

“Man is action, not being”  
Hegel *contra* Heidegger  
in an unpublished essay by Kojève

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“Kojève has a rare passion for thinking. French thought in the past few decades is an echo of those lectures. Even the interruption of these talks is itself an idea. But Kojève only reads *Being and Time* as an anthropology”. These are the words that Heidegger used in a letter to Hannah Arendt on September 29th 1967.

In these lines the philosopher from Meßkirch refers to the Paris lectures on Hegel which Kojève held from 1933 until 1939 at the École Pratique des Hautes Etudes. It is the well-known seminar dedicated to the reading and interpretation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which was later collected in a volume published by Raymond Queneau in 1947 under the title *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (for Gallimard). These lectures became a reference point for a whole generation of French intellectuals (and not only) and represent a turning-point for the reception of Hegel’s thought – or better, for Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel’s thought: when in the review *Le Contrat social* a critic, Aimé Patri, remarked that “under the pseudonym of Hegel, the author [Kojève] exposed a personal way of thinking”, Kojève simply wrote a side note on this comment, using only two words: “Bien vu” (*well spotted*).

As for himself, Kojève had read Heidegger and had been influenced by his thought – at least by the first volume of *Sein und Zeit*. When in the 1960s he wrote the foreword to his work *Système du savoir* (which remained unpublished until the 1990 Gallimard edition entitled *Le Concept, le temps, le Discours*), he acknowledged his philosophical debt to Alexandre Koyré, Eric Weil and the influence of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*. Or rather, of the man he ironically called the “former-Heidegger”: “I consider it my duty to mention here the name of that philosopher of genius, who, by the way, has taken a bad turn philosophically, perhaps precisely because of an unfortunate desire to ‘surpass’ Hegel by ‘returning to’... Plato at first (via Husserl), next to Aristotle, then to... Hölderlin and finally to Parmenides, or rather to Heraclitus, or again to whomever”.

However, despite his harsh comment of the 1960s, thirty years earlier Kojève had contributed to the reception of Heidegger's thought in France. He had done it in the review *Recherches philosophiques*, founded in 1931 by Alexandre Koyré, Henri-Charles Puech and Albert Spaier. This review, a six-annual-issue publication (consisting of six voluminous tomes, of five or six hundred pages each) numbered from 1931-'32 until 1936-'37, is an extraordinary mirror of the philosophy of the time, since it allows us to understand and to estimate the penetration of modern German thought in France. The importation of German philosophy between the end of the 1920s and the 1930s had represented, in fact, the greatest innovation of French philosophy during the 20th century, marking a renewal which, like a sort of theoretical program, overcame the premises of the philosophical culture that was dominant since the early 20th century.

Under a prestigious national label such as that of German philosophy – linked with figures such as Dilthey, Heidegger, Hegel, Husserl, Jaspers, Scheler, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche – the local philosophical landscape started to change significantly, in particular 'academic' philosophy and its rationalism. In fact, the academic *milieux* were characterized by two main attitudes: the former reduced philosophy to a specifically 'positivistic' reflection on science; the latter had a predilection for a colorless intellectualism about ethical and political problems. The review, issued by a small Parisian publisher (Boivin), was led by an editorial board – comprised of the three founders and, after Spaier's death in 1934, also of Gaston Bachelard and Michel Souriau – and by a patronage committee which was meant to legitimize the publication, considering its marginal academic position (this latter committee included numerous professors of the Sorbonne or associated to the École Normale Supérieure and the Collège de France).

Kojève (who, at that time, used his unfrenchified name, Alexandre Kojenikoff) actively collaborated with *Recherches philosophiques*, because of his personal friendship with Koyré and his competence in German philosophy. In particular, he collaborated with Koyré and Jean Wahl as curator of the section "Phénoménologie": here he reviewed several volumes dedicated to epistemology and phenomenology – it is important to note that the category 'phenomenology' included at that time not only Husserl's phenomenology in a strict sense, but also (and especially) the evolution of this latter up to Heidegger's thought.

