



Hegel in Modern French Philosophy: The Unhappy Consciousness

Bruce Baugh

Volume 49, Number 3, octobre 1993

La philosophie française contemporaine

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/400791ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/400791ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Baugh, B. (1993). Hegel in Modern French Philosophy: The Unhappy Consciousness. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 49(3), 423–438. <https://doi.org/10.7202/400791ar>

HEGEL IN MODERN FRENCH PHILOSOPHY : THE UNHAPPY CONSCIOUSNESS

Bruce BAUGH

RÉSUMÉ : La célèbre dialectique du maître et de l'esclave de Hegel n'est pas aussi centrale dans la philosophie française contemporaine qu'on a l'habitude de le dire. À partir des années 1920, les travaux de Jean Wahl et Alexandre Koyré privilégient une autre figure de la Phénoménologie de l'Esprit, la « conscience malheureuse », considérée comme décisive pour comprendre la philosophie hégélienne du concept, du temps et de l'histoire. Comme la « conscience malheureuse », tous ces thèmes sont liés à l'existence humaine qui se caractérise par une série d'inversions et d'antithèses plutôt que par une progression dialectique passant du conflit à la médiation à la réconciliation et à la synthèse. Ce courant d'interprétation se poursuit chez Hyppolite, Sartre, les surréalistes et même chez Derrida, et il provoque une réaction critique de la part de Henri Lefebvre.

SUMMARY : Hegel's famous dialectic of master and slave is not as central to modern French philosophy as is usually supposed. Beginning in the 1920s in the work of Jean Wahl and Alexandre Koyré, another figure from the Phenomenology of Spirit, the "unhappy consciousness," is seen as central to an understanding of Hegel's theory of the concept, time and history. All of these are related to human existence, which (like the unhappy consciousness) is characterized by a series of reversals and antitheses, rather than a dialectical progression from conflict through mediation to reconciliation and synthesis. This strand of interpretation continues through Hyppolite, Sartre, surrealism and even Derrida, and provoked a critical response from Henri Lefebvre.

The story of the reception of Hegel in France has usually taken as its theme the French understanding of the dialectic of master and slave in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*¹ and the importance of this reading of Hegel for a theory of history. The central figure in this story — the hero — is Alexandre Kojève, whose lectures at the

1. G.W.F. HEGEL, *La Phénoménologie de l'esprit*, trans. Jean Hyppolite, Paris, Aubier, 1939-1941.

École Pratique des Hautes Études from 1933 to 1939² have attained nearly mythic status.³

Yet I would like to suggest a different way of narrating this story, one which takes as its central theme not the dialectic of master and slave, but another “figure of Spirit” from the *Phenomenology*, that of the unhappy consciousness. On this interpretation, if there is a central figure in modern French Hegelianism, it is Jean Wahl, whose *Malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel*⁴ marked a significant step in the “humanisation” of Hegelian philosophy in France. The unhappy consciousness can also be seen as a dominant theme in those post-modern theorists who refuse the possibility of any final reconciliation or synthesis. If there is no synthesis, then there can be no dialectic, properly speaking, but only anti-thetics, the play of opposed terms that negate and pass into each other without ever coinciding in a meaningful whole. Dialectics requires the mediation of a third term that comprises both thesis and anti-thesis, and so can bring to a halt the ceaseless play of negations. If there is neither God nor an end of history, either of which would give us an all-embracing *totality* through which all oppositions could be mediated, then “human reality is by nature an unhappy consciousness, with no possibility of transcending its unhappy state.”⁵

I. THE HUMANISATION OF THE *BEGRIFF*

At the same time as Hegel’s philosophy won acceptance in France through a narrowing down of the scope of the dialectic to the domain of human historical action, and the abandonment of the idealistic side of Hegel, there occurred a humanisation of the Hegelian “notion” in the work of Jean Wahl and Alexandre Koyré, the origins of which can be traced as far back as Victor Delbos’ lectures on Post-Kantian philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1909.⁶

What most struck Delbos about the Hegelian synthesis is that it is both the origin and the result of a dialectical progression, and it is this feature that would lead Delbos to identify the moment of synthesis with Hegel’s *Begriff*, and the latter with an Absolute Subject. On the one hand, the moment of synthesis for Hegel is the *result* of spirit’s self-development through increasingly inclusive and determinate conceptions.⁷ On the other hand, however, the synthesis is *prior* to its parts, and prior to the opposing terms from which it apparently emerges as a *resolution*. For it is only through the synthesis that terms are related to each other as mutually determining contraries, that is, as thesis and anti-thesis, rather than as indifferently or indeterminately related differing

2. Alexandre KOJÈVE, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, texts edited and assembled by Raymond Queneau, Paris, Gallimard, 1947; hereafter *ILH*.

3. See Vincent DESCOMBES, *Le Même et l’autre ; quarante-cinq ans de la philosophie française*, Paris, Minuit, 1979.

4. Jean WAHL, *Le Malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel*, Paris, Rieder, 1929.

5. Jean-Paul SARTRE, *L’Être et le néant* (Tel), Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p. 129; hereafter given as *EN*.

6. See DELBOS, “La méthode de démonstration chez Hegel,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (hereafter *RMM*), 32 (1925), p. 271-281 and “Le premier principe comme pensée infinie (Hegel),” *RMM*, 28 (1921), p. 37-47.

7. Cf. DELBOS, “La méthode de démonstration chez Hegel,” p. 271-273.

terms. This is so not only in thought, but in being. Since it is the synthesis which determines and sustains the relation between thesis and anti-thesis, it "is genuinely creative; it is the *reason* for the moments it subordinates and comprises," in the sense of being both their *cause* and their *goal*.⁸ It is because the *Begriff* is a synthesis that conditions itself through its own ends, and is in that sense the cause of itself, that it must, says Delbos, be thought of as an Absolute Subject.⁹

The chief interest in this interpretation is the implication that the synthesis precedes itself. The synthesis is the origin of the "immediate" origin (the opposition between thesis and anti-thesis) from which it emerges as their resolution. As Derrida might have put it, the synthesis is an "originary non-origin,"¹⁰ a future or end that conditions its past, and which is never — unlike the thesis — immediately present, and so never a simple origin or starting point.

