



**Jeff Love.** *The Black Circle: A Life of Alexandre Kojève.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 376 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-18656-8.

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In reading Jeff Love's fine intellectual biography of Alexandre Kojève, I experienced once again what I felt in my first reading of *Introduction à la Lecture de Hegel* (1947) more than a half-century ago: a combination of fascination and bafflement. Love's thoughtful account and probing interrogation of Kojève's texts shed light on both the powerful arguments and interpretations that Kojève presents and the bewildering paradoxes and problems that the outcomes of these arguments leave us with.

The book's title is wonderfully evocative. It refers to Kazimir Malevich's painting (circa 1923), *The Black Circle*, which adorns the book jacket. Love explains that the painting's depiction of circular darkness "offers an enticing visual metaphor for the final extinction of individuality that is a key feature of Kojève's thought" (p. 2). The title is suggestive of other Kojévian motifs as well. He was fond of diagrams, many of which depict circular patterns in the development of thought. Most importantly, he judged the most original aspect of Hegel's philosophy to be the notion that circularity was the criterion of completed truth—that a thinker could demonstrate possession of final knowledge only by engaging in a dialectical series of questions and answers that would complete a circle, and that the comprehensive narrative account of human history complet-

ed a kind of circle. And yet another circle, a ring, was an illustration Kojève used to make sense of ontological dualism: the existence of negativity within given being that is identical to itself (as historical humans exist in a distinctively human mode by negating aspects of given being). Thus the gold of a ring exists in one way, the circular whole in the center of the ring exists in another way as the negation of such material; but both must necessarily exist if the ring as ring is to be.

The form of this book also evokes a frequently appearing Hegelian-Kojévian theme: trinities or threesomes (identity, negativity, totality; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; past, present, future; and so forth). This book, apart from its introduction and epilogue, is divided into three parts too, and each part consists of three chapters.

In part 1, "Russian Contexts," after developing thoughts on love, madness, and human striving for the divine from Plato's *Phaedrus*, Love deals with Russian thinkers important to Kojève's intellectual background. Chapter 1, "Madmen," and chapter 2, "The Possessed," deal with Fyodor Dostoevsky, to whose novels Kojève often referred. Chapter 3, "Godmen," deals with Vladimir Soloviev, on whom Kojève wrote his doctoral dissertation under Karl Jaspers, and Nikolai Fedorov. The fundamental theme throughout, it seems to me, is deep dissatisfaction with the limitations of

the ordinarily human and the urge to get beyond that toward the divine—and this endeavor is not an individual's separate effort but a collective project of humanity (in the case of Fedorov, a resurrection to eternal life of all present and past human beings).

In the introduction of his three-volume *Essai d'une histoire raisonnée de la philosophie païenne* (*Attempt at a reasoned history of pagan philosophy*), in which Kojève writes only about Western philosophers, he addresses Indian philosophy in a footnote. Kojève asserts that Indian philosophy does not develop anything fundamental that is not to be found in the history of Western philosophy. Nonetheless, he tells us: "The study of Indian (notably Buddhist) philosophy is not without interest for the understanding of 'western' philosophy. Indeed, since the Hindu 'genius' is characterized by a great 'imagination' and at the same time by an almost total absence of 'good sense,' the philosophers of India have developed certain 'western' philosophic themes with a 'rigor,' or better with a 'radicalism,' that one has never been either able or willing to attain in the West. So too are Indian replicas sometimes more 'revealing' than the western originals. That is why I have utilized, in my studies, my (relatively extensive) knowledge of Indian philosophy. But I do not believe it is useful to mention that fact in this book elsewhere than in the present note."<sup>[1]</sup>

Someone, such as the present reviewer, steeped almost exclusively in Western European writers may have a reaction to these Russian figures somewhat similar to Kojève's reaction to Indian philosophers: Russian thinkers appear to push certain possibilities to mad extremes. Knowing that such writers were part of the Kojève's intellectual background can help us, aided by Love's thoughtful discussions, to understand aspects of Kojève's taste for, or rhetorical choice of, extremely provocative formulations and arguments pushed to the limits.

