Merleau-Ponty and Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*
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Summary outline of Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* with criticisms drawn from Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy.

The summary outline and criticisms offered here were prepared for a summer 2016 reading group, for discussion, for educational purposes. For a more formal presentation of these ideas see Douglas Low, “Merleau-Ponty and Postmodernism,” *Phenomenological Inquiry* 32 (2008): 63-92, from which the outline draws. The outline is primarily a mixture of direct quotes and paraphrased statements.

Lyotard investigates the state of knowledge in the contemporary society of 1979.

Western claim: knowledge distinguishes itself from myth by justifying or legitimating its claims. (PC xxiii)

Lyotard will look at 4 models of legitimization.

1.) **Enlightenment model**
Here knowledge is identified with the positive or empirical sciences and attempt to perceptually verify denotative statements.
Here scientific knowledge is subordinated to an ethos: humanity and humanity’s freedom. (PC 31-32, 36)

2.) **Hegelian speculative model.**
Here knowledge is not identified with empirical knowledge but with its sublation (*aufheben*) and integration into a grand speculative system.
Here knowledge articulates the ethos to be followed. (PC 32ff)

**Inserted Summary of Hegel’s Philosophy of History**

I.) History is not a meaningless collection of accidental events. History has a meaning.
Definition: “Spirit” = A sort of pantheism, a pan-logicism or pan-rationalism.
   Everything is a manifestation of the rational mind of God.
   History is the process by which Spirit progressively unfolds itself to finite human minds,
   manifests to them the meaning of their own freedom.

II.) How does this happen? Through culture, through the conscious and unconscious needs of the people as sensed by great leaders in great nation states.

**Lyotard’s criticisms:**
Model 2 above is ambiguous, if not overtly contradictory. It takes up and integrates the empirical into a speculative narrative but simultaneously denigrates the empirical. Moreover, it provides no real justification for the process of speculative sublation, no real justification of the process that leads to the higher, more integrated stages that it reaches. It justifies the speculative process by simply claiming that in fact it exists. (PC 38-39)

Since the goal Model 1 is to provide denotative claims, it has no right to make prescriptive claims. The language of facts and the language of values are two sorts of “language games” (See Wittgenstein below) whose rules for use cannot be interchanged or substituted for one another. (PC 39-40)
Conclusion: there is no longer any justifiable grand narrative of human knowledge. Each science is simply a “language game” that operates with its own rules and has no ultimate means of justification.

**Inserted summary of Wittgenstein’s view of language:** His early traditional view: language consists of names that point to objects and their relationships. (See his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.*) His later “postmodernists view”: the traditional view is too narrow. We use language in concrete situations to coordinate activity and to do many other things: tell stories, ask for help, express feelings, sing, etc. These different ways of using language are called language games. (Example universe: Builder A and assistant B. Types of stones: block, slab, beams. Language: “block”, “slab”, “beam.” Builder A calls them out to assistant B. Assistant B brings the proper stones. Think of this as a complete primitive language.) (See his *Philosophical Investigations.*)

3.) Postmodern language game model

Each science must formulate its own language game, must define the basic terms of its field and must carefully define the rules for the use of these terms. (PC 40-41)

An “axiomatic” defines the words of the game and how they are to be used. This axiomatic is in turn established with the help of a meta-language, a logic that determines the criteria for axiomatic systems, usually consistency, completeness, decidability, and independence of axioms with respect to one another. (PC 42)

Yet there is a problem with this type of meta-level justification, for Godel has shown that certain formal systems cannot fulfill the criterion of completeness, that these systems possess statements that they should prove but cannot. (PC 42)

This is true of formal systems generally. Therefore, they cannot be self-justifying. Rather, they are based on a mere agreement of interlocutors, ideally on “a consensus of experts.” (PC 42-43)

**Lyotard:**

--“To the extent that science is differential, its pragmatics provides the antimodel of a stable system. A statement is deemed worth retaining the moment it marks a difference from what is already known, and after an argument and proof in support of it has been found. [DL: my bolding and italics] Science is a model of an ‘open system,’ in which a statement becomes relevant if it ‘generates ideas,’ that is, if it generates other statements and game rules. Science possesses no general metalanguage in which all other languages can be transcribed and evaluated. This is what prevents its identification with the system and, all things considered, with terror.” (PC 64)

