

## **“In Place of an Introduction to Hegel’s *Phenomenology*”<sup>1</sup>**

**Alexandre Kojève**

**K.R. Dove, tr. (1964)<sup>2</sup>**

Man is self-consciousness. He is conscious of himself, conscious of his human actuality and dignity, and it is this that makes him essentially different from the animal, which never rises above the level of self-feeling. Man becomes conscious of himself at that moment when—for the “first” time—he says: “I.” To comprehend man through comprehending his “origin” means therefore to comprehend the origin of “I” as it is revealed through words.

But the mere analysis of “thought,” of “reason,” of “understanding,” etc.—or, more generally: of the cognitive, contemplative, and passive conduct of a being or a “knowing subject”—never discovers the why and the how in the emergence of the word “I,” of self-consciousness, i.e., of human actuality. In contemplation man is “absorbed” by what he contemplates; the “knowing subject” loses itself in the object known. Contemplation reveals the object, not the subject. The object, not the subject, shows itself to itself in and through—or, more precisely, as—the act of knowing. As “absorbed” by the object which he contemplates, man can only be “brought back to himself” by a Desire, e.g., by the Desire to eat. The (conscious) Desire of a being constitutes that being as I and reveals it as such by forcing it to say “I.” Desire transforms the Being revealed to itself by itself in (true) knowledge into an “object” revealed to a “subject” by a subject which is different from this object and “opposed” to it. It is in himself and reveals himself—to himself and to others—as an I, as the I essentially different from and radically opposed to the non-I. The (human) I is the I of a—or of the—Desire.

The very being of man, the being conscious of himself, therefore implies Desire and presupposes it. Consequently, human actuality can only constitute and sustain itself within a biological reality, within an animal life. But although animal Desire is the necessary condition of self-consciousness, it is not its sufficient condition. This Desire alone only constitutes self-feeling.

In contrast to knowledge, which maintains man in a state of passive rest, Desire makes him restless and drives him to act. Action, born of desire, tries to satisfy it, and can do so only through “negation,” the destruction, or at least the transformation, of the desired object: in order to satisfy hunger, for example, one must destroy, or, in any event, transform the food. Thus every act involves “negating.” Far from leaving the given as it is, action destroys it—if not in its being, at least in its given form. And all “negating negativity” is, in relation to the given, necessarily active. But the negating action is not purely destructive. For although the action which is born of Desire destroys an objective reality in order to satisfy Desire, it creates in its place, in and through this very destruction, a subjective reality. A being that is eating, for

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<sup>1</sup> From an essay first published—as a commentary attached to a French translation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, ch. IV, A—in *Mesures*, January 14, 1939; reprinted in Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: Leçons sur la Phénoménologie de l’Esprit, professées de 1933 à 1939 à l’École des Hautes Études, réunies et publiées par Raymond Queneau*, Paris: Gallimard, 1947.

<sup>2</sup> MS. Many *samizdat* editions at Williams College and Yale University, 1964–72. Compare the translation by James H. Nichols, Jr., in Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, New York: Basic Books, 1969, pp. 3ff.

example, creates and maintains its own reality through the suppression of a reality other than its own, through the transformation of another reality into its own, through the “assimilation,” the “interiorization,” of a “foreign,” “exterior” reality. In general, the I of the Desire is a void which receives a real, positive content only through the negating action that satisfies the Desire by destroying, transforming, and “assimilating” the desired “non-I.” And the positive content of the I, constituted through the negation, is a function of the positive content of the negated non-I. If therefore the Desire seeks its satisfaction in a “natural” non-I, the “I” will also be “natural.” The I created by the active satisfaction of such a Desire, will be of the same nature as those things which Desire seeks for its satisfaction: it will be a “thingified” I, a merely living I, an animal I. And this natural I, this function of the natural object, can only reveal itself to itself and to others as *Self-feeling*. It will never attain *Self-consciousness*.

In order for the I to achieve *Self-consciousness*, Desire must therefore seek satisfaction in a non-natural object, in something which goes beyond the given reality. But the only thing which goes beyond this given reality is Desire itself. For Desire *qua* Desire, i.e., before its satisfaction, is *in effect* only a revealed nothingness, an unreal void. Since Desire is the revelation of a void, the presence of the absence of an actuality, it is essentially something other than the thing desired, something other than a thing; thus Desire is not at all like a being—real, inert and given—which maintains itself eternally in identity with itself. The Desire which seeks satisfaction in another Desire *qua* desire, will therefore create by virtue of the negating and assimilating action which satisfies it, an I which is essentially other than the animal “I.” This I which “feeds” on Desires, will itself be in its very being Desire, having been created in and through the satisfaction of its Desire. And since Desire actualizes itself as the act of negating a given, the very being of this I will be action. This I will not be like the animal “I,” “identity” or “equality” with itself, but “negating negativity.” In other words, the very being of this I will be becoming and its universal form will not be space but time. Its endurance in existence will therefore mean for this I: “not to be what it is (as inert, given and natural being, as “innate character”) and to be (i.e., to become) what it is not.” This I will thus be its own work: it will be (in the future) what it has become through the negation (in the present) of what it has been (in the past), and this negation is being carried out in light of what it will become.<sup>3</sup> In its very being, this I is intentional becoming, willed evolution, conscious, voluntary progress. It is the act of transcending the given which is given to it and which it itself is. This I is a (human) individual, free (in regard to the given reality) and historical (in relation to itself). And it is this I, and this I alone, which reveals itself to itself and to others as *self-consciousness*.

