

## The Hegelian Legacy in Kojève and Sartre

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French academic philosophy, from the mid-1930s until the end of the 1950s, was dominated by at least four German philosophers: Hegel, Marx, Husserl, and Heidegger. In some ways, the originality of the French philosophy of the period lay in its way of associating these entirely dissimilar thinkers. In reality, however, Hegel's ascendancy in France was short-lived, particularly because it was associated with the phenomenological-existential thinking which developed in Sartre's wake – a current of thought that was violently attacked from the 1960s onwards, particularly by structuralism. Still, an assertion by Merleau-Ponty in 1946 expresses Hegelianism's success in France from the 1930s to the 1950s: "For a century, Hegel has been at the origin of everything great which has been achieved in philosophy."<sup>1</sup>

The rebirth of Hegelianism in France is tied in with Alexandre Kojève's commentary on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. This commentary is the product of the seminar led by Kojève at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes from 1933 to 1939, which was attended by the cream of Parisian intellectual life, including Raymond Aron, Jacques Lacan and Georges Bataille. Kojève did not publish the text of his seminar himself, but left it in the hands of Raymond Queneau, who had it brought out in 1947 under the title of *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. As Kojève himself recognised, the interpretation was not intended to be philologically rigorous, and is as much a reinvention of Hegelianism as an introduction to Hegel's texts. Nonetheless, through its force and its allure, it left a lasting mark on the shape of Hegelian philosophy in France.

The relationship between Sartre and Hegel is more difficult to establish, as Sartre cites Hegel only infrequently. Nonetheless, an attentive reading reveals that Sartre uses in his own work a number of Hegelian themes. The question is, by whom was Sartre's reading of Hegel influenced? Kojève cannot have been his only source, for, aside from his personal interpretation, we find a reading influenced by other German and French authors – for instance, Dilthey and Jean Wahl. At the same time, bearing in mind the enormous success of Kojève at the time, it is reasonable to think that the Kojévian interpretation at least partially influenced Sartre. The aim of this paper is to show the family resemblances between the two interpretations. Firstly, I will attempt to show that the two authors both make Hegelianism into an anthropology, and an anthropology which tends to deal with the genesis of self-consciousness and to thereby explain the coming into existence of man as such. I will then attempt to show that by setting out from this reading of Hegel the two authors accord a decisive role to man's finitude, which, for them, expresses itself as much in the essential shortcomings of all consciousness as in the insoluble nature of human conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> (Merleau-Ponty 1996), 79.

## 1) The theme of conflict in Kojève and Sartre

Let us look firstly at how Kojève, and then Sartre, place conflict in the centre of their analyses and, from this point of view, can claim to be the heritors of Hegel.

For Kojève, as he reads Hegel, what is at stake in the master-slave dialectic is man's becoming human through his attainment of self-consciousness. The passage from the simple consciousness of objects to self-consciousness allows man to leave behind his animal state and to enter into humanity. This humanisation, Kojève says, does not occur in solitude, but in intersubjectivity. The master-slave dialectic is, therefore, not only the key to self-consciousness, but also to society<sup>2</sup>. However, the striking part of this theory of humanisation and of socialisation is that it happens through struggle, a struggle by which man, in his relations with Others, seeks to impose himself as the Other's master, and thus to enslave him.

Why, one could ask, make this struggle the key to humanity's genesis? For Kojève, as he reads Hegel, the condition of self-consciousness is nothing other than desire. In effect, the desiring I has the same nature as that which it desires<sup>3</sup>. Thus, if it desires something natural as a mere object for pleasure, the I will remain natural and animal. If, on the other hand, the desire takes as its object another consciousness, another desire, the I goes beyond its natural state. To desire a desire, Kojève says, is to wish to subjugate another's consciousness, to impose oneself on it as a supreme value<sup>4</sup>. Here, then, the struggle does not, in a Hobbesian manner, follow from competition for access to scarce goods, but rather from the effort to impose on the Other a subjection which they refuse.

The struggle, then, has two stages. The first leads from animality to the victory of one of the combatants, and the second is the fate of each protagonist after the fight.

