

Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization: Historic Constant or Changing Structures? Gilson, Rosen, and Voegelin on Equivalences and Constancy amidst Change."

Thomas Heilke
Department of Political Science
University of Kansas

“Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History” is one of Eric Voegelin’s better-known essays, and its arguments concerning the nature —the structure, persistence, and historical constancy amidst variability— of human consciousness and reality experience certainly present one of his most important philosophical insights. But is it an insight? For the purposes of this panel, Professor Wolfgang Leidhold has proposed the provocative hypothesis that, in fact, “the structure of experience” constantly changes, so that there are no historic constants of the type Voegelin purports to find in the structure of human consciousness as it unfolds in its historical search for order. Accordingly, we must therefore “write a ‘new history of experience,’” that is more consistent, presumably, with contemporary findings.

Over against this hypothesis there stands a considerable body of philosophical discussion with regard to the phenomena and problems of equivalence in human consciousness and understanding. This paper will consider the writings of two other philosophers, alongside Eric Voegelin, concerning this particular question. Stanley Rosen and Etienne Gilson both argue that one can, in fact, trace equivalences in the structure of philosophical problems and solutions in the Western philosophical tradition. While that is not quite the same problem as Voegelin’s, I will argue that it speaks to Professor Leidhold’s hypothesis from another point of entry.

This paper, then, proposes to accomplish three things. After initial comments, it introduces the problem of equivalences as articulated in the work of Eric Voegelin. It then presents and explicates the arguments of philosophers Etienne Gilson and Stanley Rosen concerning historical equivalences. Both, in quite different registers, seem to be making arguments parallel to those of Voegelin. Third, it examines Eric Voegelin’s theory of equivalences of experience and symbolization in history, comparing and contrasting Voegelin’s argument with the treatments of Rosen and Gilson. It looks not merely for parallels, however, but for clarification. In Voegelin’s language, to which I will return and offer an analysis, “the variants of the complex [of a specific genus of human existential experience] are not individuals of a species, but historical variants in a technical sense:

they have a recognizable pattern in common because they all express the tension of existence between time and the timeless; and they are variants of the pattern because they express modalities of the tension.”¹ I look for traces of such variants in the writings of Rosen and Gilson. Finally, the paper considers briefly Professor Leidhold’s challenging thesis in light of these three twentieth-century philosophical arguments concerning equivalences of human experiences and articulations/symbolizations of that experience.

I

In their method, but not necessarily their metaphysical commitments, Voegelin, Gilson, and Rosen all treat the question of equivalences in an Aristotelian manner. If the overall claim of equivalences is true, then we should find a plenitude of parallel cases of equivalences in history. The theory, in other words, begins with an observation of phenomena: it is these ‘cases’ that each thinker uncovers that constitute the objects of his investigation and that ultimately constitute the *prima facie* evidence for the claim for equivalences. There is a hint of circularity in this method that seems unavoidable but that is perhaps best exorcised by considering a similar problem in another field of inquiry altogether. Given the esoteric qualities of the equivalences problem in the field of philosophy, a brief summary of the convergences problem in the fields of evolutionary biology and paleo-biology may be illuminating.

When an observer considers the variety of life-forms that have appeared in over the course of evolutionary time, she will note that a great diversity —meaning simply a “sheer number”— of species have existed, and she may also observe their disparity, by which term she is denoting “the range of different types of design forms” with respect to “anatomy and morphology” that seems to occur among living beings over time and at the present moment.² The question in evolutionary biology is this: what should we make of these two aspects of the phenomenon of life? Of what significance are these two aspects

¹ Eric Voegelin, “Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 12: Published Essays, 1966-1985* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 81.

² Simon Conway Morris, *The Crucible of Creation: The Burgess Shale and the Rise of Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 206 and 138.

for our understanding of the nature of life and of its evolutionary unfolding? The question falls into several parts, one of which is concerned with the convergence of forms and functions amongst many species across families, classes, and even phyla, despite the diversity and apparent disparity of these species.

In basic terms, convergence can be said to occur when representative species of two different, fairly broad taxonomic ranks (beginning, perhaps, at the level of sub-class, class or phylum), evolve similar anatomical or morphological characteristics. These similarities are scarcely attributable to their common ancestor. First, they do not manifest themselves in any but a few species of each broad taxonomic class. Second, the ancestor is too distant, both genetically and phenotypically, to account for the similarities in the two descendant branches. Indeed, the common ancestor may not manifest the morphological similarity in question at all. Concerning the convergence, one may, on the one hand, argue that the sheer number of species present historically or at a point in time, each of which displays certain unique characteristics, is the product of random chance during the process of speciation via the mechanisms of biological evolution. One may, on the other hand, argue that anatomical and morphological convergence across phyla, families, or classes indicates some kind of constraint on the processes of adaptation and speciation.

