

**What Is Philosophy?**  
**Reflections on Plato and the Voegelin--Strauss impasse**

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This essay (or, at its current stage, draft paper) is not autobiographical. But a note about my encounter with the problem addressed herein makes for a fitting introduction, and helps explain my argument.

From 1989 to 1991 I attended the graduate program for the Master of Arts degree in the Department of Political Science at Boston College . I have fond memories of those years and remain thankful to every single teacher I had for their generosity, wisdom, and indeed friendship.

Those years coincided with my introduction to Leo Strauss, which is only natural, since several teachers in the Department were what are often called Straussians.

Interestingly, not much was said about Strauss -- at least not explicitly -- to new students. Indeed, as a North European not familiar with Strauss at the time when I arrived at Boston College, I received no immediate notice as to the intellectual background to what I would encounter.

However, as soon as I realized that the interpretations given of Platonic texts in particular, and also of John Locke and early liberalism, were quite different from what I was used to from my undergraduate courses in philosophy back home in Norway, discussions with fellow students and eventually my teachers brought out the name and thought of Leo Strauss. Through several of the always civil and unfailingly interesting Bradley lectures once a month,

Strauss became an even more explicit theme, and I was fortunate to be present when Barry Cooper and Thomas Pangle, somewhere in the winter of 1990/91 (I remember it as a dark and stormy night...), debated the relationship between Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss. This happened at the same time as the Strauss-Voegelin correspondence was being edited for what became *Faith and Political Philosophy* (Emberley and Cooper 1993).

It was at that time, with the aid of long conversations with students as well as teachers (not least the late, great Father Ernest L. Fortin), that suspicions grew: Something strange was afoot, having to do with the basic understanding of what philosophy is about, and even more deeply: what it means to be a philosopher. With all due respect for my great Boston College teachers -- and that respect has not diminished -- I could not but agree when a fellow student remarked that the Straussian understanding of philosophy has the potential to be dangerous to the young human mind in its quest for truth in philosophy. As not one of my teachers had the slightest intention of being dangerous to their students -- quite the opposite -- I utilize these harsh words very reluctantly, and not in order to form an indictment against any particular teacher. My aim is to question seriously and sternly -- in the best spirit of Professor Strauss and of my Boston College teachers -- what may be the actual consequences of the Straussian teaching on philosophy and revelation.

I do this (a) because Strauss has an enormous and well-documented influence on many of today's young scholars, and so many influential college teachers are indeed Straussians, and (b) because their teaching comes across as sophisticated, and as a serious alternative to the often shallow liberalism that pervades modern culture and its understanding of history as well as philosophy.

My aim here is not to analyze in detail texts by Strauss, or for that matter texts pertaining to the main alternative understanding of philosophy that I rely on: the works of Eric Voegelin. The works of both have been so masterfully edited, discussed, and commented on over the last decades, that I can only stand on the shoulders of giants who have performed these tasks. I will instead take as my point of departure what I take to be an uncontroversial understanding of Strauss' view of philosophy, its essence and purpose, based on Strauss' own assertions, and from

there formulate my possibly more controversial thesis, related to the question of what it means to be a philosopher.

#### Strauss on faith and reason

Leo Strauss held what he called the politico-theological problem to be crucial to all of political philosophy. By this problem he meant the difficult challenge of formulating rightly the relationship between religion and philosophy in political society. On the one hand, religion, whether based directly on (what is claimed or believed to be) revelation, or mediated through tradition, seems to call human beings to duty to God or to gods. By accepting the call of revealed truth, a human being also accepts this truth to be above the demands or claims -- or even questions -- of human reason. Strauss, in other words, describes faith very much as an act of submission.<sup>i</sup> [1]

As Strauss sees it, philosophers will at most times see religious faith to be socially useful, maybe even absolutely required in fostering obedience, discipline, and moderation in political society. Therefore, philosophers will rarely be outspoken critics of revelation. Furthermore, outspoken opposition to (or questioning of) revealed religion and institutionalized faith can carry a high price, and did so even more in previous times than in our own. Hence, even in case they should be agnostics or even unbelievers, philosophers often have to defer to religion and religious authority and often also utilize a form of esoteric writing to escape the sensors.

