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Keywords

Neo-Kantianism; Hegelianism; Éric Weil; Alexandre Kojève; objective reality; action; discourse; meaning; language; happiness; satisfaction.

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I. Introduction

The major works of Éric Weil (1904-1977) are still unavailable in English translation. Readers of Strauss's correspondence with Kojève may have taken notice of the former's unfavorable portrait of Weil, namely, of his purportedly unpleasant character, and of the lack of philosophical originality in his work. Thanks to the expansive body of critical literature dedicated to the short-lived *debate* on tyranny and wisdom, Strauss became a quintessential frame of reference in Kojève scholarship. Comparatively, though, we have no written trace of his life-long *discussion* with Weil to make the case that it exerted a profound influence on his thinking as far as the metaphysical problems of violence and discourse are concerned.

It is known, thanks to limited biographical evidence, that Weil and Kojève held divergent interpretations of Kant and Hegel, but there is no indication as to what their disagreement centered upon.[1] It is claimed that the Hegel lectures, which Weil followed very closely, were born from "relentless and interminable late-night discussions" that took place round his

[1] For a brief biographical account on Weil and Kojève, see Marco Filoni, *La double fin de l'histoire. Alexandre Kojève et Éric Weil* (Munich: Grin, 2012); See also Edoardo Raimondi, *Hegel tra Alexandre Kojève ed Éric Weil: storia, filosofia e politica all'ombra del sapere assoluto* (Milan: Mimesis, 2022).

dinner table.[2] Kojève's conception of his philosophical project will undergo a significant shift in orientation in the early years of his teaching. In his own admission, it was thanks to Weil that he became acquainted with the centrality of discursive coherence to modern neo-positivism.[3] One of his early lectures on "the idea of death in Hegel's philosophy" signposts the first instance when he began to talk about "the miracle of discourse" as the central paradigm of philosophical anthropology.[4] In 1936-1937, he delivered another semester course on the philosophy of Pierre Bayle, in which he analysed the conflict between reason and reality in terms of the former's claim to communicable, coherent, and demonstrable truth, while relegating diversity and contingency to an autonomous reality, beyond rationality and discourse.[5] Marco Filoni, who edited the posthumously published Bayle lectures, found extensive annotations made by Weil across the manuscript.

In the last year of the Hegel lectures, around 1938-1939, Weil formed a small reading group with Kojève to study Kant, and started writing his seminal work, *The Logic of Philosophy*, which will be resumed and completed after the war. Familiarity with the overall argument of Weil's *Logic*, as with the conceptual terminology deployed therein, is essential for readers of Kojève insofar as it sheds light on some stylistic oddities in the print editions of his Hegel lectures and in his post-war philosophical writings. As we shall see later, some italicised words or the ones placed between inverted commas in Kojève's writings are citations from Weil's conceptual terminology; these are perhaps the only material traces or footprints left of their otherwise undocumented discussion. As mentioned earlier, sparse biographical details hint at their dispute over how to read and interpret Kant and Hegel, but the causes of their disagreement can only be gleaned from a comparative study of their work. In their formative years, both Weil and Kojève studied with prominent neo-Kantians in Weimar Germany. Their divergent interpretation of the call to *return to Kant* is deserving of a separate study and cannot be addressed in this paper for lack of space. I will discuss instead the origins of their dispute over the interpretation of Hegel, and highlight its impact on their respective philosophical projects, focusing on the question of violence and discourse.

Weil put the concept of violence in the forefront of philosophical discourse. His systematic work on the subject pivots on the three-fold, logical, moral, and political, conception of violence; it aims to contain social conflict and individual rebellion in carefully orchestrated opportunities for open debate and discussion, and in legally regulated communal spaces for organized political action. In contrast with the systematic framing of the notion of violence *in* Weil, critical interpretations of Kojève often evoke the violence *of* his thought, or his "intellectual terrorism," but without finding any one text *in* his corpus of works to substantiate such claims.[6] Kojève who is said to have passed over in silence the notion of violence,[7] is paradoxically known for doing violence to Hegel, and to almost every other philosopher cited in his work.

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[2] Livio Sichirollo, "Éric Weil," in *Cahiers Éric Weil V*, ed. Jean Quillien and Gilbert Kirscher (Lille : Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1996), 17.

[3] Alexandre Kojève, *Concept, Time, and Discourse*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine Press, 2019), 14. Hereafter cited as *CTD*.

[4] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Paris : Gallimard, 1968), 542-545. Hereafter cited as *ILH*.

[5] Alexandre Kojève, *Identité et réalité dans le 'Dictionnaire' de Pierre Bayle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 17.

[6] Pierre Macherey, *The Object of Literature*, trans. David Macey, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 67.

[7] Howard Caygill wrongly accuses Kojève of avoiding any mention of violence and of attributing primacy to peaceful work over the capacity to resist "imperial reason." While this

This article aims to lift the curtain on Kojève's elusive conception of violence, arguing that his thinking on this question had been radically shaped and influenced by Weil, who remained one of his most prominent omniscient interlocutors, during and after the Hegel lectures. For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with Weil, I shall summarise the argument put forth in his seminal work *The Logic of Philosophy*, which was intended as a refutation of Kojève's Hegelianism. In response to Weil, Kojève dedicated the last year of his teaching as well as his post-war philosophical writings to engage the regulative function of discursive reason and the politics of compromise, which, in his view, threaten with the most radical forms of violence to the extent that they aim to repress rather than resolve conflict. But in what follows, I start with the context and causes of the virtually unknown and understudied Weil-Kojève dispute, situating its deeper roots in their respective experiences of exile.

