The Concept of Plato:
An exegesis of the sixth through eighth lectures of Kojeve's 1938-39 series
on the Phenomenology of Spirit

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Introduction

The years 1933 to 1939 mark the occasion of Alexander Kojève's (nee. Aleksandr Vladimirovič Koževnikov) seminal lectures on George Wilhelm Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit. One may accurately say that his lectures are remarkable in view of the remarks and controversy that his Introduction to the Reading of Hegel has both elicited, and still tends to draw from knowledgeable audiences. One might furthermore qualify those lectures as seminal, in the face of their unexpected generation of certain schools of thought which Kojève himself derided – particularly those of John-Paul Sartre and Jacques Derrida.

Among the more erudite remarks which have been bandied-about regarding Kojève's interpretation of Hegelian thought spilled from the pen of long-time friend Leo Strauss. Upon the occasion of responding to the Kojève's review of On Tyranny, Strauss once remarked that, “Syntheses effect miracles. Kojève's or Hegel's synthesis of classical and Biblical morality effects the miracle of producing an amazingly lax morality out of two moralities both of which made very strict demands on self-restraint”. In spite of the occasional sharpness of their mutual critiques, the friendship between the two continued through the republic of letters, and personal correspondence well after Strauss' departure from Europe for the United States in 1949. More to the point, however, in a few words Strauss openly questioned a fundamental tenet of Hegelian thought – that through it, the thoughts of the Greeks had been fully synthesized with those of the Judeo-Christian religion, thus effecting the unification of Athenian reason with the revelation of Jerusalem. If the result of such a Hegelian synthesis is a profound loss to both traditions, as Strauss suggested, then is it, properly speaking, a synthesis? Has something been lost in the synthesizing process? To determine such a thing, one would necessarily need to begin by asking what has been included in the process. Then, ask whether that which had been included represented the true essence of the traditions that were intended to be unified.

Given the breadth and extent of the thoughts which Hegel expounded in his Phenomenology, and which Kojève sought to interpret in his lectures, it is beyond the scope of a single paper to analyze the quality and success with which the many objects of that synthesis had been incorporated. For the sake of avoiding hubris, the scope of this paper must be more narrowly focused. Kojève himself seems to have followed similar logic for the sake of laying-out his lecture series – particularly with regards to his sixth through eighth lectures of the lecture year 1938-39, which have been collectively gathered and
entitled in his *Introduction as A Note on Eternity, Time, and the Concept*. It was through those lectures that he apparently sought to illuminate the manner by which a progressively synthesized and true understanding of the real had been produced from the leavings of the previous, incomplete systems of thought of Parmenides-Spinoza, Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. Given the breadth of such a narrowed field of study, perhaps it is right that this paper be limited to a mere exegetical analysis of those lectures insofar as they reveal Alexander Kojève's understanding of Hegel's Plato – what the latter's understanding of the real is thought to have been, and how that conception of thought is to have been in some way defective or incomplete. The task would be to determine the character of Hegel’s Plato according to Kojève in order to allow oneself to opine on the image of Platonic philosophy which had been synthesized into the *Phenomenology* by Kojève's Hegel.

