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**“God, the Creative Ground of Existence”  
In Voegelin, Etty Hillesum and Martin Buber:  
A Response to Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion***

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## UNREST OF THE AGE

Life in the twenty-first century is easier said than done. It is pretty rough, uneven and in one word: difficult. This is a great fact, one of the greatest truths we should face. Once we understand and accept what we are up against, the fact that our life is difficult is no longer relevant. What makes our life complex is that the process of confronting and solving personal as well as community problems is a painful one. One of the main post-modern tribulations to be dealt with is the unrest emerging from the “God confusion.” The variety of personal experiences, understanding and symbolizations of divine reality in the contemporary world – or the lack of it – has created a world-wide religious tension. Academic disciplines, which try to find answers to current problems and study the lived experiences of “God,” such as philosophy, theology, spirituality, psychology and sociology, have developed rapidly in the last century. Both in University courses and programs, as well as in growing publications concerning religion, we find a strong desire among scholars to unravel the mystery of the human search for the divine. The present study belongs in that category of research tools which tries to unveil the divine-human movements of the soul. One main concern is our decision or stance with respect to the questions: “is there a God?” and “can we know whether there is a God or not?” Our contemporary struggle is born at the roots of what we would call today “postmodernity,”<sup>1</sup> which goes partly back to the Romantic period, but its major influence is Nietzsche. Much of what is called postmodern thought goes back to him. He takes the view that God is dead,<sup>2</sup> resulting from what modernity has done. David Walsh in *The Growth of the Liberal Soul* reflects thoroughly on Nietzsche’s understanding of the breakdown of Western society:

Nietzsche understood the enormity of the modern secular experiment, the creation of a human order in which the question of God had become obsolete, because he realized the degree to which our whole moral tradition had depended on divine authorization. In contrast to the glibness with which the idea of a rational moral order was endorsed by liberal intellectuals, he was among the very few who foresaw the crisis of morality that would unfold. The death of God meant the advent of nihilism. All of Nietzsche’s efforts were directed to awakening his contemporaries to this realization and struggling courageously, if tragically, to find a means of confronting it. He understood that the abandonment of faith in God would put all the greater pressure on morality. It would soon collapse. “Every purely moral value system (that of Buddhism, for example) ends in nihilism: this is to be expected in Europe. One still hopes to get along with a moralism without religious background: but that necessarily leads to nihilism. – In religion the constraint is lacking to consider *ourselves* as value-positing” (*Will to Power*, 16).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For an overview on postmodernism see *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, ed. K. Baynes, J. Bohman, and T. McCarthy (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987); Michael Paul Gallagher, S.J., *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout history, the symbol “God” has been used or rather misused for human purposes and for obscure immanent and ideological projects, till the moment came that even “God” was announced “dead.” Philosopher and postmodernism’s prophet Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was convinced: we killed God! The “God is dead” statement in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (paragraphs: 108, 125, 343), published in 1882, is his single most-quoted line expressing his concern for the development of Western society in the modern age. Modern science and the increasing secularization of the West have, according to Nietzsche, effectively “killed” the (Judeo-) Christian God. For Nietzsche see: No. 230, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, in *Werke VII* (Leipzig: 1903); *The Gay Science*, translation by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974); *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Marianne Cowan (Chicago: 1955); *Also sprach Zarathustra*, in *Werke VI*, Leipzig: 1904; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translation by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1978); *The Will to Power*, translation by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> David J. Walsh, *The Growth of the Liberal Soul* (Columbia (Missouri): University of Missouri Press, 1997), 27; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*. For Walsh see also: *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom* (Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990).

The impact of the current religious crisis on the breakdown of society is not to be underestimated, its effects are real and they bite. In the global community, we wrestle with images of newspapers, television, film and internet, we struggle with ideas, with impressions and feelings and we have doubts concerning religious beliefs and perceptions of reality. In the range of public opinion, we can distinguish at least five main positions by which we can look at the world. There is the religious believer, the spiritual searcher and the secularist; although often part of the second and third group we have the atheist and the agnostic. The diversity of individuals and communities with different backgrounds, different attitudes towards religion, evokes the question: How will we govern our society? What is our guidebook? Who or what will decide what standards to live by?

At present, a fierce battle is going on between atheists and theists. The global "religious boxing ring" has become very popular. Grayling<sup>4</sup> remarks that writers of pro- or anti-religious themes had found an audience following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. "I think 9/11 has changed the nature of the debate tremendously," he said. "A decade ago people wouldn't say 'I am a Christian' at a dinner party. You would no more speak about your religious belief than you would your sex life. But after 9/11 we no longer think people should be treated differently or given exemption from certain laws because they believe something. Secularists are now saying, 'OK, believe in what you like, believe in fairies at the bottom of the garden if you want to, but don't force your beliefs on us or our children, and don't expect preferential treatment.' To allow religious organizations more privileges and influence than a political party or trade union, for example, is to distort public debate. People are waking up to the fact it is anomalous."<sup>5</sup> Grayling is right that in the last decade people's religious ideas and opinions have changed, but, are we really waking up?

According to the philosopher Martin Buber, the present crisis of deformed existence has entangled the human heart in an estrangement from God and human beings. In Buber's view, at the heart of all genuine religiosity (which may or may not take place in religious circumstances as conventionally understood) we have lost the opening up of everyday reality to dialogic relations with an eternal, absolute Presence or "Thou."<sup>6</sup> Eric Voegelin,<sup>7</sup> in his essay "The Gospel and Culture,"<sup>8</sup> formulated this kind of breakdown into which the image of God is broken down:

[T]he deculturation of the West is an historical phenomenon extending over centuries; the grotesque rubble into which the image of God is broken today is not somebody's wrong opinion about the nature of man but the result of a secular process of destruction. This character of the situation must be realized if one does not want to be derailed into varieties of action which, though suggestive, would hardly prove remedial. The question of the search cannot be recovered by stirring around in the rubble; its recovery is not a matter of small repairs, of putting a patch on here or there, of criticizing this or that author whose work is a symptom of deculturation rather than its cause, and so forth. Nor will the conflict be resolved by the famous dialogues where the partners do not step on each other's toes, less because of excessive gentility than because they don't know which toes need being stepped on. And least of all can anything be achieved by pitting right doctrine against wrong doctrine, for doctrinization precisely is the damage that has been inflicted on the movement of the search.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Grayling is Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck College, University of London, and a Supernumerary Fellow of St Anne's College, Oxford.

<sup>5</sup> David Smith, "Believe it or not: the sceptics beat God in bestseller battle," in *The Observer*, (Sunday August 12, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Martin Buber, *Das dialogische Prinzip* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1973). For Martin Buber: "*Alles wirkliche Leben ist Begegnung*". See also Martin Buber, *Gottesfinsternis: Betrachtungen zur Beziehung zwischen Religion und Philosophie* (Zürich: Manesse Verlag, 1953); *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958).

<sup>7</sup> For a biographical introduction on Voegelin's life see *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 34, *Autobiographical Reflection*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, Cumulative Index by Linda Webster (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2004). See also Ellis Sandoz, ed. *The Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); *Eric Voegelin's Thought: A Critical Appraisal* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1982a); *Eric Voegelin's Significance for the Modern Mind* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Eric Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," in *Jesus and Man's Hope*, vol. 2, edited with an introduction by Donald G. Miller and Dikran Y. Hadidian, pp. 59-101. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Press, 1971. See also *Published Essays 1966-1985*, edited with an introduction by Ellis Sandoz, pp. 172-212. Vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia MO.: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 12, *Published Essays 1966-1985*, 178.

Voegelin is calling for a radical conversion to transcendent order.<sup>10</sup> The Dutch mystic Etty Hillesum<sup>11</sup> in her *Letters and Diaries*<sup>12</sup> experiences God as the creative ground of existence, a timeless presence or “You” (“Jij,” “God,” “Heer”) encountered within her centre (“Centrum”) in the flow of life.<sup>13</sup> The deepest reason for meeting this presence, according to Voegelin and Hillesum, does not lie in the weakness of our irrationality but in the possibility of recovering a spiritual understanding of what gives meaning to our lives. Our personal reorientation to the divine is the first step to bring an elementary recognition of transcendent reality to our whole civilization. This paper is such an appeal to resist forgetfulness of God. In a culture of an ever-growing overload in information it is not easy to maintain our integrity, faith and morals. In the midst of this climate of confusion, a Voegelin, Hillesum and Buber can encourage us to find an orientation towards the divine which is a little more palatable and hopeful. The divine inspiration present in their lives and works might seep through as we search for meaning and clarity in a very complex time.

## GOD CONFUSION

“God” is said. “God” is argued. “God” is lost. The anti-religion war is now in full swing with a surprisingly intolerant book, full of scorn for religion and those who believe. Richard Dawkins’ 2006 published and controversial book *The God Delusion* contends that a supernatural creator almost certainly does not exist. Belief in a god qualifies as a delusion and faith in “God” is a persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence. Dawkins is hostile to all religions, in particular to fundamentalist Christianity and Islam: “For most of my purposes, all three Abrahamic religions can be treated as indistinguishable. Unless otherwise stated, I shall have Christianity mostly in mind, but only because it is the version with which I happen to be most familiar. For my purposes the differences matter less than the similarities. And I shall not be concerned at all with other religions such as Buddhism or Confucianism.”<sup>14</sup> Although there is something to be said for treating the latter not as religions, but as ethical systems or philosophies of life, Dawkins advocates that religion closes people’s minds to scientific truth, oppresses women and psychologically abuses children with ideas as “eternal damnation.” His rhetoric is fierce: the biblical Yahweh is “psychotic,”<sup>15</sup> “an evil monster,”<sup>16</sup> Aquinas’s proofs of God’s existence are “exposed as vacuous”<sup>17</sup> and religion generally is “nonsense.”

<sup>10</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 31, *Hitler and the Germans*, trans. and ed. Brendan Purcell and Detlev Clemens (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 51-69. Voegelin was conscious of the spiritual failure, especially on the part of the German elite during the Nazi period, to actualise their essential human capacity to participate in the timeless (that is to say the transcendent) “reality.” While most of his lectures have to do with what he calls the descent into the depths of the moral and spiritual abyss of Nazism and its aftermath in post-war German society, they also point toward the restoration of order. For Voegelin, it is precisely the revolution of the Spirit, what he will refer to as the Platonic *periagogé*, the turning round or conversion of the soul, that he upholds as an answer to the aversion from truth and justice which characterised the totalitarian ideology.

<sup>11</sup> For secondary literature on Hillesum see for instance: Sem Dresden, ‘Etty Hillesum: Identiteit als opgave en oplossing,’ *De Gids* 153 (1990), nr. 3, 159-169; Richard R Gaillardetz, ‘Etty Hillesum: Suffering and Sexuality, Reflections on Passionate Living,’ in *Spirituality* 6 (May-June 2000), 148-52; Els Lagrou, *Etty Hillesum, 1914-1943: Een historisch-biografische studie* (thesis K.U. Leuven, 1985); Jos Snijders, *Ik heb zo lief: De menselijke en gelovige groei van Etty Hillesum* (Den Bosch: KBS & Averbode, Altiora, 1993); William A. Barry, SJ, ‘Mysticism in Hell,’ in: *God’s Passionate Desire and Our Response* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1993), 81-89; Rachel Feldhay Brenner, *Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust: Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Anne Frank, Etty Hillesum* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Ria van den Brandt & Klaas A.D. Smelik (red.), *Etty Hillesum in facetten* (Budel: Damon, 2003); Ria van den Brandt, *Denken met Etty Hillesum* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2006); Philippe Noble, ‘Het dubbel filter: De dagboeken en brieven van Etty Hillesum in Franse vertaling,’ in: Van den Brandt & Smelik, *Etty Hillesum in facetten*, 93-109; Klaas A.D. Smelik, ‘Het godsbeeld bij Etty Hillesum,’ *Rondom het Woord* 26 (1984), nr. 2, 82-88; *idem*, ‘Geen heilige maar een begenadigd schrijfster,’ *Werkschrift* 14 (1994), nr. 1, 26-32.; *idem*, ‘Volledig leven tot de laatste ademtocht: Etty Hillesum, heilige of martelares?,’ *VolZin* 3 (2004), nr. 2, 28-32; Alexandra Pleshoyano, ‘Etty Hillesum: A Theological Hermeneutic in the midst of Evil,’ *Oxford Journals, Humanities, Literature and Theology*, Vol. 19, Nr. 3, (September 2005): 221-237; Meins G. S. Coetsier, *Etty Hillesum and The Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis* (Columbia (Missouri): University of Missouri Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> *Etty: De nagelaten geschriften van Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, ed. Klaas. A. D. Smelik (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 1986 [5<sup>th</sup> edition: 2008]). And *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, ed. Klaas A. D. Smelik, Trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (Ottawa, Ontario: Novalis Saint Paul University - William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002). Abbreviations are: “EH” and “Ehe.”

<sup>13</sup> Meins G. S. Coetsier, *Etty Hillesum and The Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis*, 75-81.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 37.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

This is as good a moment as any to forestall an inevitable retort to the book, one that would otherwise - as sure as night follows day - turn up in a review: 'The God that Dawkins doesn't believe in is a God that I don't believe in either. I don't believe in an old man in the sky with a long white beard.' That old man is an irrelevant distraction and his beard is as tedious as it is long. Indeed, the distraction is worse than irrelevant. Its very silliness is calculated to distract attention from the fact that what the speaker really believes is not a whole lot less silly. I know you don't believe in an old bearded man sitting on a cloud, so let's not waste any more time on that. I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented.<sup>18</sup>

Although he rarely calms down in tone, he draws on evolution to refute the concept behind intelligent design.<sup>19</sup> Dawkins constructs scientific scaffolding for atheism. He uses evolution to disprove the belief that without God there can be no morality. He is convinced: religion is a divisive and oppressive force. Sympathetic to Pirsig's reflection in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*<sup>20</sup> he quotes: "when one person suffers from a delusion it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called religion."<sup>21</sup> His reflection on the Roman pontiff is sharp:

Pope John Paul II created more saints than all his predecessors of the past several centuries put together, and he had a special affinity with the Virgin Mary. His polytheistic hankerings were dramatically demonstrated in 1981 when he suffered an assassination attempt in Rome, and attributed his survival to intervention by Our Lady of Fatima: 'A maternal hand guided the bullet.' One cannot help wondering why she didn't guide it to miss him altogether. Others might think the team of surgeons who operated on him for six hours deserved at least a share of the credit; but perhaps their hands, too, were maternally guided. The relevant point is that it wasn't just Our Lady who, in the Pope's opinion, guided the bullet, but specifically Our Lady of Fatima. Presumably Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Medjugorje, Our Lady of Akita, Our Lady of Zeitoun, Our Lady of Garabandal and Our Lady of Knock were busy on other errands at the time.<sup>22</sup>

*The God Delusion* marks a significant moment in modern history, not as much because of its scientific contribution, wit or argument, but through its representation of an intellectual breakdown where modern man consciously cuts himself off from the divine presence, from "God."

The fact that orbiting teapots and tooth fames are undisprovable is not felt, by any reasonable person, to be the kind of fact that settles any interesting argument. None of us feels an obligation to disprove any of the millions of far-fetched things that a fertile or facetious imagination might dream up. I have found it an amusing strategy, when asked whether I am an atheist, to point out that the questioner is also an atheist when considering Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further.<sup>23</sup>

By an act of imagination, to "just go one god further," man can shrink himself to a delusional self that is "condemned to be free." To this shrunken or contracted self, as in *The God Delusion*, God is dead or non-existent, the past is

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>19</sup> The argument of "Intelligent design" intended to demonstrate that living organisms were created in more or less their present forms by an "intelligent designer." Intelligent design was formulated in the 1990s, primarily in the United States, as an explicit refutation of the theory of biological evolution advanced by Charles Darwin (1809–82). Building on a version of the argument from design for the existence of God advanced by the Anglican clergyman William Paley (1743–1805), supporters of intelligent design observed that the functional parts and systems of living organisms are "irreducibly complex," in the sense that none of their component parts can be removed without causing the whole system to cease functioning. From this premise, they inferred that no such system could have come about through the gradual alteration of functioning precursor systems by means of random mutation and natural selection, as the standard evolutionary account maintains; instead, living organisms must have been created all at once by an intelligent designer. (See <http://www.britannica.com>)

<sup>20</sup> Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (London: Bodley Head London, 1974).

<sup>21</sup> *The God Delusion*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 53.

dead, the present is the flight from the self toward being what it is not. The future is the field of possibilities among which the self must choose its project. Moreover, freedom is the necessity of making a choice in a universe without God that will determine the self's own being.<sup>24</sup> Dawkins' choice against God is a self-sufficiency project called "atheist pride." The freedom of the contracted self, in Voegelin terms, is the self's damnation not to be able not to be free. *The God Delusion* represents the sustained and often hostile attacks on religious institutions and religious belief, by man who seems to have lost awareness of the divine ground. This contraction of humanity to a self imprisoned in its selfhood is the characteristic of radical modern atheism. Voegelin reminds us of a personal and social process in the eighteenth century, when man begins to refer to himself, not as Man, but as a Self, an Ego, an I, an Individual, a Subject, a Transcendental Subject, a Transcendental Consciousness, and so forth. It reaches an intense clarity of its own structure in the twentieth century, with a Jean-Paul Sartre and now in the twenty-first century with a Richard Dawkins, whose *modus operandi* I use in describing the contracted self and this type of deficient existence.

Lack of attunement or spiritual awareness in favor of popular skepticism and ridicule characterizes the analysis and refutation of God in *The God Delusion*. Given the ignorance and combative tone of modern man against religion, it is not surprising that contemporary outspoken atheism is convinced of its final solution: to actively ban God altogether. The provoking question is what is the final solution for those who do believe in God? Will they be banned too? Is Dawkins not ending up with as strong and fundamental doctrine as the ones he is trying to reject? Is atheistic fundamentalism not as dangerous?

Voegelin illustrated that with modern man, a specific balanced network of ideas and symbols has arisen. Since reason produces ideas, within the differentiated experience, we have a new situation. This new factor which appears when consciousness becomes differentiated is, on the one hand, the possibility of constructing and, on the other hand, the possibility, as in Dawkins' case, of misconstruing. Because of the possibilities of construction and the "anti God-ideas" that are consequently formed, one can indulge, as in Dawkins' project of "atheist pride," in a lot of misconstruction. It is this misconstruction of "scientific anti God-ideas" in the modern period that we can put under the title "The Revolt of Man." Dawkins would go further than Nietzsche (who still believed that there "was" or "had been" a God - but dead) by claiming that science has proven God's existence false. Dawkins does not experience God, at least that's what we are told, nor does he like "deity." In Chapter Two, "The God Hypothesis," of *The God Delusion*,<sup>25</sup> he states:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.<sup>26</sup>

With these strong Oxford words, Dawkins fights the irrationality of belief in God and the grievous harm religion has inflicted on society, from the Crusades to 9/11. He obviously intends to shock the reader and his assault seems productive. By attacking the God of sacred Scripture, he is trying to weaken traditional values and authority which are based on God's commands – commands whose interpretation in Dawkins mind has only led humanity to a shameful history of inquisitions, crusades and jihads. The derailment of *The God Delusion* is that reflections such as these which are not kept in proper balance can cause serious problems. Imbalanced and often hostile constructions, characteristic of the revolt, can cause the breakdown of (religious, political and intellectual) institutions. Atheistic constructions could create a general problem of "spiritual illiteracy" and precipitate a disharmony within society.

<sup>24</sup> Eric Voegelin, "The Eclipse of Reality" in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 28, *What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, translated by and edited by Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 111.

<sup>25</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*. In David Smith, "Believe it or not: the sceptics beat God in bestseller battle," in *The Observer*, (Sunday August 12, 2007), we read that one of the most popular "religious" books in recent times, according to Amazon, is *The God Delusion*, an anti-faith polemic by Richard Dawkins. Second is *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything, another broadside at holy citadels*, by the journalist Christopher Hitchens. Following Amazon statistics, the pope, being a firm spokesperson for a theistic worldview, takes third place with his popular book *Jesus of Nazareth*, followed by Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* and a riposte to Dawkins entitled *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* by Alister and Joanna McGrath. It has been reported that *The God Delusion*, ironically enough, has driven the growth of the category "religion." The publication of *The God Delusion*, in 2006, also prompted a 120 per cent increase in sales of the Bible. Amy Worth, books manager at Amazon, said: "*The God Delusion* has been one of the bestselling books of the past year. People are interested in the debate it has sparked. There are 524 readers' comments on our site. The comments are both pro and against and it's clear that religious people are buying it." Other books challenging religion have included Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* and AC Grayling's *Against All Gods*.

<sup>26</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 31.

Voegelin believes that in order to keep society in balance, we have to keep that intellectual structure in order. So, if a whole body of ideas like philosophy, theology and religion should be rejected or distorted, then inevitably, like in *The God Delusion* the misconstructions creep in. Nevertheless, one has to keep in mind that the search for gods or God and the construction of symbolism which includes the divine and insists on God, is to be found long before Classic philosophy.

### ATHEIST PRIDE

Dawkins revealed that although he was raised as an Anglican, he discovered Darwinian evolution at the age of 15 and escaped from traditional religion to atheism. The underlying premise of his message is that the existence of a supernatural God who designed and created everything including human beings is indefensible. From his perspective, atheists are free independent thinkers, and believers in a supernatural God are simply victims of childhood indoctrination. The kindest thought he could convey for the “deluded” is that ignorance is not a crime. In rejecting “God” or the intelligibility that created the universe, he calls for a twenty-first century “atheist pride”:

My fourth consciousness-raiser is atheist pride. Being an atheist is nothing to be apologetic about. On the contrary, it is something to be proud of, standing tall to face the far horizon, for atheism nearly always indicates a healthy independence of mind and, indeed, a healthy mind.<sup>27</sup>

His primary purpose is to assist others in their rejection of “the God Hypothesis”: “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down. Of course, dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument, their resistance built up over years of childhood indoctrination.”<sup>28</sup> On his website, Dawkins sells T-shirts and other accessories inviting the world to “wear your ‘Scarlet Letter of Atheism’ proudly.”<sup>29</sup> The red “A” on the t-shirt symbolizes the strong anarchistic refutation of the existence of God and his own personal attack on the major arguments for religion. Science, according to him, has given other truths to take its place. Although he does not say that religion is the root of all evil,<sup>30</sup> he does emphasize how religion fuels war, foments bigotry and evokes abuse and hatred. Pointing to historical and contemporary evidence, *The God Delusion* makes a persuasive case that belief in God is not just wrong, but potentially deadly. Dawkins stoutly believes that his insight into “the advantages of atheism to the individual and society, not the least of which is a clearer, truer appreciation of the universe’s wonders than any faith could ever muster.”<sup>31</sup> The advertisement which promoted *The God Delusion*, entitled “It was a bad year for God,” is entertaining. Apparently, Dawkins silently hoped that God would have “a bad year,” even if it was only to sell his book. The slogan on the advertisement: “Imagine no religion, no crusades, no suicide bombings” increased a touchy-feely John Lennon sixties sentiment, which in any case increased his book sales among its particular audience. In the Preface he wrote:

Imagine, with John Lennon, a world with no religion. Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as ‘Christ-killers’, no Northern Ireland ‘troubles,’ no ‘honour killings,’ no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money (‘God wants you to give till it hurts’). Imagine no Taliban to blow up ancient statues, no public beheadings of blasphemers, no flogging of female skin for the crime of showing an inch of it. Incidentally, my colleague Desmond Morris informs me that John Lennon’s magnificent song is sometimes performed in America with the phrase ‘and no religion too’ expurgated. One version even has the effrontery to change it to ‘and one religion too.’<sup>32</sup>

Who does not like the music of John Lennon? And who would argue against his call for world peace, if it was true world peace he intended? The Dawkinsian marketing “to get rid of God” is well done. Even in writing this paper I bought two copies of *The God Delusion*, one in English and one in Dutch to prepare a philosophical response. When one rocks the boat, as hard as Dawkins did, things are in motion and start to sway. As neither Dawkins, who seems to engage in deforming himself to an “atheistic self,” ceases to be a man; nor the surrounding reality (Voegelin: God,

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>29</sup> *The Official Richard Dawkins Website*: <http://richarddawkins.net/godDelusion> and <http://richarddawkins.net/store/>

<sup>30</sup> In “The Root of All Evil?” a television documentary, written and presented by Dawkins, the point is made that the world would be better off without religion: the process of non-thinking called “faith” is not a sufficient way of understanding the world, but instead stands in direct opposition to modern science and scientific method, and is divisive and dangerous. See Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> *The Official Richard Dawkins Website*: <http://richarddawkins.net/godDelusion>

<sup>32</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 1-2.

man, world and society) changes its structure; nor can the relations between a Dawkins and his surrounding reality be abolished; frictions between his shrunken self and reality continue to develop. Dawkins rather puts his imagination to work and surround his imaginary “atheistic self” with an imaginary reality (expressed in various forms; books, film, DVD, t-shirts, stickers, lapel pins and so forth) apt to confirm himself in his “scientific” pretense of reality. In *The God Delusion* Dawkins creates a Second Reality, an atheistic worldview, in order to screen the First Reality (Voegelin: God, man, society and the world) of common experience from a so-called “scientific viewpoint.” The frictions consequently, far from being removed, have grown into a general conflict between the world of his imagination, promoted as “atheistic pride” in a universe without God, and the real world in which God is acknowledged as present. In “The Eclipse of Reality,” Voegelin writes:

This conflict can be traced from the discrepancy of contents between realities imagined and experienced, through the act of projecting an imaginary reality, to the man who indulges in the act. First, on the level of contents, a reality projected by imagination may deform or omit certain areas of reality experienced; reality projected, we may say, obscures or eclipses First Reality. Ascending from contents to the act, then, one can discern a man’s intention to eclipse reality. This intention can become manifest in a large variety of forms, ranging from the straight lie concerning a fact to the subtler lie of arranging a context in such a manner that the omission of the fact will not be noticed; or from the construction of a system that, by its form, suggests its partial view as the whole of reality to its author’s refusal to discuss the premises of the system in terms of reality experienced. Beyond the act, finally, we reach the actor, that is the man who has committed the act of deforming his humanity to a self and now lets the shrunken self eclipse his own full reality.<sup>33</sup>

Under a veil of skepticism and wit, Dawkins tends to deny his humanity and insist he is nothing but his shrunken atheist self; denying ever having experienced the reality of common experience. He denies that anybody could have a fuller scientific perception of reality than he allows his self. In brief, in *The God Delusion*, Dawkins sets the contracted atheist self as a model for himself as well as for everybody else. Moreover, his insistence on atheist conformity in rejecting God is carried by intellectual aggression—and in this aggressiveness there betrays itself the anxiety and alienation of the man who has lost contact with reality.

But what is reality? An “atheist reality,” according to Voegelin, projected by imagination is not the reality of common experience. Nevertheless, Dawkins’ act of deforming himself and his act of projecting a Second Reality of “atheistic pride” is as real as the First Reality it intends to hide from view. The imaginator Dawkins, his act of imagination, “atheist pride” and the effects the act has on himself as well as other people, thus, can claim to be real. *The God Delusion* can be placed, be it on a lower rank, with the imaginative constructions of history, designed to shield the contracted self, as for instance those of Comte, or Hegel, or Marx. As in the case of these thinkers *The God Delusion* has grown into a social force of such strength that its conflict with reality forms a substantial part of global atheism in our time. The man with a radical contracted atheist self is as much of a power in society and history as an ordinary man, and as in Dawkins’ case sometimes a stronger one. The conflict of *The God Delusion* with reality turns out to be a disturbance *within* reality. When the human heart is steered with emotive arguments and media sensation, be it politically,<sup>34</sup> religiously or ideologically as in Dawkins’ attack on God, conflicts rise causing waves of misunderstanding. A careful discernment on human experience, reality and “God” is called for. Voegelin explains:

The multiple meanings of reality are not caused by loose usage of the term, but reflect the structure of reality itself. To be conscious of something is an experiential process polarized by the cognitive tension between the knower and the known. The several meanings of reality can be made intelligible by going through the successive acts of reflection on the process of consciousness: If, in a first act of reflection on the process, we turn toward the pole of the known, the object of cognition will be the something we acknowledge as real. If, in a second act, we turn toward the pole of the knower, the human carrier of cognition as well as his

<sup>33</sup> Voegelin, “The Eclipse of Reality” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 28, *What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, 112.

<sup>34</sup> The controversial Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders created a lot of media tension in the Netherlands with his short 2008 anti-Islam film *Fitna*. On March 27, *Fitna* was released in Dutch and English on the website *Liveleak*. After serious threats to the staff, *Liveleak* removed the film. On March 30, *Fitna* was restored on *Liveleak*, only to be removed again because of Wilder’s violations of copyright. The second edition was released on April 6. In a provocative fifteen minutes, the film explores “Koranic” motivations for terrorism, Islamic universalism, and Islam in the Netherlands. The film’s title comes from the Arabic word *Fitna* which Wilders used to describe “disagreement and division among people,” or a “test of faith in times of trial.” With *Fitna* Wilders misread the Koran and hurt people’s feelings. The government in the Netherlands strongly rejected the film, reminding the Islamic countries that Geert Wilders is *not* the Netherlands and that the majority of Dutch people disapprove of such aggressive violation of free speech and evocation of hatred and fear.

images and language symbols referring to the known, will move into the position of the something to be acknowledged as real. And if, in a third act, we turn toward the experiential process and the cognitive tension as a whole, the process will become the something we acknowledge as real. Following the acts of reflection, the meaning of reality moves from the known to the knower and ultimately to the process that is structured by the participation of, and by the cognitive tension between, the knower and the known in the experience. The consciousness of reality becomes a process within reality.<sup>35</sup>

What Voegelin means is that there is a possibility of eclipse, a risk of distortion in the process. The pole of the known, in our experience and reflection, is "God." The pole of the knower is the human carrier of cognition, you and me, who also create the symbols that refer to the known, "God." When we turn toward the experiential process and the cognitive tension as a whole, the process will become the something we acknowledge as real. This process, however, between the knower and the known, as in Dawkins case, can be twisted. Is Dawkins out of touch? Is God a delusion? No, God is real! You and I are real! These are the facts, the two realities in one overall experiential process in Reality. How can it happen that one of those two poles is denied? By refusing to mention either the "human pole" or accept the "God pole" of the experiential tension, one refuses or eclipses reality and creates a disturbance in the process, which in itself can lead to an evolution of revolt.

### EVOLUTION AS REVOLT

Dawkins had argued against creationist explanations of life in his previous works on evolution. *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986)<sup>36</sup> develops the theme that evolution can explain the apparent design in nature. In *The God Delusion* he expands his argument against the existence of God, yet, he is less convincing in arguing that the world would be better and more peaceful without religion. The "evolution card" played by Dawkins is the "scientific justification" by which he believes he can wipe God from the map of global consciousness. We could formulate the predicament of *The God Delusion* as follows: if one posits the world (or science) as an absolute, then man necessarily becomes a function of the world and consequently God becomes a function of man. In other words, with the world as an absolute, everything comes from the world and God is created (explained, denied, banned or even "killed") by man. Dawkins treats the reader to many brutal details, including today's headlines to supply enough "evidence" why God is such a "malevolent bully" and why we should get rid of such a lofty idea in the first place.<sup>37</sup>

It is not that science really can disprove God's existence, but it's rather Dawkins' misconstruction of reality and his own agenda that degrades God to the level of delusion. Instead of the original reality, in *The God Delusion* we have one part of that reality (the world; science) made by Dawkins into an absolute and so all other parts of reality must be constructed as a function of that one absolute so-called "scientific reality" or "atheist pride," which is in fact only a small part of reality. Reality, which includes God's presence, according to Voegelin, continues to exist as before. If one insists that one part of that reality is "the scientific" or "the atheistic" reality (the absolute), then one must do something about the rest of reality – i.e. "kill" or claim "God" as non-existent - which one no longer credits with being reality, and one then has to construct it as a dependent. For this construction as a dependent, Voegelin uses the term a "function." *The God Delusion* represents certain favourite constructions for expressing such a functional characteristic.

The first Chapter of *The God Delusion*, "A deeply religious non-believer," introduces the aim of Dawkins' project: to disarm (naïve) theistic belief in a personal God. He primarily draws on Albert Einstein.<sup>38</sup> Dawkins understands that a quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among scientists. He attributes the theological and poetic language employed by scientists such as Einstein, Sagan and Hawking as the symbolization of scientific wonder of the structure and complexity of the universe. He adds that it reflects a "reverence for the cosmos," but has nothing to do with supernatural belief. The title of the chapter, "A deeply religious non believer," is a partial quote from Einstein, who described his "religion" as an awe of nature and its "magnificent structure." The main thrust of the chapter and of Dawkins' work in general, is that science deserves respect (which it doesn't get) whereas religion deserves little or no respect (which it receives). In his new construction of reality, Dawkins advocates an alternative view:

I am not attacking the particular qualities of Yahweh, or Jesus, or Allah, or any other specific god such as Baal, Zeus or Wotan. Instead I shall define the God Hypothesis more defensibly: *there exists a superhuman,*

<sup>35</sup> Voegelin, "The Eclipse of Reality" in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 28, *What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, 113.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., [1986] 1996).

<sup>37</sup> For some reason, however, Dawkins does not comment on the God of the Koran, who would seem to provide equal opportunities for invective. Why?

<sup>38</sup> Einstein could be described as a deist; one who believes God created the universe, but does not interact with it, or a pantheist; one who ascribes to "God" everything that exists in the universe.



*supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.* This book will advocate an alternative view: *any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution.* Creative intelligences, being evolved, necessarily arrive late in the universe, and therefore cannot be responsible for designing it. God, in the sense defined, is a delusion; and, as later chapters will show, a pernicious delusion.<sup>39</sup>

Following Dawkins, it's acceptable to *believe* that there might well be other beings of superior intelligence out there in the cosmos—as long as they're not God. For him, it's okay to use terms like *spirituality* (which are vague enough to be useful in proclaiming “atheist pride”) to describe the awe-inspiring feeling that overcomes man when he considers the beauty of the universe, as long as he doesn't symbolize it as “God.” In the Dawkinsian theory, it's tolerable to have *faith* in physicists to solve the questions of how everything came into existence - as they just need more time - but to say that God gives them the intelligence and life to do so is unacceptable.

In response to Dawkins and other evolutionists, Voegelin would point to the role which the theory of evolution has placed in this erection of man into a function of the world. The theory of evolution, not as a scientific theory but in its broader ideological sense, reduces man to the outgrowth of natural evolution. In Voegelin's perspective, one cannot reduce man to a process of natural evolution, beginning from some beginnings and culminating through a chain of organic beings, ultimately in man. Man, for Voegelin, is more than a function of that nature which is in evolution; man is not a “last product” so to speak.

Voegelin explains that almost a century before the theory of evolution was formulated in the Darwinian form; people were already talking about the problem of evolution in the eighteenth century. It was much discussed shortly before 1750. Kant, for Voegelin, gave in his *Critique of Judgment* (“*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*”), the reason why a theory of evolution cannot serve the purposes to which it was already intended at the time: to make man a function of nature and of this world. For if one puts man as the last item in a chain of evolution, one can then trace back to life in its most simple forms, organic matter or animal matter. One can demonstrate then further that this organic life may have its origin in a chain of vegetative life still growing further. One may then say that vegetative life has its origin in a chain of various forms of inorganic life until one comes to the last element of atomic physics, or something like that. That is, one does not have a beginning of man: one cannot explain man by arbitrarily putting a beginning somewhere within that chain.

For Voegelin, if one takes evolution seriously, one has to go back further into the vegetative and into the inorganic part and then one arrives at the question of the matrix of a matter which contains potentially all this evolution. Voegelin insists on continuing the questioning: Where does that matter come from? Who devised it and who endowed it with that kind of evolution that led it culminate, in the end, in man? How can one explain all this? So, no tracing back to an imaginary beginning get us around the question that there is no beginning in time, but the beginning in Voegelin's line of thought is always a mythical or metaphysical problem. He refers to the famous question of Leibniz: “Why is there something, Why not nothing?” and “Why is that something as it is?” And that is then at the beginning. Although Voegelin does not have any prejudice concerning the empirical content of all scientific observation concerning evolution, he thinks that a theory of evolution does not fully furnish an explanation of man; it only shoves it back to an imaginary beginning.

Explanations like those which see man as a function of nature, on the basis of a theory of evolution, always rest, Voegelin describes, on the assumption that there is nobody present in the audience who will ask such questions as Kant did. Finally, Voegelin would say that only when the premises are not questioned by somebody can the argument of evolution work. He refers back to the problem of illiteracy and mentions that many theories can be developed, like a theory of evolution, because many people do not feel the need to ask such questions in the first place.<sup>40</sup> It is the task of the philosopher to do so.

<sup>39</sup> *The God Delusion*, 31.

<sup>40</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 33, *The Drama of Humanity and other Miscellaneous Papers 1939-1985*, edited with an introduction by William Petropoulos and Gilbert Weiss (Columbia (Missouri): University of Missouri Press, 2004), 222-223. See also Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, including Kant's first introduction to the work. Translated and introduced by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett, 1987). For further reading of Kant see also *Critique of Practical Reason*, translation by Lewis W. Beck, (New York: Liberal Arts, 1956). and *Critique of Pure Reason*, translation by Werner S. Pluhar, (Cambridge: Hackett, 1996).

# GOD vs. "SUPERMAN"

The ideological misconstructions of reality, whereby God becomes a function of man, are not only found in *The God Delusion*, but also in Feuerbach's "Psychology of Projection."<sup>41</sup> All religious ideas and of course the idea of God, were interpreted by Feuerbach as projections of contents of the human mind. This psychology of projection is a widely accepted part of the science of psychology today, especially in its psychoanalytic form, with its development into a psychology of religion as an illusion. Equally, Dawkins' *The God Delusion* suggests, among an increasing number of biologists, that religion is a *by-product* of something else.<sup>42</sup> He comments that an evolutionary explanation of religious belief need not postulate an evolutionary benefit for religion itself. "I am one of an increasing number of biologists who see religion as a *by-product* of something else," he writes. "More generally, I believe that we who speculate about Darwinian survival value need to 'think by-product.' When we ask about the survival value of anything, we may be asking the wrong question."<sup>43</sup> The reductionist psychological misinterpretation by which Dawkins operates pertaining religious ideas is the vehicle by which God is transformed into a function of the human psyche. The centre of all language symbols used in the experience of (psychological/"scientific") revolt is the transformation of human power over nature into human power of salvation (Dawkins: "Atheist pride"). When the transcendent "God" is made into an immanent function of Man, cutting off the divine pole of the tension, one could simply speak of "murder." The murder of God is committed speculatively by explaining divine being as the work of man. Let us consider what Nietzsche's Zarathustra has to say on this point:

"Alas, my brothers, that God whom I created was human work and human madness, like all gods."<sup>44</sup> Man should stop creating gods because this sets absurd limits to his will and action; and he should realize that the gods he has already created have in fact been created by him. "Let will to truth mean this to you: that everything be changed into the humanly conceivable, the humanly visible, the humanly sensible."<sup>45</sup>

This, for Voegelin, is the first spectrum of constructions that is used when the world is erected into an absolute entity. Whitehead called this idea of making the world into an entity "The Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness."<sup>46</sup> For Whitehead the error of mistaking the abstract for the concrete, involves thinking something is a "concrete" reality when in fact it is merely a belief, opinion or concept about the way things are.<sup>47</sup> Voegelin does not want to attribute to an idea, concreteness as an entity. When one does that one allows such a conception of the world as if "the

<sup>41</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 12, *Published Essays 1966-1985*, 69. See for instance Feuerbach's psychology in *The Essence of Christianity*, where he states that dogmatic propositions are projections of the world-immanent consciousness of man. His psychology of projection has remained one of the pillars of the ideologist's creed ever since, Voegelin believes.

<sup>42</sup> *The God Delusion*, 172. Voegelin suggests this kind of thinking started with the breakdown of the German idealistic systems after Hegel, when, very energetically, the question had to be asked: where do all these ideas come from, if one cannot explain them in the specific Gnostic form of, for instance, an Hegelian system that has been rejected? The psychology of religious ideas as projections has its critical beginning here. Of course Voegelin is aware it has its prehistory going back into the seventeenth century, but he doesn't want to go further into that.

<sup>43</sup> *The God Delusion*, 172.

<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, in *Werke*, VI, (Leipzig: 1904), 42. *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, translation by Marianne Cowan, (Chicago: 1957), 27.

<sup>45</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 5, *Modernity without Restraint, Political Religions; The New Science of Politics; and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, edited with an Introduction by Manfred Henningsen (Columbia (Missouri): University of Missouri Press, 2000), 279.

<sup>46</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 33, *The Drama of Humanity and other Miscellaneous Papers 1939-1985*, 223.

<sup>47</sup> Whitehead rejects the notion that a real, concrete object in the universe can be described simply in spatial or temporal extension. Rather, the object must be described as a field that has both a location in space and a location in time. Among the primary elements of nature as apprehended in our immediate experience, there is no element whatever which possesses the character of simple location. Instead Whitehead holds that by a process of constructive abstraction we can arrive at abstractions which are the simply located bits of material, and at other abstractions which are the minds included in the scientific scheme. For Whitehead, in a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times. Thus every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world. According to him every real-life object may be understood as a similarly constructed series of events and processes. In *Process and Reality* (1929), he goes so far as to suggest that process, rather than substance, should be taken as the fundamental metaphysical constituent of the world. Underlying this work was also the basic idea that, if philosophy is to be successful, it must explain the connection between objective, scientific and logical descriptions of the world and the more everyday world of subjective experience. Cf. A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Harper 1929). See also Donald W. Sherburne, *A Key to Whitehead's Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

world” were real, with the result that other constructions follow. If man is misconstrued as a function of this world and God as function of man, a number of problems follow. For Voegelin, turning away from the mystery of the ground (*arche*) towards, what Nietzsche calls “the human conceivable” is a disturbance in the balance of human consciousness. In *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* Voegelin reflects upon Nietzsche’s revolt:

This demand also extends to the world, which of old was understood to have been created by God: “What you called “the world” shall be created only by you: it shall be your reason, your image, your will, your love.”<sup>48</sup> “God is a conjecture”- but man’s conjectures should not go beyond his creative will,<sup>49</sup> and they should be limited “to the conceivable.” There may be no being or image of being that might make human will and thought appear finite: “Neither into the incomprehensible could you have been born, nor into the irrational.” In order to appear the unlimited master of being, man must so delimit being that limitations are no longer evident. And why must this magic act be performed? The answer is: “If there were gods, how could I endure not being a god! *Therefore*, there are no gods.”<sup>50</sup>

Where Feuerbach still left the matter at the level of psychology of projections, Marx and Nietzsche more consistently said: “Why should we project? Let us pull these projections back into ourselves from where they started.” In Voegelin’s reflection that means: let us pull the divinity back into our humanity and thereby we then will become gods or if not gods at least supermen. For Voegelin the substance of history, however, is not something that human beings are able to know, possess or control. It is rather encountered participatively on the level of experience and on its adequate symbolization, not on the level of ideas. The Marxian transfiguration of man into “Superman” is a further radicalization of an earlier medieval derailment which drew the spirit of God into man, while leaving God himself in his transcendence. In other words, man draws his projection within himself when he imagines that he himself is “God,” when as a consequence man is transfigured into “Superman” (NSP, 125). Thus the expression “Superman”<sup>51</sup> was used by Marx to designate the man who has pulled the projection of God back into himself. Nietzsche<sup>52</sup> used the same term “Superman” for practically the same purpose. For Voegelin this vividly illustrates the revolt of man as a revolt against God. When God is pulled back into man and the self- divinized man becomes the centre of all problems, something has gone wrong.

It does not suffice, therefore, to replace the old world of God with a new world of man: the world of God itself must have been a world of man, and God a work of man which can therefore be destroyed if it prevents man from reigning over the order of being. The murder of God must be made retroactive speculatively. This is the reason man’s “being-of-himself” (*Durchsichselbstsein*) is the principle point in Marx’s gnosis.<sup>53</sup> And he gets his speculative support from the explanation of nature and history as a process in which man creates himself to his full stature. The murder of God, then, is of the very essence of the Gnostic re-creation of the order of being.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, in *Werke*, VI, 124. English translation: Cf. Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, translation by Marianne Cowan, 84. For more of Nietzsche’s work: *The Gay Science*, translation by Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage, 1974); and Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*.

<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, in *Werke*, VI, 123. English translation: *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, translation by Marianne Cowan, 84.

<sup>50</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 5, *Modernity without Restraint, Political Religions; The New Science of Politics; and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 279.

<sup>51</sup> On the superman of Feuerbach and Marx see Henri de Lubac, *Le Drame de l’humanisme athée* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Paris: 1945). English translation: *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, translation by Edith M. Riley, (New York: New American Library, 1950). See also “The Formation of the Marxian Revolutionary Idea,” *Review of Politics* 12, no. 3 (1950): 275-302. And *Published Essays 1940-1952*, edited with an introduction by Ellis Sandoz, Vol. 10 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2000).

<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche, No. 230, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, in *Werke* VII, (Leipzig: 1903), 197-188. English translation: *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Marianne Cowan, (Chicago: 1955), 158-159. See also David J. Walsh, *The Growth of the Liberal Soul*.

<sup>53</sup> The symbol “*gnosis*” refers to “knowledge.” Originally, “*gnosis*” was a general term used in Greek for knowledge of various sorts. Later, especially with the Gnostic movements of the early Christian era, it referred to a purported direct, immediate apprehension or vision of truth without the need for critical reflection; the special gift of a spiritual and cognitive elite. Like in the case of Marx, the claim to *gnosis*, according to Voegelin, may take intellectual, emotional, and volitional forms.

<sup>54</sup> *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 5, *Modernity without Restraint, Political Religions; The New Science of Politics; and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 279.

According to Voegelin, Nietzsche's, but also Dawkins' "will to power," the will to dominion, the *libido dominandi*, is the passion that accounts for intellectual deception: (i) the sudden erupting resolve for ignorance, for arbitrary occlusion [...] a kind of defensive stand against much that is knowable (ii) the spirit wills to let itself be deceived on occasion (iii) enjoyment in the deception of others and to dissemble before them. It is somewhat similar to Plato's movement of the soul (the *periagogé*), but cut off from the transcendent. The Man in revolt experiences himself as being imprisoned in the "icy light" of his existence. As in *The God Delusion*, man maintains and wills unbelief in God in order to become "God": it is not that a Dawkins *wants* to be God; he *has* to be God (for inscrutable reasons). Nietzsche as well as Dawkins, in Voegelin's terms, are sensitive men denied grace. Voegelin analyzed the consciousness of "demonic occlusion" and the continuation of "masks" and "deceptions." The intellectual swindle of *The God Delusion*, entails three levels of deception: (i) the surface act of deception, which could be "error," apart from intent. (ii) Dawkins is aware of the untruth but persists. (iii) His revolt against God is revealed to be the motive of the swindle ("Demonic mendacity") (SGP, 28-34).

Voegelin reflects further on such constructions. In relation to the flow of presence, if one imagines time as a line,<sup>55</sup> then one would have to define the point of presence as the intersection of time with the dimension of the timeless. This symbolism can be speculatively misconstrued in either one or other of these directions, to the origin either in the beginning in time, or in the origin in the transcendent beginning, in the timeless beyond. Voegelin describes some modern constructions which exemplify this revolt. He looks at what happens in the vertical dimension, in relation to the transcendent; and then at what happens in the horizontal, a beginning of time in the mythical form. The vertical problem is highlighted when one constructs the world as the absolute and then man as a function of the world and then God as a function of man: in *The God Delusion* the structure of consciousness as a tension towards the divine ground is destroyed. For Voegelin that means that one does no longer have reason in its original form, but one has excluded God, and what is left is Dawkins' human pole or reason. Now when only the human pole of reason is left that means that the content of reason, which in Voegelin's thought is precisely this tension towards the ground, the consciousness of the ground, is destroyed.

Man cannot live or does not live, without accounting for himself in terms of a ground. When the ground, which is the transcendent ground, has been imaginatively eclipsed, it must be replaced by substitute world-immanent pseudo-grounds of being. For Voegelin it is important that one must take into account that these misconstructions are known to be great misconstructions in the direction of the transcendent. Man is in revolt and there is no real direction towards the transcendent because he cuts himself off, he expresses himself through the invention of substitute grounds (e.g. "science," "atheist pride"), instead of the ground of being. Voegelin is radical in this regard, so that for him this means that all of the ideologies (as substitute grounds) are theoretically, including Dawkins' *The God Delusion* that is to say as "science", wrong. Voegelin gives six different substitute grounds of being to make his point clear:

- (i) A first example he gives is the event in the eighteenth century of a replacement of a divinely conceived order of man and society by the idea of order in society through the balance of economic forces, the rationale of an optimum of production of goods. Society will be balanced on economic competition. In other words, people strive and work hard for an increase in the production of goods and this particular through competition brings about "order" within society. For Voegelin economic competition is one of the substitutes, as reason and immanent reason, for the reason that has disappeared. The purpose of action instead of attunement to the divine would then be the replacement by economic rationality and a world-immanent type of rationality.
- (ii) Another substitute that also appeared in the eighteenth century is that society internally as well as in international relations can be held in balance through the balance of power (e.g. through the Peace of Utrecht in the Netherlands in 1713). The rationale of power, just as the rationale of economic action, would provide the purposes for which to strive instead of orientating one's life towards God.
- (iii) Or, the ground of being can be placed strictly in the general sense, not in individual striving for profit, but collectively (e.g. Marx's conception of the *Produktionsverhältnisse*). Order would be achieved through, for example, a Marxian revolution.
- (iv) Or, instead of a divinely oriented order one could have as in Dawkins' case evolution. Voegelin saw that the theory of evolution was in its original Darwinian form very largely based on the English utilitarian type of argument of the bourgeois society. The survival of the fittest would provide for some sort of order. It is not so much an ethical order as an order that is gained through a struggle of conquest and defeat within an atmosphere of competition, where one gets a chance to prove that one is indeed the fittest.
- (v) Another example Voegelin gives is the attempt to order history according to the races and the struggle of races, leading in the National Socialist's case to the systematic ideological genocide of the Jews. Or

<sup>55</sup> Eric Voegelin, "Notes on T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets" in *The Drama of Humanity and other Miscellaneous Papers 1939-1985*, edited with an introduction by William Petropoulos and Gilbert Weiss, Vol. 33 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, 33-40. See also T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*.

in the case of apartheid in South Africa, which was challenged by people such as Steve Biko and Nelson Mandela.

- (vi) Or finally, one could say that the order of human existence would be determined by some sort of balance in the instincts or natural urges. Voegelin traces this back to the psychology of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to the idea of the *libido dominandi* of the amour proper as the ordering principle in one's life that permits calculability of a man's actions. One calculates that one will do what will satisfy one's passions. If that is used as a rule, then one can govern man by appealing to the passions in a proper fashion, by conditioning them properly. Instincts and their manipulation become the balancing factors, the ordering factor.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, the task of the philosopher is to unveil the substitute grounds present in society and to inspire the search for and the attunement to the Ground of all being: God.

### DEFORMED LANGUAGE

To broaden the understanding of the eclipse of God, the revolt of man and "superman's" control over the "God-reality," we have to confront the deformed language symbols that are part of the unrest we experience at present. Voegelin describes how questions and answers pertaining to the "God crisis" are held together, and related to one another, by the event of the search. He explains that by nature we are truly questioners. The calamity we face, however, is when we deform our humanity by refusing to ask the questions, or by loading them with premises devised to make the search impossible. Truth, to be heard, requires ears that can hear; philosophy is not the life of reason if the questioner's reason is depraved. The answer will not help the man who has lost the question; and the predicament of the present age is characterized by the loss of the question rather than of the answer. With a Socratic nature we might be able to recover the question lost to consciousness. We must confront the contemporary challenge in recovering the question to which, in Hellenistic-Roman culture, the philosopher could understand divine reality, God, as the answer. Voegelin writes:

Since the question concerns the humanity of man, it is the same today as it ever has been in the past, but today it is so badly distorted through the Western deculturation process that it must, first, be disentangled from the intellectually disordered language in which we indiscriminately speak of the meaning of life, or the meaning of existence, or the fact of existence which has no meaning, or the meaning which must be given to the fact of existence, and so forth, as if life were a given and meaning a property it has or does not have.<sup>57</sup>

The intellectually disordered language symbols, as pointed out by Voegelin, have bewildered, not to say baffled our modern world over the last epoch with confused images of "God" and religious terrorism. Till now the various human weaknesses that we have encountered in the crisis have not battered our need for divine reality, but endorsed us with disappointment and anger towards religion, and fierce doubts in God's existence. In Chapter 8, "What is wrong with religion? Why be so hostile?" Dawkins writes: "As a scientist, I am hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively debauches the scientific enterprise. It teaches us not to change our minds, and not to want to know exciting things that are available to be known. It subverts science and saps the intellect."<sup>58</sup> In other words, the greatest crime of fundamental religion is to think without asking scientific questions. Dawkins develops this hostility by challenging every major argument for God's existence, showing that the Founding Fathers considered religion to be a threat to democracy. He cites Thomas Jefferson, for instance, who claimed that "Christianity is the most perverted system that ever shone on man"<sup>59</sup>; Benjamin Franklin who said "Lighthouses are more useful than churches"<sup>60</sup>; a 1796 treaty signed by John Adams that declared: "the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion."<sup>61</sup> Adams also said: "this would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it."<sup>62</sup> American conservative Barry Goldwater is quoted to show that threatening to fight fundamentalists is admirable in "every step of the way if they try to dictate their moral convictions to all Americans"<sup>63</sup>

To become angry in our situation is understandable, but too easy. What is difficult is to be angry with the right person or group – should we be angry with all religious fundamentalists? - and to the right degree, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way. Yet, one could argue if becoming angry at all would have

<sup>56</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 33, 224-34.

<sup>57</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 12, 175-76.

<sup>58</sup> *The God Delusion*, 284.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

any sense, as we are fighting here over a deformed language symbol that has lost its contact with reality. In the end it is not the word "God" that makes us angry, but the helplessness and alienation of the situation we are in.

In Eric Voegelin's essay "Immortality: Experience and Symbol," he writes that the symbols in the sense of a spoken or written word, are left as traces in the world of sense perception. Their meaning, according to Voegelin, can be understood only if they evoke, and through evocation reconstitute, the engendering reality in the listener or reader. What people tend to forget nowadays, is that the symbol "God," for instance, exists in the world, but its truth belongs to the transcendent (or "nonexistent") divine-human experience which by its means articulates itself. This intangibility of the experience of the divine renders the symbol "God" and its truth vulnerable to the ups and downs of history. Because the originating experience of divine reality, as in the present crisis, can fade away, even the most adequate interpretation of an experience of "God" can achieve no more than words which are the external shell of an original complete reality containing both the experience and its articulation. As soon, however, as the symbol "God" has separated from this fullness and acquired the status of a literary account or religious dogma, the tension between an engendering experience of divine reality, and the symbol "God" engendered, is liable to separate into a piece of cold information and its dogmatic subject matter. There is no guarantee that the reader of this account in the present God confusion will be moved to a meditative reconstitution of the engendering experienced God-reality; one may even say the chances today are slim, since "God" is seen as "Delusion" and honest meditation requires more energy and discipline than most people are able to invest.

Still, the tension we experience, as is revealed in the emotional responses to *The God Delusion*, is that we can't do without the truth conveyed by "God," as one of the key symbols. So the pressure on us is great to restate the original account of "God" interpreting the key experiences as a set of simple propositions, rendering what each person or translator considers its essential meaning to be. If submitted to such proceedings, the truth of "God," the account of the experience of divine presence, will take the form of doctrine, as do the propositions, "Man is immortal" or "The soul is immortal," or else in Dawkins' case "Man is a product of an extended process of evolution."<sup>64</sup> In itself these statements are fine, but Voegelin saw that doctrinal propositions of this kind are liable to give rise to various kinds of experience, such as uncritical acceptance of "Science," of "God" or even more deficient (scientific) modes of understanding who or what "God" is. What Voegelin tries to explain is that no matter what doctrine you hold; be it philosophical, religious or a "Dawkinsian doctrine" of scientific atheism, all are in danger of the same thing, namely that they can lose the connection with what they represent.

The transformation of "God" into religious doctrine, or the alteration of Darwin's' evolution theory into (Dawkins') atheistic doctrine, is not the last hammering that truth can suffer. When "Science" or "God," as doctrinal truth becomes socially prevailing, even the facts of the process by which religious or scientific doctrine derives from the original account, and the original account from the engendering experience, may get lost. Seeing that the symbol "God," as in our contemporary world, may altogether cease to be transparent for divine reality, equally the term "Science" can deform into nothing more than delusional consumerism. "God," as in Dawkins' case, will be misunderstood as a figment of the imagination, a proposition referring to "a thing" in the manner of a proposition concerning an object of sense perception; and so the delusional "It," which for Dawkins has neither relationality nor supernatural reality, will provoke the reaction of skepticism and ridicule. The scale of "God-mockery" defers from a suspension of judgment, to vulgar agnosticism and atheism, and further on to the smart idiot questions of "How do you know there is a God?" and "How can you prove God exists?" that every college religious teacher knows from his classroom. We have, according to Voegelin, reached T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* with its broken images:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water.

The point that Voegelin tries to make is that the sequence of originating experience of divine reality and expression in the symbol "God," is followed by summarizing accounts in the form of religious doctrine, which in turn can lead, as in the modern crisis, to the degradation of "God." In bland restatement at verbal level, "God" as in the contemporary debate, provokes ferocious skeptical reactions. The experience of God, in terms of Biblical / AM-meetings and in expressions of attunement to life has disappeared. What we often fail to acknowledge is that no matter how often explanations and doctrinal claims of God are defended, attacked or revised by both theists and atheists, the real world refuses to be confined within the limits of such systems. The attempt of the monotheistic religions to act on such a doctrinal basis has repeatedly led to the most bitterly disappointing results. Dawkins in *The God Delusion* does have a point concerning the disastrous effects of religion, but seems not aware that he is fighting his battle for atheism over deformed "God symbols," which does not say anything about the actual "God-reality itself." Dawkins

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 31.

has, to put it mildly, a strong uncompromising view on *whom* or *what* “God” is. Voegelin would imply that the phenomena of original account of God’s reality, the development into doctrinal exposition -leading to what Romanian anthropologist Mircea Eliade called “the degradation of symbols” - and the skeptical argument, such as Dawkins’ repudiation of God, is not an unfamiliar sequence. This series can attach itself to every experience of nonexistent (i.e. transcendent) reality when it becomes articulate and through its symbols, enters society as an ordering force. Skeptical reactions to “God” and to deformed symbols, in other words, are not new or particular to our time. What a Dawkins forgets is that in some instances, when the sequence attaches itself to the great ordering experiences of philosophy and Christian faith, it is discernible as a structure in historical processes of infinite complexity. A recall of divine experience, rather than a blunt reaction, even if it can be no more than the barest hint, of these wide-arched courses will be of help in determining not only our own position in them but the very sense we can make of an inquiry concerning “God” today.<sup>65</sup>

## RECALL OF DIVINE EXPERIENCE

Voegelin would answer a Dawkins, not by entering into his “ping-pong game” of argument. “God” is neither a toy nor scientific data. “God,” for Voegelin, is not some object “out there” to be verified by what Dawkins would call “scientific proof.” Voegelin would rather recall the experiences of the divine, of God, of mystery, which reveals itself in human consciousness in what Voegelin terms, drawing on Plato, the *metaxy*. Voegelin reflects on the Platonic-Aristotelian analysis and interprets it in his particular way. He develops a provocative principle for his own philosophical theory: consciousness is not exclusively human. For Voegelin, what is human about consciousness is precisely its possibility of transcending its mere humanity.<sup>66</sup> This happens through conscious participation (*metalepsis*) in the ultimate formative origin of its own existence, its divine ground. Plato’s symbolization of consciousness (*nous*) is sited “In-Between” the divine and the human and so it is a divine-human *metaxy*. One could see it as an intermediate area of reality, in-between the temporal and the timeless. This area is found as a questioning and knowing awareness in-between ignorance (*agnoia*, *amathia*) and knowledge (*episteme*). The human and divine do not merge in this “site” but interplay. As a derived, created being, one suffers a degree of “participatory creativity,” insofar as one realizes and is united with the origin (*arche*) out of which one has emerged. For Voegelin, the In-Between of existence is a meeting ground of the human and the divine in a consciousness of their distinction and interpenetration.<sup>67</sup>

Etty Hillesum in her *Letters and Diaries* used the German “*in sich ruhen*,” to “rest in oneself” and the Dutch symbol “*onderstroom*,” literally translated as “under-flow” or “undercurrent,” to recall her experience of this meeting ground of the human and the divine as a “flow” beneath the surface of daily “appearances,” “opinions” (*doxa*), and “outer things.” On October 12, 1941, she wrote: “I must no doubt, stop trying to find the answer outside. And, really, the outside world only interests me insofar as it is an impression [*‘afdruk van’*] of my inner one” (EHe, 130). As such, the flow of her writing corresponded perfectly with the changes within her consciousness. This was particularly clear in her letters from and about Westerbork.

The sky is full of birds, the purple lupins stand up so regally and peacefully, two little old women have sat down on the box for a chat, the sun is shining on my face—and right before our eyes, mass murder. The whole thing is simply beyond comprehension. I’m fine. [ . . . ] As I walk through the mud between the wooden barracks, I feel as if I am walking at the same time along the corridors of my six-year home, or sitting at a shaky table in the noisy little parlor, or working at my beloved, untidy desk. I talk to many people here who say, “We don’t want to remember anything from before; otherwise we couldn’t manage to live here.” But I can live here as well as I do just because I remember everything from “before” (it’s not really a “before” for me), and I go on living. (EH, 642-43; EHe, 602-603)

Hillesum became conscious that what she was writing represented a testimony of God, of faith and love created during the darkest hours of modern history:

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Crean, O.P., *A Catholic Replies to Richard Dawkins* (Oxford: Family Publications, 2007); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006); Anthony Flew, with Roy Abraham Varghese, *There Is A God: How the world’s most notorious atheist changed his mind* (New York: Harper One, 2007); Alister McGrath, *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); Alister McGrath, with Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist fundamentalism and the denial of the divine* (London: SPCK, 2007); David Robertson, *The Dawkins Letters: Challenging Atheist Myths* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2007).

<sup>66</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The Drama of Humanity and other Miscellaneous Papers 1939-1985*, edited with an introduction by William Petropoulos and Gilbert Weiss, Vol. 33 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2004).

<sup>67</sup> Etty Hillesum and *The Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis*, 112.

I hope I shall remember everything that happens to us so that one day I'll be able to retell it all. It is so different from everything you read in books, altogether different. I can't write about the thousand little things I witness every day, but I want very much to remember them. I have noticed that my powers of observation register everything unerringly, and that gives me special joy. With all the destruction, with all my tiredness, suffering, and everything else, this is constant: my joy, the artist's joy in observing things and shaping them mentally into an image of his own. I shall read the last expressions on the faces of the dying with compassion, and preserve them. (EH, 505; EHe, 478)

As the war continued, the number of times that Etty used the symbol "God" in *The Letters and Diaries* increased. Although she claimed to have found the symbol "God" somewhat primitive, it appeared more than 400 times in her writings. The difference with Dawkins is that Hillesum's use of the word "God," referred to her personal experience of the divine presence. What had started gradually at the beginning of *The Letters and Diaries*—that is, her "listening to her inner voice" (*hineinhorchen*), her allowing herself to become intimate with what she called "God"—developed into an ongoing dialogue with "him" during her time in Westerbork.<sup>68</sup> She experienced God within herself: "I hold a silly, naïve, or deadly serious dialogue with what is deepest inside me, which for the sake of convenience I call God" (EHe, 494). She also experienced God through his creatures and through his creation: "I sank to my knees with the words that preside over human life: And God made man after His likeness" (EH, 686; EHe, 644). Echoing Jung,<sup>69</sup> Hillesum wrote:

I know people for whom the encounter with the strange power within themselves was such an overwhelming experience that they called it "God." So experienced, "God" too is a theory in the most literal sense, a way of looking at the world, an image which the limited human mind creates in order to express an unfathomable and ineffable experience. The experience alone is real, not to be disputed; but the image can be soiled or broken to pieces. (EH, 237; EHe, 227)

*The God Delusion* attempts to break "God" to pieces and sweep it up as dirt from the arena of modern culture. Hillesum was able to deal with such intellectual violence. The progress of the war saw more and more of God's images broken into pieces. Etty kept searching for the mystery behind the broken images and symbols. Her "God" is certainly not the traditional image of the Judaeo-Christian God. She does use the symbol "God" from that tradition to symbolize her own experience of God. Nevertheless, she addressed "God" as a person to whom she could relate as a "You." She felt responsible toward the person named "God," and she rediscovered her own sense of human dignity through the encounter. Being made in the image and likeness of God, Etty saw herself as a participant in God's creating. She had read the passage "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God He created him" (Gen. 1:27) (EHe, 779).<sup>70</sup> She was confronted by the helplessness around her, and she was equally convinced of God's helplessness. She decided to help him:

I shall try to help You, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn't seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last. (EH, 516–17; EHe, 488–89)

Hillesum's reading and reflection became embodied in her daily life in Westerbork. She carried her inner world with her. Struggling not to let herself be dragged down out of pity for her family, she wrote in one of her last letter from Westerbork:

I know that we must not lose ourselves so completely in grief and concern for our families that we have little thought or love left for our neighbors. More and more tend towards the idea that love for everyone who may cross your path, love for everyone made in God's image, must rise above love for blood relatives. Please

<sup>68</sup> Etty Hillesum and *The Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis*, 42–43.

<sup>69</sup> Hillesum copied this passage three times. See C. G. Jung, "Die Bedeutung der Psychologie für die Gegenwart: Vortrag gehalten im Rheinland, Feb 1933" [The importance of Psychology for the Present: Lecture Delivered in Rhineland in February 1933], in *Gesammelte Werke*, 65 ff. Hillesum also copied this passage into *Levenskunst*, her book of quotations (week 2). See C. G. Jung, "Civilization in Transition" in *The Collected Works*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, vol. 10, *The Meaning of Psychology for Modern Man*, (New York: Bollingen Series, 1964), 155.

<sup>70</sup> Etty Hillesum and *The Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis*, 43.



don't misunderstand me. It may seem unnatural—And I see that it is still far too difficult for me to write about, though so simple to live. (EH, 683; EHe, 641)

On August 18, 1943, less than a month before her deportation to Auschwitz Etty once again reminded herself of the one thing necessary, the one thing that a Dawkins could not stand, an ongoing dialogue with God: "You made me so rich, oh God, please let me share out Your beauty with open hands. My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God, one great dialogue" (EH, 682; EHe, 640). She was able to give thanks for everything: "Tears of gratitude run down my face and that is my prayer" (EH, 682; EHe, 640). Although terribly tired in the camp, Hillesum remained conscious of an experienced reality she called "God":<sup>71</sup>

I am not challenging You, oh God; my life is one great dialogue with You. I may never become the great artist I would really like to be, but I am already secure in You, God. Sometimes I try my hand at turning out small profundities and uncertain short stories, but I always end up with just one single word: God. And that says everything, and there is no need for anything more. And all my creative powers are translated into inner dialogues with You. (EH, 682; EHe, 640)

Hillesum was aware that she could be grateful for having been chosen by providence as the means, the medium, the link, in helping to express, to find a way of giving words to, "the spirit," "the divine." She said: "Call it what you will. And then it doesn't really matter who one is" (EH, 232; EHe, 222). Through her openness to the world and her capacity to be one with humanity, she received deep insights, and she was grateful for that. She thanked God: "Oh God, I thank You for having created me as I am. I thank You for the sense of fulfillment I sometimes have; that fulfillment is after all nothing but being filled with You. I promise You to strive my whole life long for beauty and harmony and also humility and true love, whispers of which I hear inside me during my best moments" (EH, 184; EHe, 175).<sup>72</sup>

Hillesum's opening of soul gave her two important symbols: "the other" (*de ander*); and "God," also addressed as "You." Etty's aim and desire to be with the other contrasted with her small expectations or demands of the other. Her words are in many respects equivalent to the famous vision of Francis of Assisi: "Oh Master, let me not yearn so much to be consoled... but long to console, to be understood... but long to understand, to be loved... but long to love" (EH, 108; EHe, 102). For Hillesum, living an open existence meant living a life with and for others. God also became an important part of that connection between herself and the other. She learned that the key to being always there for others lies in the courage one has to be oneself, which demanded a process of "learning to live." Coming to herself was related to what she called the "indwelling of God": "God, I thank You. I thank You for wanting to dwell within me. I thank You for everything" (EH, 240; EHe, 231). Her deepest and best part, her innermost self, was that area of her inner landscape in which the colloquium with God flared up in response to the Presence within her. She came to recognize this inner place as a dwelling space for God. For Hillesum, God was the person to whom she spoke, to whom she wrote and prayed in order to receive strength to deal with her situation. She also referred to God as "Lord": "O Lord, let me dwell a little more in the spirit" (EH, 259; EHe, 250). Her cry for help in *The Letters and Diaries* ranged from a need for support in her own suffering to a request for comfort for her fellow human beings in pain. From Westerbork, Hillesum wrote in a letter to Maria Tuinzing:

My prayers, too, aren't going quite right. I know: you can pray God to give people the strength to bear whatever comes. But I keep repeating the same prayer: "Lord, make it as short as possible." And as a result I am paralyzed. I would like to pack their cases with the best things I can lay my hands on, but I know perfectly well that they will be stripped of everything; about that we have been left in no doubt. So why bother? (EH, 670; EHe, 628)

Hillesum sensed that God is the hidden source, not some delusion, but the essence of goodness in every human being; and it was for him that Hillesum was searching in the depths of her heart. Having experienced a gradual breakthrough to a path of openness, she encountered God as a friend with whom she could work well "together":

God, I thank You for having given me so much strength: the inner centre regulating my life is becoming stronger and more pivotal all the time [ . . . ] I think I work well with You, God, that we work well together. I have assigned an ever larger dwelling space for You, and I am also beginning to become faithful to You. I hardly ever have to deny You any more. Nor, at frivolous and shallow moments, do I have to deny my own inner life any longer out of a sense of shame. The powerful centre spreads its rays to the outermost boundaries. (EH, 232–33; EHe, 223)

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 44–45.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 94.

Hillesum showed the possible choices we have in human experience, to either reject God and turn to skepticism and hate, or to try to create a home for God as she did within her inmost being: she wanted to give him a place in her heart and to offer him her own sources. She became aware that she was a lone but privileged person. She felt she was only at the beginning of her search. Now she had begun to experience a life with God:

I am only at the beginning, but the beginning is there, that much I know for certain. It means gathering together all the strength one can, living one's life with God and in God and having God dwell within. (I find the word "God" so primitive at times, it is only a metaphor after all, an approach to our greatest and most continuous inner adventure; I'm sure that I don't even need the word "God," which sometimes strikes me as a primitive, primordial sound. A makeshift construction.) (EH, 463; EHe, 439–40)

This "primitive, primordial sound" was nonetheless very important to Hillesum for the way she experienced God. From the time she began to live a more open existence, she felt that God lived deep within her and that at the same time she lived in God. One of her important experiences was "to rest in herself"; she used the German word *hineinhorchen*:

Even if one's body aches, the spirit can continue to do its work, can it not? It can love and *hineinhorchen*—"hearken unto"—I so wish I could find a Dutch equivalent for that German word. Truly, my life is one long hearkening unto myself and unto others, unto God. And if I say that I hearken, it is really God who hearkens inside me. The most essential and the deepest in me hearkening unto the most essential and deepest in the other. God to God. (EH, 549; EHe, 519)

Hillesum's experience taught her that God was the creator of the universe as well as helpless and dependent on us. He created human beings, but we are responsible for what we do to one another: "God is not accountable to us, but we are to Him [. . .] And God is not accountable to us for the senseless harm we cause one another. We are accountable to Him" (EH, 480–81; EHe, 455–56). The consciousness of a helpless God became stronger in Hillesum when she sensed that death was approaching. More and more she used her letters and diaries as a way to speak to God. Aware of her own possible departure to Auschwitz, she wrote: "And in spite of everything you always end up with the same conviction: Life is good after all, it's not God's fault that things go awry sometimes, the cause lies in ourselves. And that's what stays with me, even now, even when I'm about to be packed off to Poland with my whole family" (EH, 648; EHe, 608).

From the summer of 1942 until her deportation to Westerbork a year later, Hillesum wrote a number of letters to her friends in Amsterdam and to her friends in Westerbork. Although the letters are not specifically addressed to God, they illustrate her openness and trust in God. At the end of June 1943, she confirmed that she believed in a presence named "God" who "is love" (*is liefde*) and "merciful enough":<sup>73</sup>

I got a letter from Leguyt that touched me very much. He is another one of those people who make you want to survive just so you can see them again later on. He enclosed a quotation from Dr. Korff: "And yet God is love." I completely agree, and it is truer now than ever [. . .] I have noticed that in every situation, even in the most difficult, man generates new faculties that help him go on living. As far as that is concerned, God is merciful enough. (EH, 651; EHe, 611)

The relationship between God and Hillesum's "gratefulness" in *The Letters and Diaries* grew stronger, and the emphasis gradually changed. In the beginning, Hillesum wrote about a God who would be grateful to her: "Perhaps these words—God will thank you for it—will turn into my salvation" (EH, 38; EHe, 36). Later, she wrote only about her gratitude to God: "God has given me the strength to bear everything and to face up to it, and because with me, just as with you, gratitude will always be greater than sorrow" (EH, 603; EHe, 567). With gratitude, Hillesum was safe in God's arms, something Dawkins finds hard to grasp:<sup>74</sup>

I don't feel in anybody's clutches; I feel safe in God's arms, to put it rhetorically, and no matter whether I am sitting at this beloved old desk now, or in a bare room in the Jewish district, or perhaps in a labor camp under 55 guards in a month's time—I shall always feel safe in God's arms. They may well succeed in breaking me physically, but no more than that. I may face cruelty and deprivation the likes of which I cannot imagine in even my wildest fantasies. Yet all this is as nothing to the immeasurable expanse of my faith in God and my inner receptiveness. I shall always be able to stand on my own two feet even when they are planted on the hardest soil of the harshest reality. (EH, 514–15; EHe, 487)

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 94–95.

On Thursday, September 2, 1943, five days before her departure to Auschwitz, Hillesum wrote to her friend Maria Tuinzing. She described the situation in Westerbork: "Everything here has an indescribably clownish madness and sadness" (EH, 700; EHe, 657). In the midst of all this madness, she still believed God was in good hands: "We hardly realize it ourselves: we have become marked by the suffering for a whole lifetime. And yet life in its unfathomable depths is so wonderfully good, Maria—I have come back to that time and again. And if we just care enough, God is in safe hands with us despite everything, Maria" (EH, 701; EHe, 657).

Hillesum was almost certain that she would not survive her captivity. On Tuesday, September 7, 1943, Etty Hillesum was deported from Westerbork's "Transport Boulevard" ("*Boulevard des Misères*"). This main street in Westerbork ran parallel to the railway platform from which the trains to the east departed. It cut through the camp from west to east. When the train due to leave on Tuesday morning stood waiting on Monday evening, this boulevard divided the camp in two (EHe, 781). The transport train to Auschwitz contained 987 Jews, including 170 children. Only 8 survived. From the train Etty threw her last note, addressed to her teacher and friend Christine van Nooten,<sup>75</sup> who lived at the Noordenbergsingel in Deventer:<sup>76</sup>

Christine, opening the Bible at random I find this: "The Lord is my high Tower." I am sitting on my rucksack in the middle of a full freight car. Father, Mother, and Mischa are a few cars away. In the end, the departure came without warning. On sudden special orders from The Hague. We left the camp singing, Father and Mother firmly and calmly, Mischa, too. We shall be traveling for three days. Thank you for all your kindness and care. Friends left behind will still be writing to Amsterdam; perhaps you will hear something from them. Or from my last long letter from camp. Good-bye for now from the four of us. Etty (EH, 702; EHe, 658–59)

Finally, when Hillesum was sitting on her rucksack among dozens of others who shared her fate, in a packed train moving toward Auschwitz, she did not feel homeless, neither was God some "delusion" or a Dawkinsian "evil monster." Throughout *The Letters and Diaries* she had learned to be grateful and to "create" ("*scheppen*") a God who suited her and her circumstances. Now she had found herself a new "home": "The Lord is my high tower" (EH, 702; EHe, 658). Her last messages tell us how successfully she entered her home in God. She did not leave him behind; he journeyed with her to Auschwitz, where her "gratefulness" was put to the final test. How she died, no one knows, except God.<sup>77</sup>

### LET US BE FRIENDS

May I end this paper with a story of Martin Buber. One morning Buber got up early in order to read proofs. The evening before he had received galley proof of the preface of a book he wrote, and since this preface was a statement of faith, he wished to read it once again quite carefully before it was printed. Now he took it into the study below that had been offered to him in case he should need it. But here was an old man who sat at his writing-desk. Directly after greeting Buber he asked him what he had in his hand, and when Buber told him, he asked whether he would not read it aloud to him. Buber did so gladly. The old man, listened in a friendly manner, but was clearly astonished, indeed with growing amazement. When Buber was through, he spoke hesitatingly, then, carried away by the importance of his subject, even more passionately. "How can you bring yourself to say 'God' time after time? How can you expect that your readers will take the word in the sense in which you wish it to be taken? What you mean by the name of God is something above all human grasp and comprehension but in speaking about it you have lowered it to human conceptualization. What word of human speech is so misused, so defiled, so desecrated as this! All the innocent blood that has been shed for it has robbed it of its radiance. All the injustice that it has been used to cover has effaced its features. When I hear the highest called 'God,' it sometimes seems almost blasphemous."<sup>78</sup>

The kindly clear eyes of the old man flamed. The voice itself flamed. Then they sat silent for awhile facing each other, Buber and the old man. The room lay in the flowing brightness of early morning. It seemed to Buber as if a power from the light entered into him. What he answered, he could not till up to this day reproduce but only indicate. "Yes," Buber said, it is the most heavy-laden of all human words:

<sup>75</sup> J. C. van Nooten was born in Gouda in 1903 and died in Deventer in 1998. Beginning in April 1931, Christine van Nooten taught Latin and Greek at the "grammar school" in Deventer where Hillesum's father worked. When the Hillesum family was in Westerbork Camp, she was one of their trusted contacts outside. She regularly sent food parcels to them in Westerbork (EHe, 765).

<sup>76</sup> Etty Hillesum and *The Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis*, 45.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>78</sup> Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Humanity Books, 1988), 7. See also Buber, *Gottesfinsternis: Betrachtungen zur Beziehung zwischen Religion und Philosophie* (Zürich: Manesse Verlag, 1953).

None has become so soiled, so mutilated. Just for this reason I may not abandon it. Generations of men have laid the burden of their anxious lives upon this word and weighed it to the ground; it lies in the dust and bears their whole burden. The races-of man with their religious factions have torn the word to pieces; they have killed for it and died for it, and it bears their finger-marks and their blood. Where might I find a word like it to describe the highest! If I took the purest, most sparkling concept from the inner treasure-chamber of the philosophers, I could only capture thereby an unbinding product of thought. I could not capture the presence of Him whom the generations of men have honoured and degraded with their awesome living and dying. I do indeed mean Him whom the hell-tormented and heaven-storming generations of men mean. Certainly, they draw caricatures and write 'God' underneath; they murder one another and say 'in God's name.' But when all madness and delusion fall to dust, when they stand over against Him in the loneliest darkness and no longer say 'He, He' but rather sigh 'Thou,' shout 'Thou,' all of them the one word, and when they then add 'God,' it is not the real God whom they all implore, the One Living God, the God of the children of man? Is it not He who *hears* them? And just for this reason is not the word 'God,' the word of appeal, the word which has become a *name*, consecrated in all human tongues for all times? We must esteem those who interdict it because they rebel against the injustice and wrong which are so readily referred to 'God' for authorization. But we may not give it up. How understandable it is that some suggest we should remain silent about the 'last things' for a time in order that the misused words may be redeemed! But they are not to be redeemed *thus*. We cannot cleanse the word 'God' and we cannot make it whole; but, defiled and mutilated as it is, we can raise it from the ground and set it over an hour of great care.<sup>79</sup>

It had become very light in that room. It was no longer dawning, it was light. The old man stood up, came over to Buber, laid his hand on the philosopher's shoulder and spoke: "Let us be friends." The conversation was completed. May our conversation too, as on that day, be completed! Let our response to the God confusion of our time, as in Voegelin, Hillesum and Buber, be one of human experience, encounter and love. For where two or three are truly together, there is no delusion, but mutual respect and dignity, they are together in the presence of the creative ground of existence, together in the unity of our God.

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<sup>79</sup> Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy*, 8-9.