II. Narratives of Exile between Ontology and Metaphysics

In a draft preface to his system of knowledge, Kojève wrote, in the summer of 1956, that he intended his book project to be read as "an attempt to 'justify' discursively the events that began to develop in Moscow in 1917."[8] This is what he had in mind, in 1931, when he explored the metaphysical foundations of modern philosophy within the horizon of the crisis in physics.[9] Cast in a primal swamp-like world "of death and killing," with no firm ground to stand on, and no shelter in sight, the philosopher described in *Atheism* "will run until he drowns," while witnessing "the destruction of things," and the presence of absence in dark nights, ghost towns, and deserts.[10] In this exilic geography, the world had lost its objective homogeneity as *Gegen-stand*, as the non-I which stands over against the subjective certainty of the Cartesian ego. Death is everywhere; out there, in a hostile and treacherous nature, and on the mind of self-destructive fellow humans preying upon each other. In addition to capturing Kojève's clandestine border-crossing experience from Moscow to Europe at the start of the 1920s, these passages describe a primordial "extra-religious" antagonism in the guise of the intuited givenness of theism and atheism.

Atheism was written from start to finish as a sustained monologue interrupted half-way through by a brief parenthesis on suicide, killing, and murder. There is neither a build-up nor a follow up to this parenthesis, which was left suspended in a metaphysical limbo. Violence erupts in a world, which was otherwise withheld by the equilibrium of power between the positive forces represented by the theistic notion of the otherworldly and the negative forces represented by the atheistic reduction of anything outside the world to nothing. In that initial *non-discursive* state of pure affects, a peaceful theist consciousness relegates "the unqualified something" onto a divine non-existence outside the world, while the refusal of an atheist to call this unqualified content God, is generally tolerated. "The theist lives in the theistic world, the atheist in the atheistic one, and each of them can live in their own world… as the scientist, the active person, the *homo religiosus*, and so on."[11]

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reading is a more accurate summary of Weil's philosophy, it betrays a general misunderstanding of Kojève's approach to the metaphysical problem of reality in his work. See Howard Caygill, *On Resistance: A Philosophy of Defiance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 78.

[8] Kojève, *CTD*, 7.

[9] Kojève's early writings on physics foreground his interest in ancient and modern cosmology from the standpoint of Kantian metaphysics and its attempt to set philosophy on the secure path of a science.

[10] Alexandre Kojève, *Atheism*, trans. Jeff Love (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 77.

[11] Ibid., 122.

A mysterious form of violence appears in the middle of the book, bringing the otherwise peaceful co-existence of theism and atheism into a deadly confrontation. Neither divine, inflicted upon the world from without, nor triggered by religious dispute in the mundane world; the violence in question "annihilates the *difference*" that separates being from nonbeing, homogeneity from heterogeneity, the something from its something-other or the other-than-itself.[12] It is not so much the existence or appearance of "otherness" that is at stake as the annihilation of difference, the dissolution of the *borderline* between something and its other. Faced with this irruptive moment of radical violence, *Atheism* is left unfinished because, Kojève says, "we must understand all this metaphysically. To be sure, nonbeing is not, it is nothing, and for this reason it cannot appear and be present in the world, it cannot permeate it… yet the 'impregnation' of being by it, is the impregnation by nothing… the continuity of being."[13] Heterogeneity, which appears in the "border" between the living and the dead, is first and foremost a metaphysical question at the extreme limits of being and appearance, or ontology and phenomenology.[14] Kojève will soon realise that this elusive border was constantly dissolving,[15] when it should be, instead, maintained as irreducible opposition to preserve the two opposed terms while sustaining their active conflict.[16] In *Atheism*, every attempt to define difference terminates in a metaphysical cul-de-sac.[17]

Before he turned his back on the swamp-like world of the philosopher, Kojève reflected on the manifestations of heterogeneity in destruction, killing, and murder. Surely, he says, "killing an individual" is not like breaking a plate or killing an animal. If continuity in being and existence is left undisturbed, there is no difference between killing inanimate entities, organic life-forms, or a human individual. In all these instances, destruction and killing actualise existential finitude or objective obsolescence. Destroying an object will only impact "the spatiotemporal continuity of its existence,"[18] while killing organic life or an individual person, understood as such, will destroy "the continuity of their history."[19] In the first instance, we are talking about transition from one form of being to another form of being within the same material support. In the second instance, one existence transitions into another one within the same organic world. Inanimate objects exist in the present, while organic life is defined by the cyclical rebirth of the past in the present, and the return of the future death to its original past, to be reborn again. Now, murder, according to Kojève, introduces a disturbance in time, and what is murdered is neither present qua inanimate object nor reduced to a biological cycle of uninterrupted creation and decay; it is neither the continuity of being nor that of existence that is at stake. The question of murder is metaphysical, in the sense that it is about the annihilation of reality. "This is the starting point

[12] Ibid., 183.
[13] Ibid., 73-74.
[14] "Border" as denotation of heterogeneity is profusely deployed in *Atheism*, see for instance: 58-59, 63, "border as limitation by nothing," 74, "border between being and non-being," 83-88.
[15] Kojève, *Atheism*, 15.
[16] *Kant* articulates the metaphysical notion of "irreducible-opposition" as fundamental grounding of life in terms of Kantian-Newtonian positive-negative forces that do not cancel each other out.
[17] This important detail was overlooked in Esposito's comments on *Atheism* and other Kojevean texts,
[18] Kojève, *Atheism*, 70.
[19] Ibid., 71.

and 'material' of philosophy."[20] Murderous violence abstracts and separates the concept from its material support, being from its non-being, existence from non-existence, and literally, turns back the hands of time. If we try to understand destruction, killing, and murder in the context of our modern-day environmental concerns; climate crisis can no longer be framed as climate *change* in the sense of a cycle of death and re-birth. What is at stake is a murderous act against nature, the annihilation of the species, and the beginning of a new epoch in geological time. The murderous violence, unleashed against the real, which is evoked in Kojève's *Atheism* thus bears strong resonances with our contemporary notion of the Anthropocene.

