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## The Hegelian Legacy in Kojève and Sartre

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### Introduction

French academic philosophy, from the mid-1930s until the end of the 1950s, was dominated by at least four German philosophers: Hegel, Marx, Husserl and Heidegger. In some ways, the originality of the French philosophy of this period lay in its way of associating these entirely dissimilar thinkers. In reality, however, Hegel's ascendancy in France was short-lived, particularly because it was associated with the phenomenological-existential thinking which developed in Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905–1980) wake – a current of thought that was violently attacked from the 1960s onwards, particularly by structuralism. Still, an assertion by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) in 1946 expresses Hegelianism's success in France from the 1930s to the 1950s: 'For a century, Hegel has been at the origin of everything great which has been achieved in philosophy'.<sup>1</sup>

The rebirth of Hegelianism in France is tied to Alexandre Kojève's (1902–1968) commentary on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. This commentary is the product of the seminar led by Kojève at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes from 1933 to 1939, which was attended by the cream of Parisian intellectual life, including Raymond Aron (1905–1983), Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) and Georges Bataille (1897–1961). Kojève did not publish the text of his seminar himself, but left it in the hands of Raymond Queneau (1903–1976), who had it brought out in 1947 under the title of *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. As Kojève himself recognized, the interpretation was not intended to be philologically rigorous, and is as much a reinvention of Hegelianism as an introduction to Hegel's texts. Nonetheless, through its force and its allure, it left a lasting mark on the shape of Hegelian philosophy in France.

The relationship between Sartre and Hegel is more difficult to establish, as Sartre cites Hegel only infrequently. Nonetheless, an attentive reading reveals that Sartre uses a number of Hegelian themes in his own work. The question is, by whom was Sartre's reading of Hegel influenced? Kojève cannot have been his only source, for, aside from his personal interpretation, we find a reading influenced by other German and French authors – for instance, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and Jean Wahl (1888–1974). At the same time, bearing in mind the enormous success of Kojève at the time, it is reasonable to think that the Kojévian interpretation at least partially influenced Sartre.

The aim of this chapter is to show the family resemblances between the two interpretations. First, I attempt to show that the two authors both turn Hegelianism into an anthropology, and an anthropology which tends to deal with the genesis of self-consciousness and to thereby explain the coming into existence of man as such. I then attempt to show that by setting out from this reading of Hegel the two authors accord a decisive role to man's finitude, which, for them, expresses itself as much in the essential shortcomings of all consciousness as in the insoluble nature of human conflict.

### **The theme of conflict in Kojève and Sartre**

First, let us look at how Kojève (1902–1968), and then Sartre, place conflict in the centre of their analyses and, from this point of view, can claim to be the heirs of Hegel.

For Kojève, as he reads Hegel, what is at stake in the master-slave dialectic is man's becoming human through his attainment of self-consciousness. The passage from the simple consciousness of objects to self-consciousness allows man to leave behind his animal state and to enter into humanity. This humanization, Kojève says, does not occur in solitude, but in intersubjectivity. The master-slave dialectic is, therefore, not only the key to self-consciousness, but also to society<sup>2</sup>. However, the striking part of this theory of humanization and of socialization is that it happens through struggle, a struggle by which man, in his relations with Others, seeks to impose himself as the Other's master, and thus to enslave him.

Why, one could ask, make this struggle the key to humanity's genesis? For Kojève, as he reads Hegel, the condition of self-consciousness is nothing other than desire. In effect, the desiring I has the same nature as that which it desires<sup>3</sup>. Thus, if it desires something natural as a mere object for pleasure, the I will remain natural and animal. If, on the