In spite of this accommodation between religion and philosophy, some human beings will indeed continue to ask critical questions about society around them and about the culture and nature of which that society is a part, in a fashion that challenges the claims of religion -- even if this has to happen in a private or esoteric way. These individuals will, to the extent they are serious and thoughtful, rightly be called philosophers. They will easily come to express views about the gods of the city or the state that are different from the conventional view(s), and they will not feel bound to obedience to what is held to be revealed, religious truth. Seen in this light, a true philosopher such as Socrates may very well be guilty of the charge leveled against him that he does not believe in the gods of the city, since these are the exact beliefs that a philosopher

will question and possibly doubt. However, a good philosopher will as already indicated see the *utility* of religion, and will for his (or more rarely her) survival depend on the acquiescence of religion towards philosophy. Hence, the politico-theological *problem*, as seen by Strauss.

If this is an accurate, albeit abbreviated and only partial, summary of Strauss' understanding of philosophy and revelation, we are left with the view that philosophy and theology stand as two opposed answers to the same question: *What is a good, truthful, fully human life?* The one answer accepts the absolute demands of a revealed doctrine, while the other, in order to be true to itself, must decline adherence to a doctrine based on revelation, while admittedly being able, maybe even forced, to pay lip-service to it. Strauss adds that philosophy must always be open to the challenge of revelation, since it cannot disprove its contents, and also since the choice of philosophy over revelation is in itself an act of faith, that is, nothing that can be proven as superior in itself. The fact still remains, however, according to Strauss: one cannot choose adherence to *both* Jerusalem and Athens. This is the stark choice with which we are faced: a life of faith or a life of reason.<sup>ii</sup> [2]

#### Voegelin on faith and reason

Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss' compatriot and contemporary, never accepted a sharp division between philosophical analysis or activity on the one hand and faith in revelation on the other. To Voegelin, both are human responses to the reality we inhabit.<sup>iii</sup> [3] Indeed, even in his early works analyzing the race idea as expressed, *inter alia*, in National Socialism, he criticizes the tendency to disregard the spiritual or personal aspects of human life in political science as well as biological science, holding that the resulting science will be arbitrary and indeed unscientific, with many aspects of the race idea standing as a pertinent (and horrific) example.<sup>iv</sup> [4] By "spiritual", Voegelin means the human experience of participating in a reality larger than what human perception by itself can fully grasp and understand, and his sense of the problem is well captured by a sympathetic reviewer (emigrated from Germany) who wrote in 1934 about the first of Voegelin's race books: "If the human being voluntarily renounces his spiritual existence, he

will indeed bestialize and cannot complain if he is treated in accordance with Mendel's Law."v [5] .

According to Voegelin, as he would express it several years later, humans find themselves in a *metaxy* (a Platonic expression meaning "in-between"). Spiritual experiences, such as a sense of wonder, the basic human act of questioning (about the meaning of life, the finality of death, etc.), prayer, and religious rituals are all in their different ways human responses to living in the *metaxy* and to the experience of "a mystery ♦beyond' all human experience".vi [6]

Based on this metaxic understanding of human existence, Voegelin sees three distinct and very real dangers for human beings, all related to the understanding of what it means to be a thinking and living human being in this world.

The first is what can broadly be called dogmatization, where the engendering experiences behind spiritual and religious teachings are increasingly forgotten or obscured, and enclosed doctrines and dogmas are erected which tend to transform the spiritual experience(s) into inflexible systems, so that questioning and openness are banished.

The second and certainly related danger is the immanentization of transcendence, where what is essentially a belief in a reality that human beings cannot fully grasp or direct according to human will or power is transformed into a political program or a charismatic movement. In such cases, the human longing for grace, fulfillment, and redemption is placed into this world as a tangible (or sometimes mystical, but still concretely achievable) goal to be reached here and now, often through the commands of a powerful leader.

