Kojève’s Paris: A Memoir

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This is a radically revised and expanded version of a short essay commissioned by parallax for a special issue on Kojève’s Paris. I want to emphasize that what follows is a memoir, not a scholarly analysis. It is nevertheless my hope that some readers will find it of philosophical interest. I have been thinking about Kojève for almost forty years, both in himself and in relation to another great teacher, Leo Strauss. Strauss used to endorse Nietzsche’s remark that the student’s duty to his teacher is to kill him. This advice, which was not understood by many of those who later came to be called Straussian, is intended to free the neophyte for the arduous task of philosophe, and for the task of doing justice to the nature of one’s teacher. It is, of course, not intended to legitimize a shallow, narcissistic expression of independence or presumed originality.

It is a striking fact that, although Kojève was the more « original » of my two teachers, in the sense that he espoused a fully developed philosophical system as Strauss did not, there are many Straussian but very few if any Kojévians. Much of the protestation about Strauss’s disciples is hypocritical in that it overlooks the equivalent phenomenon associated with all charismatic teachers. Nevertheless, it is worth asking why Kojève’s influence was of a different kind from that of Strauss. The answer, I think, is that Strauss seemed to represent the revitalization of something old, whereas Kojève claimed to manifest the conclusion of the philosophical tradition and seemed thereby to license the initiation of a postphilosophical epoch. One could not follow Kojève’s exoteric or pedagogical doctrine without departing from it or generating something new; there was no question here of reiterating forever the closed circle of Hegelo-Kojèvian wisdom. The closure of the circle meant that such reiteration would be sterile in a new historical age, an age devoted perhaps to the repetition of fragments of Hegelian system as though these fragments were themselves novelties, or else an age in which philosophy is to be replaced by eros and aestheticism, both disguised by the rhetoric of a postphilosophical discourse. In a word, Kojèvians could not rise to the level of the master by repeating his logos, which was or claimed to be a systematic endorsement of the lapsing into silence of that logos. Strauss, on the contrary, whatever his private thoughts, articulated a philosophical program in political terms that was explicitly intended to be followed or enacted. One might call Straussianism in this sense the mirror image of Wittgensteinianism in the sense of the invocation to dissolve positive teachings of a systematic sort. Heidegger’s disciples present a more complex problem because they attempt to enter a new

epoch of thinking by repeating the deconstructive mantras formulated by the master.

These introductory remarks are intended only to hint at the complex problem of the nature of the philosopher as educator. I should like to encourage others to stop judging Kojève by the criteria of Hegel philology, just as one should not judge Strauss, Wittgenstein, or Heidegger by their pedagogical rhetoric alone. The rhetoric becomes intelligible only when one has understood the underlying philosophical doctrine. And one cannot understand this doctrine without grasping the intentions of the teacher. This is why a laudatio of one’s teachers can never be a simple tissue of pious flattery. If I may paraphrase Strauss (or Nietzsche), one keeps alive in philosophy only what one has sacrificed on the altar of truth.

In 1960-1961 I was a Fulbright Research Professor at the Sorbonne. My sponsor was Jean Wahl, a kindly gentleman who was one of the first, and perhaps the first, to redirect French philosophical attention to Hegel in the late twenties with his lectures on the unhappy consciousness. Wahl was interesting because of a certain amorphousness in his nature. By education and age, he served as a symbol of the Paris of the previous generation. At the same time, he possessed a childlike openness and imaginative predisposition for novelty that hinted at things to come. One could not confuse him with the traditional masters of erudition like Gueroult or Gouhier, who exemplified in a higher degree the classical formation of France between the two world wars but who at the same time were speaking in muted voices to partially closed ears. Unfortunately, Wahl was no longer in his prime when I met him. Our contacts were limited and of a social rather than a philosophical nature. In short, even though Wahl was administratively or politically the most important philosopher at the University of Paris (or so I was told), he was no longer in a position to lead the way into the next generation.

Despite the presence of interesting younger individuals (among them Paul Ricoeur), the Sorbonne was essentially in the hands of the old guard, a cadre of cultivated historians with an academic view of philosophy. Those who were interested in philosophy as a living enterprise had to look elsewhere: the École des hautes études, the Jesuits, the salons, and above all, the Quai d’Orsay, where Alexandre Kojève held court.

My affiliation with the Sorbonne as a Fulbright professor was, to be perfectly honest, a technical device that made it possible for me to carry out my primary motive for coming to Paris. I carried a letter of introduction to Kojève from Leo Strauss, with whom I had studied at the University of Chicago as a graduate student in the Committee on Social Thought (an organization that deserves its own memoir). In 1960 I was thirty-one years
old, or what Raymond Aron described to me, upon our first meeting, as « a bright young man – but not too young! » He was sufficiently polite to refrain from qualifying the degree of my brightness. This ambiguous compliment was accurate enough with respect to my age, which permitted me to admire the striking personalities of contemporary Paris without becoming their disciple. I had, so to speak, been inoculated against the pathos of Old Europe by growing up in the United States, and against discipleship by the spectacle of the circle (or rather circles) rotating around my old teacher at Chicago.

As this is a memoir of Kojève’s Paris, I need to say something about those Parisians of the time who were most important or striking to me. My wife and I arrived in Paris on the day before the now-famous colloquium at Royaumont on dialectic, to which we had been invited by our friend Jeanne Hersch, a professor at Geneva and a well-known member of the philosophical world of Paris. I was officially introduced to this world by Jacques Lacan, a dour, gray-faced man in a black suit who was speaking that day on what I vaguely remember, probably incorrectly, as the mirror image. I understand that his talk, which continued for some three hours, was an epoch-making event in postmodernism, and so in the annals of the influence of Kojève, whose famous lecture-course on Hegel Lacan had followed.

Like so many other Parisian celebrities of the day, Lacan, according to my information, had been deeply influenced by Kojève’s analysis of the master-slave dialectic. To anticipate, when I once asked Kojève about Lacan, he replied, « Il gagne beaucoup d’argent. » To return to the lecture, it was delivered in a stuffy, overheated room filled largely with central European specialists in dialectic, all wearing identical dark suits with widely spaced chalk stripes and all puffing away on unbearably strong cigarettes. My wife left after a quarter of an hour; I stayed for another thirty minutes or so, trying desperately to keep breathing, both literally and figuratively, in the thick atmosphere of my colleagues’ cigarettes and the lecturer’s un-assimilable rhetoric. I found Lacan pretentious, obscure, and dull, a perception that will perhaps outrage the readers of this memoir but which I must confess I have retained for thirty-five years. This is obviously not intended as an informed scholarly judgment; every effort on my part to replace initial impressions by careful study of the key texts has met with failure.

This was perhaps the most important event of the conference from a historical standpoint, but it was only a passing moment for me. There were in attendance a wide assortment of individual types, ranging from the foolish to the profound, each with its special contribution to the education of a (not too) young American. How well I remember one Parisian mandarin in his mid-thirties, to whom I was introduced by Jeanne Hersch as someone who shared his interest in Heidegger. The gentleman in question refused to look at me and treated me to five minutes of intricate tooth-
picking (his own, of course) with the fingernail of his right thumb as I muttered the usual inanities. I had previously witnessed the dental ritual only as practiced on film by Brigitte Bardot, for whom I took it to be a signal of sensuousness. In the case of my present interlocutor, who had been, I was told, an assassin for the Greek communist party, it seemed more like a symbolic execution.

It was only later that I came to understand the aforementioned gentleman’s obvious dislike of someone about whom he knew virtually nothing. His behavior was inspired in large part by an anti-Americanism that was unfortunately not atypical of Parisian intellectuals of his generation in the 1960s. This is a topic that offends some French scholars when I mention it, but I cannot sympathize with their irritation, especially after having been subjected while living in France to countless episodes of rudeness and quite banal criticism of the United States. On one point at least, a memoir is exactly like a scholarly essay. One must tell the truth. It would be absurd for me to have to say that many of my best friends, in particular my wife, are French, and that I have had some of the most satisfying philosophical experiences of my life in their company. It also has to be said that the strong point of the French character is not that of taking criticism well.

The fact remains that in 1960, the influence of Marxism in general and of Sartre and de Beauvoir in particular was extremely strong in Paris. The anti-Americanism of these persons is a matter of public record and does not rely upon anecdotes or personal memories. One should bear in mind associated phenomena such as de Gaulle’s insistence upon keeping the Americans from tarnishing the lustre of French glory, as well as the disdain felt at that time by most French philosophers toward the philosophical movements of the English-speaking world. At the deepest level, this philosophical condescension toward Americans in particular was in no small part due to the influence of Kojève but above all to that of Heidegger. I should say that at this period in my life, I was philo-European and entirely prepared to share in the criticism of the philosophical doctrines of my compatriots. What I was not prepared to accept was ignorant and malicious criticism of my country.

This unpleasant situation encouraged me to spend much of my time with Russians, Polish and Lithuanian Jews, and priests, all in their late fifties and sixties and all happily immune to the vulgar consequences of current fashionable ideologies, even when they shared in their intellectual formulations. The general view of virtually everyone with whom I came into contact was that America should be regarded at best by analogy with the Romans, whereas the French, of course, were the classical Greeks. I also encountered this view in Great Britain, but with a slight variation, according to which the English assumed the role of Hellenic mentors to the American Romans. In Germany and Italy, strikingly enough, I found widespread admiration for the United States, ambiguously expressed at times (« You won the war ! We must be like you ! ») I was told in Tübingen by a
prominent surgeon) and too often connected with the desire to receive invitations from wealthy American universities.

To restrict myself to Paris, the French at that time showed nothing of the desire to accommodate their superiority to the largesse of American academic institutions, nor did they wish to turn their own philosophical faculties into bastions of pragmatism and Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy, as did some of the brightest younger Germans. These latter were understandably motivated by a revulsion toward the philosophical views of the generation between the two world wars, and in particular toward Heidegger, who was widely acknowledged to be a Nazi as well as an unsavory personality in other respects, and whose influence was held largely responsible for the destruction of German civil and spiritual society.

In France, on the contrary, Heidegger was (and is) held in high repute. The first half of his famous observation that, metaphysically speaking, America and Russia are the same, and that these two countries constitute a pincers between the two tongs of which Germany is impaled, was endorsed by Kojève himself. It is a curious phenomenon that France and United States are the two countries in which defenders of Heidegger’s personal character have held out the longest against the evidence. To explore in detail why this might be so would take me too far afield. Suffice it to say that Heidegger provided a rallying point in the United States for many of those who rejected, or who were rejected by, the dominant analytical movement in academic philosophy. With respect to France, it should at least be noted that Jean Beaufret, one of the most influential philosophy professors in Paris (he taught at the lycée Louis le Grand), was a close friend to Heidegger and shared his political and social ideology. As the case of Derrida is enough to exhibit, however, it is hardly possible to connect Heidegger’s influence in France with a proclivity toward anti-Semitism. That this influence should take the political form characteristic of the left rather than the right is also a matter that deserves attention.

It is surprising to recall how much of the viewpoint on America held even by intellectuals and artists was apparently shaped by Hollywood and the comic strip. The fantasies of political conviction also played a considerable role here. I will rest content with a single anecdote from a slightly later period. In 1963-1964 I was a postdoctoral fellow at the Humanities Research Institute at the University of Wisconsin. One day we were visited by Nathalie Sarraute, a prominent French novelist and a Jew. She was seated next to me during lunch, presumably because I spoke French. When Sarraute learned that I was also Jewish, she informed me that there were a number of public beaches in New York City where Jews were not permitted to swim. I was unable to shake her conviction on this point, which she had acquired in Paris.

I want to expand the previous remark about Hollywood films. These were extremely popular with French intellectuals and students, who would stand in long lines in the rain in order to see a Robert Mitchum or Jerry
Lewis film, very much as New Yorkers did for the films of Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini. These American films were discussed in great detail and highly appreciated; yet paradoxically enough, they served as an important basis for the largely pejorative view of American life. A similar attitude prevailed toward « le Coca » (Coca Cola, of course), which Parisians consumed in vast quantities, even as they castigated Americans for preferring it to wine. And the same story could be told about popular music. At a more serious level, the undeniable fact of racism in the United States was put to unfair use by Parisians, who seemed not to notice that blacks were conspicuous by their absence from fashionable districts such as the eighth and sixteenth arrondissements.

I will add a word about anti-Americanism when I discuss Kojève. To return to Royaumont, another amusing aspect of the event is that I was one of four native speakers of English at the conference, the other three being G. R. G. Mure, John Findlay, and Leslie Beck. For the first time in my life, I was classified as an Anglo-Saxon. I maintained cordial relations with these men after the conference, to one degree or another, but that is part of a different story. It figures in this memoir as a background detail or preparation for the *parousia* of Kojève. These charming and articulate Anglophones helped to mediate my entrance into continental dialectic, as well as providing me with living examples of what British philosophy had been like prior to the triumph of ordinary language analysis. Mure, who belonged to the era of Collingwood and Joachim, was especially bitter about the advent of analytical philosophy, which he attributed to the loss of an entire generation of gifted young men in the First World War. One does not have to accept either his dislike of analytical philosophy or the precise form of his explanation for its rise to power in order to see that there is a connection between World War One and the changing of the guard in European intellectual life. The age of analysis and the age of *Angst vor dem Tode* are the theoretical and practical consequences of the destruction of a historical epoch.

It was at Royaumont that I first encountered a number of figures who played a peripheral role in my Parisian education, among whom perhaps the most hospitable was Lucien Goldmann. Goldmann had an ambiguous reputation in Paris as a kind of lackey for Georg Lukács. His works was never as highly regarded on the Continent as it came to be for a short time among the Americans and English. I found him both open and polite, despite his obvious fanaticism: an intriguing combination. He invited me to his apartment, where, after his wife had served us coffee and pastries, Goldmann inquired in a high, speaky voice, « Alors ! Quelle est votre position philosophique ? » I could think of nothing better to say than « Je suis platonicien » or something of the sort. « Platonicien ! » Goldmann screamed, and proceeded to speak for two hours at machine-gun-like speed, largely about Kasavubu, Mobutu, and Lumumba, leading figures in the contemporary crisis in the Congo. I liked him quite a bit but found his views to be conventional historicism and in no way comparable to the
sharpness of Lukács' formulations. I single him out for comment because he was spirited and prepared to discuss philosophy with a young American.

But the most important discovery at Royaumont by far was for me the remarkable personage of Father Gaston Fessard, S. J. Fessard is not only important in himself; he was one of Kojève’s closest friends, perhaps his closest friend in Paris. To look ahead for a moment, the structure of my year in Paris was soon fixed by Monday mornings at the Quai d’Orsay, in conversation with the reincarnation of Machiavelli laced with Hobbes and Cagliostro, and Thursday afternoon at the Jesuit House with a man of God whose extraordinary intelligence and beautiful spirit won my immediate and permanent love.

Five men above the rest impressed me during that first year in Paris: Alexandre Koyré, Gabriel Marcel, Raymond Aron, Fessard, and Kojève. In singling out these five, or rather in acknowledging that the force of their intelligence and personality singled them out, I do not wish to overlook such interesting individuals as Paul Ricœur, Jean Hyppolite, Father Dominique Dubarle, Henri Lefebvre, and others whom I either observed or met briefly. I did not meet Merleau-Ponty, who died before Kojève had the opportunity to introduce me to him. At that time I had no personal access to Emanuel Levinas, nor did I have any clear idea of his philosophical views, but I attended his public examination for the advanced doctorate and found him to be an imposing figure toward whom his examiners showed unusual deference. I never saw Erich Weil but once asked Kojève for an opinion. The answer was restricted to a negative judgement on Weil’s book, *Hegel et l’État*.

In writing this memoir, I have had occasion to consider once more a question that has puzzled me for many years. Has the level of philosophical splendor in Paris radically decreased from the period of 1960 to the present decade? Is there more rhetorical posturing, or only rhetoric of a different kind? I am not the greatest admirer in America of postmodern speech patterns, but I prefer them to the Marxist rhetoric of the early sixties. Derrida, Deleuze, and Michel Serre at their best are not radically inferior to Lukács (not a Parisian, of course, but very much present in 1960), Goldmann, and Althusser. In this context, I can only suggest that Marxists and postmodernists are responding in almost exactly opposite ways to the same fundamental crisis, namely, the apparent failure of the Enlightenment in the first half of the twentieth century. One should not make a comparative judgment between the 1960s and the 1990s on the basis of popular adaptations of legitimate political rhetoric, but rather with respect to the seriousness and profundity of the formulation of the fundamental problem by the best representatives of the two periods.

One way in which to make my point on this issue is to say that I consider Nietzsche and Heidegger to be deeper thinkers than Marx. On the other hand, Marx, despite his revolutionary intentions toward old Europe, incarnates something of its breadth and lucidity that are not present in
Heidegger, and that are obscured in Nietzsche by his tendency to bombast and vagueness of conceptual expression. Kojève is unique in my experience because the unconvincing veneer of Marxism – one might almost say of Spenglerian foolishness – that defaced his speeches and writings was balanced if not entirely dissolved by a Slavic openness to which was joined the best-stocked and best-functioning brain that I have had the pleasure of observing.

I interpolate a remark about the style of this memoir. It is, precisely, a memoir, not an essay in systematic metaphysics. Kojève is the main theme, but in my symphony his appearance is anticipated in a variety of introductory figures. He thus plays the same role in this memoir that he and his close friends, Leo Strauss and Gaston Fessard, have played in my life, which has been inevitably an effort to come to terms with the present by way of a « recherche du temps perdu ».

If we put to one side the excessive or vulgar rhetoric of Marxism on the one hand and of postmodernism on the other, I believe we can say that neither moment in Parisian philosophical culture, the 1960s or the 1990s (and these are, of course, artificial end points, defined by my experience, not by the world-spirit), predominates over the other. Both are equally serious and equally necessary moments in a more comprehensive dialectic, alluded to above, and which I represent as the fate of the Enlightenment. Postmodernism looks weightier to us today because it is our moment. This increases the dangers that it poses for us, which are by now widely recognized to be the dissolution of the subject and the object, or the replacement of the text by incoherent scribbling. These are dangers, but their dangerousness does not cancel the seriousness of the failure of traditional rationalism, a failure that may be properly held responsible for the worst excesses of postmodernism.

So far as I am able to tell, a similar story can be told about the domain of philosophical scholarship. Despite much grumbling by present-day academicians about the radical deterioration in higher education, especially in the humanities (grumbling that one hears in Germany as well as in England), it is my impression that scholarship is flourishing in contemporary Paris, in large part because of the salutary influence of Pierre Aubenque, who was the center of an unusually wide and highly competent circle of scholars for a number of years (he retired quite recently). The excellence of this scholarship is for me occasionally muted by a Heideggerian bias, but one must also say that the influence of Heidegger was instrumental in the revivification of the study of the history of philosophy in Paris. On balance, I could not say that scholarship has radically declined in Paris during the last thirty-five years. There are some lacunae, but I am not sure that these can be blamed on the deterioration of the times so much as on the ebb and flow of human affairs.

Nevertheless, something is missing. I infer this in part from what will be regarded by many as a preference for the old-fashioned philosophical cul-
ture of pre-World War II Europe. However this may be, there was a large-
ness of spirit in the « stars » of the previous generation that has too often
been replaced by narcissism and sometimes even madness in their contem-
porary successors. Eccentricity has replaced greatness of soul, and rhetori-
cal posturing too frequently pretends to be originality of thinking. I believe
that the main reason for this deterioration is obvious: a widespread rejec-
tion of the traditional paradigm of the philosopher as a person of universal
Bildung. There has been a shift in our conception of wisdom, as is perhaps
most obvious in the English-speaking world, where the term has acquired a
pejorative, ironical sense. It would take me too far afield to discuss the rea-
sons for this shift. Let me instead try to describe briefly the Stimmung, or
attunement of the spirit, characteristic of the older view. A moment ago I
used the expression « greatness of soul ». If taken strictly in the Aristotelian
sense of megalopsuchia, the term is misleading. Nor would it be precise
enough to speak of an aristocratic bearing, although this contains an ele-
ment of what I have in mind. The best representatives of the European
formation between the two world wars were stamped by a blend of courtli-
ness and freedom: to be a philosopher was for them to hold strong views
that one could defend with competence and elegance, but views that were
held by a free spirit rather than holding or binding the spirit in the grip of
an ideology, or even worse, a pose of freedom.

I grant at once that this is inadequate, but at least it points in the right
direction. Let me try one more formulation. The manners, the well-bred
humor, the irony modulated by good-natured playfulness were an expres-
sion of nobility of the intelligence and spirit, not of the aristocracy of class
or wealth. There is today instead a rejection of nobility, a celebration of
technique rather than universality, and most striking of all, the transfor-
mation of the praise of freedom into an ideology that narrows rather than en-
larges the view. The earlier complex of characteristics was sustained by its
roots in the European cultural heritage. Having been uprooted from that
soil, the contemporary spirit has withered in its freedom. I want to empha-
size that this « paradigm shift » is not due to science and technology in
themselves but rather to a different and narrower conception of the relation
between philosophy and science. One has only to compare the philosophi-
cal writings of Cantor, Brouwer, and Gödel with contemporary philosophy
of mathematics, or of Bohr, Heisenberg, and Weizsäcker with recent work
in the philosophy of physics, to appreciate the difference.

Needless to say, I have been attempting to describe two general types or
paradigms, not the many exceptions to both. And no doubt even within
the highest exemplars of the older model, there were blemishes. The most
pertinent example for the present occasion is Kojève himself. Before I turn
my thoughts directly to Kojève, let me say a few words about the other four
thinkers who particularly impressed me as products of a now-dead civiliza-
tion.
Of these four, I have the least to say about Koyré because I saw him the least, not because I do not estimate him highly. He was a gentleman and a scholar, lucid, erudite, rational, and polite. The one thing that seemed to be missing was philosophical mania. I was not surprised to learn that although it was Koyré who had invited Kojève to lecture on Hegel at the École des hautes études in the early thirties, relations between the two men were currently poor. Kojève mentioned to me that Koyré thought him to have appropriated the latter’s doctrine on the connection between Christianity and the origin of modern science, but I suspect that the peculiar personality of Kojève and his infinitely greater charisma generated a feeling of rivalry in a dimension in which Koyré could not compete.

Some readers may be surprised that I include Gabriel Marcel in my list of five, and it has to be said at once that I know very little about his philosophical productions. The only passage that stays in my mind is a comment somewhere on the French Revolution. Marcel accepts without qualification liberty and fraternity but notes that equality is a difficult conception. Or so I remember it. My homage is to the man and his vivid personality and keen intelligence as well as to his great generosity to younger philosophers. I saw him privately once or twice and attended his salon on a few additional occasions, where I was invited to give a paper. I could not say that I felt any sympathy with Marcel’s political views, the articulation of which played a major role in his salon. His circle consisted largely of the conservative wives of rich Catholic bankers and industrialists. I shall always remember ascending the steps to his apartment on the Rue de Tournon shortly after de Gaulle had given Algeria its independence. The hallway reverberated to the sound of Marcel’s voice as he read from his weekly editorial (I do not recall for which paper) : « General de Gaulle, Je ne vous aime pas ! » Impossible to reproduce in print the passion and the emphasis with which this line was delivered. And yet, Marcel was a friend of Fessard and Aron, and that in itself speaks well for him. He was also immune to contemporary ideological prejudices and, despite his advanced age, surprisingly quickwitted and fresh in the face of novel ideas. He is today largely forgotten, and I want to remember him here as a superior human being of great cultivation.

Raymond Aron presumably needs no introduction to readers of this memoir. I shall restrict myself to a few personal impressions of this unusual man. It goes without saying that he was highly intelligent, extremely witty, and spiritually vivacious. He was one of the regular auditors of Kojève’s seminars on the Phenomenology during the thirties, and the two men remained on terms of close friendship. Unlike many Parisian intellectuals, including, unfortunately, Kojève (but not Fessard), Aron was politically sane. His record of opposition to Marxist corruption of political and philosophical thought is outstanding in its courage and lucidity. It is today, but it was even more so in the sixties. It should also be noted that Aron regarded Kojève as the most intelligent human being he had ever met, a judgment that he repeats in his memoirs. Aron was as philosophical spirit,
but whereas I found him to be more animated than Koyré, he seemed to me to suffer from an analogous limitation. Aron was too sensible to succumb to philosophical mania. He was more reminiscent on this point of Leo Strauss than of Kojève, although the comparison between Strauss and Aron is faulty in various ways. Strauss had penetrated more deeply than Aron into the surface of the depths; in a way not entirely unlike Kojève, however, he had arrived rather early at exaggerated political views (a judgment shared by Aron).

Of the five men whom I have singled out for special comment, Father Fessard was in my view the greatest human being. That he is today virtually unknown in the English-speaking world, even among his fellow Jesuits, is not unexpected, given the peculiar style and content of his writings, which were invariably a mixture of philosophy and theology. He was a controversial figure in his own order and in particular in France, where he belonged to a generation of outstanding spirits that included Henri de Lubac and Teilhard de Chardin. The controversy centered upon Fessard’s intention to rewrite Catholic theology with Kierkegaard, Hegel, and even Marx furnishing the philosophical foundation in place of Saint Thomas. Fessard was also famous in France for the pamphlets he had written against the Nazis during the Second World War under the pseudonym Monsieur X. Of his religious and theological disputes I will mention only his long polemic against the worker-priest movement. He was in no sense a Marxist but at the same time was regarded by Kojève as potentially the greatest authority on Marx in France.

Fessard is the highest instance in my experience of someone who combined the virtues of the priest and the philosopher. I had been educated to believe that such a combination is in principle impossible. Fessard taught me otherwise by his personal example. In lucidity and quickness of intellect, the ability to take in at once views alien to his own beliefs, and in that peculiar combination of profundity and childlike simplicity that marks thinkers of the first rank, Fessard surpassed everyone I saw in Paris with the single exception of kojève. One could say that Fessard accepted Christ, whereas Kojève accepted only himself. But both men exerted every sinew of their spiritual being to give a logos of their faith.

I come now, or rather return, to Kojève himself. My remarks will again be entirely impressionistic, as the sociologists say; those who require a scholarly analysis of his writings will have to look elsewhere. The problem with most of what I have seen of scholarly exegeses of Kojèvian « texts » is that they treat Kojève as a fellow scholar who must be judged by objective standards of academic Hegel scholarship (as though these standards are well known and securely possessed by them). Those who take this route inevitably criticize Kojève for his arbitrariness, and even go so far as to conclude that he was himself a sort of café-philosopher or farceur, of considerable ability but not in the last analysis to be taken seriously.
Now there can be no doubt that Kojève contributed extensively to the legitimacy of this assessment. His interpretation of Hegel is arbitrary and philologically unsound, despite the fact (somehow unexplained by his orthodox academic critics) that it remains the best in the sense of the most philosophical single book ever written about Hegel, so far as I have been able to determine. Kojève was indeed something of a farceur, although hardly a café-philosopher. He detested intellectuals as well as professors and spent most of his leisure time, as he told me, with priests. He was in addition the second most important man in the French government, second only to de Gaulle himself. « De Gaulle decides on relations with Russia and the force de frappe », Kojève once told me. « I, Kojève [his usual manner of self-reference], decide everything else. » This at first outrageous assertion was in principle confirmed for me in direct conversation with such paragons of sobriety as Raymond Aron and André Philip, head of the French legation to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

Kojève was what I have described elsewhere as the Mycroft Holmes of the French government. His desk was located in the Ministry of Foreign Economic Affairs, where he advised the minister, Robert Marjolin, who had been his student during the thirties. But he was also France’s chief adviser to the GATT legation, and he traveled regularly to the United Nations, where he spoke for his government on economic affairs. In addition, he had a network of disciples in the French civil service. All this despite the fact that he had never studied economics formally and certainly had no academic training in political science, let alone direct political experience. He was conversant with Tibetan dialects, quantum mechanics, Russian mysticism, art history, and a wide range of other topics. And he was the most respected and feared individual in the Parisian philosophical world. I give this condensed list of his accomplishments because they are incompatible with the view, partly created by Kojève’s own behavior, that he was a shallow, vain poseur, not to be compared for philological Spitzfindigkeit or understanding of Hegel with the solid representatives of the academic establishment. I should also be stated that Kojève was admired in the highest degree by people like Leo Strauss and Jacob Klein, who were not exactly generous in the praise of their contemporaries, but also by such figures as Stuart Hampshire and sir Isaiah Berlin; as it happens, I was in a position to arrange a meeting between Berlin and Kojève, and Hampshire once told me of a reading group in London of which he was a member and which devoted much time to the study of Kojève’s commentary on the *Phenomenology*.

I trust that these remarks will give an indication of why it is important to think carefully about Kojève’s nature. We are now ready for the full orchestration of the main theme. But permit me a preliminary indulgence in the lighter side of my memoir. Although I saw Kojève on many occasions and for relatively long periods of time, I have great difficulty in remembering the exact features of his face. This cannot be due to a defective visual memory. For example, I saw Karl Löwith only once, for a period
of forty-five minutes, yet I recall his appearance vividly. The reader may find my suggestion frivolous, but I believe my difficulty in conjuring up Kojève’s face is because there was something in his skeletal configuration and gait that reminded me of T. S. Eliot. My contact with the great poet was quite brief and entirely trivial. As a graduate student at the University of Chicago, I was employed for a time as a waiter at the faculty dining club (known as the Quadrangle Club). One afternoon, Robert Maynard Hutchins, Julian Huxley, T. S. Eliot, and a specialist on dental caries, the vice-president of the university, whose name, I think, was Ralph Wendell Harrison, walked into the club and took a seat in my section. I was petrified with fright. Hutchins, a very tall, splendid, and arrogant looking man, did nothing to reassure me when he opened the episode by pointing to his coffee cup. « Do you see that cup? Keep it filled at all times! » I skip directly to the climax. The four guests had ordered Wiener schnitzel, and I brought out only three portions. As long as I live, I shall hear Hutchins shouting across the hall toward me, « Waiter! More Wiener schnitzel! »

Let the Freudians make of this what they will. I admit everything. As for Eliot, he sat through the entire meal in silence, hunched over his various plates, and in particular with his striking profile dangerously close to immersion in the soup, ignoring even my sotto voce request if I might give him more coffee. Eliot’s face I remember perfectly. Kojève was somehow a Slavic version of T. S. Eliot. And yet this is absurd; I was not afraid of Kojève, nor was he grim and silent. Even as I write these words, his features begin to merge from the foggy memories of the past. His cheekbones were rather high and his cheeks somewhat hollow; his nose was nothing like Eliot’s but much straighter. He wore heavy, horn-rimmed glasses and smoked constantly, waving a cigarette holder as he talked. His pace was heavy and his arms long; it was here that the resemblance to Eliot struck me, as also with the spectacles. Or so I remember it. This is how his image shakes itself loose from what is for me its Doppelgänger.

To turn now to his personality, I want first to speak of the difference between philosophers and professors. Kojève was widely regarded in Paris as a man of unusual arrogance, and in some superficial sense this is no doubt a correct assessment. Kojève did not suffer fools gladly. If he was uninterested in someone, he could be abrupt and even rude. This is no doubt a fault, but it does not take us to the heart of the matter. The Platonic dialogues make it evident that Socrates, with all his Attic urbanity, could be merciless to the pretentious and the vainglorious. Simply by his presence, Socrates constituted an existential challenge to those who prided themselves on their wisdom or knowledge. I am not implying that Kojève was at the same level as Socrates. But his superiority to his contemporaries was equally obvious.

Socrates is described in the dialogues as seeking out promising youths in order to interrogate them. With rare exceptions, Kojève sought out no one; people sought him out. If the auspices were good, Kojève was direct,
open, friendly, and attentive to his visitor's views. I have been told that spontaneity is a characteristic of the Slavic temper. Perhaps so. More plausible to me is the argument that professors suffer from the vanity induced by decades of captive audiences and the pursuit of professional honors. The professorial soul is narrowed by a lifetime of dedication to a special field of study or the application of a particular technique. But Kojève was a civil servant, and professors might also be philosophers. Let us say simply that the combination of Slavic spontaneity and freedom from the customs of the academic life allowed Kojève's philosophical nature room in which to expand. One entered directly into conversation with him, and by this I mean that the conversation, and not the ceremony of society, was the medium of social intercourse.

There was, however, also an unsatisfying, even disconcerting side to Kojève, one that is most obviously visible in the defects of exaggeration and desire to épater le bourgeois that mar his written texts (he did not himself publish books; this was done for him by others, who edited his lecture notes or manuscripts). Whereas Kojève was entirely cordial and attentive to his favored visitors, and conversations with him were never lectures but genuine exchanges, he rarely failed to radiate the aura of supreme self-confidence and superiority to everyone, which may or may not have been warranted, but which marred that superiority. I have no objection to Kojève's perception of his own worth, and neither would I expect someone of his remarkable nature to conceal his virtues behind a false veil of humility. My point is that Kojève made something of a production of concealing his superiority by an almost constant play of irony, sometimes expressed verbally but often restricted to a slight smile, a wave of the cigarette holder, or a twinkle in the eye.

As I have already indicated, Kojève regularly spoke of himself by name, introducing some heterodox pronouncement or another with the formulaic « X says so-and-so, but I, Kojève, say... » He often stated his superiority by referring to himself as a god, although once he qualified this assertion by adding that his secretary laughed when he made the claim. More irritating, however, was his habit of reminding me that « Americans play with balls, whereas I, Kojève, play with people. » To be honest, I found this all very amusing and impressive at the time, and it is entirely irrelevant to me whether Kojève was letting me into his confidence or playing with me. The premise of our conversations was that whereas it went without saying that he was the teacher and I the student, the reason he was allowing me to converse with him was that I deserved to be his student.

I am dwelling on this point because I think it is important to an understanding of Kojève's nature. It has nothing to do with my own amour-propre but with the degree to which Kojève was a genuine philosopher or, perhaps more precisely, with what it means to be a genuine philosopher, rather than a famous professor or statesman. There are two ways in which highly gifted individuals play with people. The first is by attempting to
assimilate them into the game and thereby to raise them beyond their usual level. The second is to keep reminding them that one is playing with them. Kojève was a gamester in both ways, but whereas the first was his virtue, the second was his vice. In my opinion, this way of playing was an expression of Kojève’s dissatisfaction with his own limitations, not in comparison to his interlocutors and certainly not to me, but to the world-historical figures to whose eminence he aspired, among whom the outstanding individual was, of course, Hegel.

As is well known, Kojève held that history in the philosophical sense of the term had come to an end with Hegel, and that nothing remained for his successors but the task of clarifying certain points in the absolute system and playing their various roles in the achievement of the universal world-state. In one famous formulation, these roles would culminate in lovemaking and the performance of the Japanese tea ceremony. This is not the place for a scholarly exegesis of Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel or world-history. This is a memoir, and the nature of a memoir permits me to speak of something more important than absurd philosophical doctrines. I take Kojève’s theses on the end of history (and so too of philosophy) to be his version of the response by Leo Strauss to the dilemma facing those who aspire to philosophy yet fall short of the highest level of intellectual and spiritual power. According to Strauss, philosophy is the continuous investigation of the very few plausible solutions to the fundamental problems, and not the convinced advocacy of a solution to each problem. Again I say: perhaps so. But the greatest philosophers did not restrict themselves to examining plausible answers to fundamental questions. They answered those questions, and they did so even when the answer took the form of further questionings. I mean by this that one cannot raise the fundamental questions if one does not know the foundation, and it is this knowledge that is the essence of philosophy. If one knows the foundations, then the answers to the fundamental questions become less important than the correct expression of the questions themselves. But one has to be able to describe the foundation.

Kojève once said to me that he and Strauss were the two genuinely original thinkers of their time because whereas others asserted the originality of their own views, Kojève upheld the teaching of Hegel and Strauss defended Plato. Taken at face value, the words mean little or nothing; Hegelians and Platonists are, so to speak, a dime a dozen. I think Kojève meant rather to say something like this. He and Strauss had understood the impossibility of philosophy in the grand or traditional sense but responded differently to this recognition. For Strauss, the impossibility of determining the correct answers to the fundamental questions left us with the task of attempting to find the questions. For Kojève, the same impossibility is the foundation of human freedom. We are free to invent our own answers to the questions that are seen to be fundamental because they motivate the very problematic of the philosophical nature. For Kojève, the invented answers are his interpretation of Hegel, in the broadest sens of a
quasi-Hegelian interpretation of the totality of human history. The ques-
tions, or rather the question, that the interpretation answers is the demand
of human desire.

One of the most important lessons I owe to Kojève, although he did not
intend it, is that realism and rationalism carried to their logical extremes
produce a *reductio ad absurdum*. To look at the same point from a different
perspective, in 1960 the political situation was still central to philosophers
who saw a mediating role for Europe between Russia and the United States
in the shaping of the future. I referred above to the conviction of the
French and British that each could play Athens to the American Rome.
Kojève’s version of this belief was a variant on Gaullism. Both saw the
American ruling stratum as Anglophile and so as not only intrinsically
naive but influenced by the inferior culture of the English. Let us say that
from this perspective, the Americans were Goths or Vandals and the
English Romans. Kojève accepted this, as is evident from his frequent
repetition of the previously mentioned Heideggerian thesis that there was
no metaphysical difference between the Russians and the Americans. For
de Gaulle and Kojève, it was France that had to play the decisive role in
the balance of powers, and in order to counteract the British influence with
the Americans, France had to lean toward Russia.

This was also kojève’s version of anti-Americanism, to repeat, based
upon realism carried to absurdity and so transformed into cynicism and
ideology. Nevertheless, it was rooted in the perception of the real historical
and political world and based upon the assumption that there is a link be-
tween theory and practice that can be exploited by the philosopher in a
positive manner. In other words, Kojèvian politics were sufficiently close to
Gaullism to be rooted in traditional European political thought. Kojève,
with all his talk of the end of history and the postphilosophical man, was
still attempting to purify and so to preserve modern Europe. His
postmodernism was at best a regulative idea and at worst a rhetorical fan-
tasy designed to shock. In the generation of thinkers whom he influenced,
however, the realism and traditionalism of Kojève’s thinking disappeared
along with Gaullism; what remained was exaggerated rhetoric. The
responsibility of actual political power was replaced by the irresponsible
inculcation to destroy; at this point, Heidegger’s Nietzscheanism proved
centrally influential.

Kojève transcended not only his contemporaries, but his students as
well. I will add my voice to the others who have called him the most intelli-
gent person they have ever known. If I seem to have emphasized the weak
elements in his personality, it is not because of any wish to diminish my
teacher and friend, but in the effort to understand him. the most important
lesson that a philosopher can bequeath to his students is that of his own
nature. The philosopher’s book can be read in libraries, but the nature of
the philosophical spirit, which alone gives meaning and value to those
books, is accessible only through direct contact. One cannot understand
what it is to be a philosopher without grasping how human frailties are transposed by the philosophical eros into strengths. Where this transposition does not occur, ther is also a valuable lesson to be learned.

The last degree of intellectual and spiritual freedom was missing from this superior being, in my opinion because he was at bottom a skeptic in the modern sense of that term, and very close to nihilism. Lacking a genuine system or the Socratic capacity to exist philosophically in the absence, even further the impossibility of systems, Kojève was driven to construct a pseudosystem of ever-increasing intricacy and, oddly enough in a thinker who hated academics, of scholastic rigidity.

Let me try to restate this speculation. Because he was not a philosopher in the classical sense of that term, Kojève turned his energies to the second-best life, namely, that of the statesman, a life that the eccentricities of history enabled him to live at an international level. As I surmise, he turned his attention to the serious game of instituting a philosophico-political revolution, or of demonstrating his divine nature by becoming one of those whom Nietzsche calls the commanders and lawgivers of mankind, in other words, the genuine philosopher — but not through genuine philosophy in this case. I say « not through genuine philosophy » because Kojève himself did not conceal the fact that his interpretation of Hegel, and so of European history, was moved by the practical goal of influencing that history, not by what was for him the impossible goal of achieving a theoretical understanding of nature that is not confirmed in history itself.

To this speculation of mine, one could reply that for a Hegelian, theory is indeed confirmed in praxis, and so that Kojève was acting in a straightforwardly Hegelian manner by attempting to bring about the advent of what he called the homogeneous or universal world-state, the paradigm for the recently notorious « end of history ». I have already stated explicitly that I am writing a memoir, not a scholarly study. My speculation has no other ground than my meditative reflections on Kojève as a man and a thinker, reflections that have continued for more than thirty-five years. I have come to the conclusion that my initial intuition, formed during the year of my study and weekly contact with him, was correct : Kojève’s system was unworthy of his intelligence and even of this illuminating commentaries on the *Phenomenology*. Not only this, but I believe that he knew its unworthiness, or at least suspected it, or knew it once but had allowed himself to forget it in the pleasures of his own success.

In short, Kojève presents us with the strange spectacle of a philosophical spirit of unusually high capacities who is spending his time in amusing himself as the only alternative to the impossibility of genuine philosophy. I want to say immediately that, with all of its posturing, Kojève’s play was much more illuminating than the serious work of almost all professional philosophers I have had the opportunity to know personally. I repeat : Kojève was a genius, not a charlatan. But he was a defective genius. He was too self-conscious, in the good and the bad senses of that expression, to
lose himself genuinely in a system, and (to repeat), not self-conscious enough to exist without a system.

Kojève’s irony and playfulness affected his personal dealings, even with those whom he genuinely liked. On one point, however, he was without equal. This extraordinary intellect was cold and aloof toward many a Parisian celebrity who courted his attention, but to students who came to him from Strauss and who somehow met his standards of acuity, he was open, direct, gentle in applying his corrections and gracious in accepting plausible criticism. This openness and lack of pretentiousness or even of formality (beyond the minimal requirements of bourgeois civility) may be due to his Slavic nature, but I have found it in the truly superior and highly cultivated individuals of the western European nations as well. Let me simply add that I felt more at ease with Kojève than with any other person except Father Fessard. Kojève’s openness and receptivity would periodically cloud over when he seemed to remember that he was, after all, a god, and so called upon to make some shocking remark. This was never the case with Fessard, who was also well aware of his remarkable personal gifts, but who was saved from vanity by the correlative perception of the distance between himself and his deity.

In bringing these remarks to a conclusion, I want to leave the reader with a positive impression of Kojève. He was one of those rare individuals who taught us as much through his faults as through his virtues. One cannot emancipate the philosophical spirit without risk. This is as true of the gifted few as it is of the many, although the risks are enacted at different levels and even in different registers. In reflecting upon Kojève throughout my adult life, I have been helped to understand that there is no unity of theory and practice, or, stated more cautiously, that there is no theoretical unity of the two. This is the exact opposite of what Kojève intended to teach me, but I remain permanently in his debt.