Responses to: Peter Petrakis, "Eric Voegelin and Paul Ricoeur on Memory and History" and to David Walsh, "Voegelin's Place in Modern Philosophy"

I. Peter Petrakis, "Eric Voegelin and Paul Ricoeur on Memory and History"

I. I find very little to critique in Prof. Petrakis's paper. Its introduction contrasting Voegelin's and Ricoeur's concerns with memory and history, is straightforward and lucid. Its lengthy presentation of Ricoeur's treatment of memory, history, forgetting, and forgiveness is admirably clear. I agree with his remarks that Voegelin would find little to complain about in Ricoeur's treatment of these themes. So what I would like to do is to indicate briefly how some of these themes of Ricoeur are echoed by crucial themes in Voegelin's work, and to indicate how fruitful an analysis would be that explicitly brought them into conjunction.

II. First, there is Ricoeur's analysis of how memory as "recollection," or *anamnesis*, involves an *effort of search* that inevitably, if it involves recollection of strong significance, is filled with *pathos*, disquietude, and anxiety. Ricoeur's analysis of this would dovetail wonderfully with Voegelin's discussions of: first, the challenges of anamnetically recovering the development of one's own inquiring consciousness; second, the difficulties of the meditative recovery of the originating experiences of symbols that inform the great texts of tradition; and third, the obstructions to remembrance of our lives in the *metaxy*, the in-between of immanence and transcendence.

III. Next, Ricoeur's use of Nietzsche's notion of *critical history* could be marvelously filled out by linking it with Voegelin's discussion and application of critical history in his lectures on *Hitler and the Germans* and in his essay on the German university and the Nazi era. More specifically, Voegelin's insistence that, in some cases, critical history must be founded on

nothing less than a personal conversion, a *periagoge*, in the soul of the historian, would enlarge and further solidify Ricoeur's treatment. Other works of Voegelin could also broaden and illuminate Ricoeur's clinical grasp of repetitive compulsion as a substitute for true recollection, as well as Ricoeur's accounts of blocked memory and manipulated memory.

IV. Finally, Ricoeur's treatment of *forgetting* could be usefully brought to bear on many themes and passages in Voegelin's work: for example, on his discussion of "imaginative oblivion" in *In Search of Order*; or his portrayal of existing in a state of "wilful groundlessness" in his essay "Anxiety and Reason." Further, Ricoeur's distinction between what he calls the two great figures of forgetting--the forgetting through the *erasing of traces*, and the *forgetting kept in reserve* (20)--could be applied to Voegelin's diagnoses of the difference between pathological resistance to recognizing the structure of reality, on the one hand (that is, *the erasing of traces*), and on the other, the need to engage repeatedly in meditative retrieval of profound truths that one must, after all, continually make the effort to remember (that is, the *forgetting kept in reserve*).

II. David Walsh, "Voegelin's Place in Modern Philosophy"

I. Now, for some longer comments on Prof. Walsh's paper. First I'd like to credit it with being an exceptionally successful, succinct, and provocative raising of the question of Voegelin's relationship to twentieth-century philosophy. He begins as he must by indicating the problem of situating Voegelin among the disciplines. As a toiler in the fields--or should I say, the dust bowl--of academic philosophy, I can confirm David's assertion that professional philosophers pay almost no attention to Voegelin, so that there is almost no record of deep philosophical scrutiny of his work in relation to contemporary philosophical movements. Some of us try, but we are few and far between.

II. So David asks his central question: What is Voegelin's contribution to the unfolding of modern philosophy *per se*? And he makes the following points, all of which I find both true and telling:

First, Voegelin's work, he says, is permeated by a "curious detachment" (5) from modern and contemporary philosophers, including what David calls "the great modern figures." Long ago when I was first studying Voegelin, I was unaware of the degree of this detachment. I assumed that he stayed abreast of the writings of the most influential of his philosophical contemporaries, and so I naively asked him once, in 1983, whether he thought, as I did, that there were fascinating similarities between his late works and the late works of Heidegger--to which he replied: "What I object to, you see, is the purposeless murdering of millions of innocent people." I had an insight: he's not reading the work of the late Heidegger, not to mention the crowd of post-structuralists and postmodernists then dominating the philosophical scene.

Second, David claims correctly, in my view, that Voegelin, although working in a kind of isolation from much of contemporary philosophy, trusted that his own philosophical contribution would ultimately intersect or dovetail with the "larger philosophical project of modernity" (6) and that it would enhance it by providing it with a philosophy of history and a "fundamental philosophy of existence." (6)

Third, David makes a related claim, which I consider as accurate as it is provocative: He writes, "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." (7) Yes--but it is along "the trajectory of *inquiry*" that this close convergence exists. Twentieth century philosophy has trod along its "path of inquiry" into numerous suckholes of nihilistic immanentism and disorienting labyrinths of self-contradiction astutely avoided by Voegelin.

Fourth, David points out that Voegelin retains and employs the linguistic term "experience" in a way that appears tied to Kantian philosophical and epistemological assumptions, and this is problematic for contemporary philosophers.

III. But after all, I come to query David, not to praise him. My contention will be that his essay has quietly sidestepped a core of philosophical achievement in Voegelin's work that not only reveals him not to be lagging behind contemporary philosophy's so-called "desubjectified" perspectives, but to have in fact moved beyond those very perspectives, which remain entangled in certain nefarious dichotomies.