Human desire must seek satisfaction in another Desire. A precondition for the existence of human Desire is therefore the preexistence of a plurality of (animal) Desires. In other words, in order for *self-consciousness* to emerge from *self-feeling*, in order for human actuality to constitute itself within animal reality, this latter must be essentially multiple. Man can only make his appearance on earth within a herd. This is why human actuality can only be social. But multiplicity of the Desires alone is not sufficient to transform the herd into a society; the Desires of each member of the herd must also seek satisfaction—or be capable of doing so—in the Desires of the other members. If the human actuality is a social actuality, society is human only as an ensemble of Desires mutually desiring one another as Desires. The human, or

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<sup>3</sup> This formulation is derived by Kojève from Heidegger via Alexandre Koyré’s essay, “Hegel à Iéna” (1934).

better still, anthropogenetic Desire, which constitutes a free historical individual conscious of its individuality, of its freedom, of its history and finally its historicity,—this anthropogenetic Desire differs therefore from the animal Desire (which constitutes a natural being, merely living and possessing only a feeling of its life) in that it seeks satisfaction not in a real, “positive,” given object, but in another Desire. Thus, in the relationship between man and woman, for example, the Desire is human only if one desires not the body but the Desire of the other, if one wants to “possess” or “assimilate” the Desire *qua* Desire, that is to say, if one wants to be “desired” or “loved” or, better still, “recognized” in one’s human value, in one’s reality, as a human individual. In the same way, the Desire which seeks satisfaction in a natural object is human only to the degree in which it is “mediated” by another Desire reaching for the same object: it is human to desire what others desire because they desire it. Thus, an object which is perfectly useless from a biological point of view (a decoration or a flag of the enemy) can be desired because it is the object of other Desires. Such a Desire can only be a human Desire and actuality; in contrast to animal actuality, it creates itself only through those acts which satisfy such Desires: human history is the history of desired Desires.

But—apart from this essential difference—human desire is analogous to animal Desire. Human desire also tends to satisfy itself through a negating, i.e., a transforming and assimilating act. Man “nourishes” himself on Desires just as the animal nourishes itself on actual things. And the human, realized through the active satisfaction of its human desires, is just as much a function of its “nourishment” as the animal’s body is a function of its own nourishment.

If man is to be truly human, if he is to differ essentially and actually from the animal, his human Desire must effectively triumph over his animal Desire. Now all Desire is desire of a value. The highest value for an animal is its animal life. All the Desires of the animal are, in the last analysis, a function of the desire to preserve its life. Human Desire must therefore overcome this desire for conservation. In other words, man “truly shows himself” to be human only when he risks his (animal) life for the sake of his human Desire. Human actuality is created and revealed as actuality through this risk; it is here that it “truly shows itself,” demonstrates itself, verifies itself, and establishes proof of its essential difference from natural animal actuality. And therefore, in order to speak of the “origin” of self-consciousness, it is necessary to speak of the risk of life for an end which is essentially non-vital.

Man “truly shows himself” to be human by risking his life to satisfy his human Desire, that is, his Desire which reaches for another Desire. Now, to desire a Desire means to wish to substitute oneself for the value desired by that (other) Desire. For without this substitution one would desire the value, the desired object, and not the Desire itself. To desire another’s Desire is thus, in the last analysis, to desire that the value which I am or which I “represent” to be the value desired by this other: I wish him to “recognize” my value as his value, I wish him to “recognize” me as an autonomous value. In other words, all human Desire—the anthropogenetic, generating force behind Self-consciousness and human actuality—is a function of the desire for “recognition.” And the risk of life through which human actuality “shows itself to be true” is a risk in function of such a Desire. To speak of the “origin” of Self-consciousness means thus necessarily to speak of a struggle of life and death for recognition.

Without this struggle of life and death for pure prestige, human beings would never have existed on earth. Indeed, the human being constitutes itself only in function of a Desire reaching for another Desire,

that is—in the final analysis—as a function of a desire for recognition. The human being can thus constitute itself only if at least two of these Desires confront each other. And since each of the two beings possessed by such a Desire is ready to go all the way in the pursuit of its satisfaction, i.e., is ready to risk his life—and consequently to imperil the life of the other—in order to make the other “recognize” him, in order to impose himself upon the other as supreme value—since each is ready to do so, their encounter can only be a struggle of life and death. And it is only in and through such a struggle that human actuality brings itself forth, constitutes itself, realizes itself and reveals itself to itself and to others. Thus it realizes itself and reveals itself only as “recognized” actuality.

