Potentiality and Incommensurability: Lyotard in the History of Philosophy

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Everything is full of gods
— Thales

Every experience gives rise to a divinity
— Lyotard

Aristotle, in the *Metaphysics*, is dismissive of the presocratic philosophers who propose material principles for being because, as he puts it, “[i]t is surely not the substrate itself which causes itself to change.”¹ But in *On the Soul*, he contrasts the natural philosopher (φυσικός), whose concern is matter (ὑλή), with the logician (διαλέκτικος), whose concern is “the form [or formula] of the essence” (το εἶδος καὶ τὸν λογον)² — which describes what something does³ — and asks, which of these is the real natural philosopher? the one who ignores the formula and is only concerned with matter? or the one concerned only with the formula? Thus he puts his earlier derogatory remarks concerning the presocratic philosophers in a different light. The real

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¹ Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*. With an English Translation by Hugh Tredennick (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1961), 984a23-6. The quote continues, “I mean, e.g., that neither wood nor bronze is responsible for changing itself; wood does not make a bed, nor bronze a statue, but something else is the cause of change” (984a26-8).³


³ “The formula of a house is a covering to protect from damage by wind, rain and heat.” In contrast, a “materialist” definition of a house would be “stones, bricks and timber.” *Ibid.*., 403b4-5.
φυσικός, he now says, "bases his concept on both." He "will mean the form expressed in these materials to achieve these objectives," and if the formula is to exist, "it must appear in appropriate matter."

"Form expressed in matter," is a formula for the unity of body and soul; for Aristotle, form and matter comprise a necessary unity.

[O]ne need no more ask whether body and soul are one than whether the wax and the impression it receives are one, or in general whether the matter of each thing is the same as that of which it is the matter.\[4\]

In the same way that wax cannot exist without having some shape (form), the soul does not exist without its "expression." "[T]he affections of the soul are formulae expressed in matter." For this reason the affections of the soul must be understood in terms of their implications for the body; that is, "anger must be defined as a movement of the body." "This, at once, makes it the business of the natural philosopher to inquire into the soul."\[7\] The study of the soul is of first (πρωτοτοις) importance because it "seems likely to make a substantial contribution to the whole body of truth, and particularly to the study of nature; for the soul is in a sense the principle of animal life (αρχη των ζωων)."\[11\] The natural philosopher, for Aristotle, was not a primitive scientist weighted down by the appearance of many things around him; he was a philosopher of the soul as the first principle of living things.

As much as they may be cryptic, Thales’ sayings about the soul occupy a privileged place in this discussion. Aristotle finds that most theories of the soul prioritize one or the other of its characteristic

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4 Ibid., 403b9.
5 Ibid., 403b6-7.
7 On the Soul, 412b4-6.
8 Ibid., 403a23-5.
9 Ibid., 403a25-6.
10 Ibid., 403a28-9.
11 Ibid., 402a4-7; emphasis added.
actions: movement or sensation.\textsuperscript{12} Aristotle's own theory will "take with him" what he finds valuable from both perspectives,\textsuperscript{13} but there are a few of his predecessors who anticipate Aristotle's preference and capacity to draw both characteristics into a single definition. Potentiality is a fine way to account for both self-movement and discernment, and it is primarily this (potentiality) that Aristotle wishes to contribute to Plato's account in the \textit{Timaeus}. It needs to be said that, while Aristotle's comments are very critical of Plato, his position is not nearly as far removed from Plato's as it might seem. Both are drawn to Anaxagoras on amount of his efforts to unify the body and soul.\textsuperscript{14} Aristotle says, "[Anaxagoras] assigns the power of knowing and of moving to the same principle when he says that mind set everything in motion."\textsuperscript{15}

Aristotle doesn't make much of it, but sandwiched between this reference to Anaxagoras and another one to Diogenes — both of whom hold that the soul is the principle of movement and sensation — he cites Thales.

Thales, too, to judge from what is recorded of his views, seems to suppose that the soul is in a sense the cause of movement, since he says that a stone [i.e., the Magnesian stone or magnet] has a soul because it causes movement to iron.\textsuperscript{16}

Aristotle only credits him with finding movement in soul, but the citation explicitly says \textit{what} the magnet attracts, implying on the part of the magnet a kind of perception or discernment. Magnets do not indiscriminately move everything in just any way, but only metals, in a way consistent with their nature.

There are two ways in which we could speak of the soul moving the body: directly or indirectly. Indirect movement may be likened to a person being conveyed from one point to another in a moving ship; it is not that the person moves herself, but is moved by the ship's motion.\textsuperscript{17} In this instance, the body's movement would be accounted

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.}, 403b28.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}, 403b23.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}, 405b14; \textit{cf. Phaedo}.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{On the Soul}, 405a18-19.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{On the Soul}, 405a20-21.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}, 406a1-12.
for in the same way that Daedalus is said to have "made his wooden Aphrodite move by pouring in quicksilver."\textsuperscript{18} And "some" do "say that the soul moves its body exactly as it is moved itself,"\textsuperscript{19} that is, by sensible objects.\textsuperscript{20} But this comparison is not facile because the body is not only moved, but also comes to rest. Rather, the body is moved by an "act of the mind or will,"\textsuperscript{21} that is, directly.

The "stone" is a figure for the unity of body and soul. It does not exert an external force on other objects but is an object among objects, belonging to a play of forces. On this same Thalesian insight Plato says,

> every kind of water current, even the descent of a thunderbolt as well as that marvelous "attraction" exercised by amber and by the lodestone, in all these cases there is no such thing as a force of attraction. As any careful investigator will discover, there is no void; these things push themselves around into each other; all things move by exchanging places, each to its own place, whether in the process of combination or of dissolution. He will discover that these "works of wizardry" are due to the interactive relationships among these phenomena.\textsuperscript{22}

We could easily read this passage as a demythologization of the separation of the soul from the body in the \textit{Phaedo}: the immortality of the soul means that what is done in the body has implications for the soul. Plato uses the imagery of physical separation precisely to suggest their internal correlation.

