

## VOEGELIN'S PLACE IN MODERN PHILOSOPHY

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Political theorists, like literary and social theorists, occupy a kind of twilight zone in relation to philosophy. Their disciplines are at once empirical and philosophical, an indeterminate status compared to the strictly autonomous unfolding of philosophy. Yet it is by virtue of this difference of perspective that they may have something to contribute to philosophy. The problem, however, is that the contribution remains largely invisible to the philosophical core. As practitioners of these twilight sciences we may be acutely aware of their potential application to philosophy itself, but it is difficult for philosophers to grasp the implications for their discipline in the work of Tocqueville, Weber, or Derrida. The same is surely the case with Eric Voegelin. His work may indeed be philosophical but it is not philosophy and, therefore, does not necessitate a philosophical taking notice. For philosophers this is a reassuring state of affairs. Not having to take account of every thinker who has philosophical thoughts allows them to concentrate their efforts on the canon of bona fide members. Professional narrowness is a welcome time saver, although that is not our principal concern here. Our focus is less on the consequences for philosophy of neglecting its neighboring disciplines than it is on the reverse. The consequences seem larger if social, literary, or political theory fail to take philosophy as fully into account as is possible. That is the justification for the present reflection on Voegelin's relationship to modern philosophy.

## PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

It is a relationship that goes far deeper than mere professional association, although that is a context that is not insignificant. The fact that Voegelin's work was not exposed to regular philosophical critique is a factor that must not be overlooked. It meant that he did not have to pass muster before the most intellectually rigorous scrutiny. The chances of professional historians, the proprietary practitioners of the empirical side, paying attention were even less. As a consequence Voegelin's work was left to fend for itself among the ignorant of political science. It was among the latter that he appeared as a figure of philosophical weight, an estimate that reaches no higher than its source. Even political theorists, Voegelin's own subfield within the discipline, are not well equipped to furnish philosophical critique. Having only recently stepped outside of the boundaries of constitutional theory, political theory has sought to live off an acquaintance with only one strand of the larger philosophical tradition. A focus on the strictly political texts has been deemed to be sufficient. Voegelin at any rate cannot be accused of that kind of parochialism. His omnivorous interests ranged far and wide and certainly included the centrally philosophical texts, not just their political applications. The problem was that he rarely encountered professional situations in which his broader philosophical interpretations were subjected to challenge. As a consequence his approach to the history of philosophy became peculiarly settled. Having once mapped out a line of interpretation there was little stimulus to reconsider it, especially as it was readily taken as dispositive by readers who had even less philosophical training. This is no doubt a hazard of the disciplinary setting within which Voegelin worked. It is a situation that was no different for such mentors as Max Weber.

Both were clearly men with a good grasp of the history of philosophy but that was never enough to enable them to make philosophical progress on the problems to which they addressed themselves.

In the case of Voegelin the situation is even more remarkable. Despite the fact that he locates himself outside of the discipline of philosophy, he nevertheless persists in working his way toward the resolution of philosophical problems. Of course he still interacts with philosophical texts, but it is not an interaction that is connected with any contemporary conversation. Instead it is an isolated inner conversation in which Voegelin occasionally makes contact with fragments from the great thinkers. His final work, *In Search of Order*, gives the very strong impression of a man working almost completely alone. A tendency toward isolation may well be a trait of great thinkers who find no adequate partners for their work. Yet there is something more than the vicissitudes of greatness at work here. Looking back over Voegelin's career we see that there has been a deliberate turning away from the modern philosophical conversation, even while remaining sensitive to its echoes in his own work. A rejection of the modern philosophic project remains so strong a note in his thought that most readers have concluded his avowed opposition to modernity as such. The characterization of modernity as Gnostic was only the most notorious such expression. Much has to do with the totalitarian crisis that became the lens through which Voegelin viewed the modern civilizational development. To the extent that totalitarianism was the defining feature of the era in which he lived, it was difficult to shake the sense that everything else was implicated either positively or negatively in its unfolding. It remained difficult to integrate those other counterbalancing assessments of modernity that he was always careful to insert. Focusing on the extreme instances that illuminated the essence, the intermediate developments tended to slip from view. As a result, we

are left not only with an overwhelmingly negative assessment of modernity but with a suspicion that the disorder extends to the very core. What is positive in the philosophical achievements of modernity still carries the taint within it. Little can be expected therefore by way of a genuine restoration of order from the philosophic enterprise it has simultaneously sustained.

