

## Comments: How the World is Not Flat

Copyright 2006 Barry Cooper

I would like to comment on these papers in the order I received them: Tim Hoye, Paul Stoller, Samah Alhajibrahim, and Haj Ross. I think we can all agree that the world is not flat, though it is not clear that it is either round or spherical. What we have to consider, it seems to me, is the problem of equivalences of experience and symbolization, to use a well known formula of Voegelin.

Tim Hoye begins with a brief reference to a remark by Voegelin in volume 5 of Order and History, that "consciousness of the metaleptic story" occurs only in pre-existing "social fields" by specific individuals who speak particular languages using traditional symbols in order, somehow, which is to say, paradoxically, to evoke or articulate some universal truth concerning what Voegelin called the "divine-human movement and countermovement."

The images of fields and movements and so on are not self-explanatory, even to people familiar with Voegelinian language. Of course, it is always possible to remain within the Voegelinian discursive world, which may turn out to be flat, and manipulate his terms analytically or perhaps playfully and come up with a satisfactory result. It is more difficult to translate his idiom and his images into a common language in order to explain his insights to ♠ for example ♠ an undergraduate who has never heard such things before.

"Consciousness of the metaleptic story." What is that all about? Even the most adept Voegelinian had to come across that sentence for the first time and figure out for himself or herself what it means. It was Kant, I believe, who said, more or less, philosophers ought to be able to explain things to plow-boys.

All the members of this panel have tried to deal with this interpretive issue by analyzing texts and the way that experiences of reality are symbolized, expressed, and communicated. If I may simplify their hermeneutic strategy, and I will deal first with Tim Hoye, it goes something like this:

You might not know what "consciousness of the metaleptic story" means but if you take a look at ♠ in Hoye's paper ♠ Soseki's Kusa Makura you will see another version of Voegelin's philosophical account. If you "get" Soseki, then maybe it will help you "get" Voegelin.

I use the term "get" here to translate what Husserl called die Aha! Erlebnis, which sounds quite scientific.

Hoye points out that the literal translation of Kusa Makura is Grass Pillow but that the translators chose the phrase The Three Cornered World and explained that it was taken from a

passage where an artist lives ♦ or, in other languages, perhaps a philosopher, a poet, a prophet or one of Stoller's sorcerers ♦ an artist is "a person who lives in the triangle which remains after the angle which we may call common sense has been removed from this four-cornered world."

That imagery, it seems to me, well evokes the task of a Kantian philosopher: to translate the three-cornered world of the artist ♦ or prophet, sorcerer, etc. ♦ into the four-cornered world of the commonsensical plow-boy.

What follows is a philologically and philosophically sensitive exegesis of the Soseki story and the consciousness it expresses and, as it were, imaginatively embodies. There are plenty of connections made to western as well as Japanese sources to allow us to make sense of the experiences of reality that Soseki seeks to convey. One dimension of pragmatic political significance, of course, is the response of Japanese mythic consciousness to what we might call ecumenic secularism, the origins of which are western. I would like to hear more about that since, it seems to me, it bears on a more general problem of interpretation. It has an important pragmatic dimension as well, as the actions of Aum Shinrikyo illustrate.

Hoye concludes explicitly where he began implicitly ♦ with the philosophical and hermeneutical problem of equivalences of experience and symbolization that is so central to Voegelin's late work. Like Voegelin in the 1920s and 1930s, Soseki resisted the deformations of the society within which he lived and in Kusa Makura sought to reconnect with the forgotten sources of order in Japan . The occasion was a particular one but as with the perhaps more familiar occasion of early twentieth-century Europe , it has much greater ♦ more universal ♦ significance. It is, in fact, an evocation of consciousness of the metaleptic story common to human beings.

Paul Stoller approaches this common problem of equivalences from a starting point not of a text but of an "embodied ordeal." The relations between body and soul are, of course, a major theme of philosophical anthropology so that there is no apriori reason why insight cannot be gained through or by the body. As phenomenologists have noted (to say nothing of Plato) we are embodied souls.