The third is the one most important for our purposes, although it overlaps with the other two. This is the danger of believing in the existence of a pure philosophy, in which experiences of faith and belief in revelatory truths are banished from the field of philosophical reflection. And it is on this very point that Strauss and Voegelin part ways; on the other two points, although they are more central to Voegelin's than to Strauss' concerns, they converge to a greater degree, and the disagreements are more on the level of emphasis and terminology.

I will analyze how this parting of the ways can be understood, based mainly on my understanding of their correspondence, and how this parting of the ways can be traced back, *inter alia*, to their respective readings of Plato.

What is a philosopher?

Wherein lies "the Socratic moment"? What causes a human being to ask questions about what is true, just, and beautiful, instead of simply relying on tradition or authority?

This seemingly simple question betrays the most basic rift between Strauss and Voegelin. To Voegelin, all of philosophy -- in the proper sense of the word -- starts in experiences. The most basic human experience, philosophically speaking, is exactly that of *not* grasping the whole; of somehow sensing or experiencing that there are standards or a reality towards which human beings live in a tension, those standards or this reality being amenable to neither human manipulation nor complete understanding by human beings. This also helps explain the use of the myth as the most appropriate genre for expressing certain philosophical insights; it conveys the experience of living in the *metaxy* or, in other words, the in-between character of human existence.vii [7]

As we can infer from this, Voegelin views the origins of philosophy as rooted in experience and as reflecting openness towards a reality that transcends full human cognition. For Voegelin, this "open" or "religious" element is clearly present in Plato, although it changes in important ways with the advent of Christianity, expressed by Voegelin as a process of differentiation of truth.viii [8]

Strauss balks at the use of terms such as "religious" and "existence" when applied to Platonic thought, claiming both to be anachronistic misnomers when it comes to the Greek philosophical context.ix [9] While Voegelin sees the Greek and Biblical quest for truth as essentially having the same direction and origin, namely, human situatedness in a reality larger than man himself, Strauss sees Greek and Biblical thought as diametrically opposed, even if they address many of the same questions. In Strauss' view, the philosopher is radically independent of

both the myths of the city and the proclaimed revelatory character of religious doctrine. That does not mean that he cannot show allegiance to them. He may even, in the case of religious doctrine, believe in its truth. But as a philosopher, he is and must be independent of any *allegiance to religion*. Religious beliefs lie outside the purview of philosophizing.

Father Ernest Fortin, a (wonderful) teacher and advisor of mine at Boston College, and both a priest and a Straussian, comes across as a possible challenge to this Straussian view, or at the very least as an untypical Straussian (and priest!). In an interview about his life as a priest and subsequent academic, he articulated the view that his faith was in a way a given, something he had received and never felt eager to question, while pursuing philosophy comes across as a more or less independent path from his faith (although facilitated by the leisure and study time afforded him as "a religious").x [10] Fortin is an interesting case, being indeed both a theologian and a philosopher, something Strauss himself, whom Fortin explicitly was a student and admirer of, said was impossible. Fortin himself, however, did see himself as adhering to the Straussian distinction, being a theologian by training and a priest by original vocation, but as an academic being mainly a philosopher (even if situated in a theology department) who was open to (and knowledgeable about) the challenge of faith, a challenge which permeated his life as a teacher.

To be sure, and as can be understood from what has been said so far, both Voegelin and Strauss insisted that philosophy should be open to the claims of transcendence or revealed truth, in the sense of not dismissing them (or indeed believing that they can be dismissed or refuted at all). Strauss, however, understood this in a different way than Voegelin. For Strauss the challenge of transcendence consisted in its representing irrefutable claims. Philosophy can never show revelation to be untrue; and neither can the life of faith prove the life of philosophy to be false or wrongheaded. Both kinds of lives are entered into (in the case of philosophy, paradoxically) as an act of faith. The point for Strauss is that the challenge from the other side must not be forgotten.