Derrida's description of an "originary non-origin" that both precedes and is subsequent to itself, and is so irreducibly double that even in the first instance it is a repetition (of itself) and a re-presentation, strongly resembles Delbos' interpretation of the *Begriff* as a synthesis that doubles back on itself in order to produce and enclose its own prior moments. Derrida writes:

The present offers itself as such, appears, presents itself, opens the stage (*scène*) of time and the time of the stage [...] only in repetition, in representation. In dialectics [...] For if one appropriately conceives the *horizon* of dialectics — outside a *conventional* Hegelianism — one understands, perhaps, that dialectics is the original movement of finitude, of the unity of life and death, of difference, of original repetition, that is, of the origin of tragedy as the absence of a simple origin. In this sense, dialectics is tragedy, the only possible affirmation to be made against the philosophical or Christian idea of pure origin, against "the spirit of beginnings."¹¹

The question is how Derrida may lay claim to a conception of "origin" bearing the marks of Hegelian synthesis, while at the same time denying both the possibility of such a synthesis and the dialectic of thesis and anti-thesis for which this synthesis, and in particular in the form of an *absolutely self-conditioned subject*, is the necessary foundation. How, in other words, could there be a doubling of origin such as occurs when the apparently third term, synthesis, stands at the origin of the immediate origin if for Derrida, opposed terms pass into one another in much the way they do in Hegel's logic, but "*without ever* constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics"?¹²

We can only raise this question here. But in order to see how Hegel's dialectic becomes a tragedy without resolution in Derrida, we must look back to the work of Jean Wahl. In Wahl's work, Delbos' humanisation of the *Begriff* is taken a step further

8. DELBOS, "La méthode," p. 279; my emphasis.

9. See "La méthode," p. 272; "Premier principe," p. 38.

10. DERRIDA, *L'Écriture et la différence*, Paris, Seuil, 1967, p. 303.

11. DERRIDA, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 248. See also *ibid.*, p. 11, 14, 202, 237, 246 and 297, and *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Spivak, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 61, 157 and elsewhere.

12. DERRIDA, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 43.

by being given an affective basis. For Wahl, Hegel's search for a "concrete universal," the speculative *Begriff* that overcomes and reconciles oppositions, was not motivated by purely theoretical concerns, but by the feeling that "abstraction is by its very definition a dismemberment of life."¹³ When Hegel unites opposed terms in the *Begriff*, which contains "the multiplicity of determinations, of the moving negations it encloses," he has found a philosophical way of arriving at the kind of wholeness which he had earlier sought in love and in religion. The Hegelian "notion" aims at a synthesis of the duality of the sensible and the intelligible that preserves their differences, a unity of duality (difference) and unity (identity) that Wahl calls a "triplicity," and behind which we see reflected the Triune God.

The notion, being founded on reason, stands higher than love or the God of faith, however; it is a *rational* reconciliation of opposites.¹⁴ Nevertheless, however rational the result, the *motivation* for reconciliation is affective: for separation is pain, contradiction is evil (*le mal*), and the awareness of these renders consciousness unhappy.¹⁵ The *Begriff* is then the answer to the unhappy consciousness's prayer: "the unhappy consciousness, in seeing this separation of united elements, that is, of the sensible and the intelligible, will have the notion of their union and will be the happy consciousness." In general, "abstraction is synonymous with unhappiness; joy, for spirit, will be the concrete universal."¹⁶ "The beginning of philosophy, as of religion, is less wonder than non-satisfaction and the dismembered consciousness (*la conscience déchirée*)."¹⁷

Just as the notion is an ideal of reconciliation of the self with itself before being the basis of philosophical science, so too the dialectic, before being a method, is the experience of a divided consciousness striving for unity. The dialectical progression from one stage of experience to the next is driven by the reversals suffered by consciousness when it tries to grasp its object. The understanding is forced to define each of its categories with reference to its opposite: I cannot define being without reference to non-being, sameness without reference to difference and so on. Each time consciousness seeks to define its object in terms of these categories, then, it is "driven from the one to the other of these categories by the negative force of reason,"¹⁸ with the result that each of them turns into its opposite (for example, identity differs from difference and difference is identical to itself in differing from identity.) This creates a form of ontological insecurity: every affirmation of consciousness comes to naught¹⁹

13. See WAHL, *Le Malheur*, préface, p. V; "Sur la formation de la théorie hégélienne du *Begriff*," *Revue de l'histoire de la philosophie*, 1 (1927), p. 437-456 and 2 (1928), p. 72-92; "Note sur les démarches de la pensée de Hegel," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* (hereafter *RPFE*) 101 (1926), p. 281-289; these two articles reappear as chapters of *Le Malheur*.

14. See also DELBOS, "Le Premier Principe," p. 46-47.

15. See WAHL, *Le Malheur*, "Préface."

16. *Le Malheur*, p. 154.

17. WAHL, "Note sur les démarches de la pensée de Hegel," *RPFE*, 101 (1926), p. 289.

18. WAHL, "Note sur les démarches de la pensée de Hegel," *RPFE*, 101, p. 282-283. Cf. HYPOLITE, *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire de Hegel*, Paris, Seuil, 1983, p. 78.

19. See WAHL, "Note sur les démarches...".

and consciousness becomes aware of itself as “absolute negativity”²⁰ and as the vanishing nothingness of the finite determinations it produces (448-449).

