

Kojève: The Possibility of Conceptual Representation and Discursive Development in History

Grant Kettering

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Texts Referenced, by Alexandre Kojève

Introduction to the Reading of Hegel (1933 - 1939, pub. Fr. 1947)

1934 - 1935 : Lectures 6 - 9

1937 - 1938 : Lectures 1 - 3

1937 - 1938 : *Extrait de l'Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études*

1938 - 1939 : Lectures 1, 2, 6-8, 12

The Concept, Time and Discourse (ca. 1946-1956, pub. Fr. 1990)

It is notable that, after taking over a lecture course on the religious philosophy of Hegel at the École pratique des hautes études, Section des sciences religieuses from Alexandre Koyré – a friend of his when he was a student in Berlin and a fellow Russian expatriate in Paris – Alexandre Kojève seems to have devoted his intellectual attention overwhelmingly to Hegel until his death in 1968, having done until that time (he was thirty) his most serious work in far-eastern languages, religions, and philosophy as well as many branches of historical and contemporary science. If through his

deep and understanding engagement he had a great influence on the study of Hegel in France through these lectures, carried on from 1933 to 1939, and if he framed his later writing about Hegel (little of which was published during his lifetime) as a “*mise à jour*” of the Hegelian system for contemporaries to whom it was apparently no longer sufficiently comprehensible, it is also clear that he was very much interested in correcting Hegel on a few points.

By far the most important of these was Hegel’s conception of the dialectical structure of natural reality. Hegel thought that Nature as much as Man actually are dialectical in the structure of their being. Kojève argued that on this point Hegel was wrong, and that in fact Man is the only genuinely dialectical being, while “pure and simple Being (*Sein*) does not have a three-fold or dialectical structure” [ILH ’34 p. 171]¹. This disagreement sits at the very heart of Kojève’s reconfiguration of Hegel’s System.²

Despite this disagreement – which we see Kojève articulating clearly at least as early as 1935, his second year of lectures at EPHE – Kojève remained very deferential to Hegel. He seems to have believed that Hegel had in fact reached and seen and proclaimed the end of history in 1807. Nonetheless – and especially for anyone who would want to call into question Kojève’s reading of Hegelian dialectic – their disagreement does have substantial effects that reverberate throughout Kojève’s re-articulation.

This re-articulation can, in short, be described as follows. First, man has a *real* history and it is necessary to account for it – on which point Kojève, at least apparently, does not differ substantially from Hegel. Kojève’s real accomplishment was to describe how *conceptual* (discursive) knowledge interacts with, is compatible with, and indeed is facilitated and driven by this real historical development.

¹ ILH = *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*; CTD = *Le concept, le temps, et le discours*; year refers to academic year of lecture in ILH; page numbers are for our English-language editions.

² This disagreement is discussed or referenced in the following places: ILH pp. 85, 146, 147, 158, fnt. 197, 213 ff., 216 ff., 239; CTD p. 55.

The *limiting* account of *conceptual* knowledge which comes out of this should be seen, perhaps, as Kojève's primary contribution. It pairs naturally with his work in modern theoretical physics, in which Kojève found a specifically non-conceptual but mathematical understanding. Regrettably, however, Kojève focused so explicitly on Hegel in the body of the texts we are considering here, that today the contours of his account can only be pieced together from its periphery and excavated from its interior.

Now, as we have noted, one of the great sympathies that Kojève did have with Hegel – in fact, he called it his “principle title to glory” [ILH '34 p. 218] – was his *philosophical* problematization of history. Kojève thought that Hegel completed philosophy by finally incorporating the fact of history into it. It is important for us to begin by going over the essential understanding and structure of history for Kojève, for it is what will animate our discussion conceptual knowledge.

The fact of history. With this term, Kojève means to isolate a specific layer of being and point out that it demands ontological consideration. This layer is the history of humanity – its social, political, cultural, and economic development since its beginning and as a whole. The incisive insight is that there is such a thing. Unlike inanimate things, which carry on a purely physical existence, and animals, which, though they do negate reality by consuming things, never essentially change it or themselves, the history of humanity consists of real changes in the mode of being of Man. This much is obvious – and striking – in actual history.

