The Primacy of the Personal in Kant and Voegelin

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One of the abiding principles of Eric Voegelin's political philosophy is that a theory of politics must be grounded in a theory of the human being. Since human beings engage in politics as whole persons, the political philosopher must seek to understand human existence in all of its layers, from the physical to the spiritual, if he is to attempt to offer a complete political science. For Voegelin, developing such a philosophical anthropology meant in particular recovering the personal dimensions of human existence—the moral, the intellectual, and the spiritual—that were systematically excluded from political science by the various reductionist methodologies that were prevalent during his time. Thus, Voegelin grounded his political philosophy in a philosophy of consciousness and sought to demonstrate that political community could only be understood in relation to its emergence from the most basic human experiences of moral, intellectual, and spiritual order. Without reference to these experiences, neither the creation of political order nor the desire to understand it could be explained. The structure of human existence was itself the source and foundation of both politics and political philosophy.

Voegelin appears to have realized the need for a philosophical anthropology as a foundation for political science in his early efforts to transcend the legal positivism in which he was trained as a graduate student.[1] He became dissatisfied with Kelsen's *Rechtslehre* because it not only failed to account for significant dimensions of social existence but also dismissed what it could not account for as irrelevant. Thus rejecting Kelsen's methodology as inadequate to the

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[1] Klaus Vondung, "Editor's Introduction," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 2: *Race and State*, ed. Klaus Vondung, trans. Ruth Hein (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1997), xi-xiv; Barry Cooper, *Beginning the Quest*: *Law and Politics in the Early Work of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), ch. 3.

task of constructing a complete science of politics, Voegelin endeavored to develop his own "system of Staatslehre," as he still called it,[2] on the basis of philosophical anthropology. With these efforts, Voegelin produced his early books on race theory and the Austrian constitution as well as a number of published essays and unpublished manuscripts.[3] In all of these works, Voegelin sought to develop a science of politics that recognized the personal as its foundation. His most important influence at the time was probably Max Scheler,[4] but Augustine, Descartes, and Husserl also factored into his early analysis of the "Concept of the Person."[5]

Immanuel Kant's philosophy was another important source for Voegelin, although Voegelin's treatment of Kant's thought is ambiguous. On the one hand, Voegelin employs Kant's work to recover the full range of being that must be accounted for in a philosophical anthropology. On the other, much of what Voegelin has to say about Kant's philosophy both during his early period and throughout the rest of his career is highly critical. But Voegelin's criticisms too often seem to follow an outmoded interpretation of Kant according to which he is the "all-destroyer" of metaphysics who effected a Copernican Revolution in epistemology and liberated the autonomous individual from the tutelage of God, state, and nature. While such an interpretation of Kant clearly has some textual basis, it is one that places undue emphasis on his theoretical epistemology, while downplaying his insistence on the primacy of practical over

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[2] Voegelin, *CW 2*, 2. As the editor, Klaus Vondung, notes, Voegelin's project belies the extent to which he was still working under Kelsen's influence, "Editor's Introduction," xi-xii.

[3] See Voegelin, *CW 2*, CW 3, CW 4, CW 7, *CW 8*, and *CW 32*.

[4] Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999); Bill Petropulos, "The Person as *Imago Dei*: Augustine and Max Scheler in Voegelin's *Herrschaftslehre* and *Political Religions*," in *The Politics of the Soul*: *Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience*, ed. Glenn Hughes (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

[5] Voegelin, *CW 32*, 227-255.

theoretical reason, an idea that he articulates in the second *Critique* but that governs his critical philosophy as a whole.[6]

As will be discussed, there is some evidence that Voegelin glimpsed such a reading of Kant but never developed it. This is unfortunate, since such an interpretation reveals that Kant and Voegelin are engaged in similar philosophical projects. Above all, both philosophers place the person and the structures of personal existence at the center of their philosophies. From this perspective, they are both attempting to explain how human beings attempt to illuminate the metaphysical conditions of their existence from within the process of living that existence out. Both realize that the non-objective structure of personal existence—the practical in Kant and the luminous in Voegelin—is the most fundamental reality in which we participate, and that it is the basis upon which we attempt to understand the world in which we find ourselves. Thus, both Kant and Voegelin begin from an analysis of the person and then expand their reflections to metaphysics. In sum, it could be said that both Kant and Voegelin were engaged in recovering the personal as the basis of all philosophical inquiry and explanation.

But Kant and Voegelin run into similar difficulties as well, as both thinkers are susceptible to the problems of subjectivism. They both struggle to explain the epistemological status of their metaphysical claims, although in opposite ways: while Kant is reticent to refer to his metaphysical claims as knowledge because he remains beholden to the priority of the subject, Voegelin insists that to not give metaphysics such status is the product of a confused or twisted mind. Yet, while Voegelin may better recognize the problem, he does not solve it, since his reliance on the language of consciousness and experience prevents him from fully moving

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[6] Even though, as will be discussed, Voegelin himself is aware of the practical basis for Kant's philosophy. For the importance of the primacy of the practical in Voegelin, see Richard Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Susan Neiman, *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant* (Oxford University Press, 1994); and David Walsh, *The Modern Philosophical Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

beyond the subject to a post-subjective metaphysics.[7] Nevertheless, Kant and Voegelin point

toward a solution to the problem through their mutual exploration of the personal as the most

fundamental reality. Even if neither quite makes the leap, they point to the way to the realization

that the personal is by definition more than the subjective because it characterizes reality as a

whole.

Voegelin's Two Readings of Kant

All of Voegelin's extended treatments of Kant's philosophy occur during the early period

of his career when he was still working to move beyond Kelsen's pure theory of law.[8] By the

time Voegelin published *Race and State*, he had more or less broken with Kelsen's program,

rejecting Kelsen's theory because it reduced all political science to legal analysis and failed to

ground its analysis of law in philosophical anthropology. Thus, in *Race and State*, Voegelin

notes that Kelsen struggles to account for different forms of government because his "theory of

governmental forms lacks a theory of the ideas of the state—and necessarily so, since with the

assumed identity between *Staatslehre* and theory of the content of law, a theory of ideas

transcends the scope of *Staatslehre*."[9] Kelsen simply cannot account for the various ideas of the

state within his methodologically circumscribed analysis. Second, Voegelin observes that

Kelsen fails to ground his theory of the law in a philosophical anthropology; in particular, in his

theory, "the 'normative sphere' is accepted as a reality without pointing to its origin in man."[10]

For these reasons, Kelsen's theory is susceptible to Voegelin's critique of German *Staatslehre* in

general:

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[7] David Walsh, Voegelin's Place in Modern Philosophy," *Modern Age*, Winter 2007.
[8] Thomas Heilke, "'Out of Such Crooked Wood': How Eric Voegelin Read Kant" in *Eric Voegelin and the Continental Tradition*, ed. Lee Trepanier and Steven F. McGuire (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010).
[9] Voegelin, *CW 2*, 6.
[10] Voegelin, *CW 2*, 7.

Against German *Staatslehre* since the founding of the Reich the general objection must

be raised that because of the history and organization of academic disciplines, it is treated

as an appendage to the theory of constitutional law, so that its systematic center is located

not in the fundamental human experiences that give rise to the phenomenon of the state

but in the final part of *Staatslehre* that presupposes all the other parts (general theory of

norms, *Herrschaftslehre*, theory of personal spheres of community members, theory of

the ideas of the state). The basic problems are dealt with not on their own ground but

only as they are reflected in the contents of positive law, and therefore they are *of*

necessity seen in a distorted way.[11]

Indeed, Voegelin goes so far as to suggest that "the great achievement of this purifying work [of

Kelsen's] is the elevation of positivist *Staatslehre* to a level from which the other thematic areas

not of a positive law nature and their autonomous laws have come into view with a clarity they

never had before."[12]

Contrary to Kelsen's excision of the person as the fundamental basis for political

analysis, Voegelin insists that "the fundamental idea of the system of Staatslehre…[is]…that the

roots of the state must be sought in the nature of man."[13] For Voegelin, "the task of developing a

sustem of Staatslehre out of the theory of human nature…is given by the incontestable fact that

man is the creator of the state."[14] Among the problems not yet adequately addressed by

Staatslehre because of its inattention to philosophical anthropology, Voegelin includes the

above-mentioned "justification of the phenomenon of law."[15] A positivist legal theory fails to

explain the origin of law in "the moral experience of the individual" and the "experience of

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[11] Voegelin, *CW 2*, 5.
[12] Voegelin, *CW 2*, 7.
[13] Voegelin, *CW 2*, 2.
[14] Voegelin, *CW 2*, [x].
[15] Voegelin, *CW 2*, [x].

community."[16] This is what Voegelin aims to illustrate in his early essay on "Ought in Kant's System."[17]

Voegelin's Kant essay is a curious offering (not least because he published it in a festschrift for Kelsen). The aim of the essay is to investigate the nature and origin of the sense of ought that gives rise to law, and Voegelin takes the position that "a more deeply probing investigation of ought is possible only within the purview of an all-embracing philosophical view of the essence of man."[18] He turns his attention to Kant, since he possesses a "clear view of the essence of the human being."[19] Yet, Voegelin's analysis of Kant is predominantly critical, as he concludes that Kant has a "fundamentally flawed assessment of life" and a "miserable view of human beings,"[20] while speaking of the "extraordinary poverty of Kant's image of man and society."[21] Voegelin is clearly not interested in reconstructing Kant's practical philosophy for the purpose of defending it. Rather, as he suggests at the outset, it is his "hope that in examining his ideas concerning the moral law and ought, we will expose the topography of a problem area that is independent of his time and person."[22] Voegelin is interested in discovering a philosophical problem through an analysis of Kant's work, not in offering a defense of Kant's own answer to that problem. For Voegelin, the analysis of Kant's work on philosophical anthropology is a means to an end.[23]

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[16] Voegelin, *CW 2*, 3.
[17] Voegelin, CW, vol. 8: *Published Essays 1929-1933*, ed. Thomas W. Heilke & John von Heyking, trans. M. J. Hanak & Jodi Cockerill (2003), 180-227.
[18] Voegelin, *CW 8*, 181.
[19] Voegelin, *CW 8*, 181.
[20] Voegelin, *CW 8*, 192.
[21] Voegelin, *CW 8*, 224.
[22] Voegelin, *CW 8*, 181.
[23] It is worth noting too that the choice of Kant surely offered the added bonus of shocking Voegelin's neo-Kantian readers, since, as Thomas Heilke and John von Heyking note, "The ironic subtext of Voegelin's investigation is that it was a social science based on neo-Kantian epistemological principles—ultimately exemplified in Weberian sociology and Kelsenian legal theory—that had tried to eliminate or ignore such considerations, thereby rendering impossible a theory of the state that paid any attention to the ultimate basis of the state: human beings in the fullness of their moral, intellectual, spiritual, and physical existence." "Editor's Introduction," Voegelin, *CW 8*, 17.

But the most interesting aspect of Voegelin's reading of Kant is that he recognizes its inadequacy, and, in so doing, inchoately points to a series of parallels between his own later philosophical anthropology and Kant's philosophy. In a remarkable section in the middle of the essay, Voegelin qualifies his treatment of Kant in a way that suggests three such parallels.[24] First, Voegelin anticipates his own later distinction between experience and symbolization, according to which human beings attempt to express in symbols the ultimately inarticulable divine order that they experience as pervading the world. Noting that "Kant's thought is characterized by a peculiar vagueness," Voegelin admits that he has thus far been treating Kant's ideas apart from the existential context in which they arose. This is problematic because "the primordial image comes to life only if one moves through the series in the spirit of one who participates in this philosophizing himself." A fairer reading would have to recognize that Kant's ideas "express the living, philosophical flow that infuses them all." And Voegelin expresses regret about his procedure thus far: "With pangs of conscience at the barbarity of the procedure, we have attempted to strip some of these topics of their function as expression of philosophical movement and to examine them in detail as objects."[25] In the terms of Voegelin's later language, he has divorced Kant's symbols from the experiential reality in which they arose, and treated them as if they were the most fundamental level of analysis.

In addition to presaging his mature hermeneutic of experience, some of Voegelin's remarks also suggest a similarity between Voegelin's idea of the luminosity of consciousness and Kant's mode of philosophizing. In his later philosophy of consciousness, Voegelin distinguishes between two structures of consciousness: intentionality and luminosity. Intentionality is the mode of consciousness in which "reality assumes the position of an object

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[24] Voegelin, *CW 8*, 205-10. It's literally the middle section!
[25] Voegelin, *CW 8*, 206-7.

intended" and "acquires a metaphorical touch of external thingness."[26] Luminosity, by contrast,

captures the sense that "reality is not an object of consciousness but the something in which

consciousness occurs as an event of participation between partners in the community of being."[27]

It is the mode of consciousness in which order is experienced and articulated by the philosopher,

and it is by its definition non-objective, which means that the symbols used to express this reality

cannot be reduced to objects.[28] Now, in the Kant essay, Voegelin notes that Kant's thought is an

exploration of a reality that transcends conceptualization:

> [e]very image [in Kant's account of human existence] is at once itself and the other,
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> because no one image is It Itself [Es Selbst], but the same Something shimmers through
>
> each of them that is also mirrored in all the others. Each of the images is transparent for
>
> the same core, but the core itself never becomes the subject of a statement. All
>
> statements refer to it only through statements about other images. This produces a
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> balanced, self-reposing, freely floating system of concepts that never objectivizes its
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> philosophical themes but simply prescribes the paths along which philosophizing
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> existence must necessarily proceed if, with its gaze trained upon the metaphysically real,
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> it transforms the metaphysically real along necessary paths.[29]

This description of Kant's philosophy sounds remarkably similar to Voegelin's own later

account of luminosity, and he actually mentions just such a parallel in his late work, noting that

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[26] Voegelin, *CW 18*, 29.
[27] Voegelin, *CW 18*, 29.
[28] Thus, Voegelin concludes that consciousness is fundamentally paradoxical: "Consciousness, then, is a subject intending reality as its object, but at the same time a something in a comprehending reality; and reality is the object of consciousness, but at the same time the subject of which consciousness is predicated."
[29] Voegelin, *CW 8*, 209. "Kant begins with this terminology and then robs it of its traditional solidity by drawing it up into the stream of his philosophizing." Voegelin, *CW 8*, 209.

Kant's thing-in-itself marks an experience equivalent to Voegelin's It-reality (although deficient for many reason as well).[30]

Finally, Voegelin notes that, for Kant, the inarticulate metaphysical reality expresses itself as the moral command:

> Everything can become everything because the thematic is conceived only as an expression for the One and Identical from which it emerges. Yet this single, identical metaphysical element has disclosed itself to Kant in the form of a deeply stirring awareness of the spontaneity of action and of moral necessity. Here is the experiential center that holds and maintains his conceptual world, that restrains it from chaotic confusion and from collapsing upon itself.[31]

Voegelin's criticizes Kant for his obsession with the sense of ought, but, on the other hand, it points to a similarity with Voegelin's analysis of the human experiences of tension and anxiety in the metaxy. Voegelin uses the Platonic term *metaxy* ("in-between") to characterize the human condition. For Voegelin, the *metaxy* designates the human experience of existing in tension between the mundane world and a transcendent source of order. Because of this predicament, we operate from a "perspective of participation" that prevents us from developing a complete account of the reality in which we participate. As parts within the whole, we have no access to some Archimedean point from which we could grasp the whole of reality with certainty. Yet we have an inborn desire to understand reality and our place within it, and this leads to an existentially charged situation in which we must attempt to discover the meaning of our lives as we play them out. As Voegelin writes,

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[30] Voegelin, *CW 18*, 64, 78. Cf. Voegelin, *CW 6*, 80.
[31] Voegelin, *CW 8*, 209-10.

man is not a self-contained spectator. He is an actor, playing a part in the drama of being

and, through the brute fact of his existence, committed to play it without knowing what it

is. It is disconcerting even when accidentally a man finds himself in the situation of

feeling not quite sure what the game is and how he should conduct himself in order not to

spoil it; but with luck and skill he will extricate himself from the embarrassment and

return to the less bewildering routine of his life. Participation in being, however, is not a

partial involvement of man; he is engaged with the whole of his existence, for

participation is existence itself. There is no vantage point outside existence from which

its meaning can be viewed and a course of action charted according to a plan, nor is there

a blessed island to which man can withdraw in order to recapture his self. The role of

existence must be played in uncertainty of its meaning, as an adventure of decision on the

edge of freedom and necessity.[32]

We are caught up in the movement of existence and we must attempt to bring some sense of

order to our lives from within that movement. This, it could be argued, is the experience that

Kant expresses in the form of the ought.

In sum, in a few short pages, Voegelin suggests that, for Kant, (a) the experiential source

of his philosophy is more important than the terminology it produces, (b) his terminology

represents an attempt to capture in language a reality that cannot be so captured, (c) that his

philosophy is fundamentally motivated by the personal quest to live in attunement with the order

of existence. Could not all three of these statements describe Voegelin's own mature philosophy

as well? It would seem that embedded in the middle of Voegelin's critique of Kant is a signpost

pointing toward a more Voegelinian reading of Kant, one that attempts to penetrate to the

fundamental experiences animating Kant's philosophy. And once found, this interpretation of

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[32] Voegelin, *CW 14*, 39-40.

Kant suggests that Voegelin and Kant share a similar project of recovering the personal as the basis for philosophy. It raises the question: do these statements point to an accurate reading of Kant?

Kant on the Primacy of Practical Reason

According to a long-standing but incomplete view of Kant's philosophy, his project is seen primarily as an epistemological one: he is interested in defending science against Humean skepticism and chastening the aspirations of Wolffian metaphysics. To do so, Kant argues that our minds structure the way we perceive reality, and he bifurcates the world into two realms (or at least perspectives), the phenomenal and the noumenal, maintaining that we can only know things as they appear to us and not as they are themselves. Thus, we can construct and defend science as a study of the phenomenal world, but we must refrain from engaging in metaphysics, since it means attempting to know the thing-in-itself, which is by definition impossible for us. Whatever the merits of such a reading of Kant's theoretical philosophy, it cannot stand as an account of Kant's philosophical contribution as a whole, for it neglects Kant's emphasis on the primacy of practical reason, which is central to understanding his entire critical project.[33] Once this argument is taken into account, it becomes clear that Kant is restraining theoretical reason, which attempts to reduce the world to a series of objects, in order to open a space for human reason to explore the non-objective metaphysical reality in which we exist.

As Kant explains in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "we are convinced that there is an absolutely necessary *practical* employment of pure reason—the *moral*—in which it inevitably goes beyond the limits of sensibility. Though [practical] reason, in thus proceeding, requires no assistance from speculative reason, it must yet be assured against its opposition, [so] that reason

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[33] Essential reading on this subject includes the works referenced in note 6.

may not be brought into conflict with itself."[34] For Kant, the ultimate purpose of the critique of

reason is to secure a place for the possibility of transcendental freedom and, by extension,

morality. This is the meaning of Kant's famous remark that he "found it necessary to deny

knowledge, in order to make room for *faith*." As Kant quickly explains, by this remark he means

that he restricts the reach of speculative reason in order to secure a space for the "*practical*

extension of pure reason."[35] Kant seeks to restrict the range of speculative or theoretical reason

in order to ensure that there is room for the exercise of moral freedom.

Practical reason, in turn, is capable of extending itself beyond the limits of theoretical

reason. As Kant writes,

> when all progress in the field of the supersensible has thus been denied to speculative
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> reason, it is still open to us to enquire whether, in the practical knowledge of reason, data
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> may not be found sufficient to determine reason's transcendent concept of the
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> unconditioned, and so to enable us, in accordance with the wish of metaphysics, and by
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> means of knowledge that is possible a priori, though only from a practical point of view,
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> to pass beyond the limits of all possible experience. Speculative reason has thus at least
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> made room for such an extension; and if it must at the same time leave it empty, yet none
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> the less we are at liberty, indeed we are summoned, to take occupation of it, if we can, by
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> practical data of reason.[36]

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[34] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith with an introduction by Howard Caygill (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 26-27 (B xxv).
[35] Ibid., 29 (B xxx).
[36] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 24-25 (B xxi). In fact, Kant adds shortly thereafter: "we are convinced that there is an absolutely necessary *practical* employment of pure reason—the *moral*—in which it inevitably goes beyond the limits of sensibility. Though [practical] reason, in thus proceeding, requires no assistance from speculative reason, it must yet be assured against its opposition, that reason may not be brought into conflict with itself." Ibid., 26-27 (B xxv).

Thus, "reason has, in respect of its practical employment, the right to postulate what in the field of mere speculation it can have no kind of right to assume without sufficient proof."[37] As will be discussed, Kant is primarily concerned here with three metaphysical realities: freedom, God, and the immortality of the soul. For Kant, these cannot be proved theoretically, but we can articulate them on the basis of practical reason.

In any event, given the different capacities of theoretical and practical reason, the question of the unity of reason arises, and it is in response to this problem that Kant argues for the "primacy of pure practical reason in its connection with speculative reason."[38] He explains that "primacy" holds two meanings as he is employs it: "By primacy among two or more things connected by reason I understand the prerogative of one to be the first determining ground of the connection with all the rest. In a narrower practical sense it signifies the prerogative of the interest of one insofar as the interest of the others is subordinated to it (and it cannot be inferior to any other)."[39] We will discuss the second point in a moment. With regard to the first, Kant explains that he means to say that theoretical reason should accept the results of practical reason so long as they are not in conflict with the findings of theoretical reason itself:

> if pure reason of itself can be and really is practical, as the consciousness of the moral law proves it to be, it is still only one and the same reason which, whether from a theoretical or a practical perspective, judges according to a priori principles; and then it is clear that, even if from the first perspective its capacity does not extend to establishing certain propositions affirmatively, although they do not contradict it, *as soon as these same propositions belong inseparably to the practical interest* of pure reason it must accept them—indeed as something offered to it from another source, which has not

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[37] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 617 (A 776/B804).
[38] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 100 (5: 119).
[39] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 100 (5: 119).

grown on its land but yet is sufficiently authenticated—and try to compare and connect

them with everything that it has within its power as speculative reason, being mindful,

however, that these are not its insights but are yet extensions of its use from another,

namely a practical perspective; and this is not in the least opposed to its interest, which

consists in the restriction of speculative mischief.[40]

Theoretical reason cannot make much progress in metaphysics because it attempts to objectify

reality, but once this "speculative mischief" is restrained, it is acceptable for theoretical reason to

incorporate the non-objective findings of practical reason into its operations, so long as it always

remembers that these findings are not objects of experience in the world (which, as will be

discussed below, is a qualification that Voegelin repeatedly makes in his own metaphysical

discussions).

But why does Kant give primacy to practical and not theoretical reason? This speaks to

the second point in the quote above. The answer lies in what could be called Kant's personalism:

the moral experience of the person is the origin and basis of all metaphysical speculation. Thus

Kant claims that "all interest is ultimately practical and even that of speculative reason is only

conditional and is complete in practical use alone."[41] Indeed, our very desire to come to a

speculative understanding of the universe is practical for Kant:

Reason is impelled by a tendency of its nature to go out beyond the field of its empirical

employment, and to venture in a pure employment, by means of ideas alone, to the

utmost limits of all knowledge, and not to be satisfied save through the completion of its

course in [the apprehension of] a self-subsistent systematic whole. Is this endeavor the

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[40] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 101 (5: 121).
[41] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 102 (5: 121).

outcome merely of the speculative interests of reason? Must we not rather regard it as having its source exclusively in the practical interests of reason?[42]

The centrality of this claim for Kant is confirmed by the fact that moral interests govern not only his works in practical philosophy but the Critique of Pure Reason as well.[43] The primacy of the practical governs his entire critical philosophy.

Thus, Kant's theoretical epistemology is not the center of his philosophy. His ultimate aim in disciplining speculative reason is to maintain a space for morality and freedom that escapes the limits of a theoretical perspective on the world. For Kant, it is important to recognize that the whole of reality cannot be objectified in order to be subsumed under the operations of theoretical reason. Rather, Kant recognizes that we live within a reality that transcends the theoretical mode of reason and which we explore on the basis of practical reason, i.e., our existence as persons.[44] While the theoretical mode of reason treats the world from the perspective of a subject observing a series of objects, practical reason is a mode for exploring the personal nature of reality which transcends objectivity.

Thus, if we take the primacy of practical reason into account, then our understanding of the nature of Kant's critical philosophy changes in ways that draw it closer to Voegelin's philosophy of consciousness. As the above discussion of Voegelin's Kant essay suggested, Kant does in fact share with Voegelin the project of recovering a sense of the non-objective or personal reality in which we participate. This is further confirmed by an analysis of Kant's idea of the person as autonomous.[45]

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[42] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 630 (A 797/B 825).
[43] Voegelin recognizes this, but it is developed more elaborately in the works referenced in note 6.
[44] He identifies this reality in a number of ways: as the noumenal realm, the thing-in-itself, the realm of freedom, the realm of morality, the realm of humanity.
[45] The following analysis is based on Steven F. McGuire, "Immanuel Kant on Autonomy and the Primacy of Practical Reason ."

Autonomy as Metaxy

As mentioned above, Voegelin uses the Platonic term *metaxy* to designate the in-between character of human existence. We experience ourselves as living within a tension between mundane existence and a transcendent Beyond, and this is a morally and spiritually charged situation because we experience the Beyond as an ordering force to which we should attune ourselves. We are now prepared to see the similarities between this account of the human condition and Kant's idea of autonomy. Taking Kant's argument for the primacy of practical reason into consideration, it becomes evident that autonomy is meant to articulate not some sort of emancipatory or Gnostic dream, but, rather, Kant's experience of moral agency as participation in a broader moral and metaphysical order that escapes objective conceptualization. While it is true that many of Kant's formulations of the idea of autonomy suggest the emancipatory meaning it is often given, other formulations point to Kant's recognition that we participate in an order of being that transcends the self. When all of these passages are taken into consideration, it becomes clear that Kant's idea of autonomy expresses our participation in an order that transcends the self (much like the divine ground of being in Voegelin's thought).

This reading of autonomy is suggested, first, by many of Kant's formulations of the idea of autonomy, since he often emphasizes that it is reason which gives us the law, as he does when he says we are subject to "a law through which our reason commands us compellingly."[46] Thus, self-legislation does not mean that one simply makes up an arbitrary set of moral principles for oneself. Rather, it means that each of us participates in the same universal reason that is the source of the moral law. Such a reading is confirmed by Kant's distinction between *Wille* and *Willkür*, by which he attempts to separate the self-legislative process from the whim of spontaneous individual choice. Thus, reason is not something that we possess as empirical

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[46] Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 69 (6: 49).

individuals in some sort of complete and systematic form; rather, it the horizon of our existence. We participate in reason as parts within a whole.

Second, it is important to note that Kant refers to autonomy as an idea and not a concept, which is an important technical distinction, even if Kant is sometimes careless with his language (which is the case surprisingly often). For Kant, the term *concept* can only be applied to something that is a possible object of experience. The term *idea*, by contrast, applies to something that cannot be experienced as an object in the world.[47] Thus, autonomy, as a noumenal reality, is an idea and not a concept because we can never experience autonomy as an object. This also means that no empirical human being is autonomous. Rather, autonomy must be understood as the horizon or telos of human action and not as a description of any empirical human being. It is something that we strive to realize. As was suggested above as well, autonomy is actually a transcendent reality in which we participate.[48]

Finally, in this connection, we must observe that Kant never establishes a theoretical proof of autonomy, nor could he. For Kant, freedom and morality reciprocally imply one another, and, thus, in order to prove "that morality is no phantom," he must establish either that we are free or that the moral law applies to us. The problem is that Kant never accomplishes either proof. In the third part of the *Groundwork*, he attempts to move from freedom to morality, but in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he reverses his procedure. Neither attempt is successful if judged from the standpoint of theoretical reason, however. In, fact it is by definition impossible for Kant to succeed because freedom and morality are noumenal realities that transcend the grasp of theoretical reason as Kant understands. Thus, it is not surprising that Kant

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[47] Of course, the use of the word *something* in this sentence is inadequate, as Voegelin (and Schelling) would point out.

[48] As Kant vaguely realizes in his discussion of holiness, and as Schelling observes much more lucidly in his *Freiheitsschrift* and elsewhere, only God is truly autonomous.

finally grounds the moral law, and, by extension, his entire practical philosophy in the "fact of reason":

> Consciousness of this fundamental law may be called a fact of reason because one cannot reason it out from antecedent data of reason, for example, from consciousness of freedom (since this is not antecedently given to us) and because it instead forces itself upon us of itself as a synthetic a priori proposition that is not based on any intuition, either pure or empirical, although it would be analytic if the freedom of the will were presupposed; but for this, as a positive concept, an intellectual intuition would be required, which certainly cannot be assumed here. However, in order to avoid misinterpretation in regarding this law as *given*, it must be noted carefully that it is not an empirical fact but the sole fact of pure reason which, by it, announces itself as originally lawgiving.[49]

The fact of reason holds an ambiguous status in Kant's philosophy. On the one hand, we cannot say that we "know" it (because Kant reserves the term knowledge for the results of theoretical reason); on the other, it points to the fundamental motivating experience of Kant's entire philosophy and in that sense it is more real for Kant than anything else. For Kant, the fact that human existence is moral existence is a reality beyond which we cannot penetrate. Nevertheless, it is the fundamental structure of our moral existence that forms the basis for all metaphysics in Kant, not just practical, but theoretical as well.

The Personal Foundation of Metaphysics

Thus far we have seen that Kant and Voegelin are in general agreement that (a) human beings can only know the world from the perspective of one who participates within it, (b) such knowledge is therefore non-objective because we do not stand outside the world as a subject

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[49] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 28-9 (5: 31).

before a series of objects, and (c) we experience existence as a tensional field in which we are drawn to attune ourselves to a moral-spiritual order that transcends the self. Now we can move on to show that, for both Kant and Voegelin, metaphysics begins from the structure of the person as a moral and spiritual being. This means (d) the very practice of metaphysical speculation is a practical-existential one, and (e) metaphysical knowledge is ultimately grounded in the moral-existential structure of personhood. Let us turn to Voegelin first.

That Voegelin takes this approach is well illustrated in his unique experiential approach to classical and medieval philosophy. Consider, for instance, his treatment of the metaphysical speculations of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas in his brief essay, "On Debate and Existence."[50] In that essay Voegelin attempts to show that metaphysical ideas such as the prime mover are ultimately grounded in fundamental experiences of human existence. Voegelin notes, for instance, that Aquinas's idea of the prime mover rests on "the argument that a universe which contains intelligent beings cannot originate with a *prima causa* that is less than intelligent," which in turn "draws specifically on an experience of human existence which as such is independent of the experience of the cosmos."[51] It is the experience of our own intelligence that leads to the idea that the world has an intelligent first cause. What is more, Voegelin, argues, the very attempt to offer such an explanation is grounded in existential questions that emerge from the structure of human existence itself. Here he references the classic metaphysical questions of Leibniz: "(1) Why is there something, why not nothing? And (2) "Why is something as it is, and not different?"[52] As Voegelin, goes on to show these questions are spurred by the very structure of human existence as we experience it.

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[50] Voegelin, *CW 12*, 36-51. Cf. his essay "What is Nature?" *CW 6*, 157-74.
[51] Voegelin, *CW 12*, 40-41.
[52] Voegelin, *CW 12*, 43.

Turning to Aristotle, Voegelin argues that "the immediate experiences presupposed in Aristotelian metaphysics" include subjective experiences such as "the experiences of finiteness and creatureliness in our existence, of being creatures of a day as the poets call man, of being born and bound to die, of dissatisfaction with a state experience as imperfect, of apprehension of a perfection that is not of this world but is the privilege of the gods, of possible fulfillment in a state beyond this world, the Platonic *epekeina*, and so forth."[53] Voegelin further illustrates the point in a discussion of Aristotle's argument for a final cause in the *Metaphysics*. He notes a passage in which Aristotle claims that "those who maintain an infinite series do not realize that they are destroying the very nature of the Good, although no one would try to do anything if he were not likely to reach some limit (*peras*); nor would there be reason (*nous*) in the world, for the reasonable man always acts for the sake of an end—which is a limit (*peras*)."[54] As this passage illustrates, the basis for Aristotle's metaphysical argument is an observation concerning human action. As Voegelin explains,

> The limit seems to be something inherent in reason; and this qualification appears in the context of the analysis of action, betraying that here we have reached the experiential origin from which derives the argument concerning a limit also in the demonstrations concerning the knowledge of things. For the demonstrations culminating in the assumption of a prime mover do not rely ultimately on the proof that a thinker who denies the existence of a prima cause and assumes an infinite chain of causation will involve himself in contradictions (for there is no reason why the universe should not be unintelligible and on closer analysis should not involve the thinker in unsolvable

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[53] Voegelin, *CW 12*, 41-42.
[54] Voegelin, *CW 12*, 45.

contradictions), but on an experience that reason is indeed embedded in the order of

being and it is the property of reason to have a limit.[55]

The notion of final cause in Aristotle's metaphysics actually derives from his ethics. Already for

Aristotle (according to Voegelin's interpretation at least), ethics is prior to metaphysics as it is

for Kant.

Based on this analysis, Voegelin concludes that metaphysical question emerge from

reflection on the nature of human existence itself: "the problems of transcendence, the questions

of origin and end, and the postulate of the limit, are inherent to the noetic structure of existence;

they are not doctrines or propositions of this or that metaphysical speculation, but precede all

metaphysics."[56] Metaphysical speculation emerges from existential considerations in two ways:

the impetus for such speculation comes from a desire for self-knowledge which is connected to a

desire to live rightly, and the problems of metaphysics are themselves grounded in questions that

arise in the course of reflection on the structure of human existence.

Kant follows precisely the same procedure (although his results and his reasons for them

are different). The most famous examples of this are the postulates of God, freedom, and the

immortality of the soul. Earlier we saw Kant claim that practical reason is authorized to extend

beyond the reach of theoretical reason and pursue speculative knowledge for practical purposes.

Following up on this claim, he endeavors "to seek in the moral use of reason and to base on it the

concepts of *God*, *freedom*, and *immortality*, for the possibility of which speculation does not find

sufficient guarantee."[57] Kant separates freedom from the first two and gives it a special status.

He argues that "practical reason of itself, without any collusion with speculative reason,

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[55] Voegelin, *CW 12*, 45.
[56] Voegelin, *CW 12*, 49.
[57] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5 (5: 5).

furnishes reality to a supersensible object of the category of causality, namely to *freedom*

(although, as a practical concept, only for practical use)."[58] He then goes on to claim that

> the concept of freedom…constitutes the *keystone* of the whole structure of a system of
>
> pure reason, even of speculative reason; and all other concepts (those of God and
>
> immortality), which as mere ideas remain without support in the latter, now attach
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> themselves to this concept and with it and by means of it get stability and objective
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> reality, that is, their *possibility* is *proved* by this: that freedom is real, for this idea reveals
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> itself through the moral law.[59]

Freedom is the center of the moral life, but the other ideas of reason are essential to our ability to

carry it out: "they are…conditions of applying the morally determined will to its object given to

it a priori (the highest good). Consequently their possibility in this practical relation can and

must be *assumed*."[60]

The necessary object which Kant speaks of is the highest good, which itself emerges

from the moral experience of the individual: "inasmuch as virtue and happiness together

constitute possession of the highest good in a person, and happiness distributed in exact

proportion to morality (as the worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy) constitutes the

highest good of a possible world, the latter means the whole, the complete good."[61] Immortality

must be postulated because it is a necessary condition of achieving the ultimate object of the

moral will, namely, "the production of the highest good in the world." But this requires "the

complete conformity of dispositions with moral law" or "*holiness*," which is, however, "a

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[58] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5 (5:6).
[59] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 3 (5:3-4). "among all the ideas of speculative reason freedom is also the only one the possibility of which we *know* a priori, though without having insight into it, because it is the condition of the moral law, which we do know." Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 3-4 (5:4).
[60] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 4 (5:4).
[61] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 93 (5:110-11).

perfection of which no rational being of the sensible world is capable at any moment of his existence. Thus we must the envision an "*endless progress* toward that complete conformity," which is "possible only on the presupposition of the *existence* and personality of the same rational being continuing *endlessly* (which is called the immortality of the soul)."[62] Thus, the immortality of the soul must be posited in order to render our moral experience rationally coherent. God must be postulated because only the existence of God can ensure that the complete "highest good" be realized: "The same law must also lead to the possibility of the second element of the highest good, namely, happiness proportioned to that morality, and must do so as disinterestedly as before, solely from impartial reason; in other words, it must lead to the supposition of the existence of a cause adequate to this effect, that is, it must postulate the existence of God as belonging necessarily to the possibility of the highest good."[63] Since moral worth does not guarantee happiness, we must postulate a personal God as bringing it about in the world. In Kant's reasoning, we something similar to Voegelin's discussion of Aquinas on the prime mover: "Now, a being capable of actions in accordance with the representation of laws is *an intelligence* (a rational being), and the causality of such a being in accordance with this representation of laws in his *will*. Therefore the supreme cause of nature, insofar as it must be presupposed for the highest good, is a being that is the cause of nature by *understanding* and *will* (hence author), that is, **God**."[64]

Thus, just as was the case for Aristotle (according to Voegelin's analysis), for Kant, "the concept of God…is one belonging originally not to physics, that is, to speculative reason, but to morals, and the same can be said of the other concepts of reason which we treated…as postulates

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[62] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 102 (5:122).
[63] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 104 (5:124).
[64] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 104-05 (5:125).

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of reason in its practical use."[65] There are a number of ideas that follow a similar pattern for

Kant. In the *Critique of Judgment*, for instance, he will also develop a teleological account of

nature on the basis of moral experience. Whatever we might think of his arguments and his

conclusions, Kant, like Voegelin, builds his metaphysics on the basis of the person as a moral

agent. For both, it is the fundamental experiences of our existence that both motivate us to

perform metaphysics and provide the basis for our metaphysical understanding of the world. But

one major objection presents itself to these analyses: how can we legitimately move from

subjective experiences to metaphysical claims about reality as it really is in itself?

The Personal is the Real

Kant and Voegelin both struggle to overcome the charge of subjectivism with respect to

their metaphysical claims. The ambiguous epistemological status of Kant's postulates was as

evident to him as it is to his readers. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

> by means of the concept of freedom objective reality is given to the ideas of God and
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> immortality and a warrant, indeed a subjective necessity (a need of pure reason) is
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> provided to assume them, although reason is not thereby extended in theoretical cognition
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> and, instead, all that is given is that their possibility, which was hitherto only a *problem*,
>
> here becomes an assertion and so the practical use of reason is connected with the
>
> elements of the theoretical.[66]

In this passage, Kant says both that the postulates have "objective reality" and that only their

"possibility" is asserted (not proven). Thus, within one passage Kant cannot decide which status

to give to the postulates. Numerous examples of such ambiguity could be given as Kant speaks

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[65] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 116 (5:140).
[66] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 4 (5:4-4).

of postulating, asserting, or assuming the ideas of reason, but we need not belabor the point since it is well recognized in the literature. Kant's postulates are perhaps one of the most widely questioned aspects of his philosophy, and his own treatment of them belies their fragility in his mind.

Voegelin, while more aware of the problem of subjectivism than Kant, does not entirely solve it either—although he claims to.[67] As David Walsh has argued, since Voegelin continues to appeal to the language of experience and consciousness, he never fully escapes the epistemological problems of Cartesian subjectivity. Consider, for instance, the following remark: "Insight into reality is insight from the perspective of man who participates in reality. However, the term *perspective* must not be understood, or rather misunderstood, in a subjectivist sense, for there is no multiplicity of perspectives, but only the one perspective determined by man's place in reality."[68] Here we have a more or less equivalent expression of the problem of interpretation surrounding the notion of self-legislation in Kant's idea of autonomy: while the language used indicates a subjective meaning, such a meaning is not what is intended by the author. Or consider that, similar to Kant's recourse to the language of postulates, Voegelin uses the term "linguistic indices"[69] to map out the non-objective metaphysical reality in which we exist, but, like Kant, struggles to maintain the sense of its non-objectivity. True, this points to an inherent limitation of language, but Voegelin's adherence to a philosophy of consciousness exacerbates the problem. As Voegelin himself writes, "we are compelled to speak in terms of objects because of the intentionality of consciousness."[70] We cannot help from slipping back into the intentional mode, and, therefore, so long as we think about the luminosity of being in

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[67] Walsh, "Voegelin's Place in Modern Philosophy"; Steven F. McGuire, "Voegelin and Schelling on Freedom and the Beyond" in *Eric Voegelin and the Continental Tradition*.
[68] Voegelin, *CW 6*, 362.
[69] Voegelin, *CW 6*, 374.
[70] Voegelin, *CW 6*, 374.

terms of consciousness, "it is impossible to prevent the noetic exegesis from being dogmatized and misunderstood as a proposition about things."[71] But these concerns aside—they are meant to illustrate that Kant and Voegelin are dealing with a similar tension—any attempt to analyze reality from the perspective of consciousness runs into the problems of subjectivism because it grounds claims to metaphysical knowledge in experience.

Thus, for both Kant and Voegelin their difficulties stem in part from the fact that they still remained tied to subjective modes of analysis. For Kant, the definition of knowledge is still inseparable from the theoretical mode of knowing. For Voegelin it is tied to experiences within consciousness. Yet, Kant and Voegelin both point the solution as well—Voegelin with more awareness than Kant. The solution to the problem of subjectivism can be found in an analysis of the person as a being who participates in a transcendent reality. The personal does not need to be justified in terms of theoretical reason or experience because it encompasses those modes of being. Note that Kant and Voegelin's efforts to recover the personal—practical reason in Kant and luminosity in Voegelin—are found precisely in the parts of their philosophies in which they struggle to move beyond the subject to the metaphysical reality that precedes the self. To be a person is to participate in a reality that transcends theoretical reason and consciousness. Persons participate in a personal reality that transcends the self. Thus, the turn to the personal is a turn beyond the subject that situates subjectivity in the metaphysical reality that precedes it. This is a principle that F.W.J. Schelling more fully recognizes than either Kant or Voegelin when he articulates the ancient principle that "like is known to like."[72] As Schelling realizes, our existence as persons illuminates reality from within because reality itself is personal. Both Kant

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[71] Voegelin, *CW 6*, 361.
[72] F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), [x].

and Voegelin sense and explore this insight, but their philosophies—Kant's more so than Voegelin's—remain tied to the language of an early mode of philosophizing.

Conclusion

Most of Voegelin's comments on Kant's philosophy throughout his career are critical. Yet, in Voegelin's early reading of Kant there is evidence of what a more Voegelinian reading might look like. Voegelin never carried out such a reading, but it might have revealed to him that he was actually working alongside Kant rather than against him insofar as both philosophers were engaged in recovering the personal as the foundation of metaphysics. They both shared an aversion to dogmatism and rejected the idea of attempting to enclosed human existence with an external and lifeless system of theoretical reason—whether it be political or metaphysical. For Kant, this meant turning to practical reason as the basis for metaphysical speculation, while, for Voegelin, it meant exploring the participatory experiences available to every human being. Both thinkers show that metaphysics and its categories depend on pre-metaphysical ethical or experiential, i.e., personal foundations. Despite their success in overcoming an external and lifeless philosophy of human existence, however, both Kant and Voegelin struggled to move beyond the problems of subjectivism confronting philosophy since Descartes. Voegelin is much less ambiguous than Kant in his efforts to resolve these difficulties (Kant unlike Voegelin is still very much beholden to the priority of the subject, even as his own philosophy points beyond it), but he never fully succeeds because he continues to think in terms of consciousness and experience—language which remains too closely tied to subjectivity. At the same, both thinkers point beyond subjectivity through their analyses of the personal as the most fundamental mode of being. There is no further need to corroborate the personal because the personal is the reality

that corroborates everything else. Analysis of the person reveals the nature of reality because the

personal is reality.