## NEGATIVE ASSESSMENT OF MODERNITY

We need only recall how few were the unalloyed heroes in the struggle for order in the modern world. Voegelin singled out Bodin, Vico, Schelling, and Bergson, a line of equally solitary figures whose connection with their own times had also been among the most tenuous. What he admired most about them was their achievement of a degree of detachment that made it possible to invoke a sense of universal humanity. Epitomized by the mysticism of Bodin, they had all found a way beyond the chaotic disintegration of symbols to an unassailable reality forever on the other side of them. This was an insight that informed all of Voegelin's work because it undergirded the possibility of communication across historical differences. It is no accident that the major turning points in Voegelin's own intellectual odyssey came through his reading of these thinkers. The engagement with Schelling, for example, caused him to jettison the *History of Political Ideas*, although he held on to the manuscript. Philosophy had lost its "Last Orientation" and now moved within the realm of solitary seers who might preserve its truth for an unforeseeable future. Absent was any sense that its movement might be carried forward through a broader collaborative process. The reason for this assessment, I suspect, was Voegelin's reluctance to accept the notion that the modern world might be simultaneously engaged in the struggle for order while at the same time germinating the totalitarian explosion of

disorder. Even for a mind of Voegelin's evident flexibility that seemed too unlikely a prospect. Yet we could document exactly such a pattern in his own observations. Witness the very different assessments of Hegel that emerge in *The Ecumenic Age* and in *In Search of Order*. It is worthwhile to contemplate how different Voegelin's treatment of the modern world might have been if he had discovered that Schelling marked, not a departure from German idealism, but its culmination. That would have necessitated a revision in his conception of Hegel and might possibly have raised the status of Kant within the whole account.

He might then have seen that modernity is not just a darkness punctuated by a few bright spots, but a luminosity that, while it may come into focus in a few instances, is far more widely dispersed than we had suspected. It would not then have been for Voegelin to single-handedly rebuild the edifice of order but to realize that it is already being built from within the world that had previously only exhibited a drive to destroy itself. The two dimensions cannot be separated, as Voegelin ultimately recognizes. The difficulty is that he often seems to give the impression that they can. This is when the historian of ideas comes up against the meditative philosopher within him, a conflict he struggled to reconcile over a long career without ever permitting definitive victory to the latter. If he had managed to reconcile the objectifying tendency of scholarship with the existential requirements of philosophy then he would have been able to perceive the tragic-comic character of modernity more fully. As it was, that sympathetic reading was continually present without ever managing to recognize its implication. Modernity, he often seems to suggest, is neither a problem nor a solution for it is the condition of our very existence. To frame it either way is to preempt existence within it. Rather it is for us to gain a sense of the impenetrable mystery, simultaneously tragic and comic, by which our existence is guarded. It is then no more puzzling that the figures who perpetrate the most destructive consequences are also

the ones in whom their overcoming is closest. Or that it is at the point where the struggle against evil reaches its apex that the danger of evil is at its greatest. An abundance of comments demonstrate Voegelin's awareness of this tragic-comic character of the messianic figures of modernity. It is just that it is not clear that Voegelin has himself taken on board the full consequences of that concession.

More often than not he judged that the opening toward order had failed to overcome the tendencies toward closure of which he was acutely aware. The return of philosophy toward its existential source, a challenge virtually defined by the end of scholasticism, had never been more than partially accomplished. Almost as soon as the imperative of life had been grasped, a new conceptual mummification had overtaken it. So while the aspiration of Hegel might be admired, his accomplishment fell far short of its promise. The temptation, as Voegelin saw it, to render the openness gained a permanent achievement had proved too much. Fantasies of the stop history variety vitiated the truthfulness from which they began. Even Heidegger who abjures the very notion of a system does not escape its seductive hold, for he projects what Voegelin called a philosophy of "parousiastic expectation."<sup>1</sup> [1] It is not necessary to profess an ideological faith to fall under its spell. The fatality can take many forms, including an infatuation with National Socialism. But the mistake, in Voegelin's mind, consists not in making political misjudgments but in the prior readiness to entertain totalizing solutions. It was therefore a philosophic error that paved the way for the political one. Clearly this was a view of the flawed genius of German philosophy that was widely shared. Confirmation by the facts themselves seemed to decide the

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<sup>1</sup> [1] *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism in Modernity Without Restraint, Collected Works* vol. 5, ed. Manfred Henningsen (Columbia : University of Missouri Press, 2000), 275f.

issue. Yet there is something vaguely unsettling about such a tidy disposition. Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger were not peddlers of an ideological cure-all. They were genuinely philosophical figures in whom the original eros still lived. How then was it possible for them to be so profoundly deluded? To delude themselves along the path of sorcery? The frequency with which Voegelin returns to ponder this question suggests its obstinacy within his interpretation. Yet it is not quite inconvenient enough to cause him to reconsider his dismissal of their failures. Other than the exemplification of what to avoid, they provide only limited positive guidance.