**The Concept of Plato**

Insofar as the sixth to eighth lectures of the fifth chapter of the *Introduction* are concerned with Platonic thought, one can argue they focus on three tropes of particular interest that require review or explanation. As has been said, the purpose of the Kojève lectures had been to exposit the *Phenomenology* as a systematic unification of all previous stages of Western thought – as a synthesis representing the meaningful culmination of human philosophy. To do so, however, required one to demonstrate that the variegated symbols of Western thinkers had been incorporated into the symbology of Hegelian thought. Furthermore, such a unification of symbols would need to be shown to have occurred in such a manner that the results are an improvement upon all previous understandings while simultaneously preserving them within the museum of Hegelian Science. Kojève's task should thus be understood as an attempt to show how the symbols of Hegel's Science had both assimilated and preserved the truths of older philosophic and theological traditions. To that end, in the 1938-39 lectures, Kojève may be said to have attempted to exposit the phenomenon of a progression in the Western understanding of the real, and to have done so by focusing on the advancements in human knowledge which relate to those phenomena underlying the symbols “Concept”, “Eternity”, and “Time”. Plato, as one of the four thinkers whose systems were meant to be antecedent to Hegelian Science, would thus need to be demonstrated to have both contributed meaningfully to an advancement in human understanding, while also falling short of “Absolute Knowledge” itself; he must have been partially, but not totally, correct. In the aforementioned lectures, Kojève attempted to demonstrate as much by showing, through his interpretation of the *Phenomenology*, where Plato's thoughts had contributed to a more accurate understanding of the empirically existing realities of “Time”, “Eternity”, and the “Concept”, while failing to fully apprehend those realities – a failure indicative of the Platonic System’s incompleteness.ii
However, for the sake of a truthful exegesis of Kojève's own exegetical lectures, it is necessary to first clarify the anachronisms of the Hegelian synthesis. For, it is readily apparent that Plato – a speaker of ancient Greek – could not have employed the words that Kojève uses to describe his thoughts. Neither “Concept”, nor “Time”, nor “Eternity” (nor their French or German equivalents) are words which Socrates' pupil would have used to describe the real as he perceived it. That is to say that there is an immediate problem of translation which faces any scholar who would attempt to compare the writings of two authors who are radically separated by time and language. If one is to speak of “the Concept according to Plato” versus “the Concept according to Hegel”, one must first define the meaning of that highly compact symbol. Having done so, one may then ask if the symbol “Concept” can be said to have meaning for both parties, and then ask whether the assigned meanings are similar or dissimilar. If the first criterion is not answered affirmatively, thorny hermeneutic issues arise. If the second criterion cannot be answered in such a way that affirms the existence of similar understandings of the parties under discussion, one is then tasked with plumbing the depths of the dissension and their consequences.

On pages 100-101 of his *Introduction*, Kojève decompressed the symbol “Concept” into a brief definition. It is, “... the coherent whole of conceptual understanding that lays claim to the truth”. On the same page, he affirmed that this symbol, so understood, is meaningful to and meaningful within Platonic philosophy, which he later defined as the essential expression of a “mono-theistic System”. This all occurred, in compact fashion, within the opening remarks of his sixth lecture, in which the Concept according to Plato (and all other self-consistent, mono-theistic Systems by extension) as being $C=E'$, with $E'$ being related to an $E$ which exists outside of $T$. Less compactly, it is thereby stated that, in Plato's mono-theistic System, “[the] coherent whole of conceptual understanding that lays claim to truth” is *eternal*, and it is an expression of an *Eternity* which lies outside of *Time*. Kojève, therefore, has affirmatively answered the first hermeneutic question: “Concept” is a meaningful symbol for both Plato and Hegel. As to the second question of the similarity or dissimilarity of their understandings of the reality behind the symbol, he asserted their dissimilarity by emphasizing that, for Hegel, $C=T$; that the Hegelian Concept was the final, this-worldly expression of Time itself. By this Hegelian understanding, Plato was thereafter described as a prelude or partial truth that would be superseded by more advanced Systems and ultimately subsumed and synthesized into the final synthesis of Hegelian Science.

Thus, Kojève's Hegel supplies his audience with two affirmations that must in turn be considered. It has been affirmed that “Concept” is a symbol which would have meaning to Plato or any other holder of a mono-theistic System, which amounts to an assertion that one can deduce from the
Platonic dialogues that there is such a thing as a, “coherent whole of conceptual understanding that lays claim to truth”. At first blush, however, there appear to be problems with this statement. What, for instance, would be the equivalent of a “conceptual understanding” in the language of the Athenian philosopher? What would be a “coherent whole” of such “conceptual understanding”, and what would be “truth”? The answers to these three new questions are by no means obvious, and it is not immediately apparent how Alexander Kojève apprehended that an identity existed between the Attican and the German on these matters. One must, therefore, consider these additional questions in turn.