In keeping with Hegel, Kojève sees that philosophy had to develop significantly before it could capture this insight. The story goes something like this: Platonic ontology only understands things in a static way. Each thing participates to some degree in a form which is eternal and in itself unchanging. Aristotle introduced the notion of

change into these forms. For him, existents participated in forms, but these forms themselves had a temporal character. Thus, instead of only being able to describe the static being of something like a chair, as Plato had been able to do, Aristotle was able to describe dynamic becoming, of living beings and art. However, Kojève points out, even if Aristotle's “forms” have a temporal character, they are not *themselves* subject to *development* in time. But this means that the existents which participate in them can do nothing but retrace the closed and prescribed paths of their being. Thus it is that the being of animals is fundamentally cyclical, repeating essentially the same kinds of actions generation after generation. It was only Hegel (according to Kojève) who finally incorporated the fact of real human development into ontology.³

It might be noted in passing that Kojève does not take the time to talk about other, different temporal processes and their understanding. Perhaps foremost among these would be natural science, which often has ascribed linear (non-cyclical) being to existents governed by natural law (here the temporal structure of Newton's law of motion $F = m\ddot{x}$ is exemplary) in subjects like cosmology, evolutionary biology, natural history, and geology. In any case, Kojève ends up explicitly supporting a specifically *dualist* ontology, perhaps grouping all of these kinds of natural understanding together under the being of “Nature”, which is then set against the being of “Man”.⁴

If Kojève demands an explanation by philosophy and ontology of the existence of human history, there is still a question about what really composes this history which is supposed to be explained. For surely if ‘philosophy’ didn't give a full account of the ontology of human history before Hegel (according to Kojève), it also definitely did *not* fail to talk about Man and about human institutions. But of what other things could history possibly be composed? Moreover,

³ For Kojève's elegant treatment of this trajectory of philosophy, see the sixth, seven, and eighth lectures from 1938 - 1939.

⁴ Kojève says in explicitly ontological terms that man is unique because he can actually change reality: “Man...essentially transforms the World by the negating Action of his Fights and his Work” [ILH '38 p. 138]. One might wonder in which kind of ontology *essential* change is possible.

in fact, since human events and institutions exist only by and through Man, is not a thorough account of Man enough?

The answer, according to Kojève, is that indeed history is based upon an account of individual man – that the structure of individual humanity does drive history. But the account needs to be given in such a way that the developmental possibility of history is actually demonstrated, and moreover in such a way that its intensely ontological status is revealed.

That he wants to proceed in this kind of ‘*theoretical*’ fashion – giving a general account of Man – which in a certain sense is not unlike the state-of-nature accounts familiar from seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophy, with which Kojève would no doubt feel very little sympathy – does not mean, however, that Kojève is thereby any less concerned with understanding actual history and contemporary reality.

What, then, is the structure of individual Man that drives history for Kojève? Like for Hegel, its root is *desire* (*Begierde*), specifically the desire by each man for *recognition* (*Anerkennung*) by other men. This desire induces men to *action*. Action is the *negation* of the given (natural and social) world. The taking up of it, the neutralizing of it, and the replacing of it with something new that suits them better. But what is taken up and replaced is precisely ultimately the economic, social, political, and cultural institutions and relationships whose progression *is* history. If most individual actions are necessarily more humble, like the building of a new kind of building, each still plays a crucial role in the dialectical process by establishing the slightly new material, social, or discursive conditions which then become themselves the ground for further incremental development. Therefore the Kojèveian genetic account of the fact of history goes something like this: desire moves men to

action, action changes men and their institutions, this change is history.⁵

It is absolutely essential, for Kojève, that this desire manifest itself in a specifically human, and therefore non-natural, way. Animals may be content to negate given being by consuming it, thus maintaining themselves, but they don’t essentially change anything through this negation. On the other hand, “Desire is human – or, more exactly, “humanizing,” “anthropogenetic” – only provided that it is directed toward another *Desire* and an *other* *Desire*. To be *human*, man must act not for the sake of subjugating a *thing*, but for the sake of subjugation another *Desire* (for the thing).” [ILH ’37 p. 40]. That is, while simply biological desire is a desire for *superiority* to given being, human desire is a desire for “transcendence of self with respect to self as *given*” [Ibid. p. 39] – which manifests itself in the attempts that human beings make to not only maintain themselves, but to thrust themselves *over* other men.⁶

The signal that another has been effectively subjugated is their *recognition* of their own defeat, which is their recognition that *their* desire for recognition will go unfulfilled, which is the recognition of the superiority of their adversary. They have chosen simple biological life over satisfying their essentially human desire.

So it is that Kojève sees that if desire is the basis of human action, human *interaction* will consist in the reciprocal attempts of each human to thrust himself over all the others. “By accepting [this], one can already foresee, or understand (“deduce”), what human existence will be” [Ibid. p. 40]. One can already see human history.

While, as we have already noted once, Kojève certainly was interested in a specific analysis of the working out of desire in actual history, following Hegel, he also devotes his attention to giving a certain highly abstract structural characterization of the interaction among human beings that *results* from their individual

⁵ Kojève gives many treatments of historical dialectic. See especially ILH ’34 p. 184 ff., ’37 p. 37 ff..

