

What is a Mystic Philosopher and Why does it Matter?

Preliminary Reflections

Ellis Sandoz
Louisiana State University
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Introduction

The question posed by my title (What is a Mystic Philosopher and Why Does it Matter?) can be answered briefly: A mystic philosopher is one who takes the tension toward the transcendent divine ground of being as the cardinal attribute of human reality *per se* and explores the whole hierarchy of being from this decisive perspective. Thus, all philosophy worthy of the name is mystic philosophy. It has been so from the pre-Socratics to Plato to Voegelin himself, by his account, as the *sine qua non* of philosophizing, past, present, and future. It *matters* because more than a mere definition is at stake. It matters because the experiential core of noetic and pneumatic reality insofar as glimpsed in consciousness and regarded as basic to human existence is available only through individual persons' divine-human mystical encounters— which happen as events in a variety of modalities evidenced from prehistory to the contemporary.

If it be suspected that this implies that the history of philosophy may be in largest part the history of its derailment the point is conceded, as Voegelin himself

tells us.¹ To inventory and critique the assorted ways in which the philosophic impulse has been diverted or has otherwise gone astray is a task for another day—a task, however, already substantially addressed in Voegelin’s own life-long quest for truth in resistance to untruth under such familiar rubrics as sophistry, gnosticism, scholasticism, Enlightenment, phenomenism, ideology, and positivism among myriad other deformations. Enough here if I can bring a bit more clearly to light the meaning and implications of mystic philosophy and its importance for a non-reductionist exploration of metaxic reality, one grounded in common sense and participatory (or apperceptive) empiricism—*i.e.*, one which invokes in principle the Socratic “Look and see if this is not the case.”

This then gets us to more familiar ground: Mystic philosophy is what Plato’s Socrates was about, as the messenger of the God. Sundry Spinozaists and latter day Averroists among us will be unpersuaded, since for them and their epigones theology (a neologism and term of art in Plato, *Republic* 379a) and philosophy are taken to be radically different enterprises. Dogmatic delusion everywhere dies a hard death, and you can’t win them all. However, to argue that the history of philosophy is largely the history of its derailment admittedly puts Voegelin somewhat in the company of Johannes Brahms when he departed a

¹Cf. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, 5 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956-1987), 3:277.

social gathering, insouciantly turning at the door to say: “If there’s anyone here I haven’t offended I apologize.”

What is at stake here, however, is more than social amenities. When Voegelin told an old friend from Vienna days not to be too surprised to learn that he was a *mystic* as well as a philosopher,² he did so after a high stakes battle to recover something of the truth of reality—one he had pursued for decades so as to find his way out of the lethal quandaries of radical modernity and convincingly critique National Socialism. The effort produced three books while he was a professor in Vienna, cost him his job, and very nearly his life. Still, as the battle in various less grim forums continued thereafter, humor intruded from time to time. So with a genial intramural debate while at LSU in the 1940s with the head of the philosophy department (a great admirer of Bertrand Russell) that at one point found Voegelin retorting: Mr. Carmichael you are a philosophy professor. I am a philosopher.

² Saint “Thomas [Aquinas] is a mystic, for he knows that behind the God of dogmatic theology there is the tetragrammatic abyss that lies even behind the *analogia entis*. But in that sense also Plato is mystic, for he knows that behind the gods of the Myth, and even behind the Demiurge of his philosophy, there is the real God about whom one can say nothing. It may horrify you: But when somebody says that I am a mystic, I am afraid I cannot deny it. My enterprise of what you call ‘de-reification’ would not be possible, unless I were a mystic.” *Letter 422. To Gregor Sebba* (Feb. 3, 1973) in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, 34 vols. (hereinafter *CW*), vol. 30, *Selected Correspondence 1950-1984*, trans. Sandy Adler, Thomas A. Hollweck, & William Petropulos, ed. and intro. Thomas A. Hollweck (2007; Columbia: University of Missouri Press), 751.

Perhaps the fullest direct clarification of the pertinent issues Voegelin gave in a 1965 talk to the German Political Science Association plenary session, subsequently published as “What is Political Reality?”³ The drift of that presentation is to explain why political science cannot rightly be assimilated to the natural science model most famously exemplified by Newton’s *Principia Mathematica* but has its own unique paradigm as a *philosophical* science which Voegelin sketches on the occasion. In effect a minority report to political scholars (rather like our own colleagues here in Seattle still today) eager to be as “scientific” as possible, the tenor is combative as well as diagnostic and therapeutic.