The introduction to the print edition of the Hegel lectures takes us back to the swamp-like world evoked in *Atheism*, thus highlighting Kojève's philosophical orientation away from a nihilistic line of thought. Murder, killing, destruction, and suicide had to be differentiated in their metaphysical dimension and one will have to explain why there is life and not total annihilation despite the omnipresence of the latter in the former. Accordingly, the violence at stake in the master-slave dialectic is not inflicted on animal life in the continuity of biological time, nor on inanimate objects in the continuity of their material spatiality. The struggle to the death for recognition is an absurd act of violence which stems from the encounter of two equal forms of subjective certainty. Unable to derive any knowledge of its autonomous absolute reality or absolute value, subjective certainty is in doubt as to whether its self-attributed reality and value are true or false, delusional, or even mad.

The first murderous fight, which initiated the master-slave dialectic in the Hegel lectures, is neither an act which destroys being, nor the killing of a spatiotemporal existence through the interruption of its historical continuity. In the violence triggered by the desire for recognition, total annihilation appears in a flash, in the borderline where otherness is dissolved. Such a radical act of violence would, therefore, obliterate the difference between one's madness and the madness of the other, between the divine non-existence of the theist, and the nothing of the atheist. Accordingly, the master-slave dialectic is predicated on murderous violence, which nevertheless generates "historical time" and not total annihilation. Unlike "cosmic or physical time in which the Present takes primacy," or "biological time" which is characterized by the primacy of the Past, historical time is defined by the primacy of the Future.[21] While cosmic time maintains the object as absolute presence, and biological time is reproduced through and as memory, only human time is conceived in the future-oriented project and as such. The latter introduces discontinuity in cosmic and biological time in the guise of murderous violence. Kojève's emphasis on the primacy of the future and on the "project" is often evoked with either Koyré or Heidegger in mind, but I would argue that his "*conceptual* understanding of empirical reality," as being "equivalent to a *murder*,"[22] was in part inspired by his conversation with Weil on the metaphysical dimension of discourse.

The spectre of Weil looms behind every passage in the lectures where Kojève doubles up his metaphysical description of murderous violence with a reflection on the power of competing *discourses* over the truth of the master in slavish consciousness. The border between the homogeneity of being and the structured continuity of empirical existence is "the concrete Real (of which we speak), [the] Real revealed by discourse, and Discourse revealing a real."[23] Such discursive framings of murder were not given much emphasis in *Atheism*. It thus appears that from the very start of his teaching, Kojève appropriated Weil's definition of discourse as

[20] Ibid., 69.
[21] Kojève, *IRH*, 134-135.
[22] Ibid., 140.
[23] Ibid., 178.

the sublimation of murderous violence. It is in this sense that his master-slave dialectic begins in a decision to opt for discourse over violence. The future slave will utter a *prayer,* beseeching the future master to spare them. As for the future master, they will issue an *order* to the future slave to stop praying and get back to work.

The experience of exile also plays a central role in the philosophy of Weil; it poignantly captures a visceral and very personal reflection on violence in the horizon of the Holocaust. But from the outset, and instead of lingering on the metaphysical temporality of violence, whether it interrupts and disturbs the cosmic present or the biological past, Weil believed that "what matters is not the Holocaust, but rather what comes out of the flames."[24] As far as he is concerned, he already lost his community and witnessed its death, which means that he can neither lose it again nor re-live its destruction. He is contented with the idea that he survived the catastrophe, and all things considered, life goes on and it remains bearable.[25] Weil's conception of violence is not predicated, as in Kojève, on the distinction between destruction, killing, and murder. Violence may take different forms, but like trauma, it remains impermeable to signification.

Weil came out of his exilic experience with a different outlook on the origins of philosophy and its role in maintaining the memory of (sovereign) violence while thwarting its eruptions thanks to reason and discourse. He does not start with the descent of subjective certainty into the Kojevean murderous swamps of madness. The exilic ground is given a socio-political dimension and not a psychological or metaphysical one. Desire is not articulated as a destructive libidinal force; it has always already found its regulative idea in practical life, in the primacy of community over individuality, and in the shared language of tradition. Weil did not see any masters, in the Kojevean sense of "the first Man" who initiated a struggle for recognition for pure prestige. There are only pseudo-masters and ex-slaves. When reflecting on violence from the standpoint of its perpetrators, Weil felt that loss was on their side, because, so he says, "we have never been equal, and because we are heirs to slaves… who neither had a *discourse* nor needed one, but who lived and worked thanks to a *language*."[26]

If for Kojève, exile brings philosophy to the metaphysical brinks of the real, for Weil, exile opens a path towards language as the bare life of lost community and the ruins on which a new one will rise. The exiled faces violence alone as an individual; a critical moment which marks the birth of ontology. The anti-Weilian philosopher who lost the comfort and certainty of their community would want to make sense of violence, but since they have no one to talk to, they will have to abandon discussion and develop an ontological discourse. In this discourse, the interlocutors are not bound by the interests of their communities; they turn their attention to the uniqueness and totality of being. In Weil's view, the only way out of the ontological discourse, qua the sphere of violence, is to set philosophy on a secure path to a science of meaning.