To that end, one must investigate what it means to affirm that there is such a thing as a “conceptual understanding” in purely Platonic thought. We can readily identify what, for Kojève's Hegel, a conceptual understanding would be; it may be deduced from the author’s emphasis, in his eighth lecture, of a particular line from the Preface of the Phenomenology: “Was die Zeit betrif... so ist sie der daseinde Begrif selbst” ('As for Time, it is empirically existing Concept itself'). What was emphasized in that lecture was the identification of the thoughts which occur within the human mind with the concrete reality which lay outside of it. Furthermore, one may state that one possesses the coherent whole of conceptual understanding if it is possible to reflect perfectly upon all of empirical reality in its concrete existence. In the last two of his 1933-34 lectures, collected and entitled as The Idea of Death in the Philosophy of Hegel, Kojève described this perfect reflective ability as the ability to reflect upon the in-itself, the for-itself, and the in-and-for-itself. That is to say that the coherent whole of conceptual understanding is a perfect reflection of given-Being (Nature), human-Being (Negation), and that final synthesis of the two which has been accomplished at the end-of-Time, when all dialectical action has finally and forever been exhausted. The “truth”, for Kojève's Hegel, is thus definable as the coherent reflection, in speech, of all that is, all that was, and all that ever shall be; it is attainable only at the end of history, and, when taken in its totality, is a synonym of the “Concept”, of “Absolute Knowledge”, of “Wisdom”, and of Hegelian “Science”. It is “there in empirical existence”, it is the empirical thingness of the world in its whole and its parts. The Hegelian Truth, in other words, is fully incarnate and fully immanent at the end of history.

As we have seen, for Kojève's Hegel, there is something akin to this “coherent whole of conceptual understanding that lays claim to truth” in the works of Plato, but that the latter's Concept was only one stage in the advancement and illumination of the true Concept which would one day be realized in the System outlined in the Phenomenology. For this to be true, it would be necessary to demonstrate that “conceptual understanding”, its “coherent whole”, and “truth” have been accepted and defined by the founder of the Academy in manners similar (if not identical) to those definitions employed by the Introduction. There is, however, a very good reason to believe that the Socrates of
Plato's dialogues would disagree sharply with all three identifications. Moreover, there is little substantive evidence that Plato himself would agree with them.

To begin, we must question where (if anywhere) “conceptual understanding” would subsist in Socrato-Platonic epistemology; two of the most substantive discussions thereof having been depicted in the dramatic discourse of the figures of Socrates and Glaucon, brother of Plato, in the fifth and sixth books of the Republic. In Book V, epistemé, doxa, and agnoia (true-knowledge, opinion, and ignorance) are described as dynaómēs (faculties) which have as their objects that which is, that which neither is nor is not, and that which is not. In Book VI, the description of the relationship of the human mind to the real is drawn using the allegory of the divided-line. In that instance, a fourfold division of the ontology of the real is made which is reflected in a corresponding fourfold epistemology; hoi eidoi, arithmοί, ta onta, and eikones tōn ontōn (the Forms, numbers or the objects of mathematics, things, and images of things) are arranged opposite to noésis, dianoia, pistis, and eikasia (intelligent intuition, reasoning, belief, and imagining). The first two provinces of the line, when taken together, are said to make-up the boundaries of what is (from the side of ontology) and of epistemé (from the side of epistemology). The remaining two provinces, taken together, are said to make up the realm of what neither is nor is not, on the one hand, and of doxa on the other. To which of these realms must “conceptual understanding” belong to if one were to follow the instructions and pattern of assignments given by the figure of Socrates to the sons of Ariston?

A “conceptual understanding”, if we recall, must “exist there in empirical reality” if the sum total of all such understanding is to amount to the Hegelian Concept or Absolute Knowledge. The difficulty, however, is that, in so far as the allegory of the divided-line is concerned, all of its contents partake in reality to some degree – even those things which are mere images in human imagination. Kojève's Hegel, however, does not associate true conceptual understanding with just any aspect of reality, but rather with empirical reality, the realm of the concrete and sensual. Moreover, empirical reality, by virtue of its sensuality and thereeness, must truly be characterized as empirical in the strict sense of the root word enpeirein – the ancient Greek for “to put under trial”. Empirical reality, strictly speaking, would, therefore, be controlled reality – a qualification in keeping with the end-times described by Kojève's Hegel, in which Man, through his negation of given-Being, has become the apotheosized Logos or God. At the end of History, the Man of the Introduction has reduced all of the real to empirical reality, which is to say that Man, as God incarnate, controls all that is. Conceptual understanding, understood in this sense, is the understanding in which brings with it the power “to bind and to loose” (Matt. 16:19); it is the sort of understanding needed to make and to control in the most profound sense.
The difficulty is that the ancient Greeks, to say nothing of Socrates or Plato, were quite expressive in their understanding of the extents and limits of the mortal ability “to make” or “experiment” -- poiein and enpeirein. Throughout the Platonic dialogues themselves, poiein and enpeirein are associated with the arts. That is to say that they are associated with technē -- the sort of activity engaged-in by potters, painters, and poets. In Socratic-Platonic terms technē and poiesis deal with that which neither is nor is not -- with the sensual compounds of the real and their images, be they wood, clay, paints, or animals (including, one might add, zōōn politikon). To dabble in the realms of technē and poiesis is, on the one hand, not the same as playing with what is not -- it is not agnoia (ignorant) -- but neither, on the other hand, would such dabbling amount to working with what is. In the terms of the divided-line, “empirical reality” -- that which is subject to technē, to poiesis, and to empeiros (skill) -- encompasses the realm of doxa and excludes the realm of epistemē. Thus, for Plato's Socrates, possessing the conceptual understanding of empirical reality claimed by Kojève's Hegel would correspond not with the provinces of true knowledge, but rather with those of pistis and eikasia, of faith and imagination.