The phenomenon of convergence has led most evolutionary biologists to believe that contingent processes of evolution appear to result not in unlimited morphological manifestations, but seem, rather, to be constrained by environmental constants. There are, for example, a limited set of propulsion methods in and on water. Accordingly, that limited set of methods will manifest itself across phyla, classes, or families of organism among those organisms in each taxonomic class that are at home in water.. To put it another way, “again and again, we have evidence of biological form stumbling on the same solution to a problem,” in this case, the problem of how to propel oneself in or on water.³ Thus, according to Simon Conway Morris, “Convergence raises many interesting

³ “Consider animals that swim in water. It turns out that there are only a few fundamental methods of propulsion. It hardly matters if we choose to illustrate the method of swimming by reference to water beetles, pelagic snails, squid, fish, newts, ichthyosaurs, snakes, lizards, turtles, dugongs, or

problems on how life is constrained, and equally importantly on the extent to which the expressed architecture of life shares a common genetic basis.”⁴

Like biological evolution, human experiences of order occur in and across time. Both are, in that sense, historical. Both, likewise, throw up similar forms — morphological on the one hand, symbolic on the other— across time. That, at least, is the evaluation of the majority of evolutionary biologists concerning their empirical findings on the one case, and the three authors I examine here in the other. Are similarities in form in the second case, however, brought about by constraints on the “morphology,” as it were, of human experience, just as morphological space appears to be environmentally constrained (limited by the possible solution set for a given set of environmentally posed problems) in the case of the former? Can metaphorically equivalent constraints of “morphological space” be said to exist in the realm of human consciousness and experience as they appear to exist in the realm of biological morphology? Is there, in other words, a certain “structure” to human existence, including human consciousness, that sets limitations to the possibilities of human experience and that may evoke equivalent experiences, responses, and symbolizations of both over time, just as there is a structured environment in which living things exist that broadly but recognizably constrains the evolutionary development of species in certain directions?⁵ Is the range of human experience in time and space infinite and random and discrete, or is it constrained,

whales; we shall find that the style in which the given animal moves through the water will fall into one of only a few basic categories.” (Conway Morris, *Crucible*, 204-205).

⁴ Conway Morris, *Crucible*, 194n12. There is a crucial argument in evolutionary biology at issue here. Conway Morris’ is engaged in a sharp disagreement with Steven J. Gould, who, much as in the philosophical argument I am reviewing in this present paper, argues on the basis of fossil evidence from the Burgess Shale that evolution is much more random and discreet than most evolutionary biologists, including Conway Morris, allow (see 138-139). One should note also that the larger theory of evolution and its many points of contention or sheer puzzlement among natural scientists is much more complex than this one question. I briefly consider here merely the one aspect concerning constraint and freedom with respect to morphological and anatomical characteristics of organisms across evolutionary time as an analogous question to the problem raised in Professor Leidhold’s thesis.

⁵ “In fact the constraints we see on evolution suggest that underlying the apparent riot of forms there is an interesting predictability. This suggests that the role of contingency in individual history has little bearing on the likelihood of the emergence of a particular biological property.” (Conway Morris, *Crucible*, 139)

regulated, and linked? Professor Leidhold's hypothesis suggests that the answer to the question is something closer to the former option —the morphology of human experience may be closer to being either infinite, random, or discrete than constrained with evident cross-temporal regularities. It is the hypothesis of Eric Voegelin, supported by the independent work of Rosen and Gilson, that the latter is more generally the case.

II

Eric Voegelin's essay, "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," appeared in 1968, sixteen years after the publication of *The New Science of Politics* and thirteen years after the publication of the third volume of *Order and History*, but four years before the publication of the fourth volume that would spell for Voegelin an irrevocable departure from the program of *Order and History* as he had originally conceived of it.⁶ The purpose of the essay, as a précis of Voegelin's work in the first three volumes of *Order and History*, was to summarize "[t]he search for the constants of human order in society and history," and specifically for the symbols human beings have used as indices of their experiences, from which experiences, when their symbolization has been properly understood, such constants could be drawn.⁷ The specific procedures of this search point to a "latent metaphysic"⁸ in Voegelin's work, which must necessarily

⁶ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Vol IV: The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 1.

