

ON TYRANNY

LEO STRAUSS

CORRECTED AND EXPANDED EDITION

Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence

Edited by Victor Gourevitch
& Michael S. Roth

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
Chicago and London

Leo Strauss (1899–1973) was one of the preeminent political philosophers of the twentieth century. He is the author of many books, among them *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, *Natural Right and History*, and *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, all published by the University of Chicago Press. **Victor Gourevitch** is the William Griffin Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Wesleyan University. **Michael S. Roth** is the president of Wesleyan University and the author of several books, including *Memory, Trauma, and History*.

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London
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Printed in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 1 2 3 4 5

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-03013-5 (paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-226-03352-5 (e-book)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Strauss, Leo.

On tyranny : including the Strauss-Kojève correspondence / Leo Strauss ; edited by Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth — Corrected and expanded edition.
pages ; cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-226-03013-5 (paperback : alkaline paper) 1. Xenophon. Hieron. 2. Kojève, Alexandre, 1902–1968. Tyrannie et sagesse. English. 3. Kojève, Alexandre, 1902–1968—Correspondence. 4. Strauss, Leo—Correspondence. 5. Political science—Philosophy. 6. Despotism. I. Kojève, Alexandre, 1902–1968. II. Roth, Michael S., 1957– III. Gourevitch, Victor. IV. Title.

PA4494.H6S8 2013
321.9—dc23

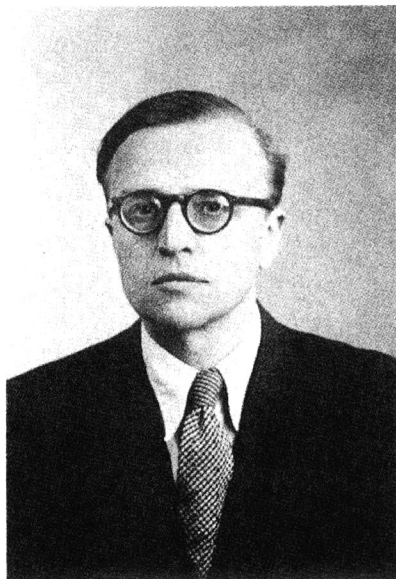
2012051428

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On Tyranny



Leo Strauss



Alexandre Kojève

Preface and Acknowledgments

On Tyranny, Leo Strauss's critical study of Xenophon's *Hiero*, was first published in 1948. A French edition appeared in 1954, which, in addition to Strauss's original study, included a French version of the *Hiero*, a slightly edited version of Alexandre Kojève's important review of Strauss's study, and a "Restatement" by Strauss that briefly replies to a review by Professor Eric Voegelin and goes on to challenge Kojève's review point by point. A volume containing essentially the same texts appeared in English in 1963. We are happy to be able to bring out a new edition of this now classic volume, enlarged by the full surviving correspondence between Strauss and Kojève.

We have taken the opportunity provided by this re-publication to correct various errors in the earlier edition, and to revise the translations. We are particularly grateful to Professor Seth Benardete for his careful review of the translation of the *Hiero*. The earlier version of Kojève's "Tyranny and Wisdom" required such extensive revisions, that we for all intents and purposes re-translated it.

We have restored the important concluding paragraph of Strauss's "Restatement" which appeared in the original French edition but was omitted from the subsequent American edition. Unfortunately we did not find a copy of Strauss's English-language original, and we therefore had to translate the published French translation of that paragraph.

In our Introduction we chose to concentrate on the issues raised in the texts that are included in the present volume, and in particular on the debate between Strauss and Kojève. Readers interested in the broader context of that debate will find it discussed more fully in Victor Gourevitch, "Philosophy and Politics," I–II, *The Review of Metaphysics*, 1968, 32: 58–84, 281–328; and in "The Problem of Natural Right and the Fundamental Alternatives in *Natural Right and History*," in *The Crisis of Liberal Democracy*, K. Deutsch and W. Soffer eds., SUNY Press, 1987, pp. 30–47; as well as in Michael Roth's *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth Century France* (Cornell 1988); and in "The Problem of Recognition: Alexandre Kojève and the End of History," *History and Theory*, 1985, 24: 293–306.