Philosophy begins when we are deliberately forced to make difficult decisions. Each philosophical discourse must decide what content should be given to the pure form of this self-grounding decision. For Kojève, the decision comes down to a choice between God against oneself and oneself against God, a choice between freedom and slavery, historical time and divine eternity. For Weil, on the other hand, the decision is for or against philosophy; an absurd, non-discursive, a-reasonable choice between violence and discourse, which is

[24] Éric Weil, *Logique de la philosophie*, (Paris : Vrin, 1950), 187. Hereafter cited as *LP*.
[25] Weil, *LP*, 39.
[26] Ibid., 39.

moreover made outside time.[27] Is the *historical* "decision for or against God," which as Kojève says, "has no 'reason' other than the decision itself,"[28] one and the same thing as the *a-historical* decision for or against violence (which is, from Weil's perspective, a decision for or against philosophy, reason, and discourse)? As we shall see next, the Kojève-Weil dispute hinges upon the divergent answers put forth in response to these questions.

III. The Weil-Kojève Dispute

When Raymond Queneau's edition of the *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* appeared in print, in 1947, Kojève was already familiar with Weil's *Logic of Philosophy*, in manuscript form. In a letter to Strauss, he described the work as "very impressive" and as "very 'Hegel-Marxist' and certainly influenced by [his] course. But it ends à la Schelling: poetry~ philosophy, and wisdom as silence."[29] In his post-war philosophical writings, Kojève will make this same reproach against an entire "cohort of neo-Kantians," while considering the lapse of Heidegger's philosophy into poetic fragments as being symptomatic of contemporary thought and its reactionary tendencies.[30] What made him think that Weil's *Logic* was both "impressive" and disappointing? Why did he take issue with its turn to poetry and language? Why are the former and the latter, in his view, nothing else but non-discursive forms of silence? Tentative answers to these questions are provided in his portrayal of Kantian intellectual contentedness in the last year of his Hegel lectures.

In the opening lecture of 1938-1939, Kojève reminded his audience that since they accepted the "starting point" of the *Phenomenology*, it would be futile to contest its "final result." He then defied his detractors to raise any "serious objection of this kind," and limited "discussion," which he signposts with inverted commas, to Hegel's premises.[31] This provocative claim did not fall on the deaf ears of his audience. In the last year of his teaching, Kojève limited his lecture to twenty minutes, and then gave the floor to Aaron and Fessard to present their objections to his conclusions. Weil, on the other hand, took issues with Kojève's premises and conclusions, and even before he put forth his objections in his *Logic*, italics, and inverted commas in the print editions of the lectures signpost the gist of his alternative interpretation of Hegel. These punctuations tell us that he had fully accepted and even appropriated Kojève's idea of wisdom as the end of philosophy, and the total domination of nature as the end of history, but he believed that both ends are infinite tasks, which should be resumed in post-Hegelian coherent discourses.[32] Moreover, Weil contested the metaphysical role of violence as the force or energy underpinning the desire for recognition. Similarly, he rejected the idea of primordial or authentic mastery, arguing that we have always been slaves, in the sense of belonging to discursive civilised communities, which have freely organised themselves to struggle against the natural world out of necessity, and for the practical end of surviving the violence of nature. In his view, the only "legitimate

[27] Ibid., 61.

[28] Kojève, *ILH*, 293.

[29] Kojève to Strauss, April 8, 1947, in Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 236.

[30] Alexandre Kojève, *Essai d'une histoire raisonnée de la philosophie païenne*, *vol. 1 : les présocratiques*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 161-66. Hereafter cited as *EHRPP1*.

[31] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 82. Hereafter cited as *IRH*.

[32] Weil, *LP*, 401.

desire" is the pursuit of reason and happiness rather than the realisation of absolute knowing, perfect satisfaction, and universal recognition.[33]

Kojève understood that Weil's objections are not theological in nature, as in the case of Fessard, socio-political in scope, as in the case of Aaron, or expressions of mystical experiences, as in the case of Bataille. Notwithstanding, Weil was, indeed, speaking from a neo-Kantian moral position and that must have struck a chord with Kojève. When he brought the Kantian philosopher's *Selbstzufriedenheit* or self-contentedness face-to-face with the Hegelian Wise Man's *Befriedigung* or satisfaction in a final showdown, he was, therefore, speaking directly to Weil, thus stressing the irreconcilable moral and political positions underpinning their divergent understanding of the ultimate ends of philosophy.

> The Wise Man is *satisfied* by what he *is* [while] the Philosopher, is a *discontented* man… by the sole fact of not *knowing* that he is satisfied… [and] he is discontented because he does not know what he *wants*… He has desires, like everyone… [but he is unable to *understand* his desires] … as long as he does not fit them into the coherent *whole* of his discourse that reveals his existence… The simple fact of not understanding his well-being, his pleasure, his joy, or his happiness, or even his "ecstasy," would suffice to make him discontented, unsatisfied.[34]

For Kojève, contentedness is closer to "animal happiness" than it is to the specifically human, and humanising concepts of satisfaction or recognition. Weil's rejection of the latter and the former would leave the master-slave dialectic with neither a beginning nor an end, thus undermining Kojève's interpretation of Hegel as a coherent discourse aimed at articulating the complex reality of struggle and work. A happy community, unperturbed by the desire for recognition, is the embodiment of the "'Chinese' ideal of the 'citizen' … who is made completely 'brutish' in and by the *security* of [their] *well-being*." Like Nietzsche, Kojève did not exclude "the possibility that the 'Chinese' ideal of happiness might become *universal*."[35] The Nietzschean ideal of happiness, laden as it is with controversial racialized overtones, is specifically evoked with reference to the Kantian striving for intellectual contentedness and moral perfection.[36] If free negating action and coherent discourse are conceptualised as infinite tasks within the ever-receding horizon of universal recognition and perfect satisfaction, "historical being remains inexplicable: neither the world of *concrete* things in which they live, nor the history they create by *temporal* free acts is understood."[37]