⁷ Eric Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 115.

⁸ The phrase is from Sheldon Wolin, who uses it to indicate the often implicit, extensive nature of the political-theoretical claims that political philosophers make when trying to make sense of political phenomena. "The concepts that constitute his [the political theorist's] vocabulary are shaped to fit the over-all structure of meanings of his theory. The structure of meanings contains not only political concepts, such as law, authority, and order, but also a subtle blend of philosophical and political ideas, a concealed or latent metaphysic. Every political theory that has aimed at a measure of comprehensiveness has adopted some implicit or explicit propositions about "time," "space," "reality," or "energy." (Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, Exp. ed. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004], 16).

form one basis for a comparison between his efforts and those of the other two philosophers treated in this paper.

The first procedural step in a recognition of equivalences consists in a recognition of the nature of human existence. That existence is historical, in consequence of which a philosopher exploring its nature encounters not an unknown world, “but moves among symbols concerning the truth of existence which represent the experiences of his predecessors.”⁹ The second procedural step is a recognition of—for lack of a better term—the ontological and corresponding epistemological qualities of the reality in which the philosopher finds himself. The experiences and corresponding symbols that the philosopher explores do not exist individually or collectively as objects or an object that can be observed “from the outside,” nor do they individually or collectively even appear in the same manner to everyone who encounters them. The encounter itself occurs in “the time dimension of existence, accessible only through participation in its reality.”¹⁰ The methodological meaning of this claim has been well summarized in the work of Voegelin scholar, Ellis Sandoz:

The principle of participation is central to noetic science. It forms the existential basis of man’s self-understanding insofar as from earliest times onward men are aware of participating in a structured reality of which they are but a part, one ontologically articulated by the symbolisms of man, God, world, and society – the primordial quaternarian structure of being reflected in the earliest cosmological myths. Participation forms, therefore, as both the essence of the knower and the knowable and the inevitable perspective of the inquiry into reality. There is no Archimedean point outside of reality- as-participation available to men. Accordingly, it supplants the subject-object categories of cognition and ontology.¹¹

One aspect of this procedural step should immediately alert us to a problem, namely that our example of paleontology and evolutionary biology was defective in once crucial respect: unlike the fossil record, “participation” is not an object of study, but begins first and foremost as an experience of consciousness in each individual human

⁹ Voegelin, “Equivalences,” 116.

¹⁰ Voegelin, “Equivalences,” 116.

¹¹ Ellis Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction*, Second Edition (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 204.

being. That experience is then symbolized in the expression, “participation.” The “structure” of that participation is open to investigation, but it does not appear to us in the manner of the morphological characteristics of various species of living beings. Rather, it appears to us as a structural element of our very existence. The validity of this conclusion is demonstrated both in our immediate, philosophical analysis of our own experience of participation and also in our discovery of parallel symbolizations of this element of human experience in other accounts, be they philosophical, literary, poetic, mythological, theological, or artistic.

The third procedural step, arising immediately out of the second, consists in a recognition that “truth of existence” is not propositional, but symbolic. The “field of symbols” representing the truth of existence as it has been experienced in time and over time is not a field of objective propositional statements concerning the nature of existence. The truth of existence cannot be expressed dogmatically, and it is not accessible to dogmatic explication.¹² Rather, it is expressed through indices of experience, namely symbols, be they —again— linguistic, of the plastic or performing arts, and so on. Here again, we should note, we see a break in the parallel to the conceptual problems of the natural sciences, in which the study is of an *object*, not of a participatory experience.¹³

Finally, one must understand the basis for the comparing and contrasting of symbols. While experiences are not objects, symbolisms, in one manner of speaking, are. That is to say, symbols can be studied and compared and their sources of similarities and differences explored. “If experiences of transcendence occur, they require certain symbolisms for their adequate expression; hence, wherever they occur they will result in the creation of similar symbolisms.”¹⁴ Underlying the ability to understand the symbolism

¹² Voegelin, “Equivalences,” 116-7.

¹³ As Rosen shows, however, and as I will review presently, this “break” does relieve the natural sciences from the need for a coherent [metaphysically attuned] account of their truth claims (*Ancients and Moderns*, 160-174).