What Voegelin does not do is think through the logic of the critique he has made. If Hegel is, for example, a flawed genius then the error does not necessarily affect the fundamental thrust of his thought. It merely constitutes a failure to prosecute it. To the extent that he has grasped the direction in which philosophy must unfold, his achievement remains indispensable. The fact that he may have betrayed his own intuition does not mean that the intuition is itself flawed. Voegelin no doubt senses this complexity but not enough to take seriously its implication. While conceding admiration for dimensions of Hegel's thought, there is little that is taken up into his own work. A curious detachment from the work of his predecessors often permeates Voegelin's work although it is most in evidence in the case of the great modern figures whom he holds at arms length. Reporting on a conversation rather than participating in it, he finds himself carrying on the philosophical project with few vital partners. It is a tension between the Voegelin of the history of ideas, who can comfortably stand outside of the process he is mapping, and the Voegelin who recognizes that he stands within the differentiations that constitute the boundaries of his own thought. The tension can be sustained more readily when he is dealing with a problematic, such as the Greek polis, that is already defined by a certain historical distance. In the case of the modern context that is Voegelin's own there is far less

possibility of detachment. Embedded within the historical and philosophical context in which we find ourselves we simply need the luminosity that has already emerged within it. A mere cursory acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the modern age is not enough to satisfy this requirement. Blumenberg sensed this withholding of legitimacy within the critiques of modernity wider than, but parallel with Voegelin's, and it is difficult to deny the overall validity of his objection. How can illegitimacy infect a whole age? Does the very notion of illegitimacy not presuppose a legitimate modernity within it?

## PHILOSOPHIC PROJECT OF MODERNITY

Derailment is only possible if one is already on the rails. A root and branch dismissal of the aberrations eliminates the very reality that became aberrated in the first place. The result is not only the isolation of the remedial or reformatory efforts we have already noted, but the even more serious disconnection between those efforts and the reality they are intended to address. That sense of removal from the age whose crisis Voegelin addresses has long struck readers, even if they have not always been able to articulate it to themselves. Over time we learn not to look for prescriptions, to accept the long term character of Voegelin's contributions, and simply to accept the limitation any thinker has of not being able to do everything. But not to be able to do anything is a different matter. The inability increases as a thinker can find no point of contact with the problematic he addresses. That notable absence in Voegelin's work is of course evident in the case of his engagement with the tradition of liberal democracy. His readers know by now that they will find no more than a few passing remarks of relevance to the principal political



form that now dominates our world.<sup>2</sup> [2] One expects, therefore, that his contribution will intersect with the larger philosophical project of modernity and there is no doubt that Voegelin understood himself as engaged in this direction. Knowledge of the empirical materials of history would continue to advance but his theoretical approach to them was likely to endure. More than anything Voegelin had opened up a way of understanding history and therefore a fundamental philosophy of existence. He discovered that there really was no such "thing" as history, but that history provided the very possibility of knowing the past and orienting ourselves toward the future. To the extent that historical research was possible, it was because of the contemporaneity of understanding that made the encounter with others possible. His own investigation could be both philosophic and empirical, drawing on the meditative immediacy of his own experience while reaching toward the enlargement achieved by the great spiritual adventurers.