The soul itself, the body and the soul, and the soul and its analysand are one — not in a physical, "spatial" sense, but in a way that is internally necessary. It is the unity of process, and Aristotle will describe each as a kind of event.

First, "mind [or soul] is one and continuous in the same sense as the process of thinking; thinking consists of thoughts. But the unity of these is one of succession, like that of numbers, whereas the unity of

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}, 406b18-19.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, 406b16.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}, 406b11.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.}, 406b25; cf. 433a6-10.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Timaeus} 80c; emphasis added.
special magnitudes is not." The "process of thinking" is one in the same sense that numbers are. A number in a sequence is not a "part" in the sense of separable from the rest; implicit in the number 5 are the numbers 1-10. In the same way, a singular thought takes place in relation to other thoughts and to a thinking self. One thought follows, not materially, but logically upon another. The unity of body and soul, then, has the sense of an event among events. For Aristotle, the soul is the actuality of the potential for life which is the body. This may seem a step back from what we would expect, with the body seemingly more "actual" than the soul. But Aristotle uses the example of an eye to bring across this unity of body and soul: "[I]f vision fails there is no eye, except in an equivocal sense." What makes the eye actual is not the eyeball, which can be easily replicated in paint or sculpture. What makes an eye an eye is its capacity to see. In the same way, the soul is the actuality of a living being because it accounts for both movement and discernment.

Next, Aristotle wants to account for perception (αισθανεσθαι). This is a third unity event because there is a sense in which, in perception, the soul becomes what it perceives. In representing a thing, a replica is produced in the mind. Again and again Aristotle says, "The mind when actively thinking is identical with its objects." The question is how this happens. Earlier philosophers tended to speak of elements in the soul recognizing elements in the world around — because "'like' can only be known by 'like.'" But Aristotle points out that sensation is not of the elements, but of things, particular combinations of elements. In order for this to account for sensation, we would have to suppose that we have not only all the elements, but also all the souls of things in us. This is certainly a cumbersome explanation — and one that is quite unnecessary. Aristotle points out that in practical matters a single standard can be used for multiple instances. "For instance, by that which

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24 Ibid., 414b28-32.
25 Ibid., 412a28-9; cf. 30-413a5.
26 Ibid., 412b17-19.
27 Ibid., 430a14-18; cf. 431b23.
28 Ibid., 431b20; cf. 429b23, 429b33-430a1, 430a5, 430a20, 431a1, 431b23.
29 Ibid., 404b17.
30 Ibid., Cf. 409b25-410a3.
is straight we discern both straight and crooked; for the carpenter’s rule is the test of both.”31 The soul is a kind of “first (πρωτηζ) sense” which accounts not only for the unity of the senses, but even for their respective functions.32 In language that recalls the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that the soul can be conceived of as a kind of “mean” with the potential to become “each of the extremes in turn.”33 That the senses give no sensation of themselves and “no sensation apart from external objects” demonstrates that “the faculty of sensation has no actual but only potential existence.”34

[M]ind is potentially identical with the objects of thought but it is actually nothing, until it thinks. What the mind thinks must be in it in the same sense as letters are on a tablet which bears no actual writing.35

What Aristotle is describing as the mechanism of sensation is an event. “[D]uring the process of being acted upon it is unlike, but at the end of the process it has become like that object, and shares its quality.”36 Something happens to the soul in the event of sensation; if Thales has said that the soul causes movement, he could just as well have said that objects cause movement (sensation) to the soul. Consciousness is effective; consciousness and its analysand are mutually effective of one another. They exist by the agency of the other. This is what potentiality means; the soul is the site of an encounter between the mind and the world. “Hence that which an object makes actually like itself is potentially such already.”37 Or, as Kant says, “the matter of all appearance is only given to us *a posteriori*, but its form must already lie ready for it in the mind *a priori*.”38

What I take to be the central doctrine of *On the Soul* reads parallel to Gadamer’s thesis in *Truth and Method*: “Understanding or its failure

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36 *Ibid.*, 418a1-2; emphasis added.
is like an event [the earlier translation edited by Barden and Cumming has ‘process’] which happens to us.” Aristotle says that “thinking is a form of being acted upon.”

Of course, anytime Aristotle says something is “a form of” something, the particular sense in which he is using the term proves to be important. Here he says,

Even the term ‘being acted upon’ is not used in a single sense, but sometimes it means a form of destruction of something by its contrary, and sometimes rather a preservation of that which is potential by something actual which is like it, in accordance with the relation of potentiality to actuality; for that which merely possesses knowledge comes to exercise it by a process which either is not alteration at all (for the development is into its real self or actuality), or else is a unique kind of alteration. So it is not sound to describe that which thinks as being altered when it thinks, anymore than it is true to say that the builder is altered when he builds.

Thinking is described here as an act of preservation. In the same way that an act of dialectic preserves by canceling out, thinking is “a unique kind of alteration” because it is a development into its “real self or actuality.” Potentiality is the identity of thinking and what is thought; the one is not different from the other except in the way that an image is different from actuality. The building analogy is apt because actual knowledge is not in possession, but in use. Aristotle says that the one who is “already exercising his knowledge…is in actuality instructed [educated] and in the strict sense knows.” Or, as Gadamer puts it, understanding is always, from the first, application.

Aristotle’s doctrine of potentiality places the human soul in-the-world, affected and effective. He speaks of a kind of “duality”; “abstract objects...[are] always combined with extension.” Greek physis is never

40 *On the Soul*, 429b27.
43 *Truth and Method*, 297.
44 *On the Soul*, 429b23.
exclusive of mind; thinking is as much a part of the world as the world is of thinking. Aristotle conceives of mind as a potential object because it is adaptable to various objects; not because it is unaffected by the world of objects, but because it is especially so. I propose that it is to draw out the same dialectic of body and soul, abstract objects and extension that Thales specifies the “stone” as his instance of the soul. It is as though he deliberately chooses the most common of objects to say — as he in the quote above from *On the Soul* — that everything has a soul. Even the stone has a principle of perception because, like all objects, it belongs to the dialectic of body and soul.