Stoller says he had been a "student of sorcery" for many years. What does this mean? As a young anthropologist undertaking the rite de passage of field work, sorcery was a power trip, like becoming a top gun. This corresponds, I would say, to Hegel's understanding of the Zauberworte as Voegelin discussed it in his famous essay, "On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery." There are worse ways of understanding Hegel than as an aspiring top gun.

For Stoller's teachers, however, the young man was an apprentice. They, the accomplished sorcerers, are participants in a larger ♦ let us say, cosmic ♦ drama. It is called by Stoller a tradition and, once one accommodates oneself to it, one is led from arrogance to humility. This is clearly equivalent to other ethical teachings that may be more familiar to us.

And then there is the question of illness and suffering. One always suffers an illness; one is passive with respect to illness; it happens to one; one lives "with it." That is, it is never actively sought. No one says, "I want to get sick." Not even Nietzsche says that. And certainly not about cancer.

On the other hand, when you suffer, including the suffering of illness, you are not simply passive. Everyone can form an attitude towards illness and suffering. From Aristotle to Simone Weil there is an argument that links wisdom or maybe just insight and suffering.

Stoller makes a very useful observation concerning the social position of sorcerers. As with prophets and philosophers they are marginal to their own social order. The discipline, the askesis, the harkening to the word of the Lord, to use terms more often associated with philosophers and prophets and with noetic and pneumatic symbolism ♦ all of which is more familiar to most of us; in any event, the discipline enables them "to live well in the world" by not living only in the world.

Then there is the problem and the experience that underlies it of "being there" and "being here" as the great, which is to say, philosophically inclined, anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it.

"We excise much of the passion of ♦ 'being there' from what we write," said Stoller. Of course, this is true for political scientists as well as for anthropologists, and some of this excision is just a professional convention to which we all defer.

In addition, however, there is the necessity of creating a reflective distance from experience in order to talk about it professionally or any other way. That is, there is a difference between talking about sorcery and practicing incantations, between discussing the meaning of ripening and ripening, between suffering illness and naming it.

The other side of the question is more difficult, perhaps, to recall: you can't say anything worthwhile being here if you have not experienced the reality of being there as well. That is, our professional discourse, if it is to be worthwhile must take into account the full amplitude of reality experienced.

In other words, we sorcerers and political scientists are in the business of making sense ♦ that is, speaking ♦ about reality, even while our participation in the reality we experience is bodily and pre-verbal. And this is the great virtue of Stoller's discussion of sorcery: it reminds us of the intimacy of body and soul, an intimacy that we are often tempted to forget or ignore.

Samrah Alhajibrahim's paper looks to be more conventional and "academic" but it raises some decisively non-academic issues. "The purpose of this paper," we read early on, "is to remove the dust from Alfarabi's concept of happiness and return the brilliance to it," and incidentally discuss the similarities between Voegelin's and Alfarabi's philosophies as they relate to happiness.

A brief exegesis of Alfarabi's teaching regarding happiness follows. It is "the absolute good;" its achievement is "the purpose of life." It is achieved when the soul "reaches perfection, in which it needs no material substance to exist."

To my untutored mind, this all sounds very Aristotelian especially the discussion of political science and what we now call philosophical anthropology or "the science of man." Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the language - of theoretical virtues, intelligibles, and so on ♦ sounds very Aristotelian. Except, perhaps for perfection of the soul, which, in the

absence of "material substance" would have to be posthumous. But then posthumous happiness is rather illusive. Is this perfection, then, a matter of faith or hope? Or am I missing something?

I would also like to hear a bit more about a brief comment: the "only difference" between philosophy and religion, which I assume to be Islam, "is that religion is based on imagination" and philosophy "is based on conception or intellectual perception."