Let us consider the first stage, the combat itself. Its outcome, according to Kojève, in his reading of Hegel, is not decided by the two combatants' differing strength, or their intelligence, or the circumstances, but rather by the acceptance by one of them of the risk of death. The victor is not truly stronger, but is indifferent enough to life to put it at stake. The loser, in the same way, is not the weaker of the two, but the one who is too attached to life to risk it in an authentic way. Two things are therefore at stake in the fight: firstly, the subjugation of one combatant by another; secondly, and more fundamentally, the transformation by each of their own desire which comes from the sacrifice of the animal dimension. There is not only a struggle against the Other, but a struggle against oneself, for the individual's desire for his humanity must win out over his desire for self-preservation. For Kojève, man only reveals himself as human if he risks his (animal) life through his (human) desire. Thus, putting his own life at stake is not simply a means of winning the struggle. For, as the realisation of a certain relationship with oneself and with the world, this putting one's life at stake is the deepest meaning of the struggle. Significantly, Kojève talks about a "fight to the death for pure

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<sup>2</sup> See (Kojève 1947), 13.

<sup>3</sup> See (Kojève 1947), 13.

<sup>4</sup> See (Kojève 1947), 14.

prestige"<sup>5</sup>. 'Prestige' here does not refer to the priority of appearance over being, but to the priority of meaning over strength. The stake is not to be the strongest, but to have the most human relationship to oneself and to Others. The hermeneutic aspect of this struggle is therefore essential, and the fight is delimited by the definition of two roles, of two identities. The victor in the fight, who becomes the master, is the one who agrees to risk their life, whereas the loser, who becomes a slave, is the one who is afraid of death.

How to describe the second stage of the master-slave dialectic, the fate of each protagonist? It is characterised by a number of paradoxical features. Firstly, there is a fundamental failure on the part of the master. In effect, the master realises that the desire of the Other whom he has conquered is not a truly human desire, as the slave, by definition, remains attached to life. The master's target reveals itself to be something other than what was aimed at. There follows a fundamental victory for the servant. In effect, in the fear that he felt when faced with death, he has become aware of the vanity of all fixed states of affairs. The slave did not wish to be the master, and no longer wishes to be the slave. He refuses all solidarity with a world that he knows is hostile to him. Rather, he wants to be autonomous, and to transform the world: in a word, he has a revolutionary consciousness. Moreover, through his work, he comes to actively transform the world. As a worker, and potentially as a revolutionary, he brings about the negation of what denies him. Finally, the slave who was afraid of death and remained attached to his natural desire is required to abandon his individual desire and thus to open himself up to a universal desire. Which is why, from Kojève's point of view, only the slave is a truly universal man in the sense that he is not enclosed in his particular situation but embodies humanity as a whole.

What are the key features of this theory? *a)* We should first note how deceptively attractive the text is. At once formal and concrete, it seems to analyse the raw centre of human existence, and to do so with perfect argumentative rigour. In a certain fashion, both its simplicity and its extraordinary dogmatism make it seductive. This explains the lasting fascination which, in spite of its actual theoretical weaknesses, it has exerted on the French-speaking philosophical world. *b)* Moreover, as has been noted, one of the distinctive features of this interpretation was the relevance it brought to Hegel, by projecting onto him themes whose legitimacy was growing – that is, the Marxist theme of struggle, and the Heideggerian theme of self-interpretation as the key to human existence. *c)* Next, Kojève places a novel insistence on the impossibility of real understanding between human beings. This is not simply because we start out from the attempt to subjugate the Other, but also because the point of arrival only reinforces the mutual hostility of the protagonists<sup>6</sup>. Of course, the possible revolution may suggest a solution – but this is deferred to an indefinite point in the future. *d)* Let us note, too, that Kojève is adopting the perspective of social contract thinkers, like Hobbes and Spinoza, for whom society grows up from a state of nature. For Kojève, as for his predecessors, it is nature which, somehow, makes up the origin and the explanation of the passage to authentic humanity. *e)* Finally, for Kojève, humanisation is not characterised only by a real causality, but also by an ideal causality, by a hermeneutic. Everything takes place, in effect, in the relationship which a human being has with himself (as being attached to life, or not) and in his manner of appearing to the Other (whether as a thing or as a human being).

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<sup>5</sup> (Kojève 1947), 516.

<sup>6</sup> See (Kojève 1947), 15.