Selected texts

(1) “Whoever has had enough of rebellion against the ground and wishes again to think rationally needs only to turn around and toward that reality against which the symbols of rebellion aggress.”⁴

³Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, trans. and ed. Gerhart Niemeyer (pb. edn, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 143-214; originally Voegelin, *Anamnesis: Zur Theorie der Geschichte und Politik* (Munich: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1966); also revised and reprinted in *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 6, trans. M. J. Hanak, ed. with an intro. by David Walsh (2002; 34 vols., University of Missouri Press).

⁴Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, ed. Niemeyer, 188.

(2) “The classical noesis and mysticism are the two predogmatic realities of knowledge in which the logos of consciousness was differentiated in a paradigmatic way.”⁵

(3) “Noetic exegesis differentiates the *ratio* as the material structure of consciousness....Noesis frees the structure of the world in a radical way by removing mythical, revelatory, ideological, and other mortgages on truth....Our study set out from the classical noesis but went considerably further.”⁶

(4) “The *realm of man* is not an object of empirical perception but a function of the participating consciousness....The existential tension toward the ground is man’s center of order.”⁷

(5) “There are no principles of political science...[rather there are] commonsense insights into correct modes of action concerning man’s existence in society.... If we go beyond the commonsense level we get to the insights into the order of consciousness [achieved through noesis].... The

⁵Ibid., 192.

⁶Ibid., 206: “[W]e... need a more differentiated language than that of classical philosophy. No longer can we speak, without qualification, of ‘human nature,’ ‘the nature of society,’ or of ‘the essence of history’ Noetic experience...brings into view the relations between the ground of being and man, ground of being and world, ...so that [today] the reality-image of being replaces the reality-image of the cosmic primary experience.”

⁷Ibid., 207-208.

insights of noesis owe their 'height' not to their generality but to the level of the participating consciousness in the hierarchy of levels of being. The existential tension toward the ground orders the entire existence of man, the corporeal foundation included."⁸

Commentary

The understanding of *experience* is a key. The core is in common sense apprehension especially of love, goodness, and beauty. Thus, Voegelin does not analytically drive the wedge of experience between the reality experienced and our consciousness of it as discrete elements of the act of knowing as is usual with the intentionality of thing-knowledge. He avoids this by showing *participatory* experience to be a different mode from sensory experience, thereby rejecting the model of apprehension of things as entities in favor of the mutuality of tensional relationship. To communicate this he resorts to various hyphenated signs such as experience-symbolization, divine-human, etc., as characteristic of the Metaxy or In-Between reality where noetic and pneumatic knowledge is luminosity rather than the discernment of discrete entities as with thing-knowledge. Nor does Voegelin identify the consciousness of the human speculator with the reality of which he is conscious as with Hegel. Rather, he preserves the tension of knower and known even in the mutuality of participatory awareness and luminosity which

⁸Ibid., 210-211.

he signals as “reflective distance” while also acknowledging that “there is something in the structure of consciousness-reality-language that forces us to think in the mode of thingness” even after noesis differentiates It-reality and thing-reality.⁹ The participatory relationship itself extends to the penetration of *things* by the divine: we have no experience of an absolutely natural *nature*, *i.e.*, of a realm wholly isolated from grace. And even our flawed knowledge of reality can only be expressed in flawed language grounded in thingness where nonthings are represented as things.

Voegelin’s primary concern is with the structure-process of reality, and on occasion he characterized *Order and History* itself as an ontology.¹⁰ However, he repeatedly underlines his insistence on *concreteness* and shows his wariness of every abstraction and classification. He avoids hermeneutics no less than dialectics, especially in the late work, so as to stay close to reality-experienced-symbolized. Thus, there is no “human consciousness” that differentiates. Rather, there is *only* the consciousness of individual human beings who from time to time uniquely respond to divine initiative (or irruptions) in a

⁹Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 5, *In Search of Order* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1987), 100. Cf. Ellis Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction* 2nd edn (New Brunswick: Transaction Pubs., 2000), esp. chap. 7: *Principia Noetica* and Epilogue, 143-87, 253-77.

