingly, Kant divides philosophy into a theoretical part and a practical part, for which his first two *Critiques* lay out the rules. These rules are quite familiar to most of us: theoretical cognition, as the first *Critique* tells us, is limited to the domain of the concepts of nature, the territory of which is confined to objects of possible experience; practical cognition, at the second *Critique* lays out, is limited to the domain of the concept of freedom, the territory of which includes things in themselves as Ideas (of God, freedom, and immortality) that cannot enter as intuitions into the realm of possible experience.

Note, then, that according to Kant, philosophy has no access to the realm of the supersensible realm, “a realm that is unbounded, but that is also inaccessible to our entire cognitive power” (*Critique of Judgment*, Ak. 175). Here, we might say, Kant is speaking from the point of view of theoretical cognition, according to which “an immense gulf is fixed between the domain of the concept of nature, the sensible, and the domain of the concept of freedom, the supersensible, so that no transition from the sensible to the supersensible (and hence by means of the theoretical use of reason) is possible, just as if they were two different worlds, the first of which cannot have any influence on the second” (*Critique of Judgment*, Ak. 175-76). “And yet,” he writes, from the point of view of practical cognition, “the second *is* to have an influence on the first” (*Critique of Judgment*, Ak. 176). “So,” he concludes, “there must after all be a basis *uniting* the supersensible that underlies nature and the supersensible that the concept of freedom contains practically, even though the concept of this basis does not reach cognition of it either theoretically or practically and hence does not have a domain of its own” (*Ibid.*). This basis is the power of judgment, which makes possible the transition from thinking in the manner of theoretical reason to thinking in the manner of practical reason.

The critique of this power of judgment has no domain, since it is not a doctrine: “Its only task is to investigate whether and how our powers allow us (when given their situation) to produce a doctrine. The realm of this critique extends to all the claims that these powers make, in order to place these powers within the boundaries of their rightful [use]” (*Ibid.*). That the power of judgment lacks its own domain is enough, for Kant, to exclude it from the division of philosophy.

Lyotard, however, without contesting this reading of Kant, continues reading. Indeed, he goes so far as to claim, as the quote from him, above, suggests, not only that philosophy by no means excludes judgment, but also that philosophy in fact excludes the possibility of developing theoretical or practical doctrines. The task of critique, which for Kant was merely preparatory for philosophy (which means for Kant, to say it again, *cognition*, a *doctrine*), has

become for Lyotard precisely what is at stake in the whole of philosophy. What else might we expect from the author of *The Postmodern Condition*, he who defines postmodernity as “incredulity toward metanarratives?” But is Lyotard forcing himself on Kant here, or is there some basis in reading Kant for Lyotard’s twist?

Rules, Rule-following, and Rule-seeking

We are all familiar with rules (at least with the fact that there are rules), as well as with the practice of following rules – this, even if (or perhaps even especially because) we chafe at rules and dislike both following rules and rule-followers.

What if, when presented with a rule, our first thought (like Wittgenstein’s) is: ‘And what if I do not do it?’ Put differently, what is the alternative to following rules? It is obvious that the alternative to following a rule is *not* following a rule – but here, it seems, it is tempting to see only the possibility of *disobeying* or violating the rule.

It becomes apparent, however, that not following a rule can be accomplished in several other ways, including learning the rules, trying to follow the rules, or finding oneself in a situation in which there simply are no rules to follow. I want to explore another way of not following rules, one that does not presuppose that there are no rules to follow. I want to explore the possibility of rule-seeking.

What is rule-seeking? Rule-seeking is not the same as trying to learn the rules, since learning the rules presupposes that there exist *already established* rules. Rule-seeking is also different from rule-making, since rule-making involves *establishing* rules. The question of establishing rules, however, is closely related to rule-seeking, as we shall see when we move on to the issue of institutionalizing a practice (in our case, the practice of philosophy). For now, let us limit our considerations to the practice of rule-seeking. But perhaps even that limitation is not limiting enough: if we do not yet understand rule-seeking, how can we hope to discuss a practice of rule-seeking?

It seems, then, that we must begin by defining our terms: ‘rule’ and ‘seek’. A rule is a standard, a principle, a measure, a limit, or a condition. Rules often proscribe things (such as certain behaviors) and may, but need not, prescribe a procedure or method. Rules may serve as guides. Seeking involves looking for, searching for, tracing, exploring, trying to find, trying to reach, or simply trying. Rule-seeking is a matter of trying to find limits, exploring boundaries.