Now, to what extent and within what limits can we call this analysis Hegelian? To begin, there is, clearly, the reference to Hegel's text on domination and servitude – even if this text, which, for Hegel, deals with only one moment among several, is read by Kojève as giving an account of the whole fate of consciousness. Next, there is the insistence on conflict and contradiction – even if Kojève neglects to talk about reconciliation. Thirdly, there is the emphasis on transformation, on the fact that the truth is only a result – even if, in this particular case, Kojève remains fixed on a single figure, and ignores both those which precede the master-slave dialectic and those which follow it. There is also the value given to the notions of consciousness and self-consciousness – even if Kojève pays no attention to that of spirit. Finally, there is the affirmation that the Other plays a constitutive role in the development of consciousness – even if Kojève overlooks the fact that, for Hegel, other experiences than that of the Other occur in the development of consciousness.

Having considered Kojève's Hegelian heritage from the point of view of conflict, let us examine how far Sartre deals with this theme. For Sartre, the relationship with the Other is at once constitutive and alienating. The Other reveals to me what I objectively am. However, I am not the master of what the other sees me as. The Other is crucial for my self-consciousness and so for my humanity: "It would perhaps not be impossible to conceive of a For-itself which would be wholly free from all For-others... But this For-itself simply would not be a 'man'"<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, the Other, insofar as it produces the consciousness that I have of myself, renders me powerless as regards this self-consciousness. This is why the relationship with the Other is essentially characterised by struggle: "Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others."<sup>8</sup>

In effect, in Sartre's view, consciousness, as far as it is pure openness to the world, is unreflected. It does not appear to itself as a self and has no positive content, but is absorbed in its object. It is only in encountering the Other that a 'self' arises which is distinct from the object. At the same time, to the extent that my "self" is produced by the Other, I have no power over it. One striking example proposed by Sartre is of the shame which comes over me when I am caught looking through a keyhole<sup>9</sup>. I then experience the fact that the Other imposes on me the identity of a voyeur, and I cannot refuse this identity, as I only see myself through the eyes of the Other. Of course, I do not become an object, and I am not transformed into a thing: but I have certainly to undergo being seen as an object – which I cannot bear. This is why, Sartre says, "my original fall is the existence of the Other."<sup>10</sup>

Another notable example is the relationship between lovers. For Sartre, love is an attempt to respond to the alienation associated with the relationship with the Other. In love, Sartre says, I aspire to determine my consciousness of myself autonomously by controlling the Other's gaze. I do this by seducing the Other. It is not a matter of not appearing to the Other as an object – which would be impossible – but of making myself the object that the Other will accept to lose their freedom in: "each one of the lovers wants to be the object for which the Other's freedom is alienated."<sup>11</sup> Here, Sartre says,

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<sup>7</sup> (Sartre 1976), 322 ; (Sartre 2003), 306.

<sup>8</sup> (Sartre 1976), 404; (Sartre 2003), 386.

<sup>9</sup> See (Sartre 1976), 298.

<sup>10</sup> See (Sartre 1976), 265.

<sup>11</sup> (Sartre 1976), 416; (Sartre 2003), 398.

we find an inherent contradiction. In effect, each person wants the Other to love him – that is, to relate to him as a loving subject relates to a seductive object. If, by chance, the Other loves me, he inevitably tries to get me to love him and so relate to me, not as a loving subject, but in his turn as a seductive object. Put in other terms: when I love, I tend to make myself a seductive object, and to make the Other into a loving subject. But the success of this attempt transforms the Other in a manner contrary to my expectations. In effect, I want the Other to be seduced and, against my wishes, they are transformed into the seducer. When they love me, the Other tends to make me into an enslaved subject – whereas I want to be a dominating object. Conversely, when I love, I tend to make the Other into an enslaved subject, whereas the Other wants in itself to be a dominating object.

What are the Hegelian or Kojévian aspects of this analysis? Firstly, for Sartre, as in Kojève's reading of Hegel, access to self-consciousness is the result of the relationship between two individuals, and intersubjectivity is the key to humanisation. Next, for Sartre as well as for Kojève, humanity is not a starting point, but a result, the effect of a process. Thirdly, Sartre, like Kojève, refuses any dualism between mind and body. Fourthly, for both authors, the relationship with the Other is not theoretical, but practical and existential, in the sense that it requires me to act and determines the meaning which I give to myself and to the world. Moreover, for Sartre as for Kojève, this process is a struggle, in the sense that each subject tends to impose on the other a determination which the latter refuses. Also, Sartre, like Kojève, does not take a moral point of view here, and gives no prescriptions insofar as he sees the conflict of individuals as inevitable. Finally, for both authors, the dialectic does not end in reconciliation, but rather brings about an alienation.