We have been reluctant to come between the reader and the texts,

and have therefore kept editorial intrusions to a minimum. Unless otherwise indicated, they are placed between wedge-brackets: < >.

Michael Roth found the Strauss letters among Kojève's papers in the course of research for his *Knowing and History*. Kojève's surviving letters to Strauss are preserved in the Strauss Archive of the University of Chicago Library. We wish to thank Nina Ivanoff, Kojève's legatee, for permission to publish the Strauss letters, and Professor Joseph Cropsey, Executor of the Literary Estate of Leo Strauss, as well as the University of Chicago Archives, for permission to publish the Kojève letters. We are also grateful to Mr. Laurence Berns for placing the photograph of Strauss at our disposal and to Nina Ivanoff for placing the photograph of Kojève at our disposal.

Victor Gourevitch transcribed, translated, and annotated the Correspondence, and wrote the Prefatory Note to it. We collaborated on the Introduction.

V.G., M.S.R.
June 1990

Preface to the University of Chicago Edition

We welcome this opportunity to restore the acknowledgment (unfortunately omitted from the first printing) of the efforts of Jenny Strauss Clay, George Elliot Tucker, Suzanne Klein, and Heinrich Meier in the early stages of transcribing Strauss's letters, and of the help Herbert A. Arnold and Krishna R. Winston gave us in reviewing portions of the translation of the correspondence.

We are pleased to have been able to restore the concluding paragraph of Strauss's "Restatement" as he wrote it. Laurence Berns very kindly placed his copy of the English original at our disposal.

We have corrected the typographical errors that vigilant readers were good enough to point out, and have brought some of the editorial notes up to date.

V.G., M.S.R.
September 1999

Preface to the Corrected and Expanded Edition

Strauss first published his “Restatement” (*Mise au point*) in the French *De la tyrannie* (Gallimard, 1954). He chose to omit two paragraphs from it in the English-language version which he published in *What is Political Philosophy?* (1959) and again in the “Revised and Enlarged” English *On Tyranny* (1963). We took the liberty of restoring the important last paragraph of the French “Restatement” in our earlier editions of *On Tyranny*, and we have been persuaded to restore the other omitted paragraph as well. It appears on page 193 of the present printing. We reproduce it from the clean and clear typescript in Nathan Tarcov’s possession. We are most grateful to him for placing it at our disposal. We do not regard annotations by unidentified hands on typescript drafts as authoritative, anymore than we do speculations based on them. We wish also to thank Nathan Tarcov, Hilail Gildin, Heinrich Meier, David K. O’Connor, Emmanuel Patard, and Olivier Sedeyn, for alerting us to omissions and misprints in the previous version.

V. G., M. S. R.
May 2012

Introduction

Over the last decade there has been a lively debate about the nature of modernity. Can it be that we have passed from a modern to a post-modern age? And, if we have made this transition, how can we evaluate the history that has led to it? Or is it the case that the transition is marked by our inability to make such evaluations? This new edition of *On Tyranny* recalls two earlier positions about modernity: those of Leo Strauss and Alexandre Kojève. In their debate about tyranny, and in their correspondence, we see articulated the fundamental alternatives regarding the possibility and the responsibilities of philosophy now.

The debate between them is most unusual. It ranges from comparatively superficial political differences to basic disagreements about first principles. As a rule, when disagreement is this deep and this passionate, there is little serious discussion. Here, the parties' desire to understand the issues is greater than their attachment to their own position. That is one reason why they state their positions so radically. They know perfectly well that, for the most part, it is not sensible to reduce the philosophical or the political alternatives to only two. But the exercise does help to bring the issues into crisp focus.

The advantages in presenting these various related texts together are obvious. The major drawback in doing so is perhaps less immediately apparent: by being made part of a larger whole, Strauss's original *On Tyranny* becomes difficult to see on its own terms. Yet it is worth the effort. *On Tyranny* is a close reading of Xenophon's short dialogue between Hiero, tyrant of Syracuse, and Simonides, the wise