IV. Let me indicate what I mean by beginning with David's criticism of Voegelin's reliance on the term "experience." One can hardly read much of Voegelin's mature work before realizing that, for Voegelin, the word *experience* is simply a symbol for a range of experiences. What is included in the range of experiences that Voegelin is symbolizing by the word *experience*? Well, centrally it includes the elemental experience of human consciousness being aware that it is *both* an irruption within Being *and* a subject. That is, consciousness experiences itself as an element "given" within reality, and, as such, as belonging to the reality within which it has irrupted. At the same time, consciousness experiences itself as an intentional subject, bodily founded, who can claim authorship of intentional operations, and deliberative thought and action. So a basic experience of consciousness is that of being a subject while also being a predicative event in the process of reality. Consciousness is therefore neither non-subject not subject; it is both non-subject *and* subject, both event and author.

V. Now, throughout his paper, Professor Walsh praises modern or postmodern philosophy as having gotten beyond the notion of the *priority* of the subject. He states this repeatedly in varying ways. He writes admiringly of modern philosophy's "almost complete reversal of the subject-object model," and of its "radical attempt . . . to think the question of truth apart from all reference to the subject" (8, 9); of its reaching a point "when all subject-object reference has virtually been eliminated," so that philosophers can think in "a thoroughly desubjectified manner," and achieve a "truly post-subjective metaphysics" (12).

VI. It seems to me that these comments show that Professor Walsh has fallen into the trap of a false dichotomy that Voegelin recognized, avoided, and philosophically critiqued. Voegelin saw clearly that in the philosophical act, as in existence generally, there is no getting away from the *experience* of being a subject, but that one must philosophize in clear recognition of the coeval experience of being a derived participation in the ground from which one has emerged. What Voegelin saw clearly was that the modern philosophical need wasn't for a *reversal* of the priority of subject and reality, but for a balanced recognition of their experiential equiprimordiality. Voegelin's human consciousness is not a subject; it is a paradoxicality of subject and event, of intentionality and luminosity, a reality constituted *simultaneously* as a clearing in Being, to use Heidegger's phrase, *and* a physically located agent.

VII. This is why Voegelin was so delighted to find the symbol of the *metaxy*--a word conspicuously absent from David's essay. The term *metaxy* captures excellently the mutual interpenetration of subject and transcendent ground, protecting both the truth of the experience of being a situated, historical, cognitive, affective, moral subject *and* the truth of the priority of participation. "Desubjectification" is not the philosophical way forward from Descartes and Kant--the proper contextualization of subjectivity is.

VIII. To be fair, I think David overstates when he uses a phrase like "desubjectified philosophy." What he properly admires in twentieth century philosophy is the *deprioritizing* of the subject, the *decentering* of the subject from its modern status as lord and master of the universe. It rejects rightfully the modern portrayal of the subject who stands nonparticipatorily apart as scientific master and controller of nature; the self-glorying subject of bourgeois utilitarian and possessive individualism; the even more dramatically self-glorifying subject of Romantic experience and aesthetic individualism; and all the varieties of subject-centered ethical individualism. All of these models of the subject-centered universe are based on a false image, that of the monadic subject, the subject of epistemological and ontological *individualism*, which, because it betrays the participatory, intersubjective and historical character of conscious experience, leads to

recognition of the need to dismantle the Cartesian and Kantian subject. But Voegelin has accomplished this more accurately and responsibly than most twentieth century philosophers.

IX. A few last quick points:

Walsh writes: "Voegelin 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." (11). Now let me quote Voegelin from *Anamnesis*: "[R]egardless of how much [we might expand a list of symbols of transcendence] we shall not gain more than the insights that (1) in the tension toward the ground we have experience of a reality that incomprehensibly lies beyond all that we experience of it in participation, and that we (2) can speak of the incomprehensible only by characterizing it as reaching beyond the symbolic language of participation" (*Anamnesis*, vol. 6 of *Collected Works*, p. 396). The passage is representative; and I would argue that Voegelin has thought through the problematic of the transcendence of transcendence as fully as any twentieth century philosopher, cf. my books.

Second, David writes about adjustments that modern philosophers must make--an adjustment he claims Voegelin has not made--to think in a "thoroughly desubjectified manner." (12) Well, in the three sentences culminating in this conclusion David relies on nouns or pronouns referring to subjects *ten* times. And really, there is a delicious irony in David's naming of Kierkegaard as "the greatest postsubjective thinker" (13)--Kierkegaard, whose most famous philosophical tenet is that "Truth is Subjectivity," and who asked that his gravestone be inscribed with only the words, "That Individual."

Finally, the final sentence of David's paper reads: "One wonders if the crucial factor was [Voegelin's] 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."

Voegelin would again detect in the phrasing here a false dichotomy. We are not a "questioning" that then afterwards opens toward being; nor are we an "openness to being" before we raise the question of being. Rather, we *are* the Question, which *is* the openness toward being.

To grasp this alternative to an illusory dichotomy is to embrace the paradoxicality of consciousness as equiprimordially intentional and luminous. This does leave an elementary ambiguity in the words, *consciousness*, *reality*, and *language*, as Voegelin recognized. But, to quote a wise phrase, maturity might best be defined as the capacity to tolerate ambiguity.