Some think that soul pervades the whole universe, whence perhaps came Thales’ view that everything is full of gods.45

“Pervades” here has the sense of measuring, discerning. It has this sense in Heraclitus when he says that if the world were to turn to smoke, the nose would sort it out. Heidegger interprets this “sort it out” (διαγνοιειν) as “to go throughout.”46 That “everything is full of gods,” then, means that everything has a principle of discernment (perception, οισθανεοσθαι) in it. As we can see, soul/mind, for Aristotle, is not first a substance that then comes into relation with something else. Rather, it is the potentiality (“nothing”) which, acted upon by the object of perception, becomes “all things.” The soul is that which leaves open the possibility of being for consciousness. It is in this sense, as much as in the sense of a principle for movement, that soul is the principle of living things.

Thales, then, is visioned as a thinker of the effect of consciousness. The soul belongs to the universe of things, not as a thing among things with the unique task of understanding the others, but as constitutive. Consciousness is not first a thing and then comes to be acted upon by things in its surroundings; rather, its potential is to become all things. It is the potential of both itself and other objects — itself by way of other objects, other objects by way of itself. The effect of consciousness is being.

"Everything is full of gods"

That all things are full of gods means that there is no grand narrative that accounts for each and every event; Lyotard says that "every experience gives rise to a divinity." Postmodernity is characterized by a fatigue toward the legitimation drive of the modern metanarrative; Lyotard says, "[W]e no longer expect salvation." 48

The harvest is past,
the summer is ended,
and we are not saved. 49

Jean-François Lyotard is best known for his definition of postmodernity as incredulity toward metanarratives. 50 "There is no genre whose hegemony over the others would be just." 51 In the fatigue of grand narratives, "micrologies" (Adorno), 52 fragments of failed wholes 53 proliferate and celebrate their own small accomplishments in isolation from one another. But no one can draw this army of

47 Jean-François Lyotard, Libidinal Economy. Translated by Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 8.
49 Jeremiah 8:20.
50 The Postmodern Condition, xxiv. Aside from the sheer practicality of this advice, do we have some of Lyotard’s ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ in Diogenes Laertius’ citation (I.23, 34, 35) of Thales’ maxim: “It is not the many words that have most meaning” (quoted by Hegel in his Lectures on the History of Philosophy (Volume I). Translated by E.S. Haldane (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 173? Words do not accumulate meaning in the way that numbers do; knowledge, of whatever quantity, Hegel would have it, is absolute.
53 It is Manfred Frank who said that “The only genuine fragment is an unsuccessful whole.” Manfred Frank, “Are There Rationally Undecidable Arguments?” Translated by Ruth Morris and Barry Allen. 119-131 in Common Knowledge 9:1 (Duke University Press, 2003), 125.
independent spirits into a full frontal attack anymore.

For Lyotard, this pagan, polytheistic state does not represent the end of modernism, but its infancy. To speak of postmodernity as the "end" of modernism, a periodization within its teleology, is anachronistic. Postmodernity visions history as indeterminate. In this sense, Lyotard says, it is a "working through" (Durcharbeitung) of modernity which is "not guided by the concept of an end." It is not the end of modernity, but its (re)beginning. Postmodernity shares with the presocratics a position before history as raw data to be (re)inscribed, (en)formed. Oriented toward ever-new beginnings, postmodernity shares the nascent, pregnant modernity of premodernity.

A work can become modern [that is, accepted, unquestioned] only if it is first postmodern. Thus understood, postmodernity is not modernism at its end, but in a nascent state, and this state is recurrent.

Spinoza used the word "compossible" to speak of the many possible worlds. It was left to the wisdom and economy of God to explain why there could only, logically be one such world. Different worlds are possible, but not compossible — not possible within the same system or at the same time. Lyotard, then, uses the word, "incompossible," to speak of the sense in which an event constitutes an entire universe such that each event, presided over by its own private deity, is incommensurable with every other event. The event is "not only...a logical violation, but an expensive and metamorphic economics." "It leaves us without criteria and requires indeterminate judgment." Bill Readings defines the event as "the occurrence after which nothing will ever be the same.

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54 The Inhuman, 30.
56 The Inhuman, 25.
57 The Postmodern Explained, 13.
58 Libidinal Economy, xi.
again.” The incommensurability of the event is such that “There are as many universes as there are phrases.”

Lyotard says that the question that concerns him is: “can we today continue to organize the mass of events coming from the human and nonhuman world by referring them to the idea of a universal history of humanity?” In often very difficult language, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge characterizes the complexification of knowledge. In cloud theory, for example, it seems that the better we understand them, the more important we realize critical factors are that are simply outside of our understanding. Lyotard cites a multitude of examples. He says, for example, that if we try to quantifiably predict (computerize) the aggressiveness of a dog, we have to take two controls into consideration: (a) anger increases aggressiveness, while (b) fear reduces it.

But if the two control variables increase together, the two thresholds [fight and flight] will be approached simultaneously: the dog’s behavior becomes unpredictable and can switch from attack to flight, and vice versa. The system is said to be unstable: the control variables are continuous, but the state variables are discontinuous.

It is a truism that the sciences are growing, not only more complicated in their models used to explain phenomena, but also progressively more independent from one another. Lyotard concludes: “It is more probable that the control variables will be incompatible than the opposite. All that exist are ‘islands of determinism.’” “We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives… [T]he little narrative [petit récit] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly of science.”