It is notable that Sartre himself recognised parallels with Hegel, while recognising their limits. "Up to this point our description would fall into line with Hegel's famous description of the Master and Slave relation. What the Hegelian Master is for the Slave, the lover wants to be for the beloved. But the analogy stops here, for with Hegel the Master demands the Slave's freedom only laterally and, so to speak, implicitly, while the lover wants the beloved's freedom *first and foremost*. In this sense if I am to be loved by the Other, this means that I am to be freely chosen as beloved."<sup>12</sup> One could challenge Sartre on the limits of the analogy, and charge him with being more Hegelian than he says – or, at least, more Kojévian. In effect, in Kojève's interpretation, the freedom – the self-consciousness particular to human beings – of the slave is central. It is precisely because the slave is not an authentically human self-consciousness that the master is deceived, and we may call his own experience a failure. All told, therefore, there is a remarkable affinity between Kojève's account of the master-slave dialectic and Sartre's account of the conflict of individuals.

## 2) Finitude

Let us now consider the question of finitude. How far can we find here both Hegel's legacy and a measure of similarity between Kojève and Sartre?

We will first examine the question of death in Kojève. For him, Hegelianism is a philosophy which brings death to the fore. For it is in accepting the risk of death, that

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<sup>12</sup> (Sartre 1976), 410; (Sartre 2003), 392.

the individual gains his humanity. In the same way, history would have no meaning, and would not even be possible, if man were not mortal. Moreover, Kojève claims, through his insistence on the absurdity of the idea of immortality, Hegelianism was history's first great atheistic philosophy.

What do we gain from death? Firstly, Kojève says, death allows us to escape our destiny. If man lived eternally and could not die, he would not be able to escape from the omnipotence of God. On the contrary, if he can bring about his own death, he can refuse any imposed destiny, because in ceasing to exist he ceases to be subject to this destiny. Suicide, voluntary death, is the clearest manifestation of human liberty: "It is only because of the essential finitude of man and history that the latter is anything other than a tragedy [...] acted out by human players for the entertainment of the gods, who are its authors, who therefore know how it will end, and who, as a consequence, cannot take it seriously"<sup>13</sup>.

Secondly, death allows a transformation of the self. Kojève insists heavily on freedom as the negation of the given – a negation of what one is oneself (as an animal, or as dependent on a tradition) as well as what one is not (that is, the natural or social world)<sup>14</sup>. Of course, death is by definition the end of all things, but the anguish we feel when faced with death, as well as the acceptance of the risk of death, bring about a self-transformation which is a self-creation<sup>15</sup>. This is why "man only is and only exists insofar as he suppresses himself dialectically—that is, by conserving and subliming himself"<sup>16</sup>. Finally, for Kojève, it is the acceptance of death which makes man a wise and universal being: "Absolute knowledge or wisdom in the Hegelian sense, and conscious acceptance of death, understood as complete nihilation, are one and the same."<sup>17</sup> Finally, finitude is not a shortcoming, but the key to man's humanisation.

Next, how should we analyse finitude as it occurs in Sartre's writing? Here, too, the question of finitude and of negativity is brought to the fore. Firstly, Sartre reinterprets Husserlian phenomenology using the Hegelian categories of the In-itself and the For-itself. For him, the opposition of consciousness and the world is an opposition between a For-itself and an In-itself – that is, between a nothingness and a full being, between something free which is its own author, and something given which is always identical with itself. Sartre also draws on the Hegelian idea of negativity. The self, he says, is a "nothingness" which "nihilates" its object. In effect, on the one hand, consciousness is a nothingness in the sense that it has no content, that it is not even a transcendental self, but only a movement towards what is outside of itself. On the other hand, consciousness has the power to nihilate being – not only in the sense that it destroys being, but in the sense that it forces it aside. Nihilation consists of "bracketing off" every particular entity, and thereby to bracketing oneself off in relation to it. To nihilate is to retreat, to distance oneself radically, in the way that Descartes asserted his capacity to doubt everything, even what is evident – a doubt which, Sartre claims, prefigures Hegelian negativity<sup>18</sup>. The subject is thereby not determined by anything which *is*, and, notably, not by itself, by its character, by its social situation, its past, etc.: "To be, for the For-itself, is to nihilate the In-itself which it is. In these conditions, freedom can

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<sup>13</sup> (Kojève 1947), 520.