Is this a neo-Mutazalite argument? Is it akin to what in European philosophy is often called Latin Averroism? Does it, perhaps, correspond to the Platonic distinction between dianoia and noesis? I am also curious about Alfarabi's view of philosophy as "a universal endeavour that does not change from nation to nation or from religion to religion." Is this, to use a modern term, not "un-Islamic"? For what it is worth, the final comments, comparing Alfarabi and Voegelin, would seem to indicate the truth of Alhajibrahim's observation ♦ that philosophy is a universal endeavour.

This observation would probably not be accepted, for example, by that talented Platonic scholar, Ruhollah Khomeini, but it does reintroduce the interpretative problem raised by the papers of Hoyer and Stoller ♦ that of equivalence of experience and symbolization, which is a philosophical rather than a cultural or, in the ordinary sense of the term, a "religious" question.

Where Alhajibrahim's paper was, for a political science panel, the kind of sound scholarly work with which we are all familiar, Haj Ross, who uses the discipline of linguistics to analyze poetry, has provided something quite new, or at least new to me.

Leo Strauss once was asked what was the notorious Straussian method. He replied: "content analysis." So too with Ross. His discussion of Drummond's poem "Ser" is minutely detailed content analysis. When I read his discussion of the numbers of nouns and verbs and the number of each per line of the father's and the son's language, I wondered: is this statistically significant? Critics of Strauss, of course, raise the same question. But then Ross says, "let us examine another grammatically significant distinction," namely the different use of main and subordinate clauses. That is, not statistical significance, a kind of universal, but the specific significance of the argument is the focus of this kind of content analysis.

Before Ross discusses the major point of his analysis, the importance of sound, he makes an aside that indicates that Tim Hoyer, who organized this panel, knew what he was doing. Ross quotes W. S. Merwin, an American poet:

elegy

who would I show it to

And makes the following comments:

Merwin's title says that these seven words are an elegy, but the counterfactuality implied in "would" says that writing an elegy is impossible, unthinkable ♦ the one person to whom the poet always shows his work is no longer there. He cannot write without that special

person to show it to. The poet is so overwhelmed with grief that he denies the possibility of his doing what he is in fact doing.

This introduces a problem touched upon earlier: the ability of finite, limited words and symbols to evoke more than finite or limited experiences. This might remind dedicated Voegelinians of the discussion of "the complex of consciousness-reality-language" made at the beginning of volume five of Order and History.

Ross remains more concrete than this; his discussion of sound and the parallels between phonetic similarities within the poem and semantic ones is, to my commonsensical political scientist's mind, amazing in its elegance. The point of it all, if I have followed his argument correctly, is that the same word in European and Brazilian Portuguese is pronounced differently. As a result, the connection between sound and structure in Brazilian Portuguese, the language in which "Ser" was written, is (as it were) closer or more immediate. As we know, ser is Portuguese for "being." Accordingly, the implication of Ross's remark is that, as a meditation on being, or more precisely on the mode of being called existence that is expressed in a lament and in consciousness of the experience of lamentation, the language of its composition, because understanding and hearing the actual, concrete sound of the words, is necessary. To that extent, the poem is "untranslatable."

Now, Ross begins his paper by recalling the "Sapir-Whorff hypothesis" according to which translation is impossible, especially poetry. His argument, which shows pretty clearly that translating poetry (in the other sense of the term) even across the Atlantic is not always a success. What this says about the problem of interpretation that I said is touched upon in all these paper (even if not formulated in the same way) is something like this: even if a third part can argue in favour of an equivalent meaning to myths, rituals, metaphysical doctrines, or legal arguments made before the courts of Ohio and California, there is also an irreducible element of difference, notwithstanding the constants. Voegelin discussed this matter, it seems to me, in terms of the concrete consciousness of the individual and of the various paradoxical attributes or dimensions of such consciousness. Ross has confirmed this insight with an analysis based on quite distinct materials. Thus he both illustrates and confirms the importance of the argument regarding equivalences.