But if all men—or, more exactly, all beings on the path of becoming human beings—conducted themselves in the same way, the struggle would always have to end with the death of one or both of the adversaries. On this assumption it would not be possible for one to give in to the other, for him to give up the struggle before the death of the other, for him to “recognize” the other instead of making the other “recognize” him. But if this were so, no realization and revelation of human existence would be possible. This is evident in the case where the struggle ends with the death of both adversaries, because human actuality—being essentially Desire and action in function of the Desire—can be born and maintain itself only within animal life. But this impossibility remains the same in the case where only one of the two adversaries is killed. For with him disappears that other Desire for which Desire must reach in order to be a human Desire. The survivor, unable to attain “recognition” from a corpse, cannot realize himself as self-consciousness; it is thus not enough that the nascent human actuality be multiple: this multiplicity, this “society,” must also imply two forms of human or anthropogenetic conduct which are essentially different.

In order that human reality can constitute itself as “recognized” actuality, the two adversaries must both remain alive after the struggle. Now this is only possible if they behave in different ways during this struggle. Through irreducibly free acts which are unforeseeable and “indeducible,” they must constitute themselves as unequal in and through this very struggle. One of them, without being in any way “predestined” to this, must be afraid of the other, must give in to the other, must refuse to risk his life for the satisfaction of his desire for “recognition.” He must give up his desire and satisfy the desire of the other: he must “recognize” him without being “recognized” by him. But to “recognize” him thus means to “recognize” him as his Master and to recognize himself and make himself be recognized as the Servant of the Master.

In other words, in his nascent state, man is never simply man. He is always, necessarily and essentially, either Master or Servant. If human actuality can bring itself forth only as a social actuality, then society is human—at least at its origin—only if it includes elements of Lordship and Servitude, “autonomous” and “dependent” existences. And therefore, when speaking of the origin of self-consciousness, one must necessarily speak “of the autonomy and the dependence of Self-consciousness, of Lordship and Servitude.”

If the human being can only bring forth itself in and through the struggle which ends in the relationship between Lord and Servant, then the progressive realization and revelation of this being can also be brought about only as a function of this fundamental social relationship. If man is nothing other than his becoming, if his being human in space is his being in time or *qua* time, if his revealed human

actuality is nothing other than universal history, then this history must be that of the interaction between Lordship and Servitude: the historical “dialectic” is the “dialectic” of the Master and Servant. But if the opposition of the “thesis” and “antithesis” is meaningful only within reconciliation through the “synthesis,” if history in the strict sense of the word has necessarily an end point, if man who becomes must culminate in man who has become, if Desire must end in satisfaction, if the science of man must have the value of a definitively, universally valid truth,—then the interaction between the Master and the Servant must finally end in their “dialectical suppression.”

Whatever it might be, human actuality can neither bring itself forth nor maintain itself in existence except as “recognized” actuality. Only by being recognized by another, by some others and—at the limit—by *all* others, is a human being really human: as much for himself as for the others. And only when speaking of a “recognized” human actuality can one, by calling it human, articulate a truth in the proper, strict sense of the word. For only in this case can one reveal a reality through one’s speech. And therefore, in speaking of Self-consciousness, of man conscious of himself, one must say:

“Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that and by the fact that it exists for another Self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or ‘recognized’...”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The opening words of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, ch. IV, A.

### TRANSLATOR'S AFTERWORD:

Three years after doing this translation, to facilitate the teaching of Hegel at Williams College in 1964, the translator received a copy of a letter (dated Paris, 30/III/67) from M. Kojève, whom he was scheduled to meet during a 1967–68 research fellowship in Europe. Owing to Kojève's untimely death (at a lectern) in the spring of 1968, that meeting did not take place.

It may not be out of place to append a selection from that letter which is a characteristic and illuminating indication of how he came to his bizarre but curiously helpful interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. As a personal letter, it will be left in the original:

“J'avais lu quelque fois le PhG sans *rien* y comprendre. Puis, Al. Koyré m'ayant demandé de le remplacer à L'EHE [L'École des Hautes Études], j'ai dû continuer son cours sur la PhG (dont il n'avait commenté que les deux premiers chapitres). Je ne savais pas comment je pourrais commente un texte que je ne comprenais pas. Puis, brusquement, j'ai eu comme une “illumination” —j'ai compris que le passage: “die Wunden des Geistes heilen ohne Nerbe” [Hegel, PhG VI—Hoffmeister ed., p. 470, “Die Wunden des Geistes heilen, ohne daß Narben bleiben;...”] (ou à peu près) se rapporte à la victoire de Napoléon sur l'Allemagne. Alors tout fut clair d'un seul coup. Je n'ai même pas relu le livre. J'ai simplement commenté page après page: chaque page confirmait mon interprétation.”

For the historical context of Kojève's Hegel interpretation, see George Lichtheim, *Marxism in Modern France*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1966, Judith P. Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, and Michael S. Roth, *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth-Century France*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.