poet, about the burdens of tyranny and about how these burdens might be lightened. Strauss was an exemplary reader. He read with respect and an open mind. Because he read in order to learn, he read critically. But nothing was more alien to him than to use texts as pretexts for displays of his own ingenuity. *On Tyranny* was his first published full-length analysis of a single classical work, and it remains the most accessible of his close readings. It seems fitting that it should have been devoted to a dialogue. He very reasonably assumes that careful writers choose the form in which they present their thought, and that the difference between a dialogue and a treatise is therefore of philosophic import. Accordingly, he attends as closely to a dialogue's setting, characters, and actions, as he does to its speeches. *On Tyranny* illustrates how much one's understanding of a dialogue's argument can be enriched by such close attention to its dramatic features. Strauss's way of reading goes directly counter to Hegel's view that the dramatic features of the dialogue are mere embellishments. The difference between the two approaches is vividly illustrated by the contrast between Kojève's Hegelian reading of Plato, and Strauss's reading of the same dialogues. In discussing these differences Strauss succinctly states his principles of interpretation, and he goes on to comment briefly but interestingly on a number of dialogues which he never discussed in print. This series of letters about Plato—beginning with Kojève's letter of 11 April 1957, and ending with Strauss's letter of 11 September 1957—might usefully be read in conjunction with Strauss's interpretation of the *Hiero*. It is altogether one of the high points of this correspondence.

Strauss opens *On Tyranny* defiantly: modern political science is so lacking in understanding of the most massive political phenomena, that it cannot even recognize the worst tyrannies for what they are.

. . . when we were brought face to face with tyranny—with a kind of tyranny that surpassed the boldest imagination of the most powerful thinkers of the past—our political science failed to recognize it. (23; 177).

In view of the failure of "our political science," he invites us to reconsider how classical political philosophy or science understood tyranny. The invitation immediately raises the question of how classical thought could possibly do justice to political phenomena so radically different from those of which it had direct experience. The question presupposes the truth of Hegel's claim that "philosophy is its own

time grasped in thought.” One of the aims of *On Tyranny* is to challenge that claim. The basic premise of classical political philosophy which Strauss invites us to reconsider is that the fundamental problems—and in particular the fundamental problems of political life—are, at least in principle, always and everywhere accessible. Now, “[t]yranny is a danger coeval with political life” (22), and reflection on political life suggests that “society will always try to tyrannize thought” (27). Reflection on tyranny thus leads to reflection on the relation between thought or philosophy and society. Strauss therefore gradually shifts the focus of his inquiry from tyranny proper to the relation between philosophy and society. In his view, the *Hiero* enacts the classical, Socratic understanding of that relation: Simonides represents the philosophic life, and Hiero the political life. Now, the relation of philosophy and society is as central to the understanding of modern tyranny as it is to the understanding of ancient tyranny. For while modern tyranny owes its distinctive character to ideology and to technology, ideology and technology are products or by-products of the specifically modern understanding of the relationship between philosophy and society (23). Strauss makes himself the spokesman for the classical understanding of this relationship, and Kojève makes himself the spokesman for the modern understanding of it.

The two fully agree that there is a tension, indeed a conflict, between philosophy and society (195, 205, cp. 27); and they agree that philosophy or wisdom ranks highest in the order of ends, that it is the architectonic end or principle (*Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, Paris, Gallimard, 1947, pp. 303, 95, 273–275, 397f; 15 September 1950). They disagree about whether the conflict between philosophy and society can—and should—be resolved. In other words, they disagree about the possibility of a fully rational society. The choice is clear: to try as far as possible to elude the conflict between philosophy and society by maintaining as great a distance as possible between them; or to try as far as possible to resolve the conflict between philosophy and society by working for a reconciliation between them. Strauss opts for the first alternative; Kojève for the second.

For Strauss the conflict between philosophy and society is inevitable because society rests on a shared trust in shared beliefs, and philosophy questions every trust and authority. He sides with Plato against Kojève’s Hegel in holding that philosophy cannot cease to be a quest and become wisdom simply.

Philosophy as such is nothing but genuine awareness of the problems, i.e., of the fundamental and comprehensive problems. It is impossible

to think about these problems without becoming inclined toward a solution, toward one or the other of the very few solutions. Yet as long as there is no wisdom but only quest for wisdom, the evidence of all solutions is necessarily smaller than the evidence of the problems. (196; 16 January 1934, 28 May 1957).