Kojève was very attentive to the objections raised by Weil to such an extent that he devoted most of his post-war philosophical writings to contest the untenable position of Kantian contentedness. Already in the final year of his teaching, and in anticipation of his debate with Strauss, he described the only "serious dilemma" facing his universal and homogeneous state in the following formula: "Plato or Hegel… that is… *theo*-logy or Philo-*sophy*."[38] The hyphens seem to suggest yet another concealed dilemma marked by *theo-sophy* and philo-logy; mysticism and language. What is at stake in the folding of the dilemma Plato-Hegel in language-mysticism?

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[33] Ibid., 20.
[34] Kojève, *IRH*, 86-87.
[35] Ibid., 84
[36] Kojève claims, after Nietzsche, that had Kant lived in Asia, he would most probably be a Buddhist. See Kojève, *Kant*, 50.
[37] Kojève, *IRH*, 130.
[38] Ibid., 97.

By the early 1950s, Kojève will make a swift exit from his *debate* with Strauss on tyranny, claiming that one cannot engage in such debates interminably in total disregard of their foregrounding historical, political, and economic realities. It is worth remembering that from a Kojevean perspective, the perfect integration of tyranny and wisdom, of absolute knowing and the radical form of tyrannical action that institutes a universal and homogeneous order, is paradoxically predicated on the disappearance of the dualism of tyranny and wisdom. In Kojève's view, this is a limit-case, a mere idea, whose truth depends on historical objective reality for its realisation and validity. Conversely, the interminable *discussion* on happiness and satisfaction is framed as an infinite task; it is the philosopher, and not the tyrant, who says that the ideal of wisdom is unattainable. Does Kantian contentedness open a void, an unsurpassable gap between Plato and Hegel? Did the discussion with Weil disturb the debate between tyranny and wisdom? What would Strauss's unhappy tyrant make of the philosopher's unhappiness? As we shall see in the next section, the philosopher as expert in the science of meaning, described in Weil's *Logic*, does not pose any significant challenge to Strauss's philosopher as the pathologist of tyranny in political life. Despite their mutual dislike of one another, both Strauss and Weil are primarily concerned with safeguarding philosophy against the collapse of discourse and reason into violence, or against "the Universal and Final Tyrant," who will "present himself as …the highest philosophical authority, as the supreme exegete of the only true philosophy."[39]

IV. Community, Discontent, and Containment in Weil's *Logic of Philosophy*

In this section, I go in more depth into Weil's *Logic* to get a better sense of its objections to Kojève's reading of Hegel and Kant on the question of violence and discourse. Each chapter of *The Logic* is devoted to the exposition of existential attitudes subsumed under one designated *category*. Some categories disintegrate into new *attitudes*, while others *resume* surpassed ones to push forward the logic of philosophy to the extreme limits of sense. Weil's categorial existential attitudes and logical resumptions are often interpreted either in a linear way or as an open circular development whereby the last category recommences the logic of philosophy from the viewpoint of its first counterpart to prevent absolute knowing from closing in on itself. This open-ended process is meant to enable the impulse of philosophising to continue interminably on the ever-receding path to wisdom.

The Logic is indeed, as Kojève says, a "big book" which is meant to be read repeatedly, and it is not my intention to capture its key arguments in detail or bring them to bear on Weil's systematic philosophy. I am only interested in showing how the categories of the *Logic* were intended as a refutation of the premises and conclusions of Kojève's Hegelianism, not by inventing new concepts, but by reframing and reordering the ones put forth by the lectures. Notably, Kojève passed over quickly the disappearance of the master in the existential impasse of pure enjoyment to unpack, in much greater details, the slavish ideologies of stoic boredom, sceptical nihilism, and the unhappy consciousness of the religious person. "This master without a slave, this slave without a master," Kojève says, is "the *bourgeois*, the private property-owner."[40] On the other hand, Weil's *Logic* does not begin with the struggle for recognition, deeming such a dramatic overture unnecessary insofar as there have always been masters and slaves. The Hegelian negative is thus put to work straightaway, without explaining its anthropogenetic, ontological, or metaphysical origins, and without clarifying what it aims to achieve. I will argue that the end that Weil had in mind can be gleaned from the thematic

[39] Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 211.
[40] Kojève, *IRH*, 63.

grouping of his categories into clusters of attitudes concerned with community, discontent, and containment.

A. Community

The first through the sixth categories (truth, nonsense, true and false, certainty, discussion, and object), are the grounding concepts of community. Both Kojève and Weil want to validate the primacy of action over discourse, but for the latter, "the man of action" is conceptualised as an attitude with a self-conscious category only at the very end of *the Logic*. As for the multitude of "real men" encountered in the first six categories, they are simply *homo faber* in the sense of makers and technicians rather than fighters and workers. In the constitutive categories of community, there is no primordial act of violence, such as a fight to the death for recognition. However, the violence inflicted on Socrates haunts *The Logic* from start to finish as the guilty conscience of the reasonable community in the making. For Weil, subjective certainty is neither in doubt about its sanity, nor particularly concerned that its reality or value are not recognised. In the category of certainty, there is no way for us to separate truth from nonsense; they both make sense as lived experiences, even though they cannot be articulated in and as discourse, thus making reality unstable and ever-changing. Reason acquires its content from a multitude of *practical* discourses which organise active life. Work is undertaken to remain at the level of natural needs and to defend oneself against the violence of nature rather than the violence of a master. The organic solidarity of the community of workers is further cemented with organised life under science (in the category of discussion), and organised life of the state (in the category of the object). The philosopher must reckon with the former and the latter to avoid the fate of Socrates.[41]