--“The pragmatics of science is centered on denotative utterances, which are the foundation upon which it builds institutions of learning…But its postmodern development brings a decisive ‘fact’ to the fore: even discussions of denotative statements need to have rules. Rules are not denotative but prescriptive utterances, which we are better off calling metaprescriptive to avoid confusion (they prescribe what the moves of language games must be in order to be admissible). The function of the differential or imaginative or paralogical [i.e., ‘beyond the logical’] activity of the current pragmatics of science is to point out these metaprescriptives (science’s ‘presuppositions’) to petition the players to accept different ones. The only legitimation that can make this kind of request admissible is that it will generate ideas, in other words, new statements.” (PC 65)

--“…in the…pragmatics of science, consensus is only a particular state of the discussion, not its end. Its end, on the contrary, is paralogy. This double observation (the heterogeneity of the rules and the search for dissent) destroys a belief that still underlies Habermas’s research.” (PC 65-66)
---“Consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value. But justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect. We must arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus. A recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language games is a first step in that direction. This implies a renunciation of terror… The second step is the principle that any consensus on the rules defining a game and the ‘moves’ playable within it must be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation.” (PC 66)

---“We are finally in a position to understand how the computerization of society affects this problematic. It could become the ‘dream’ instrument for controlling and regulating the market, extended to include knowledge itself and governed exclusively by the performativity principle. [See paragraph immediately below for definition of performativity.] In that case, it would inevitably involve the use of terror. But it could also aid groups discussing metaprescriptives by supplying them with the information they usually lack for making knowledgeable decisions. The line to follow for computerization to take the second of these two paths is, in principle, quite simple: give the public free access to the memory and data banks. Language games would then be games of perfect information at any given moment. But they would also be non-zero-sum games, and by virtue of that fact discussion would never risk fixing a position of minimax equilibrium because it had exhausted its stakes. For the stakes would be knowledge (or information, if you will), the reserve of knowledge—language’s reserve of possible utterances—is inexhaustible. This sketches the outline of a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown.” (PC 67)

Another aspect of knowledge: proof. (PC 44)

Empirical truths fail because the senses are deceptive, their range is too narrow, and their powers of discrimination are limited. (PC 44)

One of the subsequent roles of technology, Lyotard believes, is to expand these limited powers of empirical observation (PC 44), which leads Lyotard to consider a forth model of knowledge.

4.) Techno-efficiency model
Technology is less concerned with the truth and more with efficiency, even though it often seeks legitimization/justification by claiming that performance is related to reality. If a system of ideas works, and works with great efficiency, it must be true and just.

Truth becomes linked to technology, to efficiency, to commerce, to money, and finally to power. [Science and technology act as “handmaidens” for industry and ultimately for the wealthy.] Truth and efficiency can be dramatically influenced by research expenditures, that is, by wealth, one of the clearest manifestations of power. (PC 44ff)

Lyotard criticizes 4.) above by criticizing the idea of political and social consensus (PC 60), which he believes has two major proponents in contemporary society.

Proponent 1, Habermas: rational minds can resolve differences in order to find universal agreement and even the means to universal freedom.

Lyotard’s criticism: descriptive claims cannot be related to prescriptive claims. Moreover, contemporary society is a collection of diverse groups, each with their own language game, and it is precisely the legitimacy of a universally accepted narrative that has lost its appeal. (PC 65-66)

Proponent 2, the Techno-efficiency model itself: agreement regarding both knowledge and practice is encouraged to guarantee the efficiency of the technological system. Everything must
be done for the efficiency of the system, which is for the good of the whole, including the good of all the individuals within it.

Lyotard’s criticism: the language game of technology is different from the language game of science, for the former is primarily interested in efficiency while the latter is still concerned with truth. Moreover, knowledge cannot progress without dissent, disagreement, and long-term speculation—which are incompatible with the desired uniformity of systems theory and not amenable to short-term investment strategies. (PC 61-64)

Conclusion: Lyotard does not eliminate denotative claims (if we can still call them that) but shifts their verification to the consensually established axiomatic system from which they must be deduced. In addition, while Lyotard admits that it is true that science helps stabilize the perceived world, he proceeds to claim that we must now emphasize its development through dissension. Science is composed of separate disciplines, each with its own language game, games that do and must encourage dissent. How then does this relate to society and its moral and ethical goals? Science is descriptive, not prescriptive. Moral rules are prescriptive. Therefore, all science can do is point this out and call for new ideas, new rules. (PC 64ff)

Techno-efficiency model again:
Sensation is deceptive and narrow in range. (PC 44)
Technology assists with accuracy and to broaden this range. Yet technology is a language game whose concern is with efficiency, not truth (epistemology) or justice (the value statements of ethics) or beauty (aesthetics).