This is, however, where the Straussian position needs to be challenged, and the best angle from which to challenge it is from the point of view of Voegelin. As expressed in different cultures, at different times, and with varying levels of compactness, differentiation, clarity, and sophistication, human beings come to experience a tension towards or belief in transcendence.

This can come across as experiences of the divine, of moral absolutes, or even of deep philosophical insights about God. Are such basic -- Voegelin would say "engendering" -- experiences part of the subject matter of philosophy? Should a true philosopher take seriously, debate, and attempt to understand such experiences, what lies behind them, what they refer to, and what they mean -- in themselves and comparatively? Should a true philosopher even be open to the possibility that such experiences constitute the very starting-point of philosophy as a subject or as an activity in the souls of great thinkers?

The Straussian answer is an emphatic no, by reference to the fact that this "starting-point" is based on something humanly unknowable, namely, the will of God (or gods). His answer is closely tied in with his understanding of what philosophy most basically consists in, not least in its highest (and most politically aware) form, namely, the Platonic. This, to Strauss, is a form of philosophizing that is not based on -- or starts in -- faith, but which consists in reason freely debating the greatest questions about life and its meaning, unaided by revelation or religious dogma. This, furthermore, is not only a human activity alongside others, but a way of life; presumably the highest way of life.xi [11]

We seem to be faced with an almost irresolvable disagreement here, linked to the very definition of philosophy. (And as Strauss said debating this very problem: God knows who is right.xii [12] )

Yet, as philosophers and teachers we cannot leave the question at that. We are duty-bound to ask: What happens *to the vocation of being a philosopher* if one accepts one of these views over the other? This, in my view, is the point at which the Straussian position stands in danger of becoming rigid at best, dangerous at worst.

Let me explain what I mean: In light of the strong, even erotic attractiveness of Socrates in particular and Socratic-Platonic philosophical activity in general for young and bright students, the way in which we as teachers convey what it means to be a philosopher in the Socratic-Platonic sense will be formative for our students' self-understanding and direction. The basic lesson taught by the Straussian "school" is that questions about faith, God, and the experience of being addressed by revelation are not really subjects for philosophy or



philosophizing. Philosophers who raise such issues are either concealing their actual agnosticism or their downright opposition to discussing such topics, or they are not fully philosophers.xiii [13]

This is closely connected to the nature of the Platonic dialogue. For Voegelin, the Platonic dialogue and revelation are closely connected. Admittedly, "Plato propounds no truth that had been revealed to him".xiv [14] But the dialogue represents an open process, through which God in a sense speaks, mediated through Socrates-Plato, in the community formed through eros. It is a "dialogic awakening through the living word".xv [15]

The impasse in the Strauss-Voegelin exchange is deepened by an insistence on Strauss' part, which seems to be a misunderstanding of Voegelin, namely, that revelation in the Christian sense makes philosophy obsolete in the Platonic sense. I cannot see Voegelin ever saying that. Quite the opposite, the Christian revelation represents a differentiation of truth that makes philosophy more important than ever, not merely as a "handmaiden" to the faith, but as a searching quest for truth consisting in the analysis of the philosophical or religious experiences of human beings who have been fellow searchers, be they in Egypt, China, Israel, or Greece. Few have penetrated to the core of these searching questions about the truth of human existence as thoroughly and thoughtfully as Plato and his teacher Socrates. To accuse Voegelin of seeing their philosophical activity as obsolete, because he views the claims of Christian revelation as a further and indeed decisive differentiation of the human-divine mystery, seems to me baseless.

The theme of this panel is Mysticism. Many aspects of the Christian religious life are "mystical" in at least some sense of that word, even if people who partake in them do not necessarily think of themselves as mystics or of the activities as mysteries: the belief in the Incarnation, the divine presence in the Eucharist, the force of prayer, the experience of living in tension towards the unchanging Ground of Being; all encompass belief or participation of a kind that expresses an experiential encounter with the divine and a deep devotion to God. In addition come the meditations and experiences of the Christian mystics, about whom Voegelin frequently wrote, although (as Peter von Sivers points out in another paper on this panel) he did not undertake the sort of structural analyses of their writings as he did of, say, Plato or Aristotle. Either way, Voegelin saw all of these aspects of human life as the proper subject matter of

philosophy. Indeed, the task of philosophy is to reach back to the engendering experiences of these human actions and phenomena, beyond the dogmas that have been erected on top of the experiences.