More basic than the question of the “strength and competence” required to gather “islands of determinism” into a universal history is

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60 Ibid., 13.
61 Libidinal Economy, 76.
62 The Postmodern Explained, 24.
63 The Postmodern Condition, 24.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 60.
"the persistence of a we." In The Differend: Phrases in Dispute Lyotard says, "There is a first phrase, and it does not come from the subject." It is an ontological situation that a phrase occurs. It is not "we" who account for it or can dispense with it. What we decide is simply how it will be added on to. "Many types of linkages are possible, and one has to decide. Deciding nothing is still deciding. Remaining silent is still speaking... From the different phrases that are actually possible, one will be actualized, and the actual question is, which one?"

Again and again Lyotard tells us that one form of linkage or another is necessary; what is up for grabs is what linkage will be made. "To link is necessary, but how to link is not." "For a phrase to be the last one, another one is needed to declare it, and it is then not the last one." What is envisioned is a phrase thrown into a field of phrases. To borrow from Baudrillard, the phrase is an event that hollows out a vacuum (a question), creating a kind of gravitational force, drawing another happening toward itself necessarily. "A phrase, which links and which is to be linked, is always a...border zone where genres of discourse enter into conflict over the mode of linking." The "mode of linking" is what Lyotard calls a genre; they are sets of rules that determine concatenations according to their own predetermined end: "you ought to link on like this in order to get that."

Phrases from heterogeneous regimens...can be linked one onto the other in accordance with an end fixed by a genre of discourse. ... Genres of discourse supply rules for linking together heterogeneous phrases, rules that are proper for attaining certain goals: to know, to teach, to be just, to seduce, to justify, to evaluate, to rouse emotion, to oversee...

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66 The Postmodern Explained, 25.
67 The Differend, 63.
68 Ibid., 66.
69 Ibid., 30; emphasis added.
70 Ibid., 66; cf. 80.
72 The Inhuman, 17.
73 The Differend, 151.
74 Ibid., 116.
75 Ibid., xii.
A differend arises because these genres are heterogeneous to one another.

I would say that there is a differend between two parties when the 'settlement' of the conflict that opposes them appears in the idiom of one of them while the tort from which the other suffers cannot signify itself in this idiom. Contracts and agreements between economic partners do not prevent – on the contrary they presuppose – that the workers (or their representatives) have had to and will have to speak of their labor (and make their labor speak) as if it were the temporary cession of a commodity of which they were the owners. Even when they discuss whether the conditions of this cession are just or unjust and when they act so as to modify those conditions, they must always keep quiet about the fact that their labor is no such cession.\footnote{Jean-François Lyotard, \textit{Political Writings}. Translated by Bill Readings and Kevin Paul with a “Forward: The End of the Political” by Bill Readings (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 9-10.}

Let's recapitulate: a phrase comes along. What will be its fate, to what end will it be subordinated, within what genre of discourse will it take its place? No phrase is the first. This does not only mean that others precede it, but also that the modes of linking implied in the preceding phrases – possible modes of linking therefore – are ready to take the phrase into account and to inscribe it into the pursuit of certain stakes, to actualize themselves by means of it. In this sense, a phrase that comes along is put into play within a conflict between genres of discourse. This conflict is a differend, since the success (or the validation) proper to one genre is not the one proper to others... The multiplicity of stakes, on a par with the multiplicity of genres, turns every linkage into a kind of 'victory' of one of them over the others. These others remain neglected, forgotten, or repressed possibilities. There is no need to adduce some will or some intention to describe that. It suffices to pay attention to this: there is only one phrase 'at a time'. There are many possible linkings (or genres), but only one actual or current 'time'.\footnote{\textit{The Differend}, 136.}

The differend is "undecidable" (in Frank's terminology) because the genres to which the phrases belong obey different rules.
"Indeterminate judgment," however, is not resignation. "My conclusion is rather 'optimistic' in principle," Lyotard says. "The multiplicity of responsibilities, and their independence (their incompatibility), oblige and will oblige those who take on those responsibilities, small or great, to be flexible, tolerant, and svelte."[78] Kevin Inston characterizes the way the end of metanarratives retains the power of critical thinking:

Lyotard's assertion of the end of grand narratives, such as Marxism, as a way of understanding and organizing societal relations, discredits their teleological and eschatological tendencies, not their critical force. That is to say, his prognosis of their end can be understood as a statement of the end of the end, that is, a statement of the impossibility of bringing closure into the open, transformable, and plural space of the social. The universal can therefore never be mastered as an intelligible whole; its absent presence re-emerges as an insurmountable limit and barrier to dangerously Utopian ideals. His critique continues and reformulates the emancipatory aspirations of Marxism. Emancipation no longer consists in such Utopian models as would aim to convert social ambiguity into transparency and plenitude through ideological mediation, but rather, perhaps, in the freedom of indeterminate judgment coming precisely from that ambiguity, that is, from the impossibility of providing uncontroversial, totalizing rules for linking phrases.[79]

Lyotard makes it very clear that addressing issues of social inequality is an "ethical and civic responsibility."[80] Indeed, he is very critical of Heidegger for his abandonment of ethics to Hitler's Nazism. He says, "[T]he negative lesson that the 'forgetting' of the Shoah by the great thinker of Being teaches us is that this Forgotten is not primarily Being, but the obligation of justice."[81] And there is a strong sense in which his philosophy is even primarily ethical.

Manfred Frank says, "I believe that, in negotiations designed to achieve agreement, there can indeed be rationally undecidable conflicts, though it is my contention that Lyotard's 'differend' and similar

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[78] Political Writings, 7.
[80] Political Writings, 7.
[81] Ibid., 147.
constructions provide a workable approach for resolving them."