⁶ It is on this point that Kojève (and Hegel, it seems) differs from any Enlightenment or other philosophy that sees the end of man in his preservation and the attempts over men only a methods of securing this more surely.

desires. This is the relationship of Master and Slave. As each individual human being works to command the recognition of the others, they inevitably come to Fight for that recognition, and assuming the fight does not actually proceed to the death – though necessarily assuming indeed that it could – that is, assuming that one party eventually *admits* defeat, then humanity is thrust into this new dichotomous relationship in which the Master is lifted above the necessities of biological existence, and the Slave is made to Work.

Now, this outcome *might* have been a simply static result of the competition of individual desires. But if it were, one would not have explained the possibility of history. For history requires development. And it is not immediately clear from where the development would arise after the opposition of Master and Slave arises.

Kojève basically has two things to say about this situation. First of all, he says that the Master is denied truly satisfactory recognition. “But in fact, at the end of the Fight, he is recognized only by a *Slave*. To be a *man*, he wanted to be recognized by another man. But if to be a man is to be *Master*, the Slave is not a man, and to be recognized by a Slave is not to be recognized by a *man*.” [Ibid. p. 46]. In other words, the very motivation of the assertion of his desire that leads to the fight in the first place is necessarily neutralized by the capitulation because the desire that the Master asserts itself over is, by the fact of having capitulated, no longer an authentic desire.

In this structural characterization, it is the condition of the *Slave* after the Fight – specifically, his condition of *Work* – that explains the possibility of history. Because it is in *Work* that genuinely human negating action can be found. “By acting, he negates, he transforms the given, Nature, *his* Nature; and he does it in relation

to an *idea*, to what does not *exist* in the biological sense of the word, in relation to the idea of a *Master* – i.e., to an essentially *social*, human, historical notion.” [Ibid. p. 48]. The root of the essentially new content of history is the essentially new content that is generated in the Slave’s *Work*.

While noting in passing that this account of human history is structurally constructive, in the sense that it understands the development of large-scale human institutions through an account of individual relationships,⁷ now we need to understand how conceptual representation (knowledge) (discourse) arises in this framework.⁸ Although it is all important for Kojève that it is *action* – and action *alone* – that causes actual change in the world, action is nonetheless fundamentally mediated by *discourse*.

This occurs in two ways. First discourse can actually be used as a tool by the slave to negate: “But it can happen (and we know that this actually did happen one day, somewhere) that the man begins to *discuss* with his adversary. By an act of freedom he can decide to want to “convince” him, by “refuting” him and by “demonstrating” his own point of view. To this end he *speaks* with his adversary, he engages in a *dialogue* with him: he uses a *dialectical method*. And it is by becoming a dialectician that the man of myth or opinion becomes a scientist or a philosopher.” [ILH ’34 p. 179 ff.]. Thus, discourse becomes a kind of attenuated proxy theater for the real fight of slave with master.

Second, the very fact of being subject to work which is not for himself generates for the slave abstract ideas. After the fight, “the Slave only *knows* that the Master can kill him; he does not *see* him in a murderous posture. In other words, the Slave who *works* for the Master represses his *instincts* [to production for self alone] in relation to an *idea*, a *concept*.” [ILH ’37 p. 48]. The ideas seems to

⁷ I am using the concept institution here for the sake of convenience because it seems to accurately convey what Kojève has in mind. That sociology has effectively problematized if not decided firmly against understanding the composition of society on the basis of something or other at the individual level should not stand in the way of our account.

⁸ It is a little difficult to say, but this insistence by Kojève reveals perhaps a materialism or at least ‘realism’ which seems a bit foreign to Hegel.

be here that the Slave's work becomes an abstract idea for him because (part of) his work is appropriated for the Master's use.

In either case, the slave comes into possession of abstract notions and finally *understanding* (*Verstand*). This is his route to science (which is technological development) and also to philosophy (which is, for Kojève, (the search for) true discursive (conceptual) knowledge).

With this we understand the basic structure of how specifically human desire makes possible and fosters discourse (and the striving after truth) in the first place. The introduction of *abstract ideas* is the very first opening of *conceptual representation*.

However, the essential feature of human discourse in history, for Kojève, is that it *develops*. In the process of arguing and thinking and working, the discourse that the slave carries on naturally changes.

It is at this point that we rejoin the questions which animated the beginning of this essay. In order to understanding discursive development, we need to now understand how conceptual representation (discourse) works. Kojève approaches this problem by asking: what are the conditions of possibility of (discursive) *truth*? Or, how does discursive truth work? Or, how is reality captured by discourse? Or, best of all, *how can there be a perfect coincidence between Notions and Things*?