Consciousness is unhappy not simply because it feels itself to be nothing, however, but because it at the same time is aware of itself as being something other than nothingness (448): it is both being and nothingness (451). It both is and is not its object (444); it is both the infinite power of universal thought and the finite transitoriness of particular thoughts, without being able to think these two together (446).²¹ Its unhappiness arises, then, out of its dual nature or *duplicity* (444)²²: “for what is more unhappy than the opposition at the heart of a unity at which consciousness has arrived?” (446). If it were simply being or simply nothingness, consciousness would be tranquil. As it is, it is “absolute unrest” (444), because every time it affirms its being (e.g. as thought) it discovers its nothingness (e.g. as changeable thought contents), and it discovers its being in the very act of affirming its nothingness, for in affirming “I am not,” I am (451). In the unhappy consciousness, consciousness finds no rest; “it is too small for itself because it is greater than itself,”²³ and rather than grasping itself as a unity of infinite thought and finite existence, it oscillates between the two poles. “Just at the moment when consciousness attains its unity, we are in the presence of a game of ‘loser wins,’ where there is a continual reversal and an incessant irony, where consciousness ends up with, it seems, the opposite of what it sought” (467).²⁴

Wahl’s discovery of a pan-tragicist Hegel behind the pan-logicist of the System set the tone for subsequent French Hegel studies; the truth of Hegel is to be found in the striving and pathos of the dialectical movement itself, which corresponds to consciousness’ search for reconciliation with itself and with objective reality.²⁵ Wahl himself would later reject as illusory the Hegelian attempt to reconcile subjective existence *in thought*, and so turned away from the mediation of the notion and the dialectic based on it.²⁶ But before exploring further Wahl’s investigations, we should take note of another effort to humanise the notion, that of Alexandre Koyré.²⁷

Koyré had been trained in Husserl’s phenomenology in Germany, and regarded Hegel’s philosophy as a phenomenology in the Husserlian sense (152n, 178) and as

20. WAHL, “Commentaire d’un passage de la Phénoménologie de Hegel,” *RMM*, 34 (1927), p. 441-471, reprinted as a chapter of *Le Malheur*; page references within the text to *RMM*.

21. Cf. HYPOLITE, *Introduction*, p. 31.

22. Cf. SARTRE, *EN*, p. 93.

23. *Le Malheur*, p. 155.

24. Sartre’s notion of “bad faith” owes much to Wahl’s description of the duplicity of consciousness; see section II.5. below. The theme of “loser wins” is also prominent in Sartre’s essays and plays, for example, his study of Genet, *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*, Paris, Gallimard, 1952, and his play, *Le diable et le bon dieu*, Paris, Gallimard, 1951. It is also a theme which surfaces frequently in Derrida’s work.

25. Wahl’s most notable influence in this regard was on Jean Hyppolite. See HYPOLITE, “Les travaux de jeunesse de Hegel d’après des ouvrages récents,” *RMM*, 42 (1935), p. 399-426 and 549-578; *Introduction à la philosophie de l’histoire de Hegel*, p. 49-64 and 104; and Pierre BERTRAND, “Le sens du tragique et du destin dans la dialectique hégélienne,” *RMM*, 47 (1940), p. 165-186.

26. See WAHL, *Vers le concret*, Paris, Vrin, 1932 and *Études kierkegaardianes*, Paris, Aubier, 1938.

27. See KOYRÉ’s two “Hegel à Iéna” articles, *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, 5 (1935), p. 420-428, and *RPF*, 118 (1934), p. 274-283; page references in the text are to the reprint of the 1935 article in *Études d’histoire de la pensée philosophique*, p. 147-189.

a philosophical anthropology (179n) akin to Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (a view later shared by Kojève).²⁸ This is true not only of the *Phenomenology*, says Koyré, but even of the Jena *Logic* and *Realphilosophie*. The reason is that, according to Koyré, "Hegel's philosophy in fact seems to be, in its deepest intuitions, a philosophy of time" (163), and indeed of "human time, the time of man (177)," the time of which the primary dimension is the future (160n, 170, 176-177). Human time is primarily futural because man is a being "who is what he is not and is not what he is,"²⁹ a being who negates what he is to the benefit of what he is not, or is not yet, a being who, starting from the present, negates it, seeking to realise itself in the future" (177). Hegelian time, then, is the time of human self-realization through action (178-179), the negation of what is for the sake of what one is not but would be. Because this time is that of progressive self-development, it is essentially historical (177), or *oriented*, rather than being cyclical or repetitive, as is the biological time of natural functions, or "life" (153n). Only in the historical time of action — in the positing and realization of an end — does the future take precedence over the present and the past (160n).

Koyré here deliberately conflates Hegel's definition of *natural* time (*Encyclopedia* § 258) — "a being which is what it is not and is not what it is"³⁰ — with Heidegger's definition of *Dasein* as *Zeitlichkeit* (see 178n). The result is a series of identifications: of the notion with spirit, of spirit with time (175), of time with human temporality (179):³¹

This primacy of the future over the now, of the possible over the actual, is this not the analysis of man? And the dialectic of the instant, 'which is insofar as it is not and is not insofar as it is,' which negates what it is to the benefit of what it is not, is this not the expression of the unrest of *human* being, for whom time 'stops' when he has no more future, when there remains nothing more to come, when everything has already come to pass?³²

Time is existential (188), and the foundation of the dialectic is historical time, which is human time: "For, as Hegel says, it is *we* who project ourselves into the future, in negating our present and in making it into a past. And it is *we* again who, in our memory, take up and revive this completed and dead past" (187-188). Since human temporality thus stands at the basis of historical time, and it is historical time that is the model for spirit's self-development, Hegel's logic, which recounts this development, is identical to a philosophy of (human) history (178, 187). Outside of

28. See KOJÈVE, *ILH*, p. 38-39, 57, 417 and 527n1.

29. Cf. SARTRE, who appropriates this definition of *la réalité humaine*, *EN*, p. 94 and elsewhere. Hyppolite also uses this expression, e.g. in his *Logique et existence*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1952, p. 240, as does KOJÈVE, *ILH*, p. 12.

30. Koyré's reference (p. 164n) is to HEGEL, *Encyclopädie*, § 258: "Die Zeit als die negative Einheit des Aussersichseins ist ein schlechthin Abstraktes, ideelles. — Sie ist das Sein das, indem es *ist*, *nicht* ist, und indem es *nicht* ist, *ist*." Koyré adds that the Hegel's *Aussersichsein* is equivalent to the term *extase*, which has been "made famous by a recent theory" (presumably Heidegger's theory of the temporal ecstases of *Dasein*.)