Rule-seeking is thus what Kant calls a reflective activity. Kant writes:

Judgment in general is the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, principle, law) is given, then the judgment, which subsumes the particular under it, is *determinative*. But if only the particular is given and judgment has to find the universal for it, then this power is merely *reflective*. (*Critique of Judgment*, Ak. 179)

To say that in reflective judgment only the particular is given and judgment has to “find the universal for it” is simply to say that reflective judgment is a matter of rule-seeking.

It is now possible, perhaps, to risk the following proposition: for Kant, doctrinal philosophy involves determinative judgment (the rule for cognition is given and must be followed), critique involves *establishing* rules or boundaries to domains of cognition, and reflective judgment is rule-seeking.

This reading of Kant simultaneously goes against and supports Lyotard’s reading of Kant. For Lyotard, Kant’s third *Critique* ought to be read as “a propaedeutic to philosophy” – with that Kant can agree – yet not only as a propaedeutic to philosophy, but also as “a propaedeutic that is itself, perhaps, all of philosophy.” Here is where Lyotard and Kant part ways, or at least where the emphasis changes.¹ For Lyotard, Kant’s emphasis on developing a doctrinal system of philosophy hides an important insight:

Aesthetic [reflective] judgment conceals, I would suggest, a secret more than that of doctrine, the secret of the “manner” (rather than the method) in which critical thought proceeds in general. The manner (*modus aestheticus*) “possesses no standard other than the *feeling* of unity in the presentation,” the method (*modus logicus*) “follows definite *principles*.” (*Lessons*, p. 6)

Lyotard’s further claim is that critique is a matter of manner rather than method: “before an inquiry into the *a priori* conditions of judgments can be made, critical thought must be in a reflective state of this sort, if it does not want – and it must not want – these *a priori* conditions to be in any way prejudged in its investigation” (*Ibid.*, p. 7). Let us grant this much, as I believe would Kant: critique requires reflection as the condition for its possibility. Put differently, before one establishes the rules (which is, after all, the goal of critique), one must first have searched for those rules. Why suppose, though, with Lyotard and (perhaps) against Kant, that rule-seeking and rule-establishing are co-extensive – or even more to the point, that rule-

¹ Lyotard quotes Kant: “we can at most learn how to philosophize, but we cannot learn philosophy” (*Lessons*, p. 6).

seeking is the perpetual propaedeutic to rule-establishing, to the extent that it is always not-yet-possible to establish the rules for thinking?

Philosophy and the University

In two public lectures Mark C. Taylor recently gave at UNT as part of CSID's "[Future of the University](#)" lecture series, the first on "Three Types of Philosophy" and the second on "Restructuring Higher Education," Kant was key.

By 'the University' let us understand the Modern university, for which, as the story goes, the plan was laid out in 1798 by [Immanuel Kant](#), put into practice by [Wilhelm von Humboldt](#) with the founding of the [University of Berlin](#) in 1810, and exported to the US with the founding of [Johns Hopkins University](#) in 1876. I note this right away to attempt to inoculate myself from the reckless charge that I, [like Mark Taylor](#), am ignorant of the fact that universities, where people such as Adam Smith taught, existed before Kant. Having hung out with Professor Taylor for the past 5 days, I can absolutely confirm that he's not absolutely wrong about absolutely everything. Absolution, absolutely, at least from [me](#).

In the first talk Taylor described Kant as in some sense the father of all three kinds of philosophy: (1) the scientific (figured by Hegel, though traced through analytic philosophy), (2) the artistic (figured by Kierkegaard, though traced through Continental philosophy), and (3) the neither/nor, in-between (figured by the Kant of the *Critique of Judgment*, though traced almost imperceptibly through postmodernism).

In his second talk Taylor traced the conceptual roots of the Modern university to Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*, arguing that Kant's higher faculty is conceptually linked to Kant's second *Critique (of Practical Reason)*, while the lower faculty of philosophy is linked to Kant's first *Critique (of Pure Reason)*. The crisis of the Modern university is associated, at least in part, with the fact that those of us in the lower faculty of philosophy (and that includes basically all the disciplines in which one can be granted a Doctor of Philosophy degree) tend still to resist any sort of instrumental justification for our research (we pursue knowledge for the sake of knowledge and worship at the feet of the idol of intrinsic value – in this, we all follow Aristotle, though Stanley Fish is today's high priest of irrelevance). The higher faculties (which would include today's professional schools, such as those in Law or Business), on the other hand, are concerned precisely with the practical, instrumental value of knowledge. This schism, along with the division of labor that Kant champions, Taylor argued, leads to the mass production of PhDs who pursue more and more knowledge about less and less. Taylor then argued for a postmodern restructuring of the university as a network of interconnecting webs of

cooperation rather than autonomous silos of competitors who wall themselves off from each other and the world.