This perfect coincidence – synonymous with a true representation of reality, knowledge, or truth – is of course *the* constitutive and defining goal of philosophy. Kojève is undoubtedly among that subset of philosophers who think that in undertaking a *representation of reality*, much more attention should be paid to the

representation than the *reality*. He is (relatively) unique, however, in connecting, nay, constituting, his general account of representation (the account of conceptual knowledge that we are after) with reference to its own development-ability and ultimately to history and the ontological structure of Man. But before we can understand the relationship between conceptual knowledge and history, we must begin with the basic structure of conceptual representation itself.⁹

The essential problem is how it is possible for two things as different as Notions and Things to coincide. First, we need to understand that, and how, Kojève is serious about this being *perfect* coincidence. In the First Introduction to CTD, Kojève makes a soft approach this conclusion. In the second section he argues at length that the distinctions between notions and things that one often finds in philosophy – that the former are general and the latter particular, or that the former are abstract and the latter are concrete – in fact inaccurately describe the situation. The effective move on Kojève's part is to introduce the notion of *perception*, and to point out that when subjects encounter objects – that is, when *actual* subjects *in time* encounter actual objects – they always *perceive* them *as they* perceive them. The point is to restrain philosophy from jumping immediately to the trans-experiential, atemporal 'ontological' view of the object. For Kojève, at this *perceptual* level, and contrary to (a lot of) philosophy, things are *perceived* with *just as much* particularity – and so too just as much generality – as the notion which is applied to them. That is, when I see a sheep, I *see a sheep, tout court*, not some more specific breed or individual. When I see, on the other hand, *une boîte d'époisses de Bourgogne* I *see époisses*, not 'cheese'.

⁹ I should point out that Kojève only characterizes what he usually calls simply Discourse or Truth as "conceptual understanding" only *once* in our texts, in the footnote to the eighth lecture of 1938 - 1939 which is on page 147 in the English-language edition of ILH. If my account here places it at the absolute center of my explication of Kojève, that is because I feel that this footnote justifies this understanding, and that specifically demarcating the kind of understanding with which Kojève is concerned as "conceptual" helps not only to remind us that Kojève thinks other kinds of understanding are possible (the possibility of which all too frequently seems entirely occluded by the way he formulates things), but also because I think that his account *as* account of *conceptual* knowledge is an especially interesting one, both because of its logical structure and because of its fundamental involvement with history. I should also point out that the two parts of the account of conceptual knowledge which follow are highly interpretive and are often set out in terms which seem foreign to Kojève and might possibly even be opposed. This has the benefit of setting Kojève in a very different light which might encourage understanding, but the drawback that this is only possible for those with a prior acquaintance with Kojève.

To be sure, this does not mean that two different subjects will perceive the same object with the same degree of particularity or classify it in the same way, which is precisely what a philosophy which wants to transcend experience to access the 'real' ontological level wants to do. It wants to come up with some description of objects *in themselves*, that is, from the viewpoint, or, better, in the actual perception, of no actual individual subject. But this is not what Kojève is interested in. Not only can he point out that *every actual* experience is composed by *one particular* subject and *one particular* object – and so that the 'ontological' viewpoint is an *unrealistic* abstraction – but he can also say that in such an experience, each object *is* always perceived *by* some subject *with some* degree of particularity. In no case does any subject ever perceive *all* the aspects of the particularity of any object. Thus it is clear that when a subject approaches an object, the perception of that object is co-determined by the *concept* which that subject uses to comprehend that object.¹⁰ The object is *perceived with the same degree of particularity and generality* as the concept which is applied to it has.

The ultimate purpose of this phenomenological¹¹ restructuring is to suggest that the only difference between Things and Notions is that the former have *hics* and *nuncs* while the latter do not. That is, the two things are actually coincidental, excepting that things exist in time and space while notions do not. It seems appropriate, however, that Kojève does not take too strong a tone with respect to these arguments, because in a certain sense they do seem quite at odds with our experience. Among other things, we might point out that a subject is often able to consider applying *different* concepts to any one object, so it is not as if their perception is actually co- or pre-determined by the concepts that the subject has. And subjects have the capability to create *new* concepts when confronted with *new* perceptions. Or we might point out that *in discourse* subjects often choose to identify objects with some *lesser*

degree of particularity than the degree of which they are capable. Nonetheless, the force of the approach as a description of actual experience set over against ontological ideality is clear.