"[C]ontradiction between statements about what essentially holds the world together is preordained. Under such circumstances, the best way to remain loyal to the absolute is by practicing irony against every one-sided statement about it—that is, by making the contradictory elements cancel each other out." This is Nietzschean in the sense of a nihilistic response to the problem of nihilism. The 'Translator's Forward' to The Postmodern Explained says, "In these pages Lyotard approaches the postmodern as a way of maintaining the possibility of thought 'happening'... when it [philosophy, art, literature, and politics] has lost faith in its capacity to repair the crimes of the past by guiding the present toward the end of the realization of ideas." What the philosopher notices is that this failure happens, irrevocably. There is a faithfulness in constant doubt. Philosophical thinking is not rhetorical judgment after the fact, but a faithful — even prophetic — waiting, a kind of midwifery: attendance on the event of understanding.

There can scarcely be a better illustration for the incommensurability of the event than 9/11. In this one event there is the sense of the figural, the differend, the incommensurable. You simply "cannot get there from here." It is incredulous because nothing could have prepared us for the image of an airline jet flying into a skyscraper. Strangely enough, however, it seems that nothing about that event teaches us how to go on from there, how to interpret our lives in its aftermath.

We often use ground zero colloquially to convey the sense of starting from scratch, a clean slate, the bottom line. The meaning resonates with the often heard claim that the world was radically altered by 9/11, that the world will never be the same, that Americans have lost their former innocence about their safety and invulnerability at home. This way of thinking might be called a narrative of historical exceptionalism, almost an antinarrative, claiming the event to be so unique and unprecedented as to transcend time and defy comparison or historical analysis.

82 "Are There Rationally Undecidable Arguments?" 120.
83 Ibid., 125.
84 The Postmodern Explained, ix.
85 Cf. Theaetetus.
86 The Postmodern Explained, x.
87 Amy Kaplan, "Homeland Insecurities: Reflections on Language and Space" in
And yet, clearly, the event does not transcend time. Rather, it makes time in the Larry-King sense of ‘Where were you on 9/11?’ and in the sense of stored (even monetary) value. Time is preserved in the event of 9/11; the only question is in whose favor? Which genre will end up subsuming the value of this most global of events?

The first thing to be said about the events of September 11... is that they are still happening. An ontology of the historical present that constructs events from the standpoint of the political struggles at stake in them, in their broadest geopolitical scope, must recognize their durational (rather than merely punctual) temporality, as a variable of the rhythm of these struggles themselves... [T]he US state apparatus has an interest in extending it indefinitely as the occasion for the legitimation of the geographical extension of its military-juridical power to vast new areas of the globe. Sustaining the infinite possibility of ‘a’ September 11 sustains and legitimates the US imperial project of an ‘Americanization’ of the world. This is the main symbolic function of the images of the attacks on the towers: a certain freezing of historical time in the moment of the legitimation of a military-political project that almost immediately far exceeded any determinate relation to the events themselves.88

The event does not contain, but calls for its interpretation.89 And that it does so necessarily does not necessitate any particular form of interpretation. Lyotard says, “Terror is one way of accounting for the indeterminacy of what is happening. Philosophy is another. The difference between them lies in the time set aside for collecting information and making judgments. Philosophy takes its time, as they say.”90

Lyotard’s interpretation of political events pays attention to the economy of desire that gives rise to them.91 Capitalism, he says, is not

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88 Peter Osborne, “Interpreting the world: September 11, cultural criticism and the intellectual Left” in Radical Philosophy 117 (January/February 2003), 2-12, 11.
89 Cf. The Differend, 181: “[T]he occurrence doesn’t make a story, does it? – Indeed, it’s not a sign. But it is to be judged, all the way through to its incomparability.”
90 The Postmodern Explained, 56.
91 “Lyotard’s definition of society as libidinal economy is an attempt to emphasize the role of desire in the functioning of society,” James Williams, Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy (Oxford: Polity Press, 1998), 40.
a means of production, but a production of means. Similarly, Marxism
promotes not a revolution so much as “the means by which they are
able to make it happen.”92 What is common to both is the exchange
itself. There is profit to be made in exchange; what has no value is what
Lytotard calls “intensities.”

What needs to be considered first, he says, is not one part or another
of the body. The part, organized for survival and interchangeable for
other parts, presupposes a unity of the whole that is, in turn, dependent
on the part. The “body” we must first dissect is the libidinal body.
Different from a frame, “polymorphous perversion” is an immense
membrane—a skin—which is “made up from the most heterogeneous
textures, bone, epithelium, sheets to write on, charged atmospheres,
swords, glass cases, peoples, grasses, canvasses to paint.”93

The skin is an organ; “not a surface first, then a writing or inscription
over it,”94 it does not first exist and then come to bear markings. Rather,
it is the demarcation of the body. There is no “other,” no “outside”;
“there is nothing but skin on the inside and the outside.”95 Lyotard
speaks of “dissection” and yet, because the skin has only one side and
neither an interior nor an exterior,96 an incision is not really a hole, but
a continuation of the same surface. “[S]lits are not entries, wounds,
gashes, openings, but the same surface following its course after a detour
in the form of a pocket, front folded back almost against itself.”97

The surface is not a depth—it is only a rawness, a sensitivity and an
openness: a site for an encounter. Lyotard uses the language of a sacrifice:
“Open the so-called body and spread out all its surfaces.”98 Even so,
the Lord commanded Abraham to lay out animal halves opposite one
another as a place for the encounter between them. There was between
the cleaved carcasses, then, a trail (Lytotard says “a ribbon all striated
and polluted with shit”) through which the Lord himself would pass
in the darkness.99 In its Koranic recollection, Abraham places the parts
of four birds on different mountains and the Lord causes them to swift

92 Libidinal Economy, 103.
93 Ibid., 2.
94 Ibid., 17.
95 Ibid., 156.
96 Ibid., 2, 3.
97 Ibid., 21-2.
98 Ibid., 1.

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toward him.100 Who is it then, we ask, who “performs” the sacrifice? Is it Abraham or God? And this reciprocity is apparently the point; sacrifice is the commensurability of self with the other. Augustine says, “[T]hou wert more inside me than my inmost part.”101 Augustine, too, uses the language of sacrifice to describe his encounter with God: “Receive here the sacrifice of my confessions...from the hand of my tongue which thou hast formed and stirred up to confess unto thy name.”102 In The Confession of Augustine, Lyotard points out that the event shares with sacrifice this uncanny reciprocity of roles:

In true sacrifice, the confession gives back to him who first gave and gives forever. In the event, the reciprocity of roles appears so close that the writer leaves unsettled whether it is he, the sacrificer, who is the author of the offering, or you. If your Word or his tongue will have written these memoirs.103

Jean-François Lyotard’s The Confession of Augustine begins, in medias res, with a quotation “almost incorporated into the body of the text,” Dolorès tells us in her “Forewarning.”104 There are no quotation marks, only a change in tone and a marginal reference. “Here, in the middle of book X, we have been hearing him complain.”105 The authorial “we,” here, is a striking plurality. Lyotard usually uses it to implicate the reader in his polemic: “We libidinal economists.” But in commentary, the writer, too, is a reader. The addressee is a(n)other. “A second person indeed hangs over, surveys the Confessions, magnetizes them, filters through them. A you, nameless patrionym of the catholic community.”106

So Lyotard conflates these — and himself — into a “we.” From the beginning, authorship is plural — responsive rather than responsible. Writing lets you off the hook. It “filters” the presence of the author.107

100 Sura II: 260.
102 Confessions V,i; qtd. The Confession of Augustine, 26.
103 Ibid., 26.
104 Ibid., ix.
105 Ibid., 1.
106 Ibid., 75.
107 Ibid., 41.
The reader observes from the safety of an absolute anonymity — one that is enjoyed (if inversely) by the author. Is this how an author becomes an authority: by renouncing authorship (responsibility)? Is this why Augustine wrote the Confessions? After so many years of confessing, the weight of his sin grew weary and he looked to deposit it somewhere? Does the book commence or put an end to confession?

Who can deny that the Confessions — more evangelical than penitent — is an effort to enflame? Augustine says, Weight makes not downward only but to its own place also. The fire mounts upward, a stone sinks downward. Where else have we heard about a “stone” seeking out “its own place?” My weight is my love; by that I am carried upward.® Who can deny that the Confessions is written to secure the bishop his “place” as an author(ity)? To “mount upward” as fire and to place the weight of the book — like a stone sinking downward, sinking like the pit in our stomachs, the weight of a guilty conscience — place this weight on someone else? To take some unsuspecting reader “from behind his back, as ever”®?

Lyotard asks, “Is the confessing I innocent in all of this?”10 “Of scorning vainglory, he brazenly writes [X,xxxviii], one can provide oneself glory all the more vainly.”11 Does confessing — and in writing at that — propitiate guilt by foisting it on others? Who will take upon [her]self the guilt of the other? Will the taking of guilt be done in innocence? Is Sonia a guiltless whore or a pimp for others’ suffering? The libidinalist, Lebezyatnikov says of her: “she has suffered, and that has been her reserve, her capital, as it were, of which she has a perfect right to dispose as she pleases.”12 Is the confessor a guilt monger? And who will forgive my sins at the expense of her own conscience?

How is it that Lyotard has come to be the author of The Confessions of Augustine? Is it that he has insinuated himself to an authority — and a faith — that does not belong to him? Or does a written confession implicate us all? Is reading a propitiation for the sin of writing? Who writes the law but those who have transgressed it? Lyotard — and every

® Confessions XIII,ix; qtd. The Confessions of Augustine, 71.
10® The Confessions of Augustine, 29.
11® Ibid., 28.
12® Ibid., 29.
reader — is drawn into the "we" who hear Augustine confessing. And "hear" it in the strong sense of "to absolve."

We write, it turns out, for just this absolution. To write is to absence oneself from (the responsibility for) the event (of writing). The book is far from innocent; like the "stone," it has "its own place," its own movement and discernment; "the sign at the same time screens and calls up what it announces and conceals."113 "Words," Lyotard says, "do as they please."114 The end of metadiscourse means that they no longer obey orders. "There is no longer any prince or guard to draw them up in ranks and to make them fight a frontal battle with their eyes fixed on the horizon."115 The Word, it happens, is the Son of God.

*The End of the End*

What comes after the new? What will happen after the latest? No one can say. But this much is certain: something will. For Lyotard the basic fact of existence is that things happen. What will happen may be negotiable, and what it will mean is necessarily negotiable. But that it will happen is certain. You can bank on it. Philosophy is attention to the (incommensurable) happening.

History is more than a sequence of events. It is modern in the sense that it attends the progress - myth used to legitimate the transcendence of scientism over a religious worldview. From Hegel and Marx we have the unshakable sense that history is progressional. This entails the notion of earlier, less developed stages that have given way to ours — and will eventually give way to an end. A purpose even. Hegel famously saw this "end" in Napoleon's defeat of the Prussian Empire at the Battle of Jena. The end of history, then, must be contrasted with the sense (for the Germans) that the world was coming to an end; or, perhaps better, the world was taking on its last potentiality. For Hegel, Napoleon's military victory was the triumph of spirit — the triumph of the ideals that inspired the Revolution. The purpose of history was freedom for all. What happens to the notion of freedom when that of history fails? What happens to history when its end (freedom for all) is frustrated?