In the fifth volume Kojève published a very harsh review of Alfred Delp's volume, *Tragische Existenz. Zur Philosophie Martin Heideggers* (Herder, Fribourg a.Br. 1935), a work since forgotten and with good reason. To the published text Kojève had also written a long side-note which has so far remained unpublished and which we present here for the very first time in English: it is

a text of annotations, a preparatory note which has, therefore, the unfinished style and form of a collection of notes or a work-in-progress. This note is essentially divided into a first part, in which the author translates some passages from Hegel and Heidegger, and a second part in which the author explains his own relation to the double reading of Hegel and Heidegger.

In the review issued in *Recherches philosophiques* he had introduced the argument: “It is only by confronting it with the work of Hegel that one can understand and appreciate the *philosophical* importance of Heidegger’s work, and discover that it contains something truly new. In fact, part I of *Sein und Zeit* is only an attempt to reproduce – while correcting it – the phenomenological (‘existential’) anthropology of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in view of an ontology (the yet unpublished second volume) that is supposed to replace the misguided ontology of Hegel’s *Logik*” (Kojevnikoff 1936: 416).

It is, however, in the unpublished part that Kojève deals more explicitly with the convergence of the two anthropologies, the Hegelian and the Heideggerian. The philosopher detects in the main questions of *Sein und Zeit* nothing more than the premises of Hegel’s anthropology. And, therefrom, he directs his fundamental criticism at Heidegger: that he had missed – or softened – the importance of negativity and that, therefore, had not developed an important and essential sphere such as that of *action*. Kojève reproaches the author of *Sein und Zeit* with having drawn on the Hegelian theme of death but not that of ‘fight’ and ‘work’ – as if to say: Heidegger’s philosophy does not account for history. This is, ultimately, the intrinsic limitation of Heidegger’s anthropology: he founded it on three primary and irreducible categories (*Befindlichkeit, Verstehen e Angst*), which are no more than the transposition of three fundamental Hegelian categories (*Begierde, Arbeit e Kampf auf Leben und Tod*). Nevertheless, in transposing these categories, he softened the main aspect, the “active-negating” element.

This indication is precisely what marks the difference between the two philosophers: the fundamental feature of Kojève’s philosophical anthropology consists in the humanization of the Negative which prevents any kind of match with Heidegger’s thought. Furthermore, by excluding and «softening» the constitutive value of the negating action of *fight* and *work* – action arisen from the negating *desire* –, Heidegger excludes or does not necessarily arrive at the ambit of history: according to Kojève, the *Dasein* could constitute himself without coming into contact with the other man; it could well keep isolated and outside the world. The essence of the man is not only determined by the individual, but also by the ‘Social’ and the ‘Historical’. And human ‘existence’ seems to be characterized not only by the fact that it is *fnite*, but rather by the fact that it has the possibility of voluntary *death*, the death devoid of any

biological necessity. For this reason, Heidegger's philosophy risks becoming a naturalist anthropology which could only lead to an ontology of the natural being: an ontology incapable of accounting for those human existential realities that Heidegger himself would like to analyze in their constitution.

How is it possible to conceive the *Sein* of the *Dasein* if not as that which manifests itself as action? And can this action be anything other than the *negating* action? Kojève finds an answer to his question, by returning to the meaning that Hegel assigns to the negating action as *Aufheben*: an action which *destroys* the given natural and human being as given, by *preserving* it as natural and human and *sublimating* it through such a preserving destruction (which preserves it) in view of an aim. The aim will be one of the main themes of Kojève's philosophical reflection: the *recognition*, that process resulting from the fight for life and death that a man carries out, in order to impose on another, whom he recognizes as a man for the fact that he risked his own life to impose on him as a man.

This philosophical gap between Kojève and Heidegger is precisely the core of the confrontation between the two philosophers. And we go back to the beginning, to the words that Heidegger wrote to Hannah Arendt: "Kojève only reads *Being and Time* as an anthropology". In Kojève's hands, *finitude* is radicalized in view of the foundation of a human and temporal anthropology brought into the field of dialectics. For Kojève, as for Hegel, "the true being of man is his action" (in Kojève's own copy of Hegel's *Phenomenology* this sentence is markedly underscored). Therefrom the *concept* which replaces the being in the dialectical binomial with time: only the concept can make the being talk, can give rise to *speech* which is man's speech – that is, philosophy, the speech which accounts for all speeches, including itself. There is no silence, no opacity of the unutterable being (a meta-language) which is still the horizon within which Heidegger thinks.

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