B. Discontent

The second set of categories (ego, God, condition, consciousness, intelligence, personality, the absolute, and the oeuvre), describes the gradual descent of *the Logic* into discontent to demonstrate the impasse of individuality and Hegelian striving for satisfaction. If Kojève's "wise man" is perfectly satisfied, Weil's philosopher is constantly discontented with themselves in the categories of ego, God, and intelligence. No sooner does the struggle for recognition appear in the category of personality, it is perverted into struggles for "authenticity" whereby individuals strive to impose their unique value on their followers. But the latter are volatile, and do not submit to personality in the same way slaves submit to a master. Conceived as pure sentiment, personality does not engage in conversation with others; it communicates through the image, which carries within itself "the chaotic world of the living dead."[42]

If struggle over the image — which communicates nothing — in the category of personality ultimately ends in defeat, then the victorious philosopher of the absolute no longer needs language because they realized their negativity. Now that they are left with nothing to negate, they will "direct their negativity towards themselves."[43] As far as Weil is concerned, this is well and truly the point at which one history ends and another one begins. Human negativity had run its course, grand narratives lost their mass appeal, and we are left with individual revolts against the universal. However, one final challenge remains. The category of the oeuvre, which comes on the heels of the absolute, is particularly laden with important

[41] Weil, *LP*, 148.
[42] Ibid., 301.
[43] Ibid., 324.

implications in Kojève's thought. For Weil, the oeuvre or project of the Hegelian philosopher emerges from the ruins of the absolute; its dangerous appeal resides in its ability to threaten language at its core insofar as it voids out meaning, reason, and discourse. Resonances of what Weil might have grasped in the dangerous appeal of the oeuvre can be seen in today's populist politics, or in any similar projects which reduce criticism and protest to fake news, conspiratorial thinking, and online discussions. In Weil's time as in ours, the oeuvre presents itself as the only viable alternative emerging out of the personality-led and image-saturated politics of chaos and so-called post-truth societies. This is why Weil was understandably horrified by the idea of the "project" because if the oeuvre is conceived as such, "there has to be a preparatory epoch, a sacrificed generation, a prolonged time of misery."[44] It is Trump's project to make America great again, the promise of religious fundamentalism to establish a homogeneous community of believers, or the vision of Mark Zuckerberg to connect the world in his metaverse.

C. Containment

As we draw closer to the end of *The Logic*, the last set of categories, (finitude, action, meaning, and wisdom) prepare the ground for the reconciliation of pseudo-masters and ex-slaves in a shared discourse. These post-historical categories are designed to contain the violence originating from the categories of discontent, which reached their culmination in the oeuvre. Finitude provides a vintage point from which to observe, on the one hand, the hubris of intelligence and personality, and on the other hand, the ruins of the absolute and the oeuvre. Faced with this devastation, Weil turns to organized work, which in his view can make our lives meaningful because work belongs to the realm of language and *praxis*, and not to the realm of discourse alone. As such, it has deeper and concrete roots in a silent commitment to the continuity of community. It is for this reason that the category of action in *The Logic* appears at the end, but not in the sense of the *homo faber* glorified at the start of the book, but as a *homo theoreticus* who is called upon to manage pockets of rebellion and discontent.

Can we transform the world in such a way that revolt ceases to be unreasonable or silent to become discursive instead? This is the challenge facing the category of action at the end of *The Logic*. As a category of resumption, action compels the reader to retrace their steps back from the absolute to the condition, which will thus teach us something new about work as a purposeful activity beyond serving the "conditioned conditions" of our animal needs and desires. We thus learn that rather than being directed against nature, our struggle should be rechanneled against something within our own nature, and more importantly against what Weil calls "social nature." Hard work pays off, we feel *empowered* by gradual degrees of mastery acquired through life learning and professional development.[45] Masters disappear in their enjoyment, while slaves evolve thanks to their organized existence within the state. Logical resumption will throw us further back to the third, fourth and fifth categories, "the true and false," "certainty," and "discussion" to remind ourselves of the vulnerable position of community between the irrevocable loss of tradition and the omnipresent violence of individuality.

The last three categories of Weil's *Logic*, which evoke the language of poetry and faith, tradition and the sacred, loop back the conclusion of the book to its lengthy three-part introduction on philosophy and violence, thus conjuring up, once again, a non-discursive truth accessible to anyone who wants to be a "pure disinterested gaze."[46] The philosophy of

[44] Ibid., 357.
[45] Ibid., 209.
[46] Ibid., 32.

