

**Response to:**

**Henrik Syse, "Is War Natural to the Human Condition?❖ and to**

**William Petropulos, "The Relationship between Mysticism and Science in Voegelin's Work❖**

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I feel it to be both an honor and a mild irritation to have been asked by the Chair of this panel to respond to the papers of Henrik Syse and Bill Petropulos. The cause of it being an honor, and the cause of it being an irritation, are one and the same: the two papers, within the relatively narrow scope of their concerns, I find to be more or less impeccable. I have searched for a significant enough flaw or oversight in each paper into which to lodge a wedge of criticism, but both papers appear to me to be tightly constructed, soundly argued, and solidly referenced.

Dialectical criticism, however, is only one of the useful functions of a respondent. One may also, for example, be of some use through attempting to more fully articulate some of the underlying principles and assumptions of the arguments presented. This is what I will try to do somewhat with regard to these two papers--in a manner that I hope is accurate to their primary concerns, but also a bit provocative.

I am going to respond to both papers at the same time, because, although on the surface they seem to be concerned with quite different topics, they can also be seen as directly related to each other. Specifically, Petropulos's discussion of mystical experience as foundational for Voegelin's conception and practice of the science of politics—a matter about which, as Petropulos shows, Voegelin was clear from the very start of his career—can be shown to be not unconnected with Syse's discussion of the Platonic and Voegelinian recognition that political science must concern itself with war, and that the true statesman will only be able to master just deliberation about war through having undergone experiences that result in a loving wisdom dedicated to preserving the core goods of the political community, friendship and concord (or *homonoia*).

I'll put the common thesis underlying both papers—explicit in Petropulos's paper and implicit in Syse's—in this way: Personal mystical experiences are a necessary foundation both for engaging in sound political science, and for properly knowing when and how to conduct war. This is a statement that, I assume, would sound fairly aggravating, if not absurd, to most political scientists and politicians. From Voegelin's point of view, however, it is almost a self-evident proposition. I'll try to elucidate why, recognizing that, in part of what I say, I will just be expanding a bit on what Petropulos already states clearly in his paper.

Political science is the study of societies and polities as they constitute and organize themselves for action in history. What we call a society or polity is more than an aggregate of persons bound together by external force or by temporary necessity. Rather, it is a group of significant size founded on some real degree of community. Community, then, entails shared culture and shared identity, which comes into being through shared experiences, shared understandings, shared judgments of truth, and most of all by shared judgments of value and shared commitment to specific values, goals, ideals, and myths. The existential basis, and also the consequence, of these shared values and commitments, is friendship (*philia*), and concord or likemindedness (*homonoia*).

Now, the metaphysical, or ontological, substance that allows for a genuine commonality, or oneness, of shared experiences, values and commitments, is the common spiritual ground of reality in which all individual persons participate. This substance is spiritual; it is not merely material or biological. Human beings are united to each other in an identity of community through their mutual participation in a dimension of being that transcends individual differences and limitations—a dimension of transcendent meaning which is the spiritual ground of reality. As transcendent, this ground of reality is in itself not directly or fully understandable by our finite intellects; thus it is an ontological *mystery* that we experience ourselves and other human beings to be involved in, a mystery that we can apperceive through turning our attention toward, and apprehending the nature and implications of, our own spiritual consciousnesses.

Not everyone concerned with the study of society and politics understands the fact that the friendship and concord that constitute true community is grounded in common individual participation in a mystery of transcendent reality. Those who *are* cognizant of it, are so, due to

what Voegelin would call meditative experiences, in which both individual being and the life of genuine community are understood to be actually *constituted* by the spiritual mystery of the divine ground of being. Such meditative experiences may be called "mystical experiences," broadly construed. The political scientist or sociologist who has not had such experiences, who does not seek them, and who does not recognize them in the symbolisms and formulations of the founding texts of political science, simply does not have an adequate explanatory grasp of the ontological basis of community, and thus does not apprehend the utmost foundation either of political reality or of scientific analyses of social and political order.

Now a further point must be made. The political scientist or politician who *does* appreciate the foundation of political community in a shared participation in the mystery of the spiritual ground of being, has attained that appreciation through an experience of love. The mystical apprehension of the one ground of being, takes place only by way of the loving search for the ground of existence. There is no experience of a *unio mystica* that is not the fruit of a humanly unrestricted loving finding its experiential counterpart in an unrestricted reality of transcendence. The best political scientist is the one whose loving meditative concern has discovered the spiritual ground of his or her own loving, a spiritual ground which is also, as the ontological substance of self and society, the very essence of the *philia* and *homonoia* that establishes and preserves community.

The political scientist or politician whose consciousness and understanding have repeatedly undergone "spiritual awakenings" of the kind just talked about, will be someone whose loves will over time be more and more "ordered aright" through consciousness being grounded in, and oriented by, love of the unrestricted source of being, self, and society. Lesser goods--wealth, power, pleasure, status--will not be mistaken for the higher goods of friendship and social harmony; and the latter will be recognized to be possible only on the basis of the realization of sufficient justice, courage, moderation, wisdom, compassion, and charity on the part of members of the community. Thus, the political scientist who seeks to understand order and disorder in the political realm will analyze the career of societies in history with an eye toward the presence or lack of presence of these virtues in the community, and will identify the finest statesman as being the one who has mastered these virtues most fully in his or her person,

who knows how to encourage their development in communal life, and who knows how to defend and preserve them in the polity.

Now, in accordance, I believe, with the entire thrust of Syse's paper, the politician who fits this description will do all that is possible to avoid war and, indeed will be devoted at all times to establishing and preserving that peace which truly reflects concord. But, when war is inevitable or appropriate—and it *will* be inevitable or appropriate, because as Voegelin was very aware, it is an ineluctable part of the human condition—he or she will engage in the *for what*, the *when*, the *how*, and the *for how long* of war with the goods of love, justice, and concord always uppermost in mind. An unwavering habit in such a political leader will have been made possible *only* through personal experiences of that loving, mystical union with the divine ground that reveals, ever and again, with unshakeable clarity that all human beings share a common humanity through their mutual participation in transcendent spiritual reality.

This raises an interesting question. If a politician initiates or conducts a war, and in doing so explains its *what fors*, its *hows*, and its *how longs*, in terms of a concern for justice or for universal human dignity, how can we ourselves assess whether that politician is a true statesman whose actions and aims are guided by personal virtue and wisdom, or whether he or she is verbally invoking these ideals but is in fact, knowingly or not, "tearing apart the morality [and the concord] of both the individual and the community" through the specific goals of this war and the conduct of its prosecution? (Syse, page 4). To explore the answer to that question, we may do well to devote studious attention to those passages in Voegelin's works where he discusses the importance of political realism; of recognizing second realities and ideological fantasies for what they are; of understanding human nature in all its potentialities for wickedness and self-deception; and especially, of the need for the political scientist—or the mere citizen of a democracy—to strive for personal virtue through engaging in meditative self-examination and moral self-discipline, along with the study of classic texts, for the sake of enhancing one's ability to discern political wisdom from political folly.