

How Far Is It from Voegelin's Reflective Distance to Mysticism?

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For anyone who knew Eric Voegelin personally, the question elicits a smile. “Why, of course, the distance is quite far” is my own, spontaneous answer. Voegelin’s habitus, as I know it from Munich as well as Stanford, was clearly that of a man of reflective distance, not of mysticism. Reflection was his daily mode of thought, accompanied by reading, writing, and discussing. Distance was his way to stay focused on his contemplative – as opposed to activist – life devoted to philosophizing. Although he kept his distance from people and popular causes, he was not a recluse. He was a keen observer of life around him, high or low, and drew conclusions about, for example, the current political process which were unfailingly far more perspicacious than mine, even if I disagreed with them frequently for their conservatism. It would be hard for me to think of Voegelin as a mystic, as I still see him comfortably stretched out in his study chair, cigar in one hand, and the *Wall Street Journal* or a science fiction book in the other. Nevertheless, because of his insistence on articulating the experiential base of all philosophizing, there is perhaps at least an implicit element of mysticism in his thought, worthy of more detailed investigation.

Voegelin, of course, took recourse to the Christian mystics many times in his works and was much attuned to the mystical elements in St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. There are many *obiter dicta*, assembled by by Ellis Sandoz in his introduction to this panel. But, to my knowledge, Voegelin did not undertake a structural analysis of the Christian mystical

experiences as he did of the philosophical ones of Plato and Aristotle. Interestingly, he intended to comment on three widely diverging text passages at the end of his “Quod Deus Dicitur,” which reflect a somewhat expanded topic of mysticism, reaching from St. Paul and Thomas Aquinas to Goethe. Although the essay remained incomplete and we do not know how Voegelin’s analysis would have looked like, the texts in themselves warrant more detailed commenting, precisely because of their diversity. It is on these texts that I will focus my presentation.

In text 4, Goethe is cited with a “mental prayer” contained in his *West-East Divan*, “which encompasses and excludes all religions and which only in a few god-favored men permeates their whole way of life.” This prayer, Goethe argues, unfolds in most people only as “a flaming, enrapturing feeling of the moment.” After this feeling has vanished, so Goethe, the person returns to himself and, unsatisfied and unoccupied, falls back into the most interminable boredom” (Voegelin, 1985: 583). St. Paul is listed in text 5a with a brief verse (2:9) taken from his letter to the Colossians where the latter are warned against the dangers coming from “enticing words” and “philosophy,” arguing that nothing can be added to Christ, “for in him the whole fullness (*pleroma*) of divine reality (*theotes*) dwells bodily” (Ibid.:584).

In the much longer text 5b taken from the *Summa theologiae*, I, I, 1-3, Thomas Aquinas seeks to explain the Tetragrammaton, Yahwe’s self-revelation to Moses in the Burning Bush. According to Aquinas, the “He who is” is a “more appropriate” rendering of God’s name because it is his existence that makes us use his name in the first place, because of the “unrestricted way” in which he is signified, and because of the tense in which the name is stated. But, on the other hand, if the meaning of the word is considered, the term “God” is more appropriate because it signifies his “divine nature.” “Even more appropriate,” however, so the

text concludes, is the Tetragrammaton which signifies the incommunicability and singularity of God (Ibid.).

In looking over these three texts, the passage of Goethe's seems to be the most accessible. Goethe posits a mental prayer which, so he says, permeates their entire way of life of a few God-favored humans is but for the great majority of people produces only a momentary flaming and enrapturing feeling. To generalize a bit by removing the prayer context: Goethe is contrasting the mystic who lives his experience permanently with the person who, in a momentary peak experience feels the flow of something extraordinary but then falls back into his or her quotidian existence. To make this generalization even more pointed: The mystic possesses the ability to eliminate from himself all sensations, feelings, and thoughts and arrives at the experience of pure consciousness. In the technical vocabulary which I want to borrow here from the philosopher F.S.C. Northrop (1947:XXX), a disciple of Alfred North Whitehead, the differentiated continuum of sensations, feelings, and thoughts is the environment in which we all live our daily lives. A moment of happiness arrives when we pick, at one point or another, select differentiae, be they sensations, feelings, and or thoughts. Experience-based thinkers, including mystics, dwell in the undifferentiated continuum of pure consciousness as a matter of habit.

Consider the undifferentiated continuum more closely. It is flowing, unbounded, and ineffable (because it is arrived at after the elimination of all thought). It is removed from daily life with its ordinary thing-reality, as Voegelin calls our basic cognitive condition at the beginning of *In Search of Order* (Voegelin, 1987: 15). Finally, even though I am aware that the term "undifferentiated continuum," with which I describe this experience, is an effable concept, with all its complications to be explained later, I am using it here under erasure, to borrow a term

of Heidegger's who struggled mightily with the problem of the transition from ineffable experience to discursive conceptualization.

If we disregard for the moment the "He" in the Tetragrammaton cited by Thomas Aquinas, its "Is" is clearly the undifferentiated continuum. By referring to its incommunicability, Aquinas makes sure that we do not mistake the "Is" for a concept and are aware, via his remark about its grammatical function as a tense, of its experiential presence. Furthermore, he emphasizes that experience is superior to conceptualization and therefore considers the word "Is" to be preferable over the concept of "God." Aquinas' baffling identification of the Is as a Singularity, however, as well as St. Paul's identification of the "Is" of the Christ-God with "fullness" are conceptualizations which move far beyond the strict reference to experience discussed so far. In order to get an idea of what concepts mean I now move from experience to conceptualization.

Two types of concepts are available for expressing, if one must, the ineffable undifferentiated continuum experience, that is, Unity and Totality concepts. With no claims to completeness or a particular order, I list the following pairs: One-All, Nothing-Everything, Singularity-Plurality, Infinity-Finitude, Creator-Universe, God-Humanity, Being-Becoming, Soul-Body, Mind-Matter, Identity-Diversity, Freedom (called "chance" by die-hard scientists)-Determinacy, Subject-Object, Wave-Particle, Eternity-Time (or History), Society-Individual, Faith-Reason, Irrationality-Rationality, or Supernature-Nature. Which concepts from the pairs shall one use for the conceptualization of the undifferentiated continuum experience? As a mysticizing, twentyfirst-century thinker of reflective distance in Voegelin's footsteps my answer is "Wrong question. Choose pairs, please." The pair to pick would depend on the type of investigation to be undertaken. In the context of this presentation, the first pair, One-All, is

perhaps the most appropriate, in the sense that the undifferentiated continuum experience has to be thought of as both a Unity and a Totality. It is a One (perhaps even a Nothing, as in Mahayana Buddhism) because all sensations, feelings, and thoughts are removed and nothing is left. It is an All because the differentiated continuum is the point of departure before the removal of the differentiae.

In the differentiated continuum of daily life, however, no Ones or Alls are encountered. Everything we experience or do falls short of Unity or Totality. As Aristotle taught us, the iron law of contradiction requires that only one concept in a pair of opposites can be true and this law has reigned unchallenged ever since. Well, has it? In a recent study, the English philosopher Graham Priest demonstrated that Aristotle's law might have ruled for millennia but that his proof for the validity of his law is less than iron-clad (Graham: 2004). In another study, Priest investigated the logic of the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (c. 50-150 C.E.) who allows for the simultaneous truth of opposites without being incoherent. It seems that we now have to accept the idea that there are opposites which are true at the same time and cannot be dissolved, as demanded by the law of contradiction (Priest, 2002: 249-270).

Westerners have traditionally either privileged unitary conceptualizations over totalizing ones, as was the case in the Classical and Revelatory traditions of Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Or they flipped to the opposite side of privileging Totality concepts, as was the case in the New Science and Enlightenment of the early modern period. During the two centuries of ideology from 1800 to 2000 Westerners even eliminated unitary conceptualizations altogether from their thought, as was the case in the Scientist, Marxist, and Fascist reductionisms. In retrospect, it is now clear that the West has traversed a full circle of privileged Unity as well as reductionist Totality conceptualizations and has exhausted most possible choices.

What makes it so hard for us Westerners today, after the collapse of reductionist Scientism, Fascism, and Marxism, to find our way back from privileging or reducing select concepts and come to terms with the simultaneity of opposites? German Idealism, the briefly reigning 19th-century reductionist ideology seeking to explain reality through unitary conceptualizations only, somewhat surprisingly provides the answer. Hegel, one of the few doubters of Aristotle's iron law in his own dialectical *Science of Logic*, argues against all those who, on the basis of the law of contradiction, impose limits on thought: "The very fact that something is determined as a limitation implies that the limitation is already transcended ... the other of the limitation is precisely the *being beyond it*" (italics in original; Hegel, 1969: 134). In other words, a limit can be called a limit only if one knows what is on the other side. Taking his cue from Hegel, the aforementioned Graham Priest quips against Wittgenstein, who in his *Tractatus* was still a firm proponent of non-contradiction: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one has just contradicted oneself" (Priest, 2002: 233). *Pace* Hegel and Priest, I conclude: Totalities assumed to exist in daily life are false and require transcendent, complementary Unities to become true Totalities.

In contemporary physics, the complementarity of Unity and Totality concepts is, of course, well-established. As of this year, 2009, the particle-wave duality in Quantum Physics, as defined by the so-called Copenhagen interpretation, has been experimentally confirmed (XXX). A similar complementarity is beginning to be accepted in biology, through the concept of cells that organize themselves. Stuart Kauffman in his recent *Reinventing the Sacred* makes strong case for self-organization (Kauffman, 2007). Accordingly, rearguard thinkers for whom God, Being, Mind, or Soul are nothing but illusions, should be reminded that their cherished objects

do not exist either, unless in conjunction with their counterparts. If Unity is illusionary, so are Universe, Nature, Matter, Body, Objectivity, Rationality, and Determinacy.

To conclude: You probably have noticed that even though I have explored in this paper Voegelin's three quotations in *Quod Dicitur Deus* which touch on mysticism, I have conducted the analysis in categories quite different from those of Voegelin. I have done so in part because Voegelin's progression from the experience of the Thing and It-Reality into philosophy, as exemplified in its most elaborate form at the beginning of his *In Search for Order*, appears to me to be too compact. Unless the experience of the undifferentiated continuum is articulated, the requirement for complementary conceptualizations does not come fully to the fore. Voegelin, therefore, has to be characterized as only implicitly mystical.

Within his reflective distance of conceptualizations, however, he is fully aware of complementarity at the heart of all philosophizing. His analysis of the identity of the One and the All, *pace* Plato's *Timaios*, in both *Quod Dicitur Deus* and *In Search of Order*, is masterly. But besides the well-known Classical and Revelatory pairs which privilege Being over Becoming and God over the World, on which Voegelin focuses in his oeuvre, there are many more in need of exploration, as I intimated above with my list. With this conclusion, I am perhaps not quite fair since Western-Centrism was still a perfectly acceptable frame of thought during Voegelin's lifetime. We, as his successors, however, have the obligation to expand our horizon.

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