Philosophy is inherently skeptical or “zetetic” (196). It therefore threatens to undermine society’s self-confidence and to sap its will. It must therefore take account of society’s requirements. But the moment it yields to them, it ceases to be philosophy and becomes dogmatism. It must therefore go its own way. The human problem does not admit of a political solution (182).

Kojève rejects that conclusion. In his view, the philosopher who finds himself faced by inconsistencies—“contradictions”—in the practices and beliefs of his society or of his age, cannot leave it at resolving them “merely” in thought. He must resolve them in deed as well. The only effective way to resolve “contradictions”—the only effective way to resolve any differences among men or between men and nature—is by laboring and struggling to change the reality that exhibited them in the first place: to change men’s attitudes, beliefs, ways of life, through enlightenment or ideology; and to change their material conditions of life through the mastery and control of nature or technology (178). All significant theoretical disagreements are at the same time practical. It follows that they can also not be resolved by oneself alone, but can only be resolved together, by the combined efforts of each and all. Philosophy is necessarily political, and politics philosophical. Or, as Kojève puts it, anyone seriously intent on knowing, in the strong sense of the term, will be driven to “verify” his merely “subjective certainties” (152, 163f, 166).

Now, as long as a man is alone in knowing something, he can never be sure that he truly *knows* it. If, as a consistent atheist, one replaces God (taken as consciousness and will surpassing human consciousness and will) by Society (the State) and History, one must say that whatever is, in fact, outside of the range of social and historical verification is forever relegated to the domain of *opinion* (*doxa*). (p. 161).

The only way to “verify” our opinions is to have them “recognized.” Recognition “verifies” our “subjective certainty” that what is “for us” is also “for others.” It thus establishes an “intersubjective consensus.” Recognition is necessarily mutual. There is therefore always

also a moral dimension to recognition. At a minimum, recognition is always also recognition of others as free and equal. It follows that philosophical progress is possible only hand in hand with moral and political progress (174f). “History,” in the strong sense Kojève attaches to the term, is, then, the history of successive “verifications” “recognized.” “Recognition” makes for “satisfaction.” Kojève prefers to speak of “satisfaction” rather than of “happiness” because, once again, “satisfaction” is a more public, and hence a more “objective” criterion than “happiness,” which tends to be private or “subjective.” Recognition makes for satisfaction; whether it also makes for happiness is another question entirely (22 June 1946, 8 June 1956; Hegel, e.g. *Vernunft in der Geschichte*, Lasson ed., Meiner, 1930, pp. 70, 78). History in the strong sense of the term, men’s millennial labor and struggle to achieve satisfaction through recognition, is, then, the successive actualization and “verification” of harmony among men, and conformity between them and their world. In short, history is the progressive recognition of the proposition that all men are free and equal.

Kojève argues that, in the final analysis, the quest for mutual recognition can only be satisfied in what he calls the “universal and homogeneous state.” Anything short of “homogeneity,” that is to say of equality, would leave open the possibility of arbitrary distinctions of class, status, gender. Anything short of “universality” would leave open the possibility of sectarian, religious, or national rivalries, and of continuing civil and foreign wars. In the universal and homogenous state everyone “knows” and lives in the “knowledge” that everyone enjoys equal dignity, and this knowledge is embedded in the state’s practices and institutions (e.g., *Introduction*, 184f). Once all recognize that all are free, there is no further collective dis-satisfaction, hence no further collective seeking or striving, and in particular no further collective labor and struggle for new modes and orders or for a new understanding. Once men are free and universally recognize that they are, history, in the strong sense of the term, is at an end. And in so far as political and philosophical progress go hand in hand, so does their fulfillment. The end of history therefore also marks the end of philosophy or of the quest for wisdom, and the beginning of the reign of wisdom simply (e.g., *Introduction*, 435n).