31. Kojève makes the same series of identifications; see *ILH*, p. 370-375.

32. KOYRÉ, "Hegel à Iéna," *RPFE*, 118 (1934), p. 280-281. Cf. KOJÈVE, *ILH*, p. 382.

history, there is neither spirit nor dialectic — a thesis usually attributed to Kojève,³³ but already present in Koyré's interpretation of Hegel.

The result of these identifications is that in Koyré's hands, Hegel's logic becomes an anthropology. Quite simply, the dialectic and the notion reflect the temporal structures of historical human existence, the essence of which is the priority of the future end over the immediate present (174n). When Koyré states that "The time and space Hegel describes are not those of things, they are the time and space of man,"³⁴ it might be thought that he is making Hegel into a philosophical anthropologist *as opposed to* a logician. In fact, he is subordinating Hegel's logic and metaphysics to anthropology. Since Hegel's time and space are not only those of man, but *also* those of spirit and the concept (175), which are the basis of the entire "system," it follows that *everything* is to be understood on the basis of human existence (188). Even *being* is modeled on human temporality: according to Koyré, just as Hegel makes the eternal historical (see 162n, 176n, 187) by incorporating negation in the Absolute, he finds unrest and movement in being itself, which flees and negates itself to become its other and to realize itself in and by that self-negation (162-163). In this respect, Koyré's interpretation differs from Kojève's, since Kojève argues that the application of an essentially anthropological ontology to Nature in the *Logic* is in error (*ILH* 39), the reason being that Nature does not have a history (*ILH* 503), and consequently lacks the dialectical temporality upon which Hegel's logic depends (*ILH* 385).

For Koyré, then, as for Wahl, the model for Hegel's *Begriff* is to be found in human existence, but in Koyré's case this model is not the *wholeness* of a self that has surmounted its internal oppositions (the "concrete universal"), but rather the historicity that raises man above mere animal existence (see 153n5), and which consists in the transcending of what one is towards one's possibilities through creative action, a process that constitutes the essence of human freedom (189).³⁵ The notion includes the temporal structure of historical self-transcendence within itself because, like free, historical humanity, it is the victorious outcome of the struggle in which spirit posits, negates, transcends and annihilates itself (174), a *historical* result that is not separable from its temporal development, not even in thought.³⁶ Human historicity and the speculative notion mirror each other; logic is history (163).³⁷

One might have the impression that this apparently "heroic" and triumphalist Hegelianism is very far from the unhappy consciousness. Yet for Koyré, there can be no final reconciliation, no "happy" outcome of this process of self-realisation, because the condition of the possibility of history — human self-transcendence and self-negation — is what renders impossible an *end* to history:

33. See KOJÈVE, *ILH*, p. 198, 419 ff and 386 ff.

34. KOYRÉ, "Hegel à Iéna," *RPFE*, 118 (1934), p. 280-281.

35. See also Charles ANDLER, "Le fondement du savoir dans la *Phénoménologie de l'esprit* de Hegel," *RMM*, 38 (1931), and HYPPOLITE, "Vie et prise de conscience de la vie dans la philosophie hégélienne d'Iéna," *RMM*, 45 (1938), p. 45-61.

36. See KOJÈVE, *ILH*, p. 390-391 and elsewhere.

37. Compare KOJÈVE, *ILH*, p. 419-420.

It is because man is essentially dialectical, that is to say, essentially negating, that the dialectic of history, no, that history itself is possible. It is because man says "no" to his present — or to himself — that he has a future. It is because he negates himself that he has a past. It is because he is time — and not simply temporal — that he has a present [...]. [Yet] if time is dialectical and if it is constructed *from out of the future*, it is — what-ever Hegel says — eternally unfinished [...]. One cannot fore-see the future, and the Hegelian dialectic does not permit us to, since the dialectic, the expression of the creative role of negation, at the same time expresses freedom [...]. The philosophy of history, and similarly Hegelian philosophy, the "system," would only be possible if history were at an end, if there were no future, if time could stop (188-189).

The historical consciousness reflected in the *Begriff* is thus at the same time an unfulfilled and an unhappy one, with no possibility of being happy save at the price of ceasing to be historical, that is, ceasing to *be*. Conversely, the historicity of the *Begriff*, its inseparability from the self-negations that constitute it as a result, render problematic the *Begriff* itself as a final reconciliation. In the case of both consciousness and the *Begriff*, completion or fulfillment would require an end to negation and transcendence, and so a kind of death.³⁸

For Koyré, at any rate, the unhappy consciousness is inescapable. The only difference between Koyré and Kojève on this question is that the former holds that if history came to an end, then that would be the death of man, whereas the latter holds that history *is* over, and man is dead.³⁹ By the same token, Kojève asserts the when history ends and man dies, the unhappy consciousness is overcome: man achieves total "satisfaction," and there is no transcendence because there is no longer anything to strive for.⁴⁰ For both, the end of the unhappy consciousness is death.

It would be superfluous to enumerate further the many ways in which Koyré's interpretation anticipates Kojève's,⁴¹ or to point out that Koyré's definition of human reality is the same as Sartre's. Koyré's articles converge with Wahl's in the direction of the complete humanisation of Hegel's philosophy: for at this point, the Hegelian *Begriff* itself has become anthropomorphic.

38. This parallels Derrida's notion that closure, the end of the movement of signification, is the death of meaning; see section III. Derrida discusses Hegel's Jena writings and sections 257-259 of the *Encyclopedia*, the very sections Koyré discusses, in "Ousia and Gramme: Note on a Note from *Being and Time*," in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982. Like Koyré, Derrida sees great affinities between Hegelian time and Heideggerian temporality (see especially p. 44-45). Although Derrida does not mention Koyré here, he does cite "Hegel à Jéna" in "Difference", *Margins*, p. 13-14.

39. See *ILH*, p. 95, 153-155, 194-195, 383-385.

40. See Gaston FESSARD, "Deux interprètes de la Phénoménologie de Hegel: Jean Hyppolite et Alexandre Kojève," *Études*, 255 (1947), p. 368-373.

41. Koyré preceded Kojève at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, where Koyré had lectured on Hegel from 1931 to 1933; see *ILH*, p. 57.

II. THE UNHAPPY CONSCIOUSNESS

1. *Wahl: the existential protest.*

If the full humanisation of Hegel's *Begriff* allowed Hegel to at last be accepted in French philosophy, it also, ironically, marked the beginning of Hegel's downfall.

In the Preface to *Vers le concret*,⁴² Wahl attacks Hegel's argument in the "Sense Certainty" chapter of the *Phenomenology*, according to which the most concrete and richest reality, that designated by the words "here," "now" and "mine," turns out to be the poorest and most abstract, since when these words are used by others, or by myself at another time, they refer to other things. Every "I" can say "I," and so what I take to be most specific about myself is revealed to be the most empty kind of universality. But, cautions Wahl, we ought not to conclude with Hegel that language reveals the unreality of what was intended by "I", "here," "now" etc. ; on the contrary, it is language that is revealed as impotent. Similarly, in the famous dialectic of being and nothingness, in which being turns out to be identical to nothingness,⁴³ Hegel has confused words with things : real being with the concept "being," the concept "nothingness" with the real nothingness described "phenomenologically" by Kierkegaard and Heidegger. The Hegelian dialectic, which concerns only words, is "inane." The genuine pursuit of the concrete, on the other hand, is "more an oscillation than a dialectic," and is "not immanent to the idea, or if it is, this is due to the idea striving for something other than itself," a concrete reality beyond thought which is "the limit of the dialectic and its origin."

Wahl's critique of Hegel amounts to an affirmation of the unhappy consciousness. In order to preserve the concreteness of a reality that is not to be assimilated to thought, Wahl cannot allow thought and being to be united in a synthesis, at least not through reason. Reason can achieve a synthesis *in thought*, but it lacks the power to mediate between opposites or achieve a genuine synthesis *in being*.

In this, Wahl takes his inspiration from Kierkegaard.⁴⁴ Hegel's speculative mediations do not touch individual existence, which is marked by qualitative disjunctions (either/or) resolved only through passion — through resolute decision and the leap of faith, not through an immanent dialectical progression. Passion, however, can only "hold together" opposed extremes in the "moment of decision;" it cannot abolish oppositions, and the momentary resolution it achieves is valid only for the individual who makes it, not universally. But in that case there can be no universal science of existence, no *Aufhebung* of the individual in the universal, and no expression of subjective "inwardness" in the objective, universal medium of language. If Hegel thinks the unhappy consciousness is a surpassed "moment" of the dialectic, this is because he has confused himself with the Idea : he forgot that he existed.

42. The preface was published separately as an article in *Recherches philosophiques*, 1 (1931-1932), p. 1-20.

43. See HEGEL, *Science of Logic*, Vol. I, Book one, Section I, chapter I, "Being."

44. See WAHL, "Hegel et Kierkegaard," *RPFE*, 111-112 (1931), p. 321-380; reprinted in *Études kierkegaardienes*.

2. *Koyré : the failure of language.*

The failure of the Hegelian dialectic, according to Wahl, can be attributed to the insurmountable distance between language and being. Since Hegel's language was meant to be "a dialectical synthesis of the diverse significations incarnated in words," and so rooted in a determinate historical existence of a linguistic community,⁴⁵ this failure may seem puzzling, since language is on this account an expression of the historical being in which it is rooted, not some "invention." Yet Koyré points out the reason for this failure when he takes the section of the *Phenomenology* on "Culture"⁴⁶ as containing the key to Hegel's use of language.

In this section, Hegel describes language as alienation: what one intends is never what language allows one to say, and yet language is the universal and objective expression of one's thought. Language reveals the objective truth of thought's intentions: it is thought in *otherness*, as through it, thought objectifies itself, separates itself from itself and understands itself as *others* understand it. In that case, the "nearly ontological preponderance of language" in Hegel is "a trait of the dismembered consciousness [*conscience déchirée*] which is only in and by its reflection in the other."⁴⁷ In other words, it appears that Hegel's use of language is a symptom of the unhappy consciousness, rather than a cure for it.

3. *Fondane, Breton : Surrealism.*

The critique of the "ontological preponderance" of language in Hegel went hand in hand with the Marxist and Surrealist criticism that Hegel had dissolved the real into the aether of pure thought.⁴⁸ Yet the Surrealists, although they agreed with the Marxists that the unhappy consciousness raises the question of social injustice,⁴⁹ could not accept Marxist solutions.

For Benjamin Fondane, Marx was right to replace Hegel's *Begriff* with "the whole of social relations,"⁵⁰ but the latter, although seemingly concrete, is just another abstraction. Just as an individual pear is more real than the class "fruit," so an individual human being is more real than the totality of social relations.⁵¹ The problem of the unhappy consciousness — in this case, of a being that both is and is not its objective, social being — is not one that can be solved simply by a revolutionary transformation of social relations; there always remains a difference between the individual and society, and a painfully felt contradiction between the inner and the outer self for which there is no *social* solution. In support of this view, Fondane refers to Freud's

45. A. KOYRÉ, "Note sur la langue et la terminologie hégéliennes," *RPFE*, 111-112 (1931), p. 409-439.

46. See *La Phénoménologie de l'esprit*, trans. Hyppolite, vol. 2, section VI.B., "L'esprit devenu étranger à soi-même, la culture."

47. See KOYRÉ, "Note," p. 416-420.

48. See Benjamin FONDANE, *La Conscience malheureuse*, Paris, Denoël et Steele, 1936, p. 53.

49. FONDANE, *op. cit.*, p. XI; see André BRETON, *Manifestes du surréalisme* (Idées), Paris, Gallimard, 1963, p. 93-98.

50. FONDANE, p. 54.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 55-56.

Civilization and its Discontents, which argues that, since society is founded on the repression of instinct and the prohibition of the satisfaction of certain desires, the conflict between the individual and society is unsurpassable.

Breton likewise refuses the Marxist limitation of the "suppleness" of "the negation of the negation" to only social and economic problems, and insists on raising the problems of "love, the dream, madness, art and religion."⁵² By placing the latter outside of the realm of the social, Breton, like Fondane, asserts a gap between subjective psychological existence and social reality. Nevertheless, for Breton, Hegel's argument that subjective life is permeated by the substantial life of the community anticipates Feuerbach's denial of consciousness as a separate faculty, Marx's critique of conscious representations of social reality as "ideology," and the theory of the unconscious in Eduard von Hartmann and in Freud.⁵³ All of these are instances of the dependence of consciousness on something outside itself, on an "unconscious" of which consciousness is the disguised representation. Because Hegel's basic schema can be expanded beyond the "economic base/ideological superstructure" model of Marxism, it is potentially richer than Marxism, however "infantile" Hegel's dialectic becomes in Hegel's hands, where it is mere word-play.⁵⁴ What Hegel points to, as Breton interprets him, is thus a series of divisions and oppositions that would extend the structures of the unhappy consciousness beyond the realm of consciousness proper.

4. *Lefebvre : the mystified consciousness.*⁵⁵

Although Marxists such as Henri Lefebvre could not afford to ignore the theme of the unhappy consciousness, they could argue that the unhappy consciousness is not a truth of existence, but a *false* consciousness reflecting determinate historical conditions: the felt separation between thought and being is due to the division between intellectual and manual labor.⁵⁶ The contradictions within the individual and between the individual and society are more properly described as "alienation":⁵⁷

The alienation of man is a living fact, attested to at each hour of the day by all of us. This solitude in the midst of the crowd is alienation. That ignorance of self, that lucidity without content, that abstraction without matter, this dispersion, this instinct without thought and thought without instinct, this despair: the alienation of the human (*CM* 148).

Unlike more orthodox Marxists, however, Lefebvre does not hold that this alienation is the passive reflection in consciousness of physical reality.⁵⁸ On the contrary,

52. See BRETON, *op. cit.*, p. 95-97.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

54. See *ibid.*, p. 96.

55. See Henri LEFEBVRE and Norbert GUTERMAN, "Préface" to *Morceaux choisis de Marx*, Paris, Gallimard, 1934; *La Conscience mystifiée*, Paris, Gallimard, 1936; "Introduction" to Lenin, *Cahiers sur la dialectique de Hegel*, Paris, Gallimard, 1938; *Morceaux choisis de Hegel*, Paris, Gallimard, 1939; and Henri LEFEBVRE, *Le matérialisme dialectique*, Paris, Alcan, 1939.

56. See LEFEBVRE'S "Introduction" to LENIN'S *Cahiers*, p. 53-56, and *La Conscience mystifiée* (hereafter *CM*), p. 212-213.

57. See *CM*, p. 148 and 176ff; LENIN'S *Cahiers*, p. 93-101.

58. See *CM*, p. 176-178, 253-254, 258; *Cahiers*, p. 59; *Morceaux choisis de Marx*, p. 17.

consciousness is active, and it does more than it knows: we think through the body and through *praxis*,⁵⁹ and because of this, there is an unconscious within consciousness, “a content of consciousness that determines consciousness but which consciousness does not grasp or know” (CM 256).⁶⁰ Alienation can be overcome, then, not by reflection or thought alone, but by a *praxis* that would give us mastery over our natural and social selves.⁶¹ Man’s return to himself from out of his alienated state is accomplished in the “unity of the individual and the social, man’s possession of nature and of his own nature [which] defines ‘Total Man’.”⁶² The revolutionary is thus an “unhappy consciousness” who seeks to overcome his unhappiness (CM 212-213) by overturning a regime where men are alienated because they are dominated by the fetishized products of their own labour, i.e. by commodities.⁶³ In short, what is needed is not philosophical reconciliation through the “notion,” but “changing the world and [...] really abolishing existing contradictions in order to arrive at the truly human.”⁶⁴

Lefebvre, who came to Marxism through surrealism, here accomplishes a kind of synthetic *tour de force* of themes from existentialism, surrealism and Marxism, all centering on the figure of the unhappy consciousness, a consciousness torn by contradictions within itself and with reality. Like the Surrealists, Lefebvre sees consciousness as dominated by an unconscious which it cannot know or control. Nevertheless, Lefebvre’s belief in a “total man” that would be a synthesis of all oppositions, including that between consciousness (*le pour soi*) and the nonconscious (*l’en soi*),⁶⁵ places Lefebvre solidly on the side of the philosophers of totality and synthesis. Indeed, his postulation of a total reconciliation in a revolutionary future is a subordination of oneself to a beyond which is characteristic of the unhappy consciousness in its religious form;⁶⁶ for according to Hegel, religion is the projection of the complete and “happy” self outside of oneself, in the form of an Other who is an Absolute Subject (God).⁶⁷ Lefebvre’s humanistic “dialectical materialism” may have brought this Hegelian Spirit down to earth, but it is still in essence a theology, the belief in a supreme synthesis which could mediate all oppositions.

5. Sartre’s understanding of Hegel in Being and Nothingness.

Sartre’s theory of the unhappy consciousness owes much to Wahl, but it is based primarily on a theory of the temporality of human reality that derives from Heidegger, *via* Koyré.

59. See *Cahiers*, p. 59.

60. Cf. LEFEBVRE, *Le matérialisme dialectique*, p. 98, 122-123.

61. See *Cahiers*, p. 62, *Morceaux choisis de Marx*, p. 24-25, *Le matérialisme dialectique*, p. 102, and *Morceaux choisis de Hegel*, p. 17.

62. *Cahiers*, p. 98; cf. *Le matérialisme dialectique*, p. 149.

63. See CM, p. 180-191; *Morceaux choisis de Marx*, p. 18; *Le matérialisme dialectique*, p. 140-142.

64. *Morceaux choisis de Marx*, p. 29; cf. *Le matérialisme dialectique*, p. 58-60, 144-145.

65. See *Morceaux choisis de Hegel*, p. 17-18.

66. See FONDANE, p. 51-52.

67. See WAHL, “Commentaire,” and KOJÈVE, “Hegel, Marx et le Christianisme,” *Critique*, 3-4 (1946), p. 339-366 and “Christianisme et Communisme,” *Critique*, 3-4, (1946), p. 308-312.

For Sartre, all consciousness is, as Husserl said, consciousness *of* something. However, consciousness only becomes aware of that thing by transcending the thing as it presents itself to consciousness towards the horizon of other possible appearances of the object, which are correlative to future consciousnesses. The present of consciousness is thus defined on the basis of an unreal totality of consciousness which is *not yet* and which would allow consciousness to define its object, and thereby define itself as "consciousness *of*" that object.⁶⁸ Consciousness, then, seeks to define itself through a closed and determinate totality which would define its object, and yet which would be a totality of consciousnesses, that is, of the open-ended acts of transcendence. Such a totality is an impossible synthesis of infinite transcendence and determinate finitude.

Yet consciousness is implicated in this totality to the extent that it is consciousness *of* its object, that is, to the extent it is consciousness at all. In that sense, consciousness both is and is not the impossible totality through which it defines itself and the absence of which it suffers as a "lack" of its own being. If consciousness succeeded in satisfying this "lack," this would be because the totality had truly become closed, and consciousness could be confined to that closed totality only if it ceased to be intentionality and transcendence. In other words, such satisfaction would be the death of consciousness. For that reason, human reality :

[...] is perpetually haunted by a totality which it is without being able to be it, precisely because it cannot attain the in-itself [closure, identity] without losing itself as for-itself. It is thus by nature an unhappy consciousness, with no possible transcendence of its unhappy state (*EN* 129).

Being and Nothingness is the narrative of the unhappy consciousness's vain attempts to fulfill itself by becoming the impossible totality, the synthesis that is the in-itself-for-itself, or God (*EN* 678, 685). To the extent that human reality tries to *be* itself, it finds it is not itself; to the extent it tries to flee its being by affirming itself as pure transcendence, it discovers its facticity: the givenness of its past, its body, its relations with others and its historical situation.

These reversals, which Wahl had defined as characteristic of the unhappy consciousness, are also characteristic of "bad faith," which is an oscillation from transcendence to facticity and vice versa. The best example of this is not that of the waiter, but that of the coquette, who can affirm her dinner partner's hand is "just a hand" in order to see that it is not also a gesture (of seduction), and at the same time affirms that she is not merely a body in order to deny that it is to her (living, sexual) body that her companion's gestures are addressed (*EN* 91-92). This involves an exploitation of the ambiguous character of human reality (*EN* 133n): consciousness cannot *be* its transcendence in the way a table is a table, and it cannot *not be* its facticity (although it transcends it) in the way in which a table is not an ink-well. Instead of realizing a synthesis, consciousness in bad faith is caught up in an incessant play of self-negations (*EN* 124) unmediated by any "third term," such as the Freudian "censor."

68. See SARTRE, "La temporalité chez Faulkner," *Situations I* (Idées), Paris, Gallimard, 1975, p. 96.

Yet it is not just in bad faith that consciousness is unhappy ; to Wahl's question, "can there be any but an unhappy consciousness,"⁶⁹ Sartre's answer would appear to be "no." At every level, according to Sartre, consciousness seeks unity and finds division. At the level of the pre-reflective *cogito*, consciousness is separated from its present (as "consciousness of x") by its future. At the reflective level, the consciousness that reflects on itself does not coincide with the consciousness upon which it reflects. Finally, at the intersubjective level, when consciousness seeks validation in the consciousness of another, it finds that it both is and is not the being which is an object for the Other. Although I may not see myself the way the Other sees me, experiences such as shame reveal to me that I acknowledge being the object to which the Other's judgment refers. Consciousness can neither be its being-for-others, then, nor escape that being.

This last point marks a major disagreement between Sartre and Kojève. Sartre argues that reciprocal recognition is impossible (for the one recognizing inevitably makes the one recognized into an *object*),⁷⁰ and so then is any absolute community or "kingdom of ends," in which each is an end for the other and finds himself in the other who recognizes him.⁷¹ For Sartre, each for-itself defines itself as not-being the others ; consequently "no totalitarian and unifying synthesis of 'others' is possible" (*EN* 298). For Kojève, on the contrary, the "fight to the death" is an early stage of inter-subjective relations ; it is transcended in the work of the slave, whose mastery of nature presages humanity's technological mastery of nature (*ILH* 34), and in the slave's replacement of the fear of the Master with the fear of death, which makes possible the self-mastery of freedom-for-death and reveals the Master to be equal to the slave in his mortality. This process culminates in the modern world of technology and of the "universal homogeneous state," which recognizes all subjects equally. "or in a classless society comprising the whole of humanity,"⁷² a transnational and trans-ethnic classless society.⁷³ Wars and revolutions would then no longer be possible (*ILH* 145, 561), real work would end (*ILH* 114, 383, 435), and workers will work as little as possible, for "There is nothing more to *do*." But since the essence of man is historical overcoming, struggle and labour (*ILH* 378n, 435, 490-492, 560), the end of work (and the end of history) is the death of man.

Sartre rules out this final synthesis because of the irreducible plurality of consciousnesses : I cannot simply be the object I am for the other without ceasing to be consciousness, and I cannot assimilate the other into my world, since the other-as-subject is not an object, but is revealed in my experiencing of *myself* as an object. There is no "common ground" that would enable self and other to exist on the same level and in the same manner ; rather, there is an "infernal circle" of consciousnesses

69. WAHL, "Note sur les démarches. . ." p. 283.

70. See *EN*, p. 288.

71. See WAHL, "Commentaire," p. 444, 446.

72. KOJÈVE, "Hegel, Marx et le Christianisme," p. 354-356. See also KOJÈVE's "Tyranny and Wisdom," a translation of *La Tyrannie et la Sagesse*, Paris, Gallimard, 1954, by Michael Gold, in Leo STRAUSS, *On Tyranny*, edited by Allan Bloom, Ithaca, Agora Paperbacks, 1968, p. 143-188, especially pages 154-156 of the translation.

73. See "Tyranny and Wisdom," p. 156 and 183.

transcending others and being transcended in turn by them. The only possible mediation between these anti-thetical standpoints would have to come from a standpoint that comprised both, that of the Totality, but no individual can take the point of view of the totality on himself and others (*EN* 288-289). But if there is no Totality through which all viewpoints could be mediated and reconciled, there can be no universal and homogeneous community in which each recognizes and is recognized by the other. For Sartre, the divisions from which the unhappy consciousness suffers cannot be mended or surpassed. In *Being and Nothingness*, at any rate, Sartre reveals himself as an anti-dialectical thinker.

III. THE UNHAPPY CONSCIOUSNESS IN FRANCE TODAY

In this final section, I would like to suggest ways in which Derrida and others like him are still haunted by the unhappy consciousness. My remarks here are meant to be suggestive and provisional; a fuller analysis would require another paper.

Derrida attempts to "detotalize" the unifying totality of the sign. For Derrida, the sign joins together a signifier and a signified without there being any synthesis of the two, the relation between the two terms being completely arbitrary. Signifier and signified are not related to each other as thesis and anti-thesis, that is, as "moments" of a unitary sign that conserves and surpasses them. On the contrary, they retain a virulent and unmediated difference: because of the arbitrariness of the signifier/signified relation, there is no rational link between them that would enable one to pass from the one to the other through some sort of dialectical necessity. Yet if we cannot transcend the signifier towards the signified, this threatens the very possibility of signifying, and thereby threatens the "subject" as one who signifies. The dissolution of the sign, then, implies the dissolution of the subject.

This dissolution could not be remedied without also threatening the subject, however, since it is the *difference* between the signifier and signified that allows the former to stand for the latter, and so creates meaning. Much as, for Sartre, consciousness can realize itself as an in-itself totality only by ceasing to be consciousness, a complete identity of signifier and signified would be the death of meaning.⁷⁴ On the other hand, much as Sartrean consciousness both is and is not the totality towards which it transcends, the meaning-giving difference between signifier and signified presupposes the two being joined together in the sign which they thus are and are not. The Derridean sign, then, like the unhappy consciousness, confronts difference when it strives to unite itself into an identity, and yet discovers its unity when it tries to affirm itself as pure difference: pure difference is a dream.⁷⁵

In this transposition of the structure of the unhappy consciousness into the sign, Derrida in effect follows Wahl's making the unhappy consciousness the basis for the Hegelian *Begriff*. Even more so, Derrida's strategy parallels Koyré's making the tem-

74. See Jacques DERRIDA, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison and Newton Garver, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1973, p. 52-54.

75. DERRIDA, *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris, Seuil, 1967, p. 224; *Writing and Difference*, p. 151.

porality of *Dasein* the structure of the *Begriff*; Derridean “différance” also points to “the irreducibility of temporalizing” as what makes possible a “sameness which is not identical” — or a “self which is not identical,”⁷⁶ which we might call “a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is.” Indeed, Derrida remarks that “the property of the *representamen* is to be itself and another [...] to be separated from itself,” and so to differ from itself prior to ever simply *being* itself.⁷⁷ Like Sartrean consciousness and like Koyré’s “man”, the sign’s primary temporal dimension is the future: meaning must await its inscription in a signifier in order for it to differ from itself as the signified of that signifier, and so be meaning, which means that it is separated from its past, its possibility of being signified, by its own future, and so can never coincide with itself.⁷⁸ Meaning exists only as the possibility of meaning: the completion of the sign in a univocal signifier/signified relation, which would allow for the presence of signified behind a completely effaced or transparent signifier, would close the temporal gap and annihilate the meaning-giving *différance*.

The structure of unreconciled sameness and difference, multiplicity and unity which is characteristic of the unhappy consciousness, and which leads to anti-thetical reversals, all this is repeated in the Derridean sign. Mikel Dufrenne said of Hegel that “in introducing negation into the heart of being, tragedy into the heart of the Absolute, Hegel is more existentialist than existentialism. For existentialism, only consciousness is negative [...] For Hegel, the unhappiness of consciousness is the unhappiness of being.”⁷⁹ For Derrida, it is the unhappiness of meaning. For Hegel, naturally, being is all, but since for Derrida there is nothing outside the text, the unhappiness of meaning is universal. Both Hegel (as Dufrenne reads him) and Derrida are pan-tragicist.

Earlier I cited Sartre’s remark that human reality is an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state. I do not mean to endorse or deny this view; rather, I have merely tried to suggest the extent to which it is true for modern French philosophy, which can be seen, in part, as the history of various manifestations of the unhappy consciousness. I would also like to suggest that as part of that history, Sartre (despite his ideological pronouncements on behalf of “totality”) is part of the resistance to the will to totality and synthesis, a resistance whose hero is not Kojève, but which includes Wahl, Breton, and Derrida. It is in these figures, and not in any self-declared Hegelians, that Hegel’s thought has had its most profound and important impact on French philosophy.⁸⁰

76. See *Speech and Phenomena*, p. 129, 139.

77. See DERRIDA, *Of Grammatology*, p. 49-50.

78. See “Force and Signification,” *Writing and Difference*, p. 11, and *Of Grammatology*, p. 61: “[...] the origin never even disappeared, it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin.” In other words, the future inscription of a signifier founds the past it signifies.

79. DUFRENNE, “La thèse de Jean Hyppolite,” *Fontaine*, 11 (1947), p. 470.

80. If Gwendoline Jarzyck and Pierre-Jean Labarrière are representative, then it is the Christian tradition of Henri Niel that is ascendent in French Hegel studies today. See NIEL, *De la médiation dans la philosophie de Hegel*, Paris, Aubier, 1945; JARZYCK and LABARRIÈRE, *Hegelianism*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1986. The theistic nature of the latter is brought out when Jarzyck and Labarrière argue that for Hegel, “the common becoming of man and world” is governed by an eternal law that spirit historically gives itself and develops (p. 317-319), a law set forth in the *Logic*, and which governs both nature and history.