A further wrinkle arises in the thesis in which the Concept, the “coherent whole of conceptual understanding that lays claim to truth”, would both be a meaningful symbol to Plato, and be meaningful in such a fashion so as to allow later philosophers to improve upon his errors in understanding as a function of their benefiting from life at a later stage of the advancing historical dialectic. It seems that “the coherent whole of conceptual understanding”, as defined within Hegelien Science by Kojève, would be almost perfectly uninteresting to Platonic philosophy since the objects of such conceptual understanding would belong to the realm of doxa. Kojève appears to have been aware of this tension, which led him to conclude that the Concept simply hadn't been fully realized by Plato⁶. However, it is not apparent, from the lectures under study, that Kojève apprehended that Plato wasn't unaware of what is meant by a “conceptual understanding”, but rather held it to be of lesser importance, relative to knowledge of the underlying principles of the real which are represented by the eidoi and mathematics. If Kojève rejected this underlying thesis of Platonic thought, he essentially rejected the observation that Man cannot control or decide upon the underlying principles of the universe. For, without control of the principles of Being (to on), one could not long pretend to have control of becoming (gignomai). To be in the position to control and define the principles of Being, however, one would necessarily need to surmount it – to exist beyond Being. It would not suffice, in a universe of Platonic physics, for Kojève's Hegelian Man to become a pantheistic God. He would need to become a theistic God, the hen to agathon. This seems to have been too much of a project, even for Kojève.

This quandary becomes even more evident when one considers the meaning of the second
clause of Kojève's definition of the Concept -- “truth” -- and contrasts it to the traditional Platonic understanding of the same symbol. For Kojève's Hegel, the truth equaled the coherent whole of conceptual understanding. Therefore, the whole truth would be the Concept itself, “*which is there, in empirical existence*”. Otherwise stated, the Hegelian Truth would be the knowledge of the means “to bind and to loose”, or to control all that *is*. The “truth” (or Truth), is defined as a *noun*, a *thing* which may be possessed (perhaps in the form of a Book), and, like any other possession or tool of Man's, may be employed to make or to break. This contrasts starkly with the metaphorical description of *he aletheia* (the true) given by the figure of Socrates to the brothers of Plato in the sixth book of the *Republic*. In the simile of the Sun and the Good*, the older Athenian describes the Good as like the Sun, and the truth as like the Sun's rays. In the same way that the Sun's light gives life to the things of the world and simultaneously reveals those things to they who possess receptive eyes, the Good sheds truth on what *is*, thereby bringing what *is* into Being and revealing it to those of receptive intelligence. By this simile, to say that one possesses the truth would be as ludicrous as claiming to possess the Sun's rays. Rather, one would say that the truth impresses an image of what *is* on the *psyche*, in a similar way to how the Sun's rays impress an image of *things* on one's eyes. And, because the objects of *doxa* partake of what *is*, they too may be illuminated and be impressed upon the *psyche* as *alethia doxa* (true semblances or true opinions). *Alethia doxa* would be so-called for the reason that they are true impressions of that which *is* within a thing, and would stand in opposition to *pseudeis doxa* (false semblances or opinions) which do not reflect those aspects of a thing which *are*. Therefore, both the objects of *epistemé* and of *doxa* may be illuminated by truth, but all impressions of sensual things are to some degree flawed. *Techné*, which contends with sensual things, will, therefore, necessarily be somewhat defective in its process and its products. The truth, by its nature, cannot grant mortals absolute control of Being, or even of becoming.