¹⁰“It is an ontology of social order and history.” Letter to Carl J. Friedrich dated April 12, 1959, in CW30:388.

collaborative quest for truth that differentiates the reality of which they are self-reflective members and whose new insights are propagated through persuasion in their various communities.¹¹ The celebrated “leap in being” or pivotal differentiating experience of millennial significance, disclosing the soul to be the sensorium of transcendence and transcendent divine being as hegemonic reality in several modes and in different ethnic horizons, illustrates the dynamic and its limitations. But it is as ubiquitous as individual noetic or pneumatic conversion (*periagoge*, *epistrophe*, *conversio*), personal vocation, and every insight into the truth of existence at whatever level attained.¹²

Voegelin is emphatic that all of the tiers of the hierarchy of being are interdependent. There can be no good life without life itself, and neither man, society, nor history exists apart from corporeal foundations: kill the body and you destroy the human existent, who, metaphysical quibbles aside, is silently left to the hope of eternal salvation through faith.¹³ The anchoring of human personality and

¹¹Cf. “In Search of the Ground” in CW11:243. Cited and discussed in Thomas A. Hollweck, “Cosmos and the ‘Leap in Being’ in Voegelin’s Philosophy,” paper delivered at the 2010 Eric Voegelin Society meeting, at Note 33. The point is eloquently made in *Hitler and the Germans*, CW 31: 205-209. This singularity, it may be noted, has its striking physiological analogy in the uniqueness of individual fingerprints, facial identifying characteristics, and DNA.

¹²Cf. Ellis Sandoz, “The Philosopher’s Vocation: The Voegelinian Paradigm,” *Review of Politics* 71 (2009): 54-67.

¹³Philosophical anthropology may be consulted in this connection, the heart of political theory. In one formulation: “[T]here is a soul in the child which hath vegetative power in actual exercise, since the child groweth; he hath also a percipient power in actual exercise, since the child feeleth;

of overall reality in the unique *physical* existence of each and every individual man and woman is the self-evident warrant of the ineradicable worth and dignity of even the least of these as bearers of *imago Dei*. The insight has special pungency in our effete age of complacently dehumanizing man in the name of man doctrinally—with the blatant factual consequence of rampant murderous destruction of millions of human beings on biological, social class, religious, or other ideological pretexts merely for “the fun of it.”¹⁴ Voegelin writes:

Through the seeking for the divine, the loving reaching out beyond ourselves toward the divine in the philosophical experience and the loving encounter through the Word in the pneumatic experience, man participates in the divine.... Insofar as man shares in the divine, insofar, that is to say, as he can experience it, man is ‘theomorphic,’ in the Greek term, or the image of God, the *imago Dei*, in the pneumatic sphere. The specific dignity of

he hath moreover an imaginative power, but not yet in actual exercise; and a reasoning power, the exercise whereof is as yet still more remote; he hath, too, an intellectual power, but that is even more delayed in developing. Thus we find that one and the same soul hath the lower powers in actual exercise first, and afterward the higher, as if man were animal before he is spiritual.... Draw me, Lord, for none can come unto Thee save he be drawn by Thee; grant that, thus drawn, I may be set free from this world and may be united unto Thee, the absolute God, in an eternity of glorious life. Amen.” Nicholas of Cusa, *The Vision of God* [1453], trans. Emma Gurney Salter (Escondido, CA: The Book Tree, 1999), 120-21, 130. For the hierarchy of being from *Nous* to *Apeiron* and its theory see the diagram and discussion in the appendix to Voegelin, “Reason: The Classic Experience,” in *Anamnesis*, ed. Niemeyer, 114-115; also reprinted in *CW* 12: 289-91.

¹⁴Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, rev. edn with glossary, ed. and intro. by Ellis Sandoz (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011), chap. 14, p. 74.

man is based on this....¹⁵Unfolding at the level of the questing meditative's open ascent to the vision of God—the infinite flowing Presence of the ineffable It-reality beyond symbolization-experience—, ambiguity, paradox, and silence attend the process whereby the ineffable somehow becomes effable in human experience.¹⁶ All representation falters as the symbols partake of the ineffable mystery of infinitude to yield only such enigmatic linguistic markers of the quest as the Parmenidean *IS!* or Mosaic I AM or Platonic GOOD beyond being and silence.¹⁷ Following Jean Bodin and Pseudo-Dionysius, along with Henri Bergson and Plotinus, Voegelin stresses the inadequacy of all symbolization to express the reality of knowing participation. “Behind the knowledge, which enters into the symbol, there is always the ineffability of the knowledge about the

¹⁵Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, ed. Niemeyer, 210; quotation from Eric Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, trans., ed., intro. Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell, *CW31* (1999): 87.

¹⁶Voegelin, *Order and History* 5 (1987), 103: “When the paradoxical experience of not-experientiable reality becomes conscious in reflective distance [in Plato], the questioner's language reveals itself as the paradoxical event of the ineffable becoming effable. This tension of effable-ineffable is the paradox in the structure of meditative language that cannot be dissolved by a speculative meta-language of the kind by which Hegel wanted to dissolve the paradoxical ‘identity of identity and non-identity.’ In reflective distance, the questioner rather experiences his speech as the divine silence breaking creatively forth in the imaginative word that will illuminate the quest as the questioner's movement of return to the ineffable silence. The quest, thus, has no external ‘object,’ but is reality itself becoming luminous for its movement from the ineffable, through the Cosmos, to the ineffable.”