It was a conception of order that recognized the impossibility of congealment within any fixed incarnation. History remained the horizon of an order that could never definitively be achieved. The elevation of history as the constitutive framework for every emergence of meaning was in line with the prominence it was accorded within post-Kantian philosophy. Voegelin recognized his affinity with Hegel in this regard. But he was hesitant to contemplate the relationship further. Beyond an appreciation for historical context, he failed to see how far the idealists had traveled in explicating its philosophical implications. To the extent that history had become the horizon of human existence then it ceased to become an object external to the subject who contemplates it. This was the great philosophical project underway within that

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<sup>2</sup> [2] My own effort to address this is in *The Growth of the Liberal Soul* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

unassimilated movement we know as German idealism. The Cartesian subject, the self whose domination of reality had marked the modernity of the scientific revolution, was undergoing a profound displacement. Its revolutionary significance was not by any means fully grasped at the time and the subsequent history of philosophy is still in the midst of grappling with it. Voegelin only seems to have been dimly aware of the pivotal dimension of this turn that philosophy takes from Kant onward, even though his own efforts virtually parallel it. The failure is important not because it constitutes a shortcoming in his interpretive project, but because it suggests the possibility of advancing that project beyond where Voegelin was able to bring it. To overlook the modern philosophic revolution was to lose out on the enlargement his own project might have received. Voegelin was sufficiently attuned to the direction philosophy had to travel in the modern world, but neither he nor anyone else is adequate to the task of unfolding all of the possibilities of that enterprise. Rather than merely seeing modern philosophy as implicated in the totalitarian convulsion it failed to avert, it might be possible to discern the direction its unfolding would resume once the crisis had passed. Astonishing as it may seem to most readers of Voegelin, the path philosophy has trod in the twentieth century converges almost exactly with the trajectory of his inquiry.

We are familiar with his late ruminations on the "It-reality," or his accounts of a "subjectless" and "objectless" event in being as constituting the experience of order, and of the impossibility of linguistic reference to anything outside of the participation it makes possible. The eerie similarity of such reflections to the poetic metaphysics of Heidegger or the tortuous semiotics of Jacques Derrida has been noted more than once. The possibility that Voegelin might himself occupy some space within the mansion of postmodern philosophy flutters across our minds. But we have not been able to pierce the bewilderment other than to note the affinity

between their respective critiques of modernity. Missing has been any clear insight into the challenge that has occupied philosophy since Kant. Having been misled by the Cartesian phase that seemed to install the dominance of the subject at the center of reality, we have failed to see to what extent the more recent efforts have amounted to an almost complete reversal of the subject-object model. Rather than talking about the anthropocentric character of modernity, preoccupied with the self and its sources, we should begin to recognize the extent to which the priority of the self has been almost completely displaced. Our failure to understand this development and, by implication, the course of modern philosophy arises from our retention of the early modern primacy of the subject. As a consequence, the later efforts to displace it simply look like a series of ever widening circles of incoherence.

Absent is an appreciation of the task that philosophy has accomplished. That has been nothing less than the reversal of the assumption that epistemology precedes metaphysics, the very rock on which pre-Kantian philosophy sought to rescue certainty from the uncertainties to which probabilistic science had so thoroughly exposed it. The hopeless naïveté of the notion that knowledge might be secured in advance of its assault on the great questions of existence has been demolished. How can the justification of knowledge prescind from the reliability of knowledge on which its justification depends? Knowing is an irreducibly existential reality behind which knowing itself cannot go. Descartes had inverted the priority in his famous *Cogito ergo sum*, for there could not be a thinking subject unless he already was. The subject is not primary and therefore does not have the problem of establishing its relationship to reality. Rather, the subject is already within being and must take its orientation from within the pregiven relationship of existence. No contemplation of being is possible from a perspective outside of it. Existence is the priority behind which it is not possible to go. Heidegger's famous "*Kehre*"

consisted in sloughing off the last shred of subjectivity that still attached to that recognition. To exist is not to hold one's existence within one's control but to recognize that all possibility of control is contained within the relationship to being. There literally is no existence apart from the openness toward being. The unencompassability of being, the impossibility of containing it within an idea, is the boundary of all language that cannot itself be referenced within the medium of language. Philosophy now must avoid the implication that it is contained within subjective mind but must strain its utmost to show that the mind of philosophy is contained within being.

What this displacement of the subject really means was already clear in Kant although he did not fully recognize the logic of what he had accomplished. It meant the priority of practical reason over theoretical reason. Indeed Kant's "Copernican revolution" in the *Critique of Pure Reason* ultimately consisted of recognizing theoretical reason as itself a genre of practical reason. Before it could be a means of accessing reality, reason had to assume the form of a practice. It was hardly surprising therefore that the metaphysics Kant sought to save found its emergence most fully embraced within his other two critiques of practical reason, the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Critique of Judgment*. In the former it was the famous "postulates" of God, immortality, and freedom that were salvaged, while in the latter he found his way toward beauty and order as regulative ideas through which our reflection operates. The caution with which Kant proposed such "metaphysical" conceptions demonstrated the hold that the earlier identification of thought with subjectivity still had over him. His successors evinced far less hesitation in entering on the path he had opened up. The metaphysics that had been definitively foreclosed by Kant's recognition of the impossibility of overstepping the bounds of empirical knowledge, was now regained as the ineluctable boundary of existence that included the possibility of empirical knowledge itself. Besides the knowledge of intentionality, as Voegelin