Weil is trapped between the "no longer" and "not yet," in the hope of "reconquering the spontaneity of philosophizing."[47] But the philosopher qua meaning-maker will never achieve an absolute self-coincidence with philosophy qua "science of meaning." As far as discontent is concerned, the philosopher is given privileged access to the realm of language, as they alone can "become an eye open onto the world... beyond becoming and destruction, [where] language reaches the point of the silence of the gaze."[48] Weil's logic of philosophy marches freely and voluntarily to the last frontiers of the coherent discourse, to the Heideggerian pealing stillness of poetry, leaving the reader with that most dreaded question, "then what?" The only answer left is either philosophy or violence. Life may go on without reason or meaning, but then again, is it worth living? An existence devoid of meaning can be either animal or divine. But Weil rules out the former and the latter as contradictions in terms, adding that the human being "is not God because they live in discourse, and the animal is not human because it does not have a discourse,"[49] and if we choose to abandon discourse without becoming gods or animals, we cannot abandon the sphere of language. Trying to overcome language is like jumping over one's shadow. Weil's *Logic* concludes in the position of the Platonic philosopher, who is, in Kojève's words, still bothered by "the silent" and "ecstatic" vision of "a gap, a break in continuity."[50] Confronted with the gap between the real and the signifier, philosophy takes its flight from the categories of "discussion" and the "object" into "poetical imagination."[51] Now standing on the brinks of language, the only way forward is inevitably a climb down into the bottomless abyss of the *logos;* either a philosophy in fragments devoid of systematic coherence, or mystical silence. Alternately, philosophy will have to pull itself back from the brinks of language to retrace its steps in the opposite direction and inevitably come face to face "*horribili dictu* with Marx."[52] Weil, Kojève claims in 1956, "started as 'a good Hegelian' but has gone astray along a route that is leading him I know not where."[53]

V. The Peal of Stillness

Weil was more emphatic in his designation of violence as the central question in and for philosophy. Kojève, on the other hand, did not overtly name violence as the absolute other of reason and discourse. The term itself does not often appear in his writings, and when it does, it is evoked as a direct translation of the Hegelian *Gewalt* [violence], *Kraft* [force/strength], and *Scheidung* — the latter being the force of separation at work in analytic reason (*Verstand*).[54] In his later work, he often evokes the notion of violence in relation to the Kantian *Gewissen*. If the pure force of the *Gewalt* pertains to non-discursive action or *Kraft*, the *Scheidung* wrenches the word from its material support, or from its here and now, to incarnate it into a discursive concept. As for the violence of the *Gewissen*, it utters a Kantian categorical commandment, which impacts a concrete change in empirical existence.

Whether the work of violence or force takes place in the interaction between subjects or between the subject and the object; whether it is limited to a purely discursive and conceptual plane, or again, whether it is framed with a moral commandment or the exercise of authority,

[47] Ibid., 423, and 428.
[48] Ibid., 11.
[49] Ibid., 416.
[50] Kojève, *IRH*, 181
[51] Ibid., 182.
[52] Kojève. *EHRPP1*, 166.
[53] Kojève, *CTD*, 42.
[54] Kojève, *ILH*, 540-543.

in all these cases, it pertains to the Hegelian concept of the *Wirklichkeit* [reality]. In Kojève's view, this is the plane of objective-reality which was traditionally called metaphysics. In his post-war writings, he coined the term "energology" to capture the multilayered dimension of the Hegelian *Wirklichkeit* in free-historical-individuality, upon which he laid too much emphasis throughout his lectures.[55] As Angelica Nuzzo explains, the Hegelian "*Wirklichkeit* is the sediment or the objectivization of reason's activity, the solid reality assumed by an 'activity' (*Wirken*) that has shown and continues to show its efficacy (*Wirksamkeit*) in the world precisely by constituting and reconstituting this world."[56]

According to Kojève, philosophy turned away from reality because its theoretical reason conceptualizes reality at the antipode of the coherent, communicable, and demonstrable discourse. This is the central theme of his lectures on Bayle. From the standpoint of discursive reason, reality is the source of incomprehensible, non-discursive, contradictory, and primordial irruptive violence. On the other hand, Weil avoided the idea of mutual antagonism on which the Kojevean conception of objective reality rests, and aimed to proceed, following Kant, from the logic of philosophy to its practical applications in the sphere of politics and ethics *as if* there was no conflict whatsoever between discourse and action, or reason and reality. From Kojève's perspective, theoretical reason has not resolved its conflict with reality. "The only 'fault' of Logic is believing (or seeming to believe for the needs of a "polemical" cause… as Éric Weil wished to do) that this "logical contradiction" can be evaded [otherwise than in and through Silence]."[57]

In light of the evidence that I have so far gathered on the Kojève-Weil dispute, we may begin to identify further divergences in their philosophical positions. The 1934-1935 lecture on "The dialectic of the Real and the Phenomenological Method" had already anticipated the first six categories of the *Logic*, suggesting that it may have been written in conversation with Weil. "The isolated object… has no fixed and stable continuity (*Bestehen*) and is perpetually deformed or perturbed. Therefore, it cannot serve as a basis for a truth."[58] Moreover, and contrary to what Weil claims, "mathematical language is devoid of contradiction, certainty, and truth," and for that matter it is not "a genuine Discourse (Logos) that reveals the Real."[59] Still in conversation with Weil, Kojève will subsequently put a great deal of emphasis on the category of community in his 1952-1953 close reading of Kant. Foregrounded with "objective-reality" qua category of *inter-action*, community is said to enable the agent to "transform a present, causally determined by the past, in function of the future, through a freely conceived project."[60] Notwithstanding, Weil maintained the interplay of freedom and necessity at the basis of communal social existence, thus rendering "collective action" inconceivable, perpetually undermined by the political and moral limitations imposed on "the social and the historical human world."[61] At the antipode of Weil's "resumption" of the idea of community from the standpoint of the condition, Kojève frees the Kantian sub-category of community from causality, claiming that it is "the grounding category of freedom," rather than that of necessity.[62]

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[55] Kojève. *EHRPP1*, 304.
[56] Angelica Nuzzo, "Hegel's Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hegel*, ed. Dean Moyar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 349.
[57] Kojève, *CTD*, 224.
[58] Kojève, *IRH*, 177.
[59] Ibid., 178.
[60] Kojève, *Kant*, 133.
[61] Ibid., 170.
[62] Ibid., 169.