¹⁷Cf. Voegelin, *Order and History* 2 (1957), 211: “[Parmenides'] progress on the way toward the Light culminates in an experience of a supreme reality that can only be expressed in the exclamatory ‘Is!’.”

inexhaustibility of the ground.... Symbolism is no more than the last word of each historical religion; the reality of faith through *conversio* lies beyond the symbols.”¹⁸ One prudential consequence is the moderation of raging dogmatomachy or warfare of contending dogmas through the balm of religious and political *tolerance*: the ultimate truth of *faith* is not at stake in the dogmas or even in the symbols. The inadequacy of *all* experience-symbolization is emphasized in later paradoxical formulations, *e.g.*: “Even when the divine Beyond reveals itself in its formative presence, it remains the unrevealed divine reality beyond its revelation.”¹⁹

Conclusion

Questions remain, of course, but these hints will perhaps suffice to secure the chief points of analysis for present purposes and to arouse further interest in the issues. The open quest of the process of reality for its truth (for which Anselm’s *fides quaerens intellectum* is taken to be paradigmatic)²⁰ does not deliver a truth to end all truth. Rather it signals the enduring *mystery* of being whose penetration by the responsive human being is precious but remains forever imperfect, ultimately

¹⁸Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, ed. Niemeyer, 195, 197.

¹⁹Voegelin, *Order and History* (1987 edn), 5:97

²⁰Voegelin, “Quod deus dicitur,” in *CW* 12: 376-94 at 383: “Behind the quest, and behind the *fides* the quest is supposed to understand, there now becomes visible the true source of the Anselmian effort in the living desire of the soul to move toward the divine Light.”

“penultimate” in Voegelin’s expression: the philosopher does not know and knows why he does not know. Philosophy, despite its limitations, nonetheless stands as an indispensable bulwark of noetic truth. It stands against reductionist manipulators and apocalyptic dreamers of all stripes whose lust for power in the warfare of contending dogmas often is unrestrained by any concern for *salus populi*, the cornerstone of just governance, and for the well being of every person in their respective communities. For while the physical safety of a society may be the cardinal political priority, the spiritual health nurtured by truth and justice in the public order and civic consciousness is essential to the happiness of individuals and to the thriving of the societies they compose. This is not a novel insight but unoriginal thinking may bear the mark of truth in human affairs. As Voegelin writes:

The philosopher’s way is the way up toward the light, not the way down into the cave....The search for truth makes sense only under the assumption that the truth brought up from the depth of his psyche by [one] man, though it is not the ultimate truth of reality, is representative of the truth in the divine depth of the Cosmos....The search that renders no more than equivalent truth rests ultimately on the faith that, by engaging in it, [a] man

participates representatively in the divine drama of truth becoming
luminous.²¹

The beginning of mystic philosophy—*i.e.*, of philosophy *per se*—in Parmenides’
differentiation of being and discovery of *Nous* and *logos* also was accompanied by
the differentiation of the individual soul in its search for the truth of being.

Mystic philosophy was thereby born in a responsive movement in Hellas akin to
that reflected in the “Suffering Servant” (Isaiah 52-53) of Deutero-Isaiah in Israel.
Parmenides’ poem *Way of Truth* (*ca.* 485 BC) experientially gives his mystical
vision of being (*Eon*) and personal immortality. Voegelin writes:

Only with Jesus does the symbol of the Way of Truth appear in the Jewish
orbit. But when Jesus answers the question of the apostle with his “I am
the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), he firmly takes the symbol
away from the philosophers. From then onward the redemption of the soul
goes through Christ; the component of redemption, which is still present in
the compact philosophizing of Parmenides, has been revealed in its true
meaning; and philosophy, the sole source of transcendent order for the polis,
has become one of the two sources of order for mankind, that of Reason by
the side of Revelation.²²

²¹Voegelin, “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History” in *CW* 12:119, 122, 133.

²²Voegelin, *Order and History* 2 (1957): 203-204; cf. 207-14 *passim*.

If one is finally left wondering what the individual can *do* in order to propagate truth and to resist massive societal corruption as a personal obligation, Voegelin was fond of quoting God's message to the prophet Ezekiel, a passage he told the students to memorize:

So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked man, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way; he shall die in his iniquity, but you will have saved your life.²³

²³Ezekiel 33:7-9 [RSV] as in *Hitler and the Germans*, 200.