Technology needs money. Thus the games of technology and science “become games of the rich.” “No technology without wealth, but [also] no wealth without technology.” (PC 45) Some percent of the profit goes to technology and technical research—to direct research in private companies for technical application, and indirect research in foundations and universities with no expectation of immediate return.

Nation states follow the business model: “hierarchy, centralized decision making, calculation of individual and collective returns, development of saleable programs, market research, and so on.” (PC 46)

Proof is now related to performativity and power. Power is justified because it is efficient, because the trains run on time, because capitalism delivers the goods (i.e., consumer goods)—which is good for all.

Efficiency increases with information. Thus the growth of power is related to data storage, data access, and data application. (PC 47)

Techno-efficiency model and Education (See PC 47-53)
How is education (the transmission of knowledge) related to the efficiency requirement?
If we assume a body of knowledge, we can ask: who transmits, what is transmitted, to whom, what medium, what form, what effect?

“A university policy is formed by a coherent set of answers to these questions.” (PC 48)

Education serves the goal of enhancing performativity by:
1.) education of experts/high level managers in the leading competitive sectors of computer science, cybernetics, linguistics, mathematics, logic…
2.) providing skills needed for the functioning of society. Skills are provided rather than a broad education grounded in the humanities for the purpose of enlightenment and fulfillment of the whole person in a democratic society.

Professional training aims at two categories of students:
1.) professional intelligentsia
2.) technical intelligentsia

There is more *a la carte* training and retraining of adults rather than *en bloc* training of young people before they enter the work force.

When the efficiency model dominates in society, education becomes subordinate to commercial power—rather than to fulfillment of individuals in a democratic society. Teachers almost never control budgets.

What is transmitted? A professional stock of knowledge is transmitted. As new technology is applied to this stock, the medium of transmission is transformed. The lecturing professor (who allows some time for practical work) is no longer needed. Knowledge is stored in computers and transmitted by them. Students must still be taught, not content but how to use computers to access information. Knowledge thus becomes equivalent to knowing what memory banks or databases to go to and how to properly formulate a question within their context.

In the context of the emancipation of humanity, the substitute of machines for teachers seems inadequate, but this context (the emancipation of humanity) is disappearing. We no longer focus on what is true but what is efficient, saleable, and profitable. It is important to possess operational skills and database information. It is especially important to be able to use information to solve problems.

Education is divided: education for simple reproduction, and here technical proficiency is important; and education for extended reproduction, and here technical imagination is important.

Social system  ➣Maximum efficiency = Truth, justice.
Economy  Technology and science improve the efficiency of the system—for the dominant class in a hierarchical social structure.
Industry  Education becomes preparing workers for the economy.

**Criticisms of Lyotard’s position:**

*Review:*
Meta-theory: the formal conditions for a theory

Theory: definitions and rules for relating terms

Derive denotative statements

World
Theories and explanations require definitions of basic terms and rules for their use and application.

*New:* How are the definitions established?

They are established with the help of a meta-theory that states the basic conditions for a theory, including its definitions.

A system of ideas must be consistent, complete, etc., to satisfy certain formal conditions, or, as philosophers of science remind us, a theory or system of ideas must be relevant, testable, compatible with previously established theories, possess predictive or explanatory power, and simplicity to satisfy certain scientific conditions of theory construction.

How are the meta-theatrical conditions established?
- Rationalism: by rational intuition.
- Empiricism: by abstraction from the senses.
- Pragmatism: by succeeding or working.
- Postmodernism: by agreement among interlocutors.

**Merleau-Ponty**: by being suggested by live-through perceptual experience.

A variety of interpretations are possible, since nature is inexhaustible, yet some theories/interpretations are better than others because they describe our perceptual contact with nature more accurately. (See *fundierung* relationship below.)

Merleau-Ponty fully embraces the 20th Century belief that logical principles can no longer be recognized as absolute, that logical systems can no longer be regarded as complete and without presupposition. Yet he does seek to ground rationality in a more open way, and does so by appealing to the *Fundierung* relationship, to a relationship in which terms mutually determine one another, with an advantage being accorded to one of the terms. Perception, for example, suggests certain linguistic and theoretical interpretations which fold back upon and help articulate the perceived world. As he expresses it in one of his lectures:

“There is truly a reversal when one passes from the sensible world, in which we are caught, to a world of expression, where we seek to capture significations to serve our purpose, although this reversal and the ‘retrogressive movement’ of truth are solicited by a perceptual anticipation. Properly speaking, the expression which language makes possible resumes and amplifies another expression which is revealed in the ‘archaeology’ of the perceived.”2 (TFL 4)