<sup>14</sup> See (Kojève 1947), 492.

<sup>15</sup> (Kojève 1947), 547.

<sup>16</sup> (Kojève 1947), 510.

<sup>17</sup> (Kojève 1947), 538.

<sup>18</sup> See (Sartre 1976), 59. See also (Sartre 1947), 327.

be nothing other than this nihilation. It is through this nihilation that the For-itself is always something other than what one can say of it."<sup>19</sup> This is why man is always something other than what he is.

Secondly, Sartre no longer thinks of the relationship of man to the world in terms of knowledge, that is, in terms of the theoretical construction of objectivity, but rather does so in terms of existence. The fundamental relationship of man to the world is one of being, by which man chooses the meaning he gives to his world. Existence, for Sartre, responds to a desire<sup>20</sup>, and this desire expresses the lack of that fullness and stability which is precisely characteristic of the In-itself: "This perpetually absent being which haunts the For-itself is its own self, frozen into an In-itself. In the impossible synthesis of the For-itself and the In-itself, it would be its own foundation, not as a nothingness, but as a being, and would hold in itself the necessary transparency of consciousness, at the same time as the coincidence of being with itself."<sup>21</sup> Man is characterised by emptiness, and wants fullness. Human existence may be analysed from the starting point of a subjectively felt shortcoming and the desire to surpass it. Human existence is characterised by the search, always in vain, for the In-itself-for-itself. The For-itself is not the foundation of its being, but only of its nothingness, and man's undertaking aims on the other hand to reappropriate for itself this factual being, and so to give a foundation for the In-itself. There exists here an obvious affinity with Kojève, who defines desire as a nothingness, a void<sup>22</sup>. Furthermore, we can see, in the striving of the For-itself towards fullness, an inheritance of the Hegelian idea of self-development and of concretisation springing from the dissatisfaction linked to the initial abstraction. For Sartre, consciousness first of all arises, and only later defines itself. Here we come across the Hegelian idea of the passage from being to concept, which is, further, that from immediacy to self-founded subjectivity.

Finally, there is in Sartre a powerful call for atheism, insofar as, for him, man is the being which strives to be God, which excludes the existence of God<sup>23</sup>. Now, whether right or wrong, Kojève makes Hegel the first atheist philosophy in history, arguing, like Sartre, that the absence of God is the condition of man's freedom<sup>24</sup>.

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To conclude, I would say that in both Kojève and Sartre we see a refusal of metaphysical analysis in favour of pragmatic and hermeneutical analyses. There is no given human nature, but, rather, self-consciousness produces itself; in the same way, each individual produces his own humanity. Not only is God in fact absent, it is *necessary* that he is absent. In effect, according to Kojève, freedom is only possible through the renunciation of all immortality, and, according to Sartre, man is only free if no God imposes on him a "nature" *a priori*. For the two authors, in the same way that the limits of consciousness are not boundaries which make consciousness impossible, but rather the conditions of all knowledge, the finitude of existence is the jumping-off point for freedom. Finally, it is the Hegelian idea of negativity which marks Kojève and Sartre

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<sup>19</sup> See (Sartre 1976), 494.

<sup>20</sup> See (Sartre 1976), 281.

<sup>21</sup> See (Sartre 1976), 133; (Sartre 2003), 117; quoted by (R. Barbaras, 2005), 127.

<sup>22</sup> (Kojève 1947), 12.

<sup>23</sup> See (Sartre 1976), 126.

<sup>24</sup> (Kojève 1947), 536.

most strongly – negativity understood as the activity of negating the given, as the power to escape from everything which is, and thereby to be the autonomous author of all knowledge and of all action. We are right to doubt how faithful this interpretation is to Hegel's texts, but it is certain that, in this very unfaithfulness, there is an authentic philosophical undertaking, and that this undertaking can still inspire our thinking today.

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