Epistemology, Myth and Politics in Hegel and Voegelin

Several years ago in this venue I presented a paper which considered the justice of Eric Voegelin's notorious designation of Hegel as "the greatest of speculative gnostics."[1] Today I would like to re-visit the confrontation of these two thinkers, with particular reference to the issues of epistemology raised by each. My procedure on this occasion will be to briefly indicate how certain issues broadly concerned with epistemology, myth and politics might be illuminated by a comparative study of the two thinkers. The issue of epistemology is essentially the issue of one's conception of "science", and we will have touch on the relative conceptions of "science" advanced by our thinkers. The role of myth in or its relation to science will then be considered, and finally the relation of the foregoing to the analysis of problems in political reality will be indicated. Such a field requires a large treatment; in this venue I must confine myself to brief and sketchy outlines.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel must be seen first of all, I believe, as the author of ***Die Phaenomenolgie des Geistes***. In this great, and indeed unique work, Hegel set out to accomplish a number of tasks:

1) To begin the transformation of philosophy into "science"--Wissenschaft-- or "actual knowledge"--wirkliches Wissen
2) To do this via the invention and display of a new and unique science- "phenomenology"--the mastery of which Hegel seeks to demonstrate in the work itself.
3) To provide via this phenomenology the "ladder" by which ordinary consciousness can ascend to the level of "pure thought" beyond the subject-object opposition of consciousness. Only such "pure thought, " according to Hegel, is able to properly contemplate the absolute determinations of the speculative idea--the subject of the ***Science of Logic*** yet to come. It is in this sense that the phenomenology is the "Introduction or "First Part" of the "System of Science."
4) To accomplish all this with the help of rhetorical strategies adapted to a philosophical audience prepared by two decades of idealistic philosophy and the historical upheavals associated with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, still very much in progress as Hegel wrote his masterpiece.
5) To present to this public via this performance ***both*** a "mythology of reason" suitable to the age and a new mode of scientific discourse which definitively transcends "myth" altogether.

Hegel's claim to have transformed philosophy into science is itself notorious, and was followed by positivistic, Marxian, pragmatic and phenomenological claims to do the same. It is also of course the basis of Voegelin's criticism that Hegel was in fact a gnostic.

What I wish to focus on here is Hegel's specific and ingenious response to the "epistemological turn" of the age of Reason. In various ways, modem philosophers from Descartes to Kant had argued that, before one goes off half-cocked with various metaphysical claims, it would be

advisable to first examine the instrument or medium of cognition itself, in order to see that it was capable of the work. The idea was to expose and get rid of unwarranted prior assumptions before beginning the work of philosophy proper. Epistemology had become a sort of "philosophical conscience," and any thinker who did not lay his epistemological cards on the table was regarded as not playing by the rules.

Hegel changed all that by replacing epistemological reflection with phenomenological reflection. In a brilliant passage in his Introduction to the Phenomenology, he points out that the epistemological anxiety itself rests upon various conceptions and presuppositions, and that the examination of the "instrument of cognition" is itself a cognitive activity which would itself have to be justified (leading to an infinite regress). Why not begin *in medias res*, as had Aristotle, for instance, instead of pretending to have made a clean sweep prior to beginning? The Phenomenology, the "Science of the Experience of Consciousness", is thus not indentured to a prior epistemological "clearing of accounts." Many commentators have found this procedure dubious, but Hegel does have a point. The next obvious question, however, is how is the science to proceed--what is its object, and what its method? Hegel's ingenuity here is simply to point out that consciousness contains its own object and method within itself--none needs to be presupposed or imported from without. Consciousness is always consciousness of something, so the science of phenomenology is simply the conscious examination of consciousness itself So the "object" is consciousness itself and the "method" is simply the comparison of the object as it is initially taken to be by consciousness with the object as it comes to be understood when this initial acceptation is "taken seriously" and actually "experienced" or lived through.

"Progress" in this science is derived from the systematic examination of all the "forms of consciousness" according to the "criterion" which each posits in its initial claim. Since, in the process of the examination, each claim is found to be inadequate, the "negative" finding is positively incorporated into the next claim via "determinate negation." Thus, according to Hegel, a complete traversal of all possible "forms of consciousness" is made until the "goal" is reached--when the "object" corresponds with its "concept" (in this case, simply the "original acceptation" I cited above. Such a form of consciousness would be an "absolute knowing"--absolved of reference to anything outside itself, since any possible "outside" would be a repetition of one of the "forms of consciousness" advanced and dialectically negated earlier. The process of achieving such an "absolute knowledge" would be a "thorough going skepticism" in that it involves the taking up and rejecting (or rather, finding inadequate on its own terms) of each "form of consciousness." In this way, various historical positions--such as ancient skepticism, stoicism and Kant's transcendental philosophy, will reveal themselves as both dialectically necessary and as definitively inadequate.

The above paragraphs briefly indicate how I think Hegel saw himself as transforming philosophy into "actual knowledge" via the creation of a "new science." What about my claims that in doing so he availed himself of peculiar rhetorical devices, that thereby he "provided a ladder for ordinary consciousness", and that he simultaneously transcended and instantiated "myth"?

The rhetorical devices which Hegel employed that I am concerned with here involve his subtle use of a dramatistic and agonistic form of "dialectic." As Professor Joseph Flay has pointed out[2], Hegel self-consciously used a form of dialectic which had been criticized by Aristotle as invalid.

He did this, I think, for two reasons: he believed that he had discovered a way to elude the Aristotelian criticism, and he recognized the rhetorical power of this form of dialectic. Very briefly, according to Flay, there are two basic forms of dialectical argument: in the first, one simply examines a position "internally" so to speak, by seeing if it leads to self contradiction or absurdity, while the second opposes to a given position another position. In the second form, an "external" opposition is compared with the first claim, and both are examined in order to find if either, neither, or some combination of both is adequate. Following Flay, let us call the first foem. of dialectic "Socratic-Hegelian" and the second "Aristotelian-Kantian." Both forms appear in Plato. The great rhetorical strength of the first is that it lends itself to a more intense form of identification and hence a more pathetic experience of transition or loss. One can "identify" with the position under examination, and one must painfully admit failure when it is found wanting. And indeed this is how Hegel structures the movement within each form of consciousness. The agonistic dimension is of course explicit in such famous passages as the socalled "master-slave" or "lordship and bondage" confrontation, but the procedure is the same in principle throughout. The explicit self-conscious confrontation of master and slave is prepared by Hegel's prior sly invitation for the philosophical "we" who conducts the whole examination to actually "Become" or "impersonate" the concept (in the Chapter "Force and Understanding" immediately preceding the chapter on "Self-Consciousness" within which the master-slave confrontation occurs.[3]) For a work addressed to a philosophical public obsessed with the "facts of consciousness" and living through the tumultuous European events of the Napoleonic era, this rhetorical strategy made sense.[4]

The ***Phenomenology*** constitutes a "ladder" for the "ordinary consciousness" in that it purports to demonstrate to ordinary consciousness that the movement toward the "absolute standpoint" is in fact inherent in it already, and that a rigorous demonstration of the necessity of this absolute standpoint will be developed via a dialectical examination of all "partial" standpoints on the way.[5] The standpoint of "ordinary consciousness" will be seen to be a thoughtless melange of several different standpoints among which ordinary consciousness moves and shifts at need.

The "ladder" image leads directly to the question of "Myth." I spoke above of a simultaneous transcendence and instantiation of myth. What was I getting at? Well, anyone who has tried to climb Hegel's ladder knows very well that getting to the "top" of "absolute knowing" is very problematic. Either one falls off the ladder, or finds that several necessary rungs are missing, or that the ladder seems to be established on no stable ground, or that the top is in some distant cloud--or that when one gets to the top, it doesn't seem to be "absolute knowing" after all. Or one can refuse to climb it at all. In any case, I think Hegel is most interesting when taken seriously, and I think he seriously considered that he had succeeded in providing such a ladder. Yet Hegel knew very well that, in the best of cases, only a very few climbers were likely to join him. What about those--and Hegel must have known there would be many--who were generally sympathetic to Hegel's attempt to "think the concrete" for his own era, but frankly unable to muster the necessary noetic endurance to survive the climb? Well, for such people the Phenomenology itself could constitute a new "mythology of reason." For such people, the memorable *images (Bildern)* which appear in the ***Phenomenology*** could form a mnemonic catalog of various phases in the epic story of spirit's odyssey.[6] So in a sort of modem "averroistic" twist, Hegel, I suggest, simultaneously sought to provide, for those capable of the journey, a definitive critique of all previous myth--it was based on *vorstellendes Denken* or "pictorial thinking"--while at the same

time providing a "mythical" version of the "scientific" exposition.

To argue for this in detail would take me too far a field in this venue. But I do wish to point our that there is warrant in Hegel's own writing for ascribing to him this ambition to be a Volkserzieher--a "popular teacher" by providing a "mythology of reason." The phrase "mythology of reason" appears in Hegel's handwriting in that strange document of 1796 or '97 titled by his editors as "Das Aelteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus" ("The Oldest System-Program of German Idealism").[7] Here Hegel, evidently inspired by Schiller's ***Letters on the Esthetic Education of Mankind***, speculates that only a "mythology of reason" can truly affect the mass of men. Since Hegel also notes that, so far as he knows, no one has ever thought of this before, one must consider whether the "lust for originality" hinted at might have played a perduring motivating role in Hegel's own project.

As far as the "scientific" side of his achievement is concerned, Hegel thought he had eluded the Aristotelian criticism of his mode of dialectice by contending that he wrote, in effect, as the amanuensis of the absolute--the circuit of determinately-negated positions could be "circular" without this involving him in a vicious circularity, because the circuit itself was simply the abstract form of God's own self-revelation. The circuit was rationally conceivable and selfcompleting. So "science" now was in principle complete, and included the sorts of issues which had been pursued by philosophers and religious people since ancient times.

Hegel's system in fact had enormous immediate and long-term impact. Even though as a "scientific" project it was rapidly superceded by positivist, pragamatist and neo-Kantian projects more subservient to the paradigm of physical science and less respectful of the problems of spirit which Hegel had endeavored to integrate into his "concrete universal," still I think the example of Hegel was instructive. Even so talented a student as Marx accepted Hegel's completion of philosophy as definitive, and saw the task remaining as the "realization of philosophy." Whether or not Hegel intended, as I have suggested, to provide a "mythology of reason" in his "system of science," he must, I think, be credited with a sure insight into the longing for such a simplified or "compact" presentation of reason. Positivism may have triumphed for its time because it was, compared with the difficulties of Hegel's system, a more-readily-accessible "mythology of reason."[8]

I will hold off any consideration of the political implications of Hegel's work until after a brief survey of Voegelin's approach to epistemology and myth.

If Hegel completed his own intellectual development amid the turmoils of the period of the French Revolution and the ensuing Napoleonic era, Eric Voegelin began his in a century of total war and ideological intensification. Hegel was always a defender of the Revolution, even in his later, supposedly "conservative" Berlin years, and was able to construct his system only after overcoming a depression and making the decision to "make a bold gamble" on the validity of his own times.[9] Indeed, Hegel was to famously claim that "Philosophy is its own time apprehended in thought."[10] Eric Voegelin, in contrast, saw his own task as far more in opposition, in resistance to, the dominant trends of his age.

In his intellectual training, Voegelin assimilated positivist, neo-Kantian, pragmatist, idealist,

Thomist, and phenomenological approaches to the problem of human knowing.[11] But he is most valuable for his informed critique of these and most modem philosophical trends-including the legacy of Hegel himself. How did Voegelin see the problem of human knowing? As a process of "clearing away the rubble" by a project of *anamnesis--a recovery* of the classical conception of reason as a luminous tension towards the ground of being, an activity of "resistance to..personal and social disorder of the.. Age."[12] This recovery was not simply a matter of "re-learning" in the sense of absorbing information which was once known but had become obscure through forgetfulness, , but of himself practicing the open-souled meditative engagement which was the hallmark, Voegelin insisted, of the great mystic-philosophers. So Voegelin felt himself emancipated from the methodological obsession of neo-Kantian and positivist epistemology, and he became disillusioned with phenomenology "after wasting more years than I care to remember" in pursuing it.[13] He had the strength of character to maintain the highest standards of intellectual and scholarly integrity even while jettisoning the most prevalent academic ideologies in whose terms scholars were expected to form and justify their own standards of excellence. Voegelin uses the symbol "science" just as respectfully as Hegel did, but he self-consciously owes as much to Plato and Aristotle as he does to contemporary physics in his understanding of the term.

The process which I referred to above as "clearing away the rubble" was not, for Voegelin, an arbitrary or self-willed rejection of much of modem intellectual history, but ratheran arduous process of analytical penetration of this history with the conceptual analysis and meditative engagement which his own theory of consciousness made available.

Voegelin's insights into myth and politics are supported by his theory of consciousness. Voegelin's anamnetic science does not base itself upon the subject-object distinction, but rather provides an account of consciousness as primordial awareness of tension whose poles may 11precipitate out" into the structured opposition of subject and object (or act and object, for Husserlians) which are then the basis for philosophical inquiry and speculation. In ***Anamnesis*** and ***In Search of Order*** Voegelin makes his most sustained discussion of what we might call " epistemological" issues. In these works, Voegelin resurrects metaphysics as a "science of substance" while accepting that the doctrinalization and deformation of symbols had given metaphysics a bad name. One might argue that the whole point of Voegelin's theory of consciousness is to avoid the antinomies of propositional metaphysics. Systematic metaphysics, according to Voegelin, operates after hypostatizing one or both of the poles of consciousness into "concepts denoting objects." This is always a danger because of consciousness' capacity for "reflective distance." Reflecting upon one's experience is facilitated by symbols which function exegetically and mnemonically at once. The mnemonic function tends, by a sort of psychoserniotic entropy, to predominate, in which case the symbol elides into the concept which denotes an object.

Illumination repeated gives way to recognition of the familiar; luminosity is absorbed into intentionality. In this way a "deformative" or "derailed" practice reduces meditative symbols deriving from the whole complex experience of consciousness into the formal terms appropriate to only one of its structures. By this analysis, Voegelin repeats and expands Aristotle's warning from ***Nichomachean Ethics*** that one should not expect a greater degree of certainty from a given inquiry than it is inherently capable of providing. He also makes his own Whitehead's warning

about the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness."

In contrast with Hegel, then, Voegelin remains a classical skeptic. Where Hegel had attempted ingeniously to marshal the Skeptical tropes into a "self-completing skepticism" which ended up in absolute knowing,[14] Voegelin admits to an "ultimate, essential ignorance" which is simply a part of the human condition--despite various claims (by Hegel, for instance) to have "leaped beyond" this condition.[15] Voegelin more than Hegel exhibits that "negative capability" spoken of by Keats which is able to endure the presence of mystery without restless seeking after explanations. Hegel would no doubt retort that if an explanation is available, it is contemptible to remain stuck in mystification.

As far as myth is concerned, it is a central concern for Voegelin. In his view genuine myth expresses in "compact" symbolism the insights of order relative to a "cosmological" , consciousness. Since we all live in the cosmos, "myth" is potentially valid in any era. But when noetic or pneumatic revelation creates "differentiated" symbolism, then the symbolism of myth will typically seem inadequate or simply false. Or the experiences which engendered and sustained the mythic symbolism may themselves become rare or non-existent, and the mythical symbolism may die of "experiential atrophy."[16]

For Hegel, on the other hand, myth is a charming but obsolete expression of mystery which is no longer justified since we now are in a position to adequately penetrate the mystery symbolized. Or myth is seen to express philosophical truth in an allegorical form. But mythic thought is "pictorial thinking"--vorstellendes *Denken--and as* such is inherently inadequate to express rational, speculative truth-2'absolute knowing." -

If an essential dimension of politics is "struggle for control of the myth," then the contrasting approaches to myth embodied in the projects of Hegel and Voegelin offer food for thought for those interested in political reality. Only the briefest indications will be hazarded here. For Voegelin, his conception of myth provides an initial approach to the interpretation of the symbols, ideals of order, and motivations of political actors. When referred to his distinction of "compact" and "differentiated" symbolism, and to the related distinction between 66cosmological civilizations" and "ecumenic empires", the analysis of symbols permitted by Voegelin's conception offers a rich field for researchers wishing to study phenomena of political representation, political legitimacy, political alienation, and movements of political transformation.

Hegel's approach to myth--overtly consigning it to the dustbin of history while effectively inventing a new myth--the "myth of reason"--has become a significant feature of the contemporary climate of opinion. As the exchange between Paul Feyerabend and Karl Popper indicates, one can be a positivist and yet still be living "in a myth."[17] And the fact that the dominant scientistic "myth" has functioned as a "myth of enlightenment," as a pretence to have dispensed with myth, has perhaps dulled our perception of its mythic dimensions. A whole region of study distinguishing genuine cosmological myth from ersatz "invented" myth is suggested here. And this may become easier, as the positivist myth loses its power and a recrudescent cosmological myth vies for supremacy. I refer here to the quasi-mystical ideology of "deep ecology," to the devotees of the "gaia hypothesis," and the various strands of so-called

"new age" thought, and so on. Students of political reality would do well, I think, to consider Eric Voegelin's fundamental analysis of philosophy and myth, with its narrative of spiritual and rational derailment, in their efforts to continue the process of "clearing away the rubble."

NOTES

1. Chip Sills, "Is Hegel a 'Gnostic' in Voegelin's Sense?", unpublished.

2. Joseph Flay, "Hegel's ***Science of Logic****:* Ironies of the Understanding, in ***Essays on Hegel's Logic***, ed. George di Giovanni (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), pp. 153-169, and "Dialectic of Irony," **Owl *of Minerva*** 25/2 (Spring 1994): 209-214

3.Hegel, ***Phenomenology of Spirit***, trans. A.V. Miller, p. 80, par. 133; ***Werke 3*** (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1970), eds Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, p. 108.

4. For the phrase "Facts of Consciousness", see George di Giovanni and H. S. Harris, eds, ***Between Kant and Hegel. Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*** (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), passim and especially the introductory essay "The Facts of Consciousness" by di Giovanni, pp. 1-3-50. For the condition of the "philosophical public," see Frederick Beiser's brilliant study, ***The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*** (Cambridge, etc: Harvard University Press, 1987).

5. The "ladder" image is from the "Preface" to the ***Phenomenology***. Miller, p. 14, par. 26, ***Werke 3***, 29.

6. Donald Phillip Verene, ***Hegel's Recollection: a Study of1mages in the Phenomenology of Spirit*** (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), offers an interpretation of Hegel compatible with this understanding.

7. ***Werke 1***, *pp.* 234-36.

8. For the notion of positivism--in the broadest sense meaning the attitude that positive (quantifiable and operationally-validated) knowledge patterned after mathematical physics constitutes the paradigm of knowing, and that the life of spirit involves "values" whose cognitive status is vague or non-existent or "subjective" in a pejorative sense--as itself 'mythological," see the exchange between Paul Feyerabend and Karl Popper. Popper, ***Conjectures and Refutations***. Also relevant are Eric Voegelin, ***The New Science of Politics*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, esp. Pp. 3-26; Leszek Kolakowski, ***The Alienation of Reason: A History of Positivism***

9. Joachim Ritter, ***Hegel and the French Revolution : Essays on the Philosophy of Right*** (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984), trans. Richard Dien Winfield.

3,6,7.
10. Hegel, ***Elements of the Philosophy of Right***, ed. Allen Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 21; ***Werke 7***, *p.* 26.

11. Voegelin, ***Autobiographical Reflections****,* ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1989), esp. Ch.

12. Eric Voegelin, "Reason: the Classic Experience" in ***Collected Works****, vol.* 12, p. 265.

13. Quoted in Barry Cooper, ***Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science*** (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), p. 153.

14. See Chip Sills, "Is Hegel's ***Logic*** A Speculative Tropology?" Owl of Minerva 21/1 (Fall, 1989), 2140; Chip Sills, Hegel's Pyrrhonian Poetics: Tropology and Systematic Inquiry in Hegel's ***Phenomenology of Spirit," Philosophy Today*** (December, 1995).

15. ***Israel and Revelation*** (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1956), p. 2.

16. For a study of this phenomenon from a different perspective, see Owen Barfield, ***Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry***, 2d edition (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988); Voegelin uses the phrase "experiential atrophy" in ***The New Science of Politics****: an Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 107

17. See note 7 above. Feyerabend argues that the modem scientific outlook is a "mythic" structure in ***Against Method*** (London: Verso).