

Remarks on Paul Caringella's paper

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First of all, I'd like to thank Professor Caringella for a very fine paper, and especially for his opening autobiographical reflection--how rare and wonderful it must be to have known both Voegelin and Levinas. I envy you entirely. This is indeed a fine paper and I would like to proceed directly to my response.

On page two of his paper, Professor Caringella writes "What [Voegelin] introduces in the letters [to Alfred Schutz] with the primary bond of community of being remains through all his later work. It is the point at which we can truly bring him face to face with Levinas.❖"

I would offer the following by way of response: isn't the community of being only possible, for Levinas, with the arrival of the third party that extends the ethical dyad, thus introducing the (at least potential) primacy of intentional, symbolizing consciousness? Here's why. For Levinas, "community❖ presupposes law and order of some kind, however rudimentary its conceptualization, implementation, or institutionalization. The ethical relationship breaks with community precisely because of the expiatory sacrifice that the ethical subject undergoes for the sake of the Other. I was enlightened by Levinas's having stressed in conversation with Professor Caringella the increasing importance of expiation to his thought. It seems to me his later work indeed bears this out. I think, however, that expiation for Levinas entails a decisive break with community and the order that it presupposes. In that sense, expiation is an *an-arche*.

"This primary bond of community of being❖ also requires, and here I quote Voegelin's review of Schutz's *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt*, "the assumption of a direct contact between human existences❖ that "appears to me indispensable [*unerlasslich*] as the ground on which analyses of consciousness such as those Schutz so excellently gives can then be carried out.❖

This idea of "a direct contact between human existences❖ that Voegelin believes to be "indispensable❖ is precisely that which Levinas seeks to undermine in his later work because of his desire to overthrow ontology as first philosophy. Levinas's philosophical project does not envision the ethical relationship to occur in "real time,❖ a fact for which he has been roundly criticized, and his thought has at times been characterized as "ghostly❖ for that very reason.

Michael Purcell, a fine Levinas scholar, has called Levinas's philosophy a "diachronic transcendentalism❖ that refuses to think in "real time❖ because of the primacy of ontology that undergirds real time's temporalizing conceptuality. The Other is never "present,❖ for Levinas, which is probably a more succinct way of making the essential point here, as his later work firmly eschews any primacy accorded to a traditional metaphysics of presence. It seems to me that the extent to which Levinas seeks to undermine the primacy of ontology in favor of ethics, the *epekeina tes ousias*--the good beyond being, is also the extent to which he and Voegelin are working in different philosophical registers. Just to mention this, however, there is a debate going on among Levinas scholars as to whether his ethics is indeed an "otherwise than being❖ (the title of his second major text, after *Totality and Infinity*), or a "being otherwise❖ that misguidedly pretends to overthrow an ontology that is too "foundational❖ to western thought to be dispensed with.

I cite another passage from Voegelin that we find on page four of Professor Caringella's paper: "The bond of being between man and man (as between Man, World and God) precedes the differentiation of the I and the Other. The world (encompassing God, Cosmos, Society and other men) is understood as being of the same kind as one's own, before personal existence within being in its essential traits can be clearly distinguished. The way does not go from the I toward the Other but rather from undifferentiated participation in the being of the personal existences of the others (not yet clearly differentiated) to the differentiation of things and their essences, and especially of the I and the Other.❖ I think it is important to point out that in my own reading of Levinas and I know I'm not alone in this, and in light of his analysis of ethical responsibility, personal existence thought of as "human❖ is not primarily a state of being except in a banal manner; it does not "participat[e] in the being of the personal existences of the others (not yet clearly differentiated) to the differentiation of things and their essences, and especially of the I and the Other.❖ Personal existence as "human,❖ for Levinas, is rather an ethical accomplishment, an expiatory sacrifice, and a perhaps quite fleeting and ephemeral accomplishment at that.

I am grateful to Professor Caringella for resisting the temptation to add Levinas's name to the list "Husserl . . . Heidegger . . . Sartre,❖ names of which Voegelin is clearly critical. Professor Caringella writes: "My resistance to that temptation is the evidence of Levinas, through his living Judaism, breaking through to a primordial layer in the tension between the three partners in Voegelin that bear the names God, Man, and Society.❖ Levinas's "living Judaism❖ was clearly

quite real and raises an issue that is currently also under debate: to what extent does Judaism influence Levinas's philosophical project? Levinas claimed that his thought stood alone without it and he sought to make a clear distinction between his philosophical writings and Talmudic commentaries. Many of his readers are not sure that such a clear distinction can be made and I am not of the opinion that it needs to be made. I am also grateful for Professor Caringella's clarification of what I consider to be the "supersessionism" problem in relation to Voegelin's thought; that issue has always troubled me somewhat.

Finally, I am especially grateful for Professor Caringella's statement that "[I]lluminosity cannot be separated from Intentionality and Language is an essential part of the Quest of Truth. Is it stretching too much to combine Voegelin's and Levinas's centrality of questioning in their descriptions of knowing and intentionality?" The centrality of questioning for both thinkers had not been as clear to me before reading this paper and I think it is key to dialogue between Voegelin and Levinas. Levinas writes; "[A]udacity may be taken to the point of wondering whether intentionality is not already derived from prayer which would be the originary thinking-of-the-absent One." Voegelin counters: "This luminous search in which the finding of the true answer depends on asking the true question, and the asking of the true question on the spiritual apprehension of the true answer is the life of reason." For both thinkers, as Professor Caringella points out, the question "is it righteous to be?" is key to understanding the truth of what it means to be human, seen through either an ontological or an ethical lens.