Given all of this, was it proper of Kojève (or Hegel, or Kojève's Hegel) to speak of the Concept according to Plato, and, having spoken of such a thing, stated that the Athenian Concept was an incomplete prelude to the German? The purpose of the sixth and seventh lectures was after all to demonstrate that the Concept, as previously defined, was a meaningful symbol to Platonic philosophy, and that Plato himself had only erred by relating “the coherent whole of conceptual understanding that lays claim to truth” to Eternity rather than identifying it with Time. By all appearance, Kojève was correct in assuming that the Hegelian Concept would be comprehensible and expressible within the language of Platonic thought. The problem, however, is that in the eyes of a Plato, the Concept would be a symbol of things of dubious worth. The rough translation of “the Concept” into Platonic language would have to be something like “the Concept is the coherent whole of technical understanding which
may be used to manufacture items which, in turn, may reflect some truth into the psyches of those who are receptive to it”. Worse yet, it would have to be accepted that a Book, as a manufacture, through the metaphorical “light” of truth, could only ever impress an image of what is into the psyches of those with eyes to see. A Book, to follow Platonic thought, could never be Truth, for alethia is a mere emanation of the agathon. To be the source of alethia, Hegel's Book, the Phenomenology of Spirit, would need to be the agathon. This, however, would be quite impossible, for the agathon lies beyond and exists previous to what is and is the source, sustenance, and illumination of it. For a Book to be the Truth, it would necessarily need not only to subsist beyond what is, but it would also have to be its source. Because the Hegelian Book is claimed to be a manufacture that resulted from the dialectical process of Hegelian Time, it would be an absurdity to claim that it existed before Time. To do so would amount to claiming that the Book is totally transcendent and, simultaneously, totally immanent; it would be a claim that the Book is the hypostasis of a Christian theistic God. Because Kojève understood Hegel to have discovered that the Christian, Trinitarian, theistic God to be an early error of Reason which was corrected by Hegel, either a Socrates or a Plato would need to conclude that he was confused, for earlier he had claimed that the Hegelian Concept to be only totally immanent.

It may be objected that the thoughts of a Socrates or a Plato may still be proven to be sufficiently unprepared for the reality of modern technology to have been capable of comprehending its power. Thus, they could not possibly have been able to account for, or even to comprehend, the circumstances of more progressed stages of history. It may further be claimed that technology is essentially different from techné, and that it is for that reason, that it is beyond the intellectual horizons of such ancients. However, this argument is unconvincing for the reason that, from the perspective of an ancient Greek, the essence of modern technology would be recognizable as only techné married to hubris – two phenomena with which ancient Athenians were quite familiar. One need only have a basic familiarity with the myths of Daedelos, Orpheus, Phaethon, and the Gigantomachy, among others, to realize that the Greeks of Plato's time were well acquainted with that peculiar type of mortal who thinks their technical abilities so great as to allow them either control over or immunity from the fundamental laws of the cosmos. It is equally obvious that they thought hubristic acts to be an endemic feature of human existence. As has hopefully been impressed, Plato and the Socrates of his dialogues were quite ready to admit to human beings their ability to shape the raw stuff of the senses. However, they denied them the ability to select the laws of phusis – of physics. To express such an ability would necessitate that human beings be able to create the eidoi and decide upon the principles of mathematics (and what committee should be assigned to the task of making the number “three”? Should it be an even number or an odd number? Bigger or smaller than “two”, etc.?). For one of the ancient philosophers to claim to
have the ability to control physics, and thereby be able to halt the cycles of change, generation, and degeneration would be to claim possession of an ability which is not, and to think something which is not agnoia – ignorant. One might therefore deduce their assessment of technological messianism. En fin, what should be said is this: that, from the preceding observations, one must say that Plato's Socrates would indeed be familiar with the principles which underlie the “Concept” as it was defined by Kojève's Hegel. However, what they would be familiar with would not be of such a nature that it might be, was, or could be, synthesized into Alexander Kojève's 1938-39 interpretive lecture on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

**Bibliography**


For the purposes of this paper, we shall leave aside the perennial question of whether or not there is, or ever was, such a thing as “Plato's system or doctrine”.


Kojève (1969), 117.

Kojève (1969), 110-111; herein the author remarks upon Plato's purported inability to account for human freedom or present a science of anthropology.

Interestingly, other half-human or half-animal creatures – such as the centaurs – are rarely depicted in Greek myth as involving themselves in similar follies. Disastrous revolts against the divine order seem to be the peccadillo of only men such as Deadulos and monsters such as Typhos – and even the monsters usually have more sense.