113 Libidinal Economy, 43.
115 Ibid.
Of course, it gets progressively more and more awkward to look back through the pages of history to the place, long ago, where it is supposed to have ended. What do we call the intervening chapters? Still, in the proliferation of Western consumerist culture we see the ridiculous (but logical) results of the political and economic liberalism hardwired into our historical consciousness by Napoleonic France; it is hard to see how our basic situation has changed since the arrival of the liberal democratic state. For (Kojève’s) Hegel,

The Battle of Jena marked the end of history because it was [the actualization of] the principles of the French Revolution. While there was considerable work to be done after 1806 — abolishing slavery and the slave trade, extending the franchise to workers, women, blacks, and other racial minorities, etc. — the basic principles of the liberal democratic state could not be improved upon. The two world wars in this century and their attendant revolutions and upheavals simply had the effect of extending those principles spatially.\(^{116}\)

On Fukuyama’s interpretation, the end of history does not mean the end of newsworthy events, but the end of politically and economically viable alternatives to Western liberalism. History does not so much end as it runs out of options, fatigues. Lyotard says that it is not that there are no contradictions in a capitalist economy, “only that nothing results from these contradictions that signifies or announces the obsolescence of capitalism.”\(^{117}\) In his Foreword to Lyotard’s *Political Writings*, Bill Readings says, “capitalism does not suffer from contradictions so much as profit from them.”\(^{118}\) Ironically, from the perspective of Hegel’s spirit, this end would be the triumph of utility over ideals.

The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one’s life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called for daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation,


\(^{117}\) *Political Writings*, 8.

\(^{118}\) *Ibid.*, xiv.
the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history. I can feel myself, and see in others around me, a powerful nostalgia for the time when history existed.\textsuperscript{119}

Jean Baudrillard will characterize this nostalgia as repentance; at some point (after the revolutionary idealism of the 60’s and 70’s) history has reached its solstice, and since then we have been regressing toward its beginning. The turning point happened when events stopped making history, and news starting making events. “All that remains is actualité, ‘action’ in the cinematographic sense.”\textsuperscript{120} History has been replaced by a (re)enactment, a simulation.

Political events already lack sufficient energy of their own to move us: so they run on like silent film for which we bear collective irresponsibility. History comes to an end here, not for want of actors, nor for want of violence... nor for want of events (there will always be more events, thanks to the news networks!), but by deceleration, indifference and stupefaction. It is no longer able to transcend itself, to envisage its own finality, to dream of its own end; it is being buried beneath its own immediate effect, worn out in special effects, imploding into current events.\textsuperscript{121}

The ironic effect of “proximity to the real” is simulation;\textsuperscript{122} the more technology is able to bring the images of history into our living rooms, the more history is replaced by illusion. The great illustration of this is the first Gulf War; experienced firsthand by people around the world, it has been immediately forgotten as the networks moved on to the next catastrophe. The two hundred thousand dead are twice-ghosts for never having been seen. We don’t tell the stories of its fallen soldiers as we do for those of other wars precisely because we saw this war — or what television showed us of it. Because this war was real (we saw it),

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 6.
their deaths were not (they were un-image-inable).

Television barrages us with images, to the effect that we can no longer see anything. "If you take one-thousandth of what you see on the TV to heart, you're done for," Baudrillard says. "But television protects us from this. Its immunizing, prophylactic use protects us from an unbearable responsibility. Its effect and its images self-destruct in the mind."123 "Events follow one upon another, canceling each other out in a state of indifference."124 Over-stimulation results in under-response by a kind of psychological Chaos Theory. Images on the screen disappear without a trace, without reference to reality. "Is an image which refers only to itself still an image?" Baudrillard asks. "However this may be, that image raises the problem of its indifference to the world, and thus of our indifference to it."125 Even human suffering has become a spectacle for our entertainment.

We are the consumers of the ever delightful spectacle of poverty and catastrophe, and of the moving spectacle of our own efforts to alleviate it (which, in fact, merely function to secure the conditions of reproduction of the catastrophe market).126

Sceptical dis(over)illusionment has overwritten our programming for (in)credulity.

It's as if our will not to forget anything, not to leave anything behind, has disabled our memories. Preservation becomes a watchword precisely when something's value has fallen off. In this sense, our preservation of culture, language and ancient artefacts is ominous for their survival.

Paradoxically, by dint of this zealous effort forcibly to bring back into the present what we no longer even remember, we live in a world which is both without memory and without forgetting.127

What happens to art(ifice) when it is preserved for posterity? "[W]e shall turn them from something buried and living into something

123 Ibid., 63.
124 Ibid., 3.
125 Ibid., 56.
126 Ibid., 67.
127 Ibid., 73.
visible and dead.”128 “Museums, jubilees, festivals, complete works, the publication of the tiniest of unpublished fragments – all this shows that we are entering an active age of ressentiment and repentance.”129

“Current events” do not bear meaning in any tradition sense. It is, rather, as if they have a negative meaning, only undoing what has gone before. They create a vacuum, inexorably drawing the objects of consciousness into its black hole. “They leave hardly any scope for interpretation, except for all interpretations at once, by which they evade any desire to give them meaning.”130

The Gulf War and the events in Eastern Europe are among those quasi-unreal events which have less meaning in themselves than in the fact that they put an end to things which long ago ceased to have meaning (communism in the Eastern bloc countries, the Cold War for the Gulf).131

The non-event moves us closer to the beginning of history by unraveling previous myths of meaning which clearly no longer account for new developments. What is uniquely characteristic of “current events,” however, is that they leave no alternative explanation in the stead of the ones debunked. “[I]t seems we are tired of fueling the end of history with simulacra and are now letting it follow out its course; we are tired of that long simulation of modernity.”132

Fatigue after history has run its course is nothing like an end; it is more like a beginning. But of what? It is less like the end (purpose) of history than it is like historicity (the on-going-ness of history), its potential — no, the necessity — of new happenings. Baudrillard points out that the “problem of speaking about the end (particularly the end of history) is that you have to speak of what lies beyond the end and also, at the same time, of the impossibility of ending.”133 “The end is always experienced after it has actually happened, in its symbolic

132 *Ibid*.
elaboration.” So far from bringing things to a close, we have simply run out of energy for this elaboration. In this sense the end of the end is a “disappropriation” of thinking. “That something happens, the occurrence, means that the mind is disappropriated. The expression “it happens that…” is the formula of non-mastery of self over self. The event makes the self incapable of taking possession and control of what it is.” Happening, for Lyotard, is the exacerbation of thinking. In this sense, postmodernity is a beginning; something “not tautological” happens. Thinking gives itself something more powerful than itself. Something new passes from potentiality into actuality which then makes its own demands or, rather, constitutes its own world. The new phrase has its own deity and orients its new universe around its own center. It has, in the idiom of Augustine, the character of a sacrifice, which “gives back to him who first gave and gives forever.” A potentiality becomes actual, a new identity establishes and perpetuates itself. A new universe, complete with presiding deity, commences. Things happen.