came to formulate it, there was also the more embracing knowledge of luminosity. But what Voegelin did not do was to follow out the logic of this realization within the existential metaphysics that characterizes philosophy after Kant. His place in modern philosophy is peculiarly tied to the Kantian moment in which metaphysics had still not clearly separated from the presumptively foundational questions of epistemology. As a result the issues are framed in terms of "experience," an avenue still predisposed toward the subjectivity of the experience itself. Largely overlooked by Voegelin, although he continually charts an independent course toward it, is the more radical attempt of philosophy to think the question of truth apart from all reference to the subject. Nowhere was this more evident than in the case of Nietzsche.

#### FAILURE TO RECOGNIZE POSTSUBJECTIVE METAPHYSICS

In other words, by neglecting the main line of philosophy after Kant Voegelin passed up the assistance he might have derived from its intensive unfolding. Only occasional concessions of admiration give any evidence that Voegelin was even dimly aware of the large parallel enterprise to overcome "propositional metaphysics." He seems to have no clear idea of how far modern philosophy had succeeded in the task. Even his early study of Husserl betrays no real recognition of the achievement of the latter's phenomenology regarding the centrality of ontology.<sup>3</sup> [3] There is only a brief recognition of Husserl's achievement, followed by astonishment at the possibility of its chiliastic misdirection from which Voegelin draws the

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3 [3] "A Letter to Alfred Schütz Concerning Edmund Husserl," *Anamnesis, Collected Works*, vol. 6, ed. David Walsh (Columbia : University of Missouri Press, 2002).

conclusion of the necessity of embarking on a new beginning. Nowhere is there the suggestion that Husserl might have provided an indispensable clarification from which a new beginning might be taken. As a result Voegelin's own application of the phenomenological method is confined to its experiential applications rather than to its ontological primordially. He is more like his friend Schütz than the philosopher of primordially, Heidegger. It was only later as Voegelin approached the end of his project that he began to realize the necessity of inventing a new philosophic language by which the post-subjective understanding of order might be expressed. "Eternal Being in Time," the penultimate essay of *Anamnesis*, may be taken as the marker for this phase. It is no accident that its formulation is redolent with Heideggerian overtones. One senses Voegelin realized that what he had sought to do in the empirical investigation of order as a living reality within *Order and History* could never really be clarified until it had found philosophic formulation. What is remarkable about "Eternal Being in Time" is the extent to which it echoes all of the language of post-subjective metaphysics with little overt reference to its extensive literature. Again, Voegelin is alone in his meditation with only the classic philosophers to guide him. This is all the while acknowledging, in a characteristically contemporary vein, that neither Plato nor Aristotle saw their way through to the development of an adequately non-objective metaphysics.

Of course Voegelin is hardly to be blamed for missing the turn toward a metaphysics of existence in contemporary philosophy. The extent to which a stable consensus is still to emerge may be measured by Derrida's remark toward the end of his life that he was less well understood today than he was twenty years ago.<sup>4</sup> [4] It is simply that closer attention to this mainline of

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<sup>4</sup> [4] Derrida observed that the fate of his writing was to be ". . . almost with every letter, to be bound better and better but be read less and less well over almost twenty years, like my religion

continental thought would have assisted Voegelin enormously in breaking free from the subjectivity of experience, a burden that still affects the reception of his thought. His insistence on the triad of "reality-experience-symbol" does not quite capture the dynamic character of existence by which reality as such is never present. We are always too late to encounter it and it is precisely this lateness that opens the possibility of existence, for we exist within the unending movement toward what can never finally be reached. Something of this insight is certainly present within Voegelin's conception of the transcendent ground as constituting the boundary of existence, but it is still too much attached to the spatiality of substantial presence. He seems not to have thought through what the meaning of transcendent being must entail. As transcendent it is just what cannot become present, what cannot be revealed. His approach to the question of Being remains too closely tied to the historic reception in texts formed around the aspiration of naming it. Too much identity is still attached to the project of naming when the very meaning of naming has not yet been subjected to radical examination. By uncritically accepting the language of substantial identities the problem of the possibility of naming is overlooked, for naming can only take place when not everything can be named. Beyond the name there is always what exceeds the name.<sup>5</sup> [5] If this is the situation with persons who always retain a mysterious depth that belies the identity of a name, then it is preeminently true of the divine

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about which nobody understands anything . . ." *Circumfession*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 154.