¹⁴ Eric Voegelin, “What is History?” in Thomas Holweck and Paul Caringella, *What is History” and Other Late Unpublished Writings*, Volume 28 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 42.

of another person, moreover, is a commonality of experience. Whether symbols of transcendent experience are independently developed or diffused from one source to other cultures, the question of their intelligibility remains the same: “The decisive point would still be that readiness to receive a symbolism, because such readiness presupposes confirmation of the symbolism as true by the recipient’s own experience.”¹⁵

To begin as I have done here, is, by Voegelin’s account, to begin at the end. An exploration of equivalences must begin with the phenomena that indicate the experiential equivalents —with symbols and symbolisms— not with abstractions and theories. For purposes of a clearer comparison, I begin again at another beginning, reserving Voegelin’s beginning for the end. The philosophical analyses of Gilson and Rosen will serve as the entry points to an examination of Voegelin’s historical findings.

III

Etienne Gilson was both an historian of philosophy and a Thomistic philosopher. Writing rather more in the mode of the former than the latter, he published a series of lectures he had given at Harvard University in the Fall of 1936 as *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* in 1937. Its motivating thesis is that “Unless it may be shown as exhibiting some intrinsic intelligibility, the endless chain of mutually destructive systems that runs from Thales to Karl Marx is less suggestive of hope than of discouragement.”¹⁶ Its principle conclusion, after the examination of three broad historical episodes in the history of philosophy,¹⁷ is that in this endless chain, “strikingly similar movements can be observed” in the course of the history of that chain. Those movements “bring forth

¹⁵ Voegelin, “What is History?” 42.

¹⁶ Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937), vii. The inverse phrase occurs at p. 318.

¹⁷ Gilson refers to these the episodes of philosophical failure as “the mediaeval experiment” (originating with Peter Abailard), “the Cartesian experiment” (originating in the thought of René Descartes and picking up from the “breakdown of mediaeval philosophy” [p. 125]) and “the modern experiment” (originating with Immanuel Kant).

strikingly similar results.”¹⁸ Those similarities are, in Gilson’s estimation—which he seeks to substantiate through three historical “cases”—the result of an intelligible structure of reasoning within which each of these movements take place:

Each particular philosophy is, therefore, a co-ordination of self and mutually limiting principles which defines an individual outlook on the fullness of reality. . . . The philosophical events which have been described in the previous chapters cannot be wholly understood in the sole light of biography, of literary history, or even of the history of the systems in which they can be observed. They point rather to the fact that, in each instance of philosophical thinking, both the philosopher and his particular doctrine are ruled from above by an impersonal necessity.¹⁹

Gilson was neither a mystic or a fideistic deterministic. What, we may then ask, are the characteristics of that necessity from above that he identifies? They are not quite those, unsurprisingly, of Voegelin’s cosmos, since Gilson’s field of inquiry is much more restricted than a history of order, but they are not of an entirely different class, either.

Gilson’s *interpretive* argument is with that form of historicism which states that the philosophical teachings of a particular philosopher are determined by the sociological, political, cultural, and/or economic context in which a philosopher develops his thought.²⁰ One obvious problem with such an argument is that there are usually multiple philosophers living at any one point in time, and they do not all make the same argument. Rather, it seems that the teaching of a philosopher arises out of the first principles that he lays down, and that all philosophers, once such principles are laid down, “no longer think as they wish—they think as they can.”²¹ One guiding thread of Gilson’s argument as he examines the philosophical inquiries of a series of medieval and early modern philosophers is that both a philosophical concept or an assemblage of philosophical concepts has a determinative structure in the sense that they both display a “naked, impersonal necessity of both their contents and their relations.” “The history of these

¹⁸ Gilson, *Unity*, 299.

¹⁹ Gilson, *Unity*, 301.

²⁰ Gilson, *Unity*, 304.