Now, however, this phenomenological approach of the First Introduction is recast in the Second in much more precise, definite, systematic, and effective terms. It is here that Kojève introduces the distinction between being-as-such and the being-of-which-one-speaks (= given-being). The argument takes on a schematically logical form. Kojève points out that philosophy and discourse can only *speak*, by definition, of the being-of-which-one-speaks – and that if there is any being-as-such outside of the being-of-which-one-speaks, philosophy need not, because it *cannot*, concern itself with it. Thus, what in the First Introduction Kojève attempted to make plausible through an account of experience which we might recognize is here converted into an argument built on the very grounds of possibility of discourse. The question, though, of course, is (even if for Kojève we can't strictly *ask* this question): is there any difference between given-being and being-as-such? At the very least: what is the theoretical import of making this distinction if it is analytically true? Why is it meaningful?

The answer is that it is this distinction which makes true conceptual representation possible. *This* is the distinction that sits at the root of Kojève's project, is it with *this* distinction that Kojève articulates his disagreement with Hegel. For, as we have already noted, Kojève will go on to say (though he does not take this up in CTD) that being-as-such has a monistic ontological structure, while given-being has a dialectical structure. The argument, when distilled, is then actually rather simple: true conceptual knowledge *is* dialectical and so is possible only when paired with a *dialectical* given-being. If dialectical conceptual knowledge tried to cohere with monistic being-as-such, it could not be true.

¹⁰ This language is foreign to Kojève.

¹¹ I of course use this term in this context, as Kojève himself does, to refer to the phenomenology beginning in the late nineteenth century that we associate with Husserl et al.

Now it seems appropriate to wonder why Kojève is so insistent in using ontological terminology (*given-being*) in a situation which might also be described on an epistemological level. That is, if we are going to recognize that given-being is only the result (as we will see) of the *interaction* of subject and object, is this not a question of epistemology? Have not the ambitions of ontology and philosophy always been to consider the being of the object *by itself*? We can grant that at a rhetorical level Kojève will want to cede as little ground as possible to this other kind of ontology. But if this insistence seems only like a slight of hand, one does well to keep in mind Kojève's motivations. Ultimately, he is trying to account for the fact of history. And the fact of history as he understands it plays out only and always *in time* and at the level of *experience*. Therefore, seeing that there *is* a real fact of history which ontology seems to need to account for, whatever its hesitancy to do so, we need an *ontological* to account that really does put us back into time and into experience. But it is only when time (history) and experience (phenomenology) are taken account of and regarded as ontologically important that the fact of history can be described at all. Therefore, the *ontological* characterization of this 'phenomenological' insight is in fact no slight of hand, but a fully justified and in fact necessary re-configuration and improvement of ontology itself. If this means that ontology must give up its ancient ambition to describe objects in themselves, then so be it; that ambition is incompatible with truth.

But this is just to characterize not only the Kojèveian position, but one that had existed in various strands of European thought since Hegel, the phenomenologists, and Heidegger (of course, among others). We need to return the specifics of the Kojèveian account because Kojève's conclusions (or at the least his articulations) are not shared on the whole by these traditions.

Back in the First Introduction, where Kojève was still using the language of perception, he says: "Perception 'reveals' certain aspects of the *interaction* between the 'subject' and the 'object,'"

[CTD First Introduction p. 59]. Then, in the language of the Second Introduction he says, "Indeed, as soon as one speaks of something, one cannot 'take' it independently of the fact that one is speaking of it." [CTD Second Introduction p. 102]. So, *under perception*, the *object* is taken up *in some way* by the *subject*. Both subject and object interact equally in producing the perception.

So, we know that human experience is grounded on an interaction of subject and object. But what Kojève is after is the conditions under which this interaction can produce coincidence between given-being and discourse. Now, we might first point out that the way in which his account of perception in the First Introduction puts it, we might even wonder how a perfect coincidence could *not* be possible. For if our perceptions are in some sense or other co-determined by our concepts, and our perceptions are what matters for the determination of being, and if indeed there is then a perfect coincidence of Thing and Notion (except for *hic et nunc*), then how could they not, in the everyday course of experience, automatically coincide? It seems like the coherence is built into the very structure of the phenomenological account.

It is at *this* point that the fact of discursive *development* (in history) becomes important once again. The idea is that even though our actual perceptions may cohere with *our* Concepts, in history the slave is able to challenge these (the Concept) by arguing and *negating* the Concept that the master asserts. Therefore, and this is very important, what 'discursive war'¹² amounts to for Kojève is the mutual competition of different *conceptual orderings* of the world (different Concepts). Now, these are conceptual orderings which not only involve human description of the natural world (something we will have to wait just a bit to problematize as well) but also human description of the human world. And if the human world is subject to change by the action of man, it is possible to understand competing human discourses (conceptual orderings) as simply constitutive of each man's desire to have the (social) world be ordered according to his will, which would then satisfy his desire for

¹² This is my term, not Kojève's.

recognition. Thus, the possibility opens up that the descriptions of the social world at any point in history in fact do cohere with (human) reality, and therefore do have a certain kind of truth:

“The Real corresponding to a given philosophy itself becomes really other (thetical, antithetical, or synthetical), and this other Real is what engenders another adequate philosophy, which, as “true”, replaces the first philosophy which has become “false.” Thus, the dialectical movement of the history of philosophy, which ends in the absolute or definitive truth, is but a reflection, a “superstructure,” of the dialectical movement of the *real* history of the Real. And that is why all philosophy that is “true” is also essentially “false”: it is false in so far as it presents itself not as the reflection or description of a constituent element or a dialectical “moment” of the real, but as the revelation of the Real in its totality” [LH '34 p. 184 ff.]

We might characterize this by saying first, at the ontological level, that the truth is only a partial uncovering¹³ (‘revelation’) of a total truth which will be realized only at the end of history, but which for all its partiality, is no less true, and second, at the historical level, that insofar as what is being represented in discourse is human *historical* reality, it can be characterized *at the time* in history in a positive and truthful manner by simply cohering with the historical state of affairs – but because that reality is subject to negation, that ‘truth’ will not be enduringly (and therefore really) *true*.

Now, this means that *ultimate* truth on the historical level would therefore be made possible by the *universal* coherence of representation with social reality and no new negation. But we still must ask what is constitutive of truth on the *ontological* level (which encompasses both social and natural reality), for it still appears that not *all* human discourse is about its own social constitution. We know very well that Kojève marks the end of history on the

ontological level by the completion of the Concept¹⁴, and so we must see what this might mean and how this is possible.

The first important point is that *both* given-being (the object *for* the subject) *and* the Concept (the discursive representation in the subject) in the interaction of (a) subject with (an) object each form mirroring “*totalities*”, that is, they are wholes. This results from the fact that ontology “speaks exclusively of what is *common* to *all* that of which one speaks, that is, of that which (irreducibly) *distinguishes* any one discourse from all the others” [CTD Second Introduction p. 104]. What Kojève is beginning to suggest here on the ontological level is that discourses are *constituted* by what specifically they take to be *common* to *all* of the objects that they speak about – that is *through* what collective set of terms they *understand* (analyze, structure) their “universe of discourse”, their given-being, what we have already called conceptual ordering – that is, by their (individual) *Concepts*. But the (a) Concept is nothing other than the set of all notions, in other words, the set of all (of its) *concepts*. So, conceptual understanding works (to start) by the *application* of a limited set of specific concepts *to* a being which then *structures* that being in accordance with those concepts.

Again, the *negation* of a discourse in dialectic amounts to nothing more than the *re-configuration* of the Concept of a given discourse to create a new discourse with a new Concept. As Kojève puts it at one point,

“Thanks to Identity every being remains *the same* being, eternally *identical* to *itself* and *different* from the *others*; or, as the Greeks said, every being represents, in its temporal existence, an immutable eternal ‘idea,’ it has a ‘nature’ or ‘essence’ given once and for all, it occupies a fixed and stable ‘place’ (*topos*) in the heart of a World ordered from all eternity (*cosmos*). But thanks to Negativity, an identical being can negate or overcome its identity with itself and become other than it is, even its own opposite. In

¹³ It is in this entire account but especially here that we might see the influence of especially the final two chapters of the first division of *Sein und Zeit* on Kojève.

¹⁴ Though we haven’t used this term frequently, the Concept is prominent in Kojève’s articulation. It means the totality of all concepts, and what they share in common, and is used as a stand-in for concepts in general.

other words, negating being, far from necessarily 'representing' or 'showing' (as a 'phenomenon') it given identical 'idea' or 'nature', can *negate* them itself and become opposite to them (that is, 'perverted'). Or again, the negating being can break the rigid ties of the fixed 'differences' that distinguish it from the other identical being (by 'freeing' itself from those ties); it can leave the place that was assigned to it in the Cosmos." [ILH '34 p. 199 ff.]

Kojève is quite explicit in his discussion of negation in this lecture that the negation of something need not be to its strict *opposite*, but can be just to something *other*. This point is all important in understanding dialectic, in understanding how forward progress can be made by dialectic, and it all too often is obscured by the formulaic articulations of pairs like Being and Nothingness which is how, after Hegel, Kojève chooses to express himself, which, however, does have the admitted advantage of reinforcing certain structural connections between the various levels at which the dialectic operates.

In any case, we can now begin to understand Kojève's internal structure on the ontological level of dialectic (of discourse) in the Second Introduction of CTD in which he emphasized the *tri-partite*, trinitarian structure of dialectic (its "being-three"). A conceptual structure, to be *complete*, must be closed, "coherent". But this is what conceptual structures are.

However, if they are also to be *true*, they must be *unique*:

"Discursive Truth (which Philosophy seeks) is a true Discourse [which any Philosopher is supposed to be able to express some day]. Now, this Discourse can be said and can claim to be *true* only if it is *one* in itself (= 'coherent' or non-contradictory) and *unique* of its kind (that is, not contradicted by any other 'coherent' discourse)" [CTD Second Introduction, p. 120].

But if any conceptual structure is a *totality*, what more can it do to express its uniqueness in truth? How would such uniqueness be possible? It would be possible on the historical level if no new

discourse were asserted and some existing discourse were universalized. But on the ontological level, that is, with reference to the internal structure of the discourse / given-being pair itself, Kojève also says that final *truth* would manifest itself if the Concept in question were truly *fully articulated* and expressed not only its *positive* Being, but also expressed that *all of* the Non-Being which it does *not* attribute to its positive Being *is not the case*. That is why it is Being *and* Nothingness that for Kojève is the expression for truth and dialectical completeness. This makes sense in the context of Kojève's account of discursive development: for the way that negation occurred was that a new, *other* competing discourse was put forward. If the present discourse *can assert* by asserting its three-fold structure of Being *and* Nothingness that it is not only *whole* but *unique*, then truth is achieved.

This is essentially Kojève's account of the structure of conceptual knowledge and truth. If we should return for a moment and ask: why should given-being be *three* while being-as-such is *one*? The answer is because given-being is the being created when a *conceptual understanding* interacts with being-as-such and, in taking it up and imbuing it with its structure, making it into given-being, constructs a self-enclosed and comprehensive set of concepts / categories which it uses to assign unique locations to each type of object that appears in its self-articulating ontological topology.¹⁵ Conceptual understanding must posit *specific* and *definite* being to the objects that it represents, and *in so doing* it necessarily refers to the specific and definite *negatives* of the being it positively brings into representation, and *if it can hope to be 'true'*, it must also *positively* preclude that there is anything other that is conceptually *articulable* than the world (totality) which is circumscribed by its own positivity.

In this case, the Concept – at the end of history and in the condition of Absolute Knowledge – according to Kojève, "exhausts" all the "content" of understanding and fully articulates being, which means

¹⁵ We might also add, for the sake of completeness, that the empirical-existence of the given-being in question is then composed of each individual object's position in this ontological space as well as its position in physical space and time.

that the Concept contains *all* the concepts (and their complete understanding) which suffices for a true description of *given-being*.

But in what sense is this content exhausted? How can a Concept articulate its own uniqueness? Is this completed Concept – the *truth* – true *because* its Concept is completely articulated and really has *logically*, as it were, positively excluded all other possible Concepts, or is it *true* because at the end of history *no one will attempt to overcome the existing Concept because their desire has been itself exhausted, or rather, finally satisfied, in universal recognition by his fellow human beings?*

Another way of putting this question is: does the Concept upon the realization of Absolute Knowledge *cohere* with *being-as-such*? But we have already seen that Kojève will argue that this question strictly doesn't have any sense. There is, for him, no question of the *conceptual* representation of being-as-such. Therefore the question we must ask is: with respect to what is the Concept at the end of history exhausted? If Kojève answers, as it seems he must, *given-being*, then we can point out that because, reading from the phenomenological account, it seems possible that given-being is unstable in itself not only because human beings can actually change their own history but more importantly and fundamentally because given-being is the being-of-which-one-speaks *not* the being-of-which-one-can-speak. There seems to be in the logical structure of Kojève's account absolutely no reason that discursive truth will exhaust the being-of-which-one-can-speak (which we could not get outside of to verify in any case) but rather only the being-of-which-one-does-speak. Therefore, it seems that it is *only* because the Concept is *not* negated *in history* that it is *allowed* to express its full articulation. But just because discourse "speaks" of itself and *speaks* of the impossibility of another discourse does not mean it is impossible that it be negated.

In short, the structure of conceptual understanding provides the ground and possibility for its own change (in the Concept / given-

being pair), but history and history alone can make it start or make it stop.

If this interpretation is correct, note that it *is* strictly consistent with what Kojève says. For when he articulates the complete truth of discourse, he says that it is the coherence of discourse with *given-being*. If we have pointed out more forcefully the gap between given-being and being-as-such than Kojève always does, it is still the case that we cannot, strictly, speak of this gap, because it is, in this way of looking at things, outside of given-being. Therefore, *perfect conceptual truth is possible* but only, in our eyes, because (i) the structure of conceptual truth and given-being makes possible their perfect coincidence, and (ii) their mutual evolution ceases at the end of history with the cessation of desire.

Now, even if this phenomenological attitude is to be sustained, there is one outstanding observation which can destabilize this account. What if history doesn't end?

It was important for us to articulate the mechanics and specificity of Kojève's understanding of history because they make it clear the mechanism of Kojèveian history (desire) is extremely specific and extremely limited. The structural account that he gives of the Master and the Slave makes it seem plausible that all the vicissitudes of actual history (religion, bourgeois ideology, etc.) could somehow be described as manifestations of this struggle and the competition of discourses.

But what of other human themes like happiness, art, love, and play? Kojève wants in no uncertain terms to exclude these from what is properly *human* in man.¹⁶ This is because what he sees as essential to man is the fact of history. But even if we were to grant that *history* would stop if the desire *for recognition* were genuinely and universally satisfied, it seems that human *discourse* (about happiness, art, etc.) *would* continue, and that these reputedly non-historical desires could, in their own frustration, also

¹⁶ See ILH '38 ftnt. p. 158 ff.

have the capacity to do for *discourse* what properly historical desires can, like generate abstract notions.

In any case, the everyday experience the institutions engendered by these non-historical desires is shot through with discourse. If Kojève really wants to support the idea that the Concept exists and is related to and only to history in the way that we have described, it seems he must either explain the content and structure of *these* discourses in terms specifically relating to historical desire, *or* he must grant that the Concept, after all, is constituted by more than this desire, and therefore, given his ontology, the Concept itself is fundamentally un-complete-able (and therefore truth is strictly impossible), assuming these non-historical desires themselves are never satisfiable.

However I do not want to press harder on this point than is required to make clear the simultaneous tenuousness of Kojève's system but also (especially if we are accustomed to materialist accounts) its elegance in describing not only the end of history, but also the end of philosophy as such. As a characterization of history and account of contemporary discourse, it is highly original and demands attention. Insofar as his understanding about the end of history actually does play out in the world, *his* account of the fate and structure of human discourse may show itself to be highly insightful.

Kojève's account does seem, however, on these grounds to face two more substantial obstacles. First, if Kojève will allow that at the end history humanity will of course continue to exist at the level of love, art, and play – viz., for him, essentially at the level of animals – but in any case to stop negating reality, he must assume the secure constitution of history in only the *public* realm, where it can be isolated and remain unaffected by the non-historical desires playing out in private beneath it. If, however, these non-historical *private* concerns which would in any case continue to motivate individuals were somehow allowed to systematically influence the

public realm, then they could in turn be the drivers of (an admittedly new form of) history.¹⁷

In the extremely important addendum in the second edition to the footnote to the twelfth lecture from 1938 - 1939 which appears on our page 159, Kojève evaluates with extreme brevity his reading of the postwar situation. This footnote is interesting not only because Kojève's understanding of *whether* the *World* had reached the end of history by that point is described in explicit terms and it is clear that he had been uncertain of exactly what its final form would look like, but also because it shows *what* Kojève saw in the various situations in Soviet Union, the United States, and finally Japan. Now, what is interesting is that where Kojève saw a tame and firm end of history in no doubt among other things the peculiar kind of political apathy that these populations evidenced, others might have seen the forcible homogenization of intellectual expression along politico-national lines in the pressure of an intensely fought world war, a pressure which was renewed and redoubled immediately and then carried on for nearly a half a century by the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union in their respective spheres of influence, the astonishing and final collapse of the international Left, and the the explicit global economic policies of at least the United States which propelled that country in the post-war period to a prosperity so great that not only was it able to absorb the social reconfiguration brought on by the mobilization for the second war, but it was able to exceed all expectations (not the least, surely, of its beneficiaries) of the possibility of 'universal' prosperity. In short, one wonders whether Kojève simply mistook the experience of a newly intense middle class society in the west (soon to be subject to its own disillusionment) for an end of historical ambition as such.

On this account, in reading Kojève, it necessary always to keep in mind both that he is very aware that there are strongly *material* conditions for the end of history – "...post-historical animals of the species *Homo Sapiens* (which will live amidst abundance and

¹⁷ In a certain way, the recent work by Agamben about the collapse of the public and private makes this plausible.

complete security)...” [ILH '38 ftnt. p. 159] – but also that he does not seem to think that they require much attention, as if the economic problems of a capitalism sublimated into a nice capitalistic socialism was realized and able to sustain the production of these material conditions. Perhaps his work with the *Organisation européenne de coopération économique* after the war would contain some insight into his thought on this matter.

In any case, it should also probably be pointed out that however developed human society and technology is with respect to the satisfaction of its material needs, *natural disaster* and above all *resource use and scarcity* cannot be ignored as important and perhaps decisive factors in the possibility of universally and stably satisfying the material conditions which necessarily ground the end of history.