This is, thus, the very point at which the parting of the ways between Voegelin and Strauss becomes decisive for how philosophy is defined and portrayed. For the one, the life of faith and the experience of revelation are proper subject matters of philosophy, closely connected to the meaning of the Socratic-Platonic dialogue; for the other, these fields of experience and life stand squarely outside of philosophy and denote the essence of that with which a philosopher qua philosopher cannot investigate, even though he should make sure the religious life is accommodated and respected (if nothing else, for his own survival), and he should always remain open to the challenge of revelation's truth claims.

What the latter implies for the life of the mind, and for how philosophers are read and understood, we can only surmise. I, for one, fear the narrowing of philosophy -- and the ensuing narrowing of minds -- that this represents.



The mystery of the human person

Whether Voegelin himself was a "mystic" is not a question I feel qualified to answer. It depends both on which aspect of Voegelin's life and writings one looks at, and how one defines a mystic. As very much a level-headed, analytic, and historically conscious scholar, Voegelin was no sectarian. Nor was he a recluse or meditative dreamer. And he was certainly not a missionary on behalf of any particular religious insight.

Nonetheless, to Voegelin the human being is, in a very real sense, a mystery, as well as being the most basic subject of philosophy (or at least of political philosophy), as expressed by Voegelin in the language-symbol of the *metaxy*. A human being existentially partakes in a reality that goes beyond himself, and he can through philosophizing, meditation, or religious experience -- often in a dialogic community with others -- attain insights into this reality. While not all human beings have such differentiated experiences to the same degree, revelation in the

Christian sense does address itself *to human beings as such, indeed to human beings as persons*, and this personhood is universal. It is not Greek man in the *polis* or a select group of philosophers, but man as man (and woman!) -- man as an individual person -- that is being addressed, universally and unequivocally.

This brings up an important difference between Voegelin and Strauss, most easily detectable in their early correspondence from the war years. For Voegelin, Greek and Hellenic political science was not *universal*, in the sense of addressing or pertaining to all human beings as individuals, regardless of societal status or cultural, linguistic, or political belonging. But with Christianity it is the individual person that is being addressed, and the address as such is universal. In this sense, Christian thought is superior, in Voegelin's view. It does not replace or invalidate Greek thought, but it further differentiates the divine from the human, and in that process it further differentiates the status of each individual human being before the transcendent Ground of Being.

I believe this is relevant to the context of these early letters. It is remarkable that the two German migrs seem not to address the war itself during the war years. The most obvious explanation is the seriousness of the philosophical issues they debate and the understandable feeling that an academic correspondence allows for a legitimate withdrawal from the omnipresent war and its horrors.

Yet, with two scholars addressing the crisis and challenges of political science in their correspondence, we must assume that the war is never far from their minds. And in this light, bearing in mind Voegelin's insistence on the radical affirmation of individual personhood following from Christianity, it is not far-fetched to see this as Voegelin's way of addressing the underlying crisis represented by National Socialism. For Strauss it is the other way around: only by returning to the radical, open-ended questions about the good life posed by Greek philosophy, and by being open to the possibility of a truly scientific political philosophy which is independent of revelation and religious belief, can the current crisis be addressed. The one goes back to the dignity of the individual as differentiated and formulated in the engendering experiences of the Christian tradition; the other returns to the quest for a universal political

science based on the philosophic-scientific insight into human nature, acquired through the dialectics of the philosophical community.