The Future Anterior

Postmodernity repudiates modernity, but in a way that does not simply bring it to an end. It is a repetition, a rewriting (Durcharbeitung) of modernism. After all, to bring modernism to an end would be to reaffirm it. “[H]istorical periodization belongs to an obsession that is characteristic of modernity.”

In Book IV of the Physics Aristotle exacerbates the popular notion of living in the “now.” He says, in Lyotard’s précis, that

it is impossible to determine the difference between what has taken place (the proteron, the anterior) and what comes along (the husteron, the ulterior) without situating the flux of events with respect to a now. But it is no less impossible to grasp any such ‘now… because… it is always both too soon and too late to grasp anything like a ‘now’ in an identifiable way… When this argument is applied to modernity, the result is that neither modernity nor so-called postmodernity can be identified and defined as clearly

134 Ibid., 90.
135 The Inhuman, 59.
136 Ibid., 25.
circumscribed historical entities, of which the latter would always come 'after' the former. Rather we have to say that the postmodern is always implied in the modern because of the fact that modernity, modern temporality, comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself into a state other than itself. And not only to exceed itself in that way, but to resolve itself into a sort of ultimate stability, such for example as is aimed at by the utopian project, but also by the straightforward political project implied in the grand narratives of emancipation. Modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity.\footnote{Ibid., 24-5.}

Applying Aristotle's idea of the impossibility of speaking about the present to the concept of modernity means that it has always already been both too early and too late to be modern. The modern is (the impossible) now. The naïve notion of postmodernity as simply after-the-modern fails the test of incredulity toward metanarratives. The modern cannot be visioned as a "now" which has simply passed; it has to be rethought (\textit{Durcharbeitigung}) as the future anterior. That we belong to history means that we do not inhabit the present, but are always forming what will have happened. The nascent present means that our past lies before us like a book to be written. "After Auschwitz" does not mean (would that it could) that we have securely closed the door between us and modernist scheming. Aristotle's observation is that the event (Auschwitz, 9/11) may only be conceived of by way of a nascent present, never here but always arriving and always slipping away. Aristotle's observation is that the event (Auschwitz, 9/11) may only be conceived of by way of a nascent present, never here but always arriving and always slipping away. The event lies before us like unrealized potential.

In \textit{The Postmodern Explained}, Lyotard boasts ironically of explaining postmodernity to children. The Preface explains, "The postmodern text will be in advance of itself: it will be writing written in the \textit{what will have been} of the future anterior. It will be both premature (without presumption) and patient (awaiting the event of thought)."\footnote{\textit{The Postmodern Explained}, ix, x.} So far from presenting a finished thought on a level that even children can understand, Lyotard's writing awaits a thought-event that has not
yet occurred. "Postmodern would be understanding according to the paradox of the future (post) anterior (modo)."\(^{139}\) We can no more claim postmodernity for ourselves today than the presocratics could have claimed philosophy for themselves; neither term identifies a claim to be made on thinking, but a claim that thinking makes on us.

Thinking is pure potentiality. It is not so much that anything may be thought as that, in being thought, what is potential will have become actual.

The radical effectivity of the event of consciousness is described by both Aristotle and Lyotard as a kind of agency. It is not the case that a moment of consciousness first occurs and then happens upon an explanation. Rather, the libidinal body is the "demarcation," the formation of the subject. The soul no more exists in itself than an imprint exists without a "body" of wax to hold it. The body in this necessary dichotomy comes into existence with its formation. Form, like the interpretation bourn in the event, must be thought of in the strong sense of "to in-form." That is, form is not attributed to a preexisting substance, but constitutes it as a substance. Likewise, substance does not subsist on its own without the in-form-ation of a concrete happening.

Drawing on Aristotle's unity of process for the soul, the singularity of a happening is a function of an internal unity. Even as the soul as a unity of parts, the soul and its body, and the soul with its analysand are one by way of a potentiality that is enacted in the course of an encounter, so too the event is a certain kind of potentiality. Like the soul, it is literally nothing — or the potential for all things. In being enacted, the event affects history. But this not in the way of an external force. The event constitutes history because it belongs to it the way a body belongs to a soul or a soul belongs to its analysand. The key is the process that mutually enacts both: during the process of being acted upon they are unlike, but at the end of the process the soul has become like its analysand. The soul and its analysand are enacted in the event of an encounter that constitutes both. In the same way we could say that, as an event effects discernment (interpretation) it consequently effects movement (body, character). An event does impose a particular consequence or interpretation; it is, rather, a potential. The event

\(^{139}\) Ibid., 15.
necessarily affects a consequence in being enacted. The movement (material result) of an event is the effect of the discernment (horizon) which it enacts.

Lyotard’s incommensurable happening is the postmodern incarnation of the potentiality of the soul. The soul is incommensurable in just the same way: it does not have a determinate character until it gives itself one. This “giving,” however, is a self-giving in such a way that it is nothing — or not yet itself— until it receives. It is nothing until it takes on a particular form or genre. Thus, taking on a genre is inevitable; it proceeds from the vacuum of the event’s potential, fecund-nothing. That all things have a soul (Thales) or incredulity toward metanarratives (Lyotard) means that not only the particular character of the event but, indeed, the whole universe of things is the effect of consciousness.