In Weil's *Logic*, the pendulum of the philosophical discourse is perpetually swinging between the antithetical poles of contentedness and discontent, nothing is settled, nothing is resolved, nothing is synthesized. We have an infinite task ahead of us. What is to be done, for instance, about environmental activism today? Would it be enough to offer climate protestors a platform to engage in verbal struggles while acknowledging them as a serious threat to the community and its way of life? What is to be done when the sites of discussion are or become contested spaces? This is also the predicament of any discussion on postcolonialism or neoliberalism and the irony of their communitarian containment within the discourse of the university. For Kojève we will have to be more attentive to the trees "which taught Socrates nothing," but "which teach Hegel that opinions and discussions are possible only because there *had been* cities in which men had discussions against a background of fighting and work, while they worked and fought for and because of their opinions."[63]

Weil is clearly on the side of the politics of compromise and (neo-Kantian) moralism. His philosophical system seeks to achieve the optimum neutralization of discontent, revolt, and antagonism by maintaining spaces and opportunities for debate and discussion. He acknowledges that philosophy is born from and often speaks the discourse of a community of masters freed from their subjection to natural needs, enjoying equal rights amongst themselves, and having at their disposal technical and scientific means to maintain their position of privilege and authority. The discourse of the master does not, however, make the struggle with nature disappear, while the language of the ex-slave is unable to make the demand for contentment go away.[64] In Weil's view, what has become problematic is discourse itself, and whether it can serve the politics of compromise; whether it can bridge the gap between technical discussion and elitist debates, between the pursuit of happiness and the determination of the condition. Weil seems to suggest that leaving the discourse of the master unchallenged is a small price to pay to keep our collective commitment to the idea of community steadfast. We thus keep calm and carry on. Conflicting interests are the open secret known to everyone but never discussed. To avoid rocking the boat of communitarian consensus, each citizen will have to act *as if* they were driven by the general interest of the community. Ideally, we would like to have an honest and open "debate" with one another, but in the meantime, we will have to make do with "technical discussions" to keep state institutions functional, and services deliverable with as little disruption as possible. By analogy, when faced with striking railway workers or underpaid nurses, we will not be having a *debate* about their demands, but we are deliberately incited to *discuss* the impact of strike action on commuters and patients.

That said, Weil is aware that Kantian moral consciousness is no longer contented with invoking its right to be critical; it wants to revolt but it also knows that if it does, nothing can stop another immoral act from contesting the legitimacy of its demands. If for instance "Black Lives Matter" represent a dissatisfied consciousness, "white lives" felt justified in the immoral act of opening fire on "black lives." For Weil, both camps are already alienated from the sphere of politics, and their moral consciousness is an expression of their respective "private lives."[65] The logic of philosophy must therefore find a common ground at the intersection of, what Weil calls, "slave language" and the "discourse of the master" to mediate our private lives, our conflicting interests, our competing worldviews, while safeguarding our open secret, the symbolic order that keeps us from abandoning reason and falling back on violence and nonsense. Notwithstanding, Kojève's philosophy offers an entirely different perspective on

[63] Kojève, *IRH*, 186.
[64] Weil, *LP*, 43.
[65] Ibid., 245.

our contemporary predicament as we stand on the brink of mythical violence. In that sense, his emphasis on the need for philosophical discourse to reckon with reality, and to find a coherent discursive articulation for the desire for universal recognition are demands reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's critique of violence in the realm of ends.

In his "Critique of Violence" (1921), Walter Benjamin differentiates the use of violence in the realm of means from its use in the realm of ends.[66] While the former is predicated on a double negation of violence which secures and preserves the legitimacy of a given order by violent means to achieve just ends; the latter is fate-imposed, sovereign, and primaeval, perhaps even beyond moral and legal considerations. In my view, The Kojève-Weil dispute over the interpretation of the desire for recognition and the master-slave dialectic in Hegel pertains to their divergent positions on the notion of violence in the realm of ends. Weil interpellated Kojève on a deeper level, insofar as their dispute reaches far back into their philosophical education at the confluence of neo-Kantian currents of ideas. He deployed the de-totalising concept of violence from a neo-Kantian position to prove that a lot remains to be done after Hegel. Conversely, in his post-war philosophical writings, Kojève revisited his system of knowledge from the standpoint of left Hegelianism to prove that a lot remains to be done within Kantianism, which constitutes, in his view, the site of an unresolved conflict between, on the one hand, the "Judeo-Christian" concept of free will or "active negativity" and, on the other hand, the "pagan" irreducible dualism of action and discourse.[67]

Considering that Kojève and Weil deliberately made only marginal mention of each other in a few cursory footnotes, it is difficult to say which of the two exerted more influence over the other. Neither of them reviewed the other's work, and the long-lasting interest each one of them had in his interlocutor's philosophical project did not materialize in a sustained correspondence or a public debate. But one thing is sure, had it not been for Kojève's lectures on Hegel, the philosophical legacy of Weil would have been entirely different in scope, impact, and subject matter. On the other hand, without his intense intellectual exchange with Weil, Kojève might have never found enough motivation to articulate and clarify the politics of his philosophical project throughout the 1950s.[68]

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[66] Walter, Benjamin, "The Critique of Violence," in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 236.

[67] Kojève, *Kant*, 9.

[68] In a letter addressed to Arendt, in April 1954, Koyré suspected that what motivated Kojève to resume work on his philosophical system had something to do with his intellectual rivalry with Weil. See Paola Zambelli, "23 Lettres inédites de Alexandre Koyré à Hannah Arendt (1951- 1963)," in *Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres* 1 (1997), 145.

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