Throughout both lectures Taylor suggested that the two talks were themselves related to each other – though he mostly left us to make the connection. Here's how I would do it.

First, I would modify the description of the three kinds of philosophy, as follows. It's not so much that we have a scientific/analytic kind, an artistic/Continental kind, and something that's neither scientific nor artistic. Sure, that makes a certain sense, and it's consistent with what I take to be at least a key element in several [versions](#) of the [story](#) of the analytic/Continental philosophy divide: that it's really about the relative value each side places on science and philosophy, with the analysts valuing science more highly (philosophical naturalism) and the Continentals valuing philosophy more highly (constructivism).

Suppose, however, that the real divide in philosophy is neither analytic nor Continental. Suppose, instead, that the salient divide in philosophy is between those scholars who value philosophy for the sake of philosophy (to the exclusion of its practical relevance, à la Stanley Fish) and those philosophers who seek (à la Marx) to change the world. We could then think of the first type of philosophers as those who might gravitate toward Kant's first *Critique* – they value the True, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, pure science, theoretical significance, and so forth. The second type of philosophers would be those who would gravitate toward Kant's second *Critique* – they value the Good, justice, the pursuit of knowledge for its practical employment in solving real-world problems, applied science, practical relevance, and so forth.

This division of the first two types of philosophy actually makes Taylor's appeal to Kant's third *Critique* more interesting. If modernity is something like the struggle between these two grand narratives (reason in its theoretical employment and reason in its practical employment -- or theory and practice, for short), then the appeal to Kant's third *Critique* as a sort of third type of philosophy navigating between the first and second types, seeking rules, making indeterminate judgments, valuing the Beautiful (and the Sublime!) – well that has postmodernism à la [Lyotard](#) written all over it!

It also allows us to connect Taylor's first and second lectures. The problem with the Modern university as designed by Kant is that it institutionalizes the split between the first two types of philosophy, which we now see are not just two types of folks within the discipline of philosophy, but rather two attitudes toward knowledge production (one theoretical, one practical). *The Conflict of the Faculties* instantiates an incomplete architectonic of the university -- there is no Middle Faculty (of Judgment) to chart the course between the practical (higher) and theoretical (lower) faculties.

Of course, Kant would object that the power of judgment *has no domain*. It is therefore not possible to develop a positive doctrine, a cognitive domain, on the basis of reflective judgment alone. This, one might say, is also Lyotard's point.

The Philosopher à la Lyotard

Lyotard suggests in *The Differend* that the task of the philosopher is opposed to the task of the intellectual. The intellectual is "someone who helps forget differends, by advocating a given genre, whichever one it may be, for the sake of political hegemony" (Lyotard, *The Differend*, §202). The philosopher, on the other hand, is one whose responsibility consists in "detecting differends and in finding the (impossible) idiom for phrasing them" (*Ibid.*). Without delving into Lyotard's own (impossible?) idiom, perhaps it is possible to say what this means.

If we return for the moment to Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*, we recall that it was written as a series of essays regarding the proper relationship between the higher and lower faculties. In the case of the conflict between the Faculty of Theology and the Faculty of Philosophy, at stake was who had the right, the authority, to espouse a doctrine concerning God. (This disagreement, by the way, would be an example of a differend.) Kant argues that each faculty has its own right to discuss God in its own way, without interfering with each other's right to do so (think of cognition from a theoretical and a practical point of view). In offering his argument, however, Kant is serving not as an advocate for the (genre) of philosophy over and against that (genre) of theology, that is, not as an intellectual in the Lyotardian sense, but rather as a philosopher à la Lyotard.

Insofar as the Kant of *The Conflict of the Faculties* serves to mediate between the Higher and Lower Faculties of the university, he is not serving in his capacity as a professor of a grand philosophical doctrine. Indeed, to the contrary, he is engaged in the kind of intra-institutional politics many of us would so like to avoid. Yet, *The Conflict of the Faculties* is also a philosophy of the institution of the university – one that, moreover, still serves in some sense as the model for our research universities today.

I have one more point to make in conclusion. Although Kant did write his metaphysics of morals and was working on the metaphysical foundations of natural science when he died, it is neither of these works for which he is known. Should we, as philosophers, limit ourselves to professing some philosophical doctrine (say, all is water) or is it beginning to dawn on some of us that that type of philosophical practice is all wet?