Part 2 deals with Kojève's thought as it found expression in his famous seminar of 1933-39 devoted to an interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Examined in great detail are: Kojève's view of the fundamental character of the human being as it comes into existence in the original fight to the death between future master and future slave; the character of human history that follows from that; the universal and homogeneous state as the goal of that historical process; and how the philosopher must eventually become the wise man or sage with his possession of the final circular narrative truth of humanity (expressed in a book that would be an updated and perfected whole comprising the matters treated in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and his *Encyclopedia* [1816] or *Logic* [1812, 1813, 1816]). One cannot do justice to these discussions in a short space. Suffice it to say that Love chooses manifestly important topics; pursues them with scrupulously close examination of texts; articulates two (occasionally three) possible modes of interpreting the issues involved; and having made some suggestion as to what might seem closest to the truth, moves on to the next topic, leaving the reader free to rethink the issue again.

Part 3 deals with Kojève's later thought, especially his *Esquisse d'une phénomologie du droit* (*Outline of a Phenomenology of Right*) (1981) and his *Essai d'une histoire raisonnée de la philosophie païenne*. The former work, focusing on justice and laws, expounds the underlying character of right/justice/law as it has emerged in the course of history, looking toward the final synthesis of the fundamental types of right (of masters and of slaves) that will be realized in the universal and homogeneous state. The latter work is "the series of texts that, taken together, constitute an enormous text of 1,292 pages that develops in prodigious detail the crucial insight about the evolution of the identity of the concept that Kojève sketched out in the 1938-1939 lectures" (p. 227). The ninth chapter addresses the issue of finality that looms so large in Kojève's thinking: what is life like at

the end of history as envisaged by Kojève, both for most of us and for the philosopher-become-sage? The central puzzle here is this: Kojève often refers to history's ending in a universal and homogeneous state as definitively known (even though the precise path to it remains contingent because of the freedom of human actors to choose one way or another of acting) and calls Hegel's "philosophy" the final wisdom or system of knowledge. But Kojève also undertakes the project of updating Hegel's system, a project to which he contributed three long introductions (including the 1,292 pages already mentioned), but which he did not complete. And what Kojève did not complete would need to include the full development of a dualist ontology (toward which he thought the first efforts had been made by Kant). Such an ontology would necessarily underlie, it seems to me, a coherent way of replacing Hegel's natural science (considered untenable by Kojève) with an appropriate articulation of how modern science fits into the total knowledge of the sage. With difficult problems like these to solve, one is left thinking that the final system of knowledge is not appreciably closer than the universal and homogeneous state, that philosophers still have work to do, and perhaps that Kojève's writings may provoke others to continue that work.

The late Pierre Hassner reminded us, not so long ago, of Kojève's "almost constant will to shock or to astound the bourgeois." Hence a fondness for provocative, extreme, paradoxical formulations, so that, again in Hassner's words, "How many times, faced with his verbal fireworks, was one not obliged to ask oneself if he was making fun of you, if he was delirious, or if he was presenting a profound truth in as paradoxical as possible a manner?"[2] The interpretative difficulties posed by this aspect of Kojève's discourse are magnified by the fact that, in dealing with it, one runs the risk of doing something that bears, at least in part, a close resemblance to the odious business of explaining a joke. However that may be, Love's learned and lively book provides wel-

come help to the reader who seeks to ponder what Kojève's frequently provocative, extreme, and baffling formulations are seeking to tell us.

#### Notes

[1]. Alexandre Kojève, *Essai d'une histoire raisonnée de la philosophie païenne*. Tome 1, *Les Présocratiques* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1968): 163-64.

[2]. Pierre Hassner, "Le phénomène Kojève," *Commentaire*, no. 128 (Winter 2009-10): 877.

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