And this is how he expresses it in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

“[The construction of the triangle and its auxiliary hypotheses] express my power to make apparent the sensible symbols of a certain hold on things, which is my perception of the triangle’s structure.”3 (PhP 386)

Merleau-Ponty’s claim here, contra most forms of postmodernism, including Lyotard’s, is that without the geometer’s embodied perceptual encounter with the physiognomy of the triangle, the abstract definition would be impossible. Moreover, the geometer’s derivation of theorems from the original definition is made possible because the geometer has experienced these transitions in the perceptual world. This is not an empiricist reductionism, for new meaning can be added, and the derived theorems fold back on the perceived to help define it more precisely, but these
derived meanings do travel along pathways already opened by the aesthesiological body. These meanings, then, are not arbitrary, or haphazard, or the mere result of arbitrary conventions, as postmodernists claim, for they follow a perceptual structure or physiognomy.\footnote{4}

Formal or linguistic systems, then, whose basic terms are decided by agreement among experts, are not primary, as Lyotard seems to maintain. They are abstractions or sublations from the perceptual--to which they must constantly return for verification.

Merleau-Ponty remains critical of the linguistic or “semantic philosophies” that sever our embodied, perceptual contact with the world and turn it into mere word meanings. The world is not just a word meaning, and language is not just about itself. It refers to a transcendent world. Philosophy, then, is not just about language. It is about attempting to bring our embodied, perceptual encounter with the world and others to expression in language, about attempting to map out, even though perception remains primary, the often reciprocal relationship between perception and language.\footnote{5} (VI 4, 36, 96-97, 126) Moreover, even though Lyotard does not deny the perception or denotative claims, he shifts their verification to their derivation from theoretical and formal frameworks. And even though he doesn’t deny that the “agreement among experts” that defines basic terms occurs in a perceptual context, he does call into question the veracity of perception and shifts the burden of verification to derivation from theoretical systems whose terms are primarily established agreement. It seems that it is not what they see that confirms their agreement, but their agreement that confirms what they see.

Also, within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, we perceive through values and interests. Thus there are no purely denotive or prescriptive statements, as Lyotard maintains. Knowledge is value laden. I perceive the world through my interest and values and those of my group, but this does not lead to relativism. Humans have similar interests and values. Thus we can share values with other individuals and other groups. Yet a universal morality must be a minimalist morality, for it difficult to overcome our many differences. Merleau-Ponty’s “multiculturalism”: listen to all voices, try to move toward a minimalist morality, and then try to live with differences.\footnote{6}

In addition, while Merleau-Ponty is fully aware that instrumental frameworks can be powerful and efficient tools in assisting our adaptation to nature, he insists that they must be placed in the broader context of human life as a whole, otherwise human beings risk becoming one more variable in a formula that is manipulated for its results. Moreover, while it is true that we perceive the world through interests, these interests span a wide range of human interests, including the psychological, social, aesthetic and cultural, and so on. Actions that stem from these interests cannot be evaluated by simple measures of efficiency. (VI 103)\footnote{7}

Thus, computers and technology should be placed in a broader human context. They should be a tool for the enlightenment and fulfillment of humanity, as democratically decide by all. Knowledge is not just practical efficiency. It must be related to the whole human condition. It must be related to the whole range of lived-through experiences. Knowledge is not \textit{just a} language game based on conventional definitions or on mere agreement among experts. All knowledge claims should at some point connect with and make sense of our perceptual contact with the world and others.

Merleau-Ponty and Lyotard, both are highly critical of narrow forms of instrumentalism and both share an abiding concern for the freedom of all. Yet here we also find differences, for Merleau-Ponty’s own “pragmatism” is intimately tied to the sentient body while Lyotard’s is tied to the practical working out of agreements among interlocutors. (PC 9ff) To address Lyotard more specifically, we have seen that he claims that the scope of human perception is too narrow and too
prone to error to produce reliable human knowledge, yet Merleau-Ponty argues that it is perception that provides our way into the world and, in fact, is our only way to know it. Human perception may be narrow, but it is our only non-arbitrary way into the world, and, moreover, the errors that we discover in perception of the world are discovered by perception itself. Within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, then, we need to stress both stability and ambiguity in human perceptual experience and agreement and dissent in human knowledge.

1 Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brain Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Referred to as PC.


4 See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Philosophy in the Flesh (New York: Basic Books 1999), for a development of these themes.


7 See also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind” in Primacy of Perception (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159-160. Referred to as PrP.