5 [5] "Thou art *thyself*," says Juliet, "though not a Montague . . . Romeo, doff thy name, and for thy name, which is not part of thee, take all myself." Quoted in Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John Fitzgerald (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 39.

name that opens an infinite abyss of mystery. Voegelin was certainly aware of such issues but that is not quite the same as following them out into their full linguistic consequences.

## TRUTH AS PRIOR TO EXPERIENCE

One of the most significant is indicated by the question of how the non-transparency of language permits the possibility of any transparency? How is it possible that we nevertheless can apprehend what cannot be apprehended? Is there a revelation of what is not revealed? The question is one that lies at the heart of German idealism, that flowering that has increasingly come to be recognized as the seedbed of the contemporary philosophic revolution. It was the genius of the idealists to recognize that the question of how meaning is apprehended could not be resolved in subjective or psychological terms. Ultimately the provenance lay within the realm of metaphysics. When we ask how it is possible for us to grasp what lies beyond appearance, what cannot be revealed, we are directed toward that within us which is derived from what is there before the beginning. Schelling in particular made this realization the focus of his meditation. We know that we do not live within the world of appearances, that beyond the symbols we can grasp what cannot be symbolized, because there is in us what is derived from that primordially. Unravelling the meaning of that observation occupied the post-idealist history of philosophy. The task took the form of despatializing such metaphors as "within us" or "outside of us" until the point is reached when all subject-object reference has virtually been eliminated. This is the achievement of a truly post-subjective metaphysics which, while its formulations may initially bewilder, nevertheless manages to penetrate to the truth that has been the aim of all previous



metaphysics. That is, that truth is not a condition internal to our consciousness but the very reality within which consciousness exists.

A good contemporary example is provided by the work of Emmanuel Levinas. His formulation that "ethics precedes ontology" captures the thoroughly existential thrust. There is no neutral "ontology," a condition of existence that permits the subject to dispute with itself before it resolves on the direction it will bestow its favor, for we have already arrived at obligation too late. We have no choice but to assume responsibility for what makes us responsible even before we have arrived. It is not as if we have to prove the existence of persons before we determine the limits of our responsibility toward them. There is no conditioning of responses when we are called by the unconditional. To say that we are obliged is to recognize that we are not free to disregard what is required of us, that the imperative within which we find ourselves is far more real than the subjective freedom of the possibility of turning away from the other. None of this is any longer the language of impulses and motivations that still envisage a subject capable of walling himself up within his subjectivity. Rather we live within a moral-metaphysical universe whose truth is not contained within us but contains us as the very condition of our existence. Some adjustment is no doubt required to think in such a thoroughly desubjectified manner, although it is probably far less of a shift once the power of its moral truth has penetrated. The dislocation of philosophical reflection over the past two centuries then strikes us as less disorienting, for it has become the means of reaching a more profound orientation within existence. Thinkers who had previously been perceived only vaguely suddenly come sharply into focus as harbingers of this most profound transition. Kierkegaard stands out as perhaps the most prominent such instance. His reception has been peculiarly delayed as it has been assimilated to contexts that were not yet ripe for the full realization of his

achievement. In many ways he represents the epitome of the shift, not to a metaphysics of existence, but to existence within metaphysics. It is no accident that our contemporary postsubjectivists have rediscovered him as already there at the end of their own meditations.

Kierkegaard provides the clearest and most persuasive illustration of the distance Voegelin still had to travel along this road. The affinity between them has long been noted and includes Voegelin's own engagement with the language of the great existentialist. It was, however, an engagement that did not pursue the deeper intimations of Kierkegaard. Like many others Voegelin appears to have assumed he knew all that there was in him. This is perhaps why it breaks off before Voegelin faces Kierkegaard's challenge to the centrality of religious experience. One might have thought that a thinker who places the relationship of the individual to God at the center of his reflection would privilege those moments in which the encounter becomes manifest. Similarly we might have expected that much would turn on those modes of life that seem wholly dedicated to divine service, as in the practice of monasticism. Yet Kierkegaard firmly renounces such avenues to faith, insisting that faith itself takes priority over them. He does not want the experience of God to supplant the God of experience. It is an admirable grounding of thought within truth that completely understands the impossibility of thought grounding truth. When we begin with the subject, Kierkegaard recognized, we rarely get outside of it. Instead, endless debates about the truth of truth endlessly postpone existence within it. Preoccupation with experience had been the fatal flaw of romanticism, a fatality abundantly evidenced in its turning away from existence for the sake of its contemplation. In the name of existence, existence was deferred. The bankruptcy of subjectivity was virtually complete. Living in a romantic age the necessity of confronting the ubiquity of experience had thoroughly cured Kierkegaard of any misconceptions concerning its primacy. By recognizing