²¹ Gilson, *Unity*, 302; cf. 304. Gilson repeats the phrase in several places.

concepts and of their relationships,” he concludes, “is the history of philosophy itself.”²² “If these two claims are valid, then “the recurrence of similar philosophical attitudes is an intelligible fact, . . . [the] comparative history of philosophy becomes a concrete possibility,” and “the constant recurrence of definite philosophical attitudes should suggest to the mind of its observers the presence of an abstract philosophical necessity.”²³

But just what is this “abstract philosophical necessity”? What kind of an epistemological and experiential claim does Gilson make with this thesis? Gilson’s *philosophical* argument is with those who either misplace or deny altogether the valid place of metaphysics in philosophical inquiry. By metaphysics, Gilson names a specific kind of rational inquiry and a specific place for that rational inquiry with specific competencies that will bring us back to questions concerning the structure of reality. For any in a series of philosophers from antiquity to modernity whom he names, Gilson argues that “in all cases the metaphysician is a man who looks behind and beyond experience for an ultimate ground of all real and possible experience.”²⁴ This search for an ultimate ground is not, for Gilson, a dogmatic search. It is by its very nature—which is to say, but the very nature of human knowing and the ontological structures of the context of human knowing—open-ended and never complete, but it does contain its own principles of order:

By observing the human mind at work, in its failures as well as in its successes, we can experience the intrinsic necessity of the same connections of ideas which pure philosophy can justify by abstract reasoning. Thus understood, the history of philosophy is to the philosopher what his laboratory is to the scientist; it particularly shows how philosophers do not think as they wish, but as they can, for the interrelation of philosophical ideas is just as independent of us as are the laws of the physical world. A man is always free to choose his principles, but when he does he must face their consequences to the bitter end.²⁵

The “bitter end” of the mediaeval tradition of philosophical was thorough-going philosophical skepticism among philosophers and various literary figures and other

²² Gilson, *Unity*, 302.

²³ Gilson, *Unity*, 302, 204.

²⁴ Gilson, *Unity*, 307.

²⁵ Gilson, *Unity*, 120

cultural leaders. That process of philosophical reasoning toward the outcome of skepticism was to repeat itself first in the efforts to overcome such skepticism at the end of the Renaissance with the philosophical efforts of René Descartes and his philosophical successors and again in the Kantian efforts to rescue philosophical thinking from the skepticism of Hume (which could trace an indirect genealogy back to Descartes). In contrast to the skeptical end of mediaeval philosophy, however, “the exact place of philosophical speculation had been clearly defined by St. Thomas Aquinas.” When his successors rejected or neglected his orienting arguments, the logic of that rejection was such that “they were no longer free to keep philosophy from entering upon the road to skepticism.”

The logic to which Gilson directs our attention is not the logic of inquiry that frames the tradition, for example, of political theory.²⁶ Rather, it is a logic of philosophical argument. That logic reflects the structure of our existence insofar as our concepts correspond in greater or lesser degree to its realities, thereby reveal or obscure them, and thereby result in one of a limited number of philosophical outcomes. Gilson concludes his study with several “laws” or regularities of philosophical inquiry that may be inferred from western philosophical experience since antiquity.²⁷ The first regularity is that philosophy is a perennial possibility in human experience, which arises, secondly, from the evident fact that human beings continually recur to the question of ultimate existence and the ground of all being. This recurrence, incidentally, is manifested in the natural sciences, where we observe scientists who begin with empirical phenomena, move to a natural-scientific analysis of them, but then move to a question of their meaning. The final step, while perfectly valid, is not within their competence as empirical scientists.²⁸ Metaphysics, in Gilson’s conception, is “the knowledge gathered by a

²⁶ Cf. Thomas Spragens, Jr., *Understanding Political Theory*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999.

²⁷ Gilson’s emphasis is on the mediaeval and modern periods, but he (he hints strongly that similar patterns are in evidence in the earlier experiences of philosophers as well. (Gilson, *Unity*, 311-12).

²⁸ For an example, see Conway Morris, *Crucible*, 218, 22-223. Richard Dawkins’ widely popular and popularizing *The God Delusion* is a current example. Even his *The Selfish Gene*, in its reductionism, may be guilty of this move to metaphysics. See Conway’s critique, 7-9.

naturally transcendent reason in its search for the first principles, or first causes, of what is given in sensible experience.”²⁹ Human beings are, on this count, metaphysical animals: “Since man is essentially rational, the constant recurrence of metaphysics in the history of human knowledge must have its explanation in the very structure of reason itself,” which is to say that “the reason why man is a metaphysical animal must lie somewhere in the nature of rationality.”³⁰ It is in the nature of metaphysics to aim at “transcending all particular knowledge.” In consequence, metaphysical problems belong to metaphysics, not to other sciences, none of which are “competent either to solve metaphysical problems, or to judge their metaphysical solutions”.³¹

Herein, then, we trace an equivalence. Just as in antiquity the metaphysical search for a unifying principle led to failure, because the search for such a principle led the searