

Kant as a Proto-Hegelian

Kant, by Alexandre Kojève, *Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1973. 220 pp. Frs. 34.*

IN THE COURSE of a recent interview, Raymond Aron, "the most intelligent Frenchman," was asked whom he regarded as the most intelligent man he ever met. (The French are addicted to this kind of Gallup-poll). His answer: Alexandre Kojève. Now if intelligence carries with it a forbiddingly complicated presentation of very difficult speculative problems, Kojève's

books qualify to the highest degree. He published three works only: *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (available in English translation) devoted to Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, the *Essai d'une histoire raisonnée de la philosophie païenne*, and his posthumous *Kant*. In spite of the specificity and narrow range of each of these books: respectively, on pagan philosophy, on Kant, and on Hegel, Kojève claims to have written a *history* of Western philosophy, on the following grounds: in Hegel all speculation culminates; in Greece, there were only five men deserving the title of philosopher: Thales, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle; and since the Greeks, Kant alone. I do not know whether this thesis proves Kojève's intelligence; it certainly shows his originality. And readers of his works know the extremely difficult style which strives to accomplish a *more-geometrico* demonstration as well as a speculative *tour de force*.

The book here reviewed attempts further to condense the history of philosophy by showing that Kant himself—the middle term between the Greeks and Hegel—is a pre-Hegelian. Kojève's objective is thus clear: subject Kant's work to an extremely close analysis so that the hard-squeezed texts—the *Critiques*, the *Prolegomena*, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, etc.—might yield up their Hegelian content. This is done by showing that Kant was in reality a skeptic thinker, but with enough religious conviction (or, simply, caution?) left in him to introduce in his philosophy a certain number of systemically unfitting God-notions which falsify the final appearance of his life-work. (Kojève goes as far as to call him a *vieillard astucieux*, a cunning old man.) Remove these notions—and primarily the Thing-in-itself—Kojève suggests, and under your scalpel you disclose almost all the elements which make Hegelian philosophy the last and greatest achievement of the history of thought.

It is hoped that the reader measures the originality of Kojève's ambition. Kant who for hundred and fifty years dominated the

philosophical realm, to whom nearly all, from Paulsen and Kuno Fischer to Cassirer, Wittgenstein, and Nabert owe their speculative being, suddenly becomes a kind of stammering famulus to the master-thinker. No doubt, Kojève's propositions will be re-analyzed by scrutinizing eyes, but personally I think that the core of his thesis is convincing: namely, as I read it, that German "idealism" constitutes a unity and that "in the hands of Fichte and Schelling the Kantian system changes in the direction of Hegel's system of Wisdom" (*savoir*). By bringing the four peak personalities of German idealism into one formula, Kojève manages to link Kant with Hegel in such a fashion that the older man appears indeed as the precursor of the younger.

Kojève himself (died in 1968) was a Hegelian, in fact a Hegelo-Marxist. He makes his allegiance repeatedly clear by adding to numerous paragraphs: "this is Hegel's system which is ours too." Thus it is advisable to read, although Kojève may not have intended it that way, his book on the *Phenomenology* before the one on Kant: in this manner we understand the premises and the *modus operandi* of the Kant-book better. (The manuscript of this book was regarded long time as lost. It was recovered after the author's death. Thus the date of writing is uncertain.)

I may, perhaps, summarize Hegel's (Kojève's) thesis, insofar as it points back to Kant. I refer to pages 64-65 and 79 of Kojève's *Introduction to the study of Hegel* (French edition): The first point is that history must be circular if *true* philosophy is to realize itself because the spirit (*Geist*) is nothing else than this totalization. Only one man grasped this totalization, Hegel. The second point is that idealism is false because it condenses all reality in the self; but the self becomes all reality not in the course of history but only at its end. The third point, stressed throughout the three books, is that man achieves totality through historical "recognition" for which work and struggle are the chief instruments. At that ultimate phase work, struggle, and the

true discourse become one, definitive knowledge.

The book on Kant argues that there are two lines in Kant's work, one dealing scientifically with our spatio-temporal field of empirical experience, the other with the domain of the Thing-in-itself, hence with God, the soul's immortality, and free will. The two lines are incompatible, and constant interference of the second with the elaboration of the first misleads the inattentive (or pre-Hegelian) reader into believing that God, etc. do have a legitimate place in Kant's philosophy. But the Thing-in-itself is undemonstrable, it was introduced by Kant for complex reasons. First, the "Platonic" tradition (Kojève's expression) lingered on in him as a necessary affirmation of transcendence; secondly, Kant regarded man's this-worldly happiness as impossible. He was (still) Christian enough to oppose animal nature to man's non-nature, that is his search for conformity with God's assumed nature. Thirdly, if Kant had ceased to believe in God, he would have had to abandon his moral concepts also which, in turn, would have led to contempt of himself. Thus, Kojève concludes, Kant's ethics, hence his belief in God, are the results of an "internal discipline which guarantees servile man against the risk of self-contempt, that is against the satisfaction of living exclusively in this world."

Kojève, the pure atheist, thus displays the Kantian God as the product of a personal need, one might say of an inhibition to live a full life. Kojève goes further: the philosophical equivalent of God-belief is the positing of the Thing-in-itself as the reality behind the phenomena. But this too is a false notion: "The whole Kantian critical achievement shows that no meaning can be ascribed to a non-empirical evidence." Expressing it more carefully, Kant wrote: "Reason's purely [pure reason's] speculative interest in God, the immortal soul, and free will is minimal." This is why Kant must have felt compelled to devote a large part of his life-work to *practical reason* where the three objects: God, etc. were sup-

posed to find their speculative justification. "Put God back into your work, Herr Professor, then they will not accuse you of atheism," his servant, Lampe, was supposed to say to the complaining Kant, who then proceeded to write his second *Critique*. However, Kojève calls the latter an "area of the as-if," calls Kant's procedure fraudulent, and pursues the fraud to its ultimate consequences. The main one is that the Kantian system, in its shape by 1790, changed into Hegel's system of 1806 (the *Phenomenology*)—if one cuts out from the former the Thing-in-itself. This excision, performed by Hegel, was successful for the historically decisive reason that Kant had reduced the whole area of transcendence to the one notion, the Thing-in-itself. The latter's elimination (and Kojève argues that Kant himself had performed this operation surreptitiously by locking up the Thing-in-itself in the area of as-if) restores the space-time world and its necessary causal connections. There is no freedom in the universe, and Kant knew it; the proof is that he left out of his final system the entire artificially inserted area of the as-if, thus transmitting to Hegel a philosophy of the phenomena. Hegel then "accomplished the crucial task of eliminating from philosophy all reference to transcendence. He transformed philosophy into (absolute) Knowledge."

Kojève's own philosophy is the passionately atheistic kind, and we would be justified to submit it to the same analysis to which he submitted Kant's system: to which he might say that Kojève adopted Hegelianism in order to justify his own (Marxian) radical atheism. This would not be unjust to say since he stoops to such primitive pre-Kantian (Enlightenment-) arguments as "religion is hypocrisy," "religious man is servile," "religion denies the efficacy of worldly action and satisfaction," etc. Why not assume, in other words, that Kojève's obvious lack of understanding of religion prompted him to "save" Kant's system from integration with the religious discourse?

Yet, whether Kojève's study is correctly conducted or not, the central section of his thesis about Kant is inescapable. Not being a "passionate atheist," though, I would reach his conclusion through a different path. Kant claimed he was not an idealist since he recognized a Thing-in-itself. He even made it the source of his practical philosophy: morality, action, aesthetics. But, and this is the main point where we must agree with Kojève, one cannot be an agnostic in the matter of pure reason *and* formulate a reasoned discourse about God, morality, etc. The second area becomes inevitably dominated by the mode of the *as-if*. Agnosticism thus pervades Kant's system in its entirety: his (unjustified) religious commitment follows from his passion for symmetry, simply because morality requires, for the time being at least, a supreme guarantor. But God's extramental existence is finally and explicitly denied in Kant's posthumous writings, published only in 1920. Morality is nothing more than an autonomous sense of duty, universalized and promised to a mundane career in, of all places, the world federation of enlightened and peaceable republics! A very pale political substitute for what Hegel called man's need for "recognition," the full humanity of the ex-slave liberated from God the master through labor and struggle.

Does all this make of Kant a Hegelian or of Hegel a Kantian? Hegel, impatient to bring the Spirit fully into its own, identified the Thing-in-itself with history, thus knowable *in the end*, and the end was Hegel's own system. Yet, in retrospect Hegel appears less subtle than Kant because he introduced an arbitrarily constructed "historical dialectics" where Kant needed only a purely speculative construction. Kant's was therefore the more arduous as well as the more elegant task since he achieved, so to speak, with one musical instrument for what Hegel needed an orchestra. The revolution in thought, for good and for evil, had been achieved by Kant, not by Hegel.

Reviewed by THOMAS MOLNAR