that existence within truth could not be postponed he became the first and, in many ways, the greatest postsubjective thinker.

## HISTORY NO LONGER OUTSIDE BUT WHAT WE LIVE WITHIN

Voegelin by contrast still remained entangled by the linguistic vagueness of "experience." Symptomatic of the problems is the objection that all experience is private, a difficulty that is not quite overcome by the response that it is universally available or recognizable by all human beings. Of far greater weight is the objection that the experience cannot authenticate its own truth, that there is no way of establishing the transition from what is within to a reality that lies beyond the subject. How do I know that a correspondence holds? Philosophy of consciousness reflections may alleviate but they cannot resolve the difficulty that beginning with consciousness has already established an unbridgeability. Voegelin's intention is obviously to avoid any such suggestion. The difficulty is that he has not found the philosophical means; he has not quite thought his way through to the priority of truth over consciousness. Breaking with the conventions of subjectivity has proved more difficult than expected, for it involves nothing less than a radical departure from prevailing patterns of thought. Some measure of what is entailed may be gained by considering what the experience of transcendent being must involve. To speak of it as an "experience" is already to move into the realm of metaphor, for we can hardly experience what cannot be contained within us, that which itself contains us and provides the possibility of all experience. How then do we know or recognize it as transcendent being, as God? Surely not in virtue of something immanent to our consciousness. When we use the term "revelation" we are more appropriately on track, especially insofar as we acknowledge that the

initiative lies wholly on the side of the divine. But how then is it possible for us to receive such a revelation of the transcendent? The difficulty seems to have merely been moved further ahead as the question we cannot finally avoid. Revelation seems then to be an event that occurs to human beings who already exist within the luminosity of revelation. They have simply not yet awoken to it. There is then no event of revelation within time, there is only revelation that has already happened before and perhaps even as the condition of time itself.

Such reflections are hardly surprising to any close reader of the later Voegelin but, I would suggest, they clarify one of the great unresolved tensions that remain with him to the very end. It goes back to the tension between the historian of ideas and the meditative philosopher. Voegelin may have surmounted it at one level but there were yet other layers to maneuver. Nor is this a tension that is peculiar to Voegelin for we encounter it every day within philosophical discussions. Heidegger expressed it best when he pointed out that it is impossible to recount the history of philosophy from the outside, no matter how erudite the scholarship. It is a history that can only adequately be narrated from within its movement, that is philosophically, for it has no reference but to the very movement by which it is constituted. In this regard Voegelin consistently found himself on the side of Heidegger although that was never quite enough to completely shake the alternative model of Ernst Cassirer. Perhaps it is Hegel who provides the most telling example of the effort to hold together the empirical and the philosophical in some final resolution. So while Voegelin might abandon the *History of Political Ideas* he would only revise not abandon its successor, *Order and History*. The form that the project took in the final volume, *In Search of Order*, had of course rendered the conception of a material philosophy of history all but unrecognizable. Voegelin might still insist on its empirical content, but its meditative movement had virtually absorbed it all. Only a slight step remained to the recognition

of its impossibility. To the extent that any empirical material remained, it was now completely within the meditative movement. History, Voegelin came increasingly to concede, is not something outside of us but what we live within. It is that contiguity that provides the possibility of understanding history, of placing ourselves within it. Scholarship of its externalities may yield enormous troves of information but it cannot provide access to its inner life. Voegelin's own insistence on the perspective of participation as the only avenue of interpretation recognized this, but he did not carry that recognition to the conclusion of the irrelevance of all external mappings. His own evolution may have indicated as much, yet it never rose to the level of principle. One wonders if the crucial factor was his failure to grasp the pivotal insight of post-Kantian philosophy that thought is already an openness to being even before it begins to raise the question of being.

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