For Kojève’s Hegel, history was the revelation of truth, and this truth was revealed primarily through the various turns taken by the master-slave dialectic. The master-slave dialectic was the motor of history, and the desire for recognition its fuel. Why did the central role

which Kojève assigned to the master-slave dialectic prove so powerful? Kojève's Hegel was certainly a dramatic pragmatist. Truth and successful action were tied together, and progress was accomplished through labor and bloody battles for recognition. Kojève claimed that he was able to make sense of the totality of history and of the structure of human desire by looking at them through lenses ground against the texts of Marx and Heidegger. History and desire became understandable when their ends, their goals, became clear. Kojève claimed to provide this clarity, and he couched his interpretation in the form of a political propaganda which would further the revolution that would confirm the interpretation itself. In the 1930s Kojève thought that Hegel's philosophy promoted the self-consciousness that is appropriate to the final stage of history, a stage which would be characterized by satisfaction of the fundamental human desire for mutual and equal recognition. Kojève—and everybody else—could also see who the enemies of equality were, and thus the battle lines for the final struggle for recognition were clear. Philosophy and revolution were linked in what would be the culmination of world history.

After the War, perhaps in response to Strauss's sharp criticisms of his views, especially in his letter of 22 August 1948, and perhaps also in response to what he may have perceived as an increasingly congealed political environment, Kojève abandoned his "heroic Hegelianism," his confidence in the meaning and direction of history. His late work no longer took the form of propaganda aimed at stimulating a revolutionary self-consciousness. It took the form, instead, of a commentary on a history that had already run its course. The change in the place of revolution entailed a change in the form of his philosophy: he shifts from being a dramatic pragmatist to being an ironic culture critic. He continued to believe that the culmination of world history would define the truth of all previous events, and he continued to write of Hegelian philosophy as providing this truth. Instead of situating this philosophy at the onset of the culmination, however, in his late work Kojève claims that the end of history has already occurred. Once it became clear that revolution was not just about to occur, the only *political* rhetoric possible for Kojève's Hegelianism was in the mode of irony. The ironic edge of much of his late work results from his valorization of self-consciousness even when progress is not possible.

The expressions "the end of history" and "the end of philosophy" have become fashionable and hence virtually empty slogans. In our time, Kojève was the first seriously to think what such expressions might mean.

With a certain rhetorical flourish, he maintained that history “ended” in 1806 with Napoleon’s victory over Prussia in the battle of Jena, a victory which opened the rest of Europe and, in the long run, the rest of the world to the principles of the French Revolution.

What has happened since then has been nothing but an extension in space of the universal revolutionary force actualized in France by Robespierre-Napoleon. From the genuinely historical perspective, the two World Wars with their train of small and large revolutions have only had the effect of bringing the backward civilizations of the outlying provinces into line with the (really or virtually) most advanced European historical stages. If the sovietization of Russia and the communization of China are anything more and other than the democratization of Imperial Germany (by way of Hitlerism) or of the accession of Togo to independence, or even of the self-determination of the Papuans, they are so only because the Sino-Soviet actualization of Robespierian Bonapartism compels post-Napoleonic Europe to accelerate the elimination of the numerous more or less anachronistic remainders of its pre-revolutionary past. This process of elimination is already more advanced in the North-American extensions of Europe than it is in Europe itself. It might even be said that, from a certain point of view, the United States has already reached the final stage of Marxist “communism,” since all the members of a “classless society” can, for all practical purposes, acquire whatever they please, whenever they please, without having to work for it any more than they are inclined to do. (*Introduction*, 2nd ed., p. 436n; J. H. Nichols Jr. translation, pp. 160f, somewhat altered.)

Clearly, if the Russian and the Chinese Revolutions, the two World Wars, Stalinism and Hitlerism merely confirm—“verify”—it, then “the end of history” cannot possibly mean that nothing more happens. It can only mean that nothing *radically* new can be achieved, nothing comparable in magnitude to the recognition, at all levels of life and over the entire face of the earth, that, in Hegel’s phrase, all men are free; or, as Kojève’s phrase “universal and homogeneous state” suggests, that all are free and equal. But that does not by any means entail an end to politics. As Strauss notes, Kojève holds out no prospect of the state’s ever withering away (211).