We may see these as two different responses to the spiritual and political crisis of National Socialism. Both writers are strongly critical of the Fascist, Nazi, and also Communist ideologies that are bringing the world to the brink of disaster, but they are also doubtful of the ability of contemporary liberal democracy to restore the order needed. Both see their respective answers to this crisis as more *universal* than the other, but only Voegelin emphasizes the spiritual singularity of each human person as the focal point around which order can be restored. In that sense, he seeks the answer in an acknowledgment of the mystery of the human person, its unique status not as a material substance but as a metaxic being with a spiritual orientation. This brings, in my view, a degree of mysticism to the very core of political philosophy.

Glenn Hughes perceptively notes that a "refined appreciation of mystery is, for Voegelin, one of the requirements for being a true philosopher."xvi [16] That sums up well why the Strauss-Voegelin correspondence had to end in an impasse, and it reminds us of what lies at the heart of this debate: the question of what it means to be a philosopher.

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## Notes

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i [1] This also comes out in the way in which Strauss repeatedly appeals to dogma rather than experience when debating religion in his correspondence with Voegelin; see Ellis Sandoz' perceptive comments on this point in Emberley and Cooper 1993, p. 307.

ii [2] See Strauss 1989, part 3, for a useful collection of essays debating the relationship between reason and revelation; see also the essays "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections" and "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy" in Emberley and Cooper 1993. A good summary of the Straussian position related to his view on the history of philosophy can be found in Tarcov and Pangle 1987.

iii [3] Voegelin emphasizes that the experiences of revelation, as they are experienced and then transmitted by human beings, *can* be meaningfully discussed by human beings, even if it is an experience of the divine: "Revelation ♦ is humanly debatable because it, like all knowledge, is human knowledge" (Letter 38, from Voegelin to Strauss, in Emberley and Cooper 1993, p. 81).

iv [4] See Voegelin [1933]1997 and Voegelin [1933]1998, not least part II, ch. 7 of the former, on the Jews.

v [5] From Helmuth Plessner's review of *Rasse und Staat*, in *Zeitschrift für ♦ ♦ffentliches Recht*, vol. XIV (1934), pp. 407-414, discussed and quoted by Klaus Vondung in Voegelin [1933]1997, pp. xix-xx.

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vi [6] This is Glenn Hughes' formulation, in Embrey and Cooper 2005, p. 85. Hughes gives here a good explanation of the relationship between the "in-between" and the "beyond" in Voegelin's thought. For Voegelin's use of the symbol of the *metaxy*, see, for instance, the essays "Eternal Being in Time" and "What is Political Reality?" in Voegelin [1966]2002.

vii [7] Glenn Hughes talks about "Voegelin's conception of human existence as conscious participation in a mystery of transfiguration, and of the need for mythic symbolization of that mystery ♦" (Hughes 1993, p. 69).

viii [8] For a penetrating analysis of this process of "differentiation", see Ellis Sandoz' essay on the Strauss-Voegelin correspondence, in Emberley and Cooper 1993, esp. p. 306.

ix [9] See Letters 26 to 28 in Emberley and Cooper 1993; cf. Voegelin's article on "The Philosophy of Existence: Plato's Gorgias" (originally published in *Review of Politics*, vol. 11 (1949); later included as ch. 2 in Voegelin 1957).

x [10] See Foley and Kries 2002, pp. 279-302.

xi [11] See Thomas L. Pangle in Emberley and Cooper 1993, p. 344.

xii [12] Letter 39, from Strauss to Voegelin, dated June 4, 1951, in Emberley and Cooper 1993, p. 91. Strauss here claims that Voegelin sees revelation as making "philosophy in the Platonic sense" obsolete. I believe this overstates the point; see below.

xiii [13] I hasten to add here, in all fairness, that several of my fine teachers at Boston College, not least Professor Robert Faulkner and Father Ernest Fortin, encouraged and appreciated my challenging the Straussian orthodoxy on this point.

xiv [14] Letter 38, from Voegelin to Strauss, dated April 2, 1951, in Emberley and Cooper 1993, p. 87.

xv [15] *Ibid.*, p. 86.

xvi [16] Hughes 1993, p. 1.