Kojève argues that if history is the millennial struggle to achieve freedom and equality, then the end of history also marks the end of “historical man,” of man striving and struggling, in short of man as we have so far known him. (19 September 1950, *Introduction*, 387 n. 1, 434, 64). He does not share Marx’s vision of an end of history that

opens to “the realm of true freedom,” in which men might hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, farm in the evening, and engage in criticism after dinner, without needing to become hunters, fishermen, farmers, or critics (*Kapital*, III, 48, iii; *German Ideology*, I A). Nor does he expect that once men have achieved freedom and equality, they will go on and seek to achieve the noble or the good. He envisages, rather, that most men, satisfied with one another’s mutual recognition, doing whatever they do without purpose or constraints, and free to acquire and consume to their hearts’ content, would do what is right and avoid doing what is wrong because nothing would constrain them to do otherwise. They would not be heroes; but, he appears to think, neither would they be villains. They will be mere “automata” that might assert a remnant of humanity by such utterly formal rituals of pure snobbishness as tea-ceremonies, flower arrangements, or Noh plays. As for the few who remain dissatisfied with their aimless existence in the universal and homogenous state, they will seek wisdom. Since they live in an essentially rational order, they no longer need to change it in order to understand. They can now “merely” contemplate (September 19, 1950; *Introduction*, 440n; second edition, 436n). “The owl of Minerva takes flight at dusk.”

It is a constant of Kojève’s thought that the end, so understood, is good and desirable. Kojévian philosophers will therefore do what they can to embed freedom and equality in practices and institutions, or “at least *accept* and ‘justify’ such action if someone somewhere engages in it.” (*Introduction* 291, 29 October 1953 i.f.) One cannot help wondering how Kojève reconciles arguing for universal recognition with “accepting” and “justifying” the worst tyrants of the age. It is true that in “Tyranny and Wisdom” his advice to tyrants is to work for mutual recognition in the universal homogeneous state, in other words for “liberalization” and, at least in the long run, for some form of democracy. He, of course, knew that if his advice were to have reached the tyrant, the tyrant would, at best, have turned a deaf ear to it. But Kojève also knew that deeds carry more weight than speeches, and regardless of what he may have said, his actions were designed to put as much pressure as he could on the tyrant. He quite rightly thought that the European Economic Community which he was helping to establish, could become an economic power capable of standing up to the Soviet Union, and hence of forcing it to liberalize (19 September 1950). He evidently also came to think of the European Economic Community and of the Soviet Union as the most plausible alternative models for the “universal and homogeneous state,” and he spent the

last twenty-five years of his life trying to tip the balance in favor of the European model. He did not turn his back on the horrors of the age and, “like a man in a storm, seek shelter behind a wall.”

The end of history, as Kojève understands it, also marks “the end of philosophy.” Indeed, he regards the universal and homogeneous state as the goal and fulfillment of history only because he regards it as the necessary condition for the comprehensive, coherent, hence definitive, hence true account; in short, for wisdom (19 September 1950; *Introduction*, 288f, 291). Wisdom is the architectonic principle. The comprehensive and coherent account is “circular”: it explains and resolves the conflicts between “all” alternative, provisional—earlier—accounts, at the same time as it accounts for itself. Provisional accounts, that is to say philosophy or philosophies in the strict sense of the term, are inevitably shadowed by skepticism. The comprehensive and coherent account would overcome that skepticism.

Skepticism is one thing; relativism is another thing entirely. Skepticism leaves open the possibility of a definitive account. Relativism categorically denies that possibility. The most typical and influential versions of relativism accept Hegel’s argument that, up to “now,” being, life, and thought have been through and through historical, but reject his conclusion, that history has “now” ended. They hold that history cannot “end,” and that therefore there cannot “ever” be a definitive account. Kojève and Strauss are at one in categorically rejecting this decapitated Hegelianism (e.g., 19 September 1950, 1 August 1957 i.f.) Kojève rejects it in the name of the comprehensive and coherent account, and Strauss in the name of skepticism or, as he prefers to call it, zeteticism.

Kojève does not think that “the end of philosophy” leaves nothing to think about, or that men would cease to think. Rather, as far as we can tell, or, as he says, as far as he can tell, there would henceforth be no occasion for thinking which, in the language of the long note quoted on p. xv makes a difference from “the genuinely historical perspective.” Henceforth men think “merely” in order to understand. Henceforth to think is to re-think or to re-collect (*erinnern*) and to re-construct history, and most particularly the history of philosophy, and re-confirm its end. It is in this spirit that Kojève thought his later studies in ancient philosophy about which he speaks at such length in his correspondence with Strauss.

Strauss rejects Kojève’s reconciliation of philosophy and society root and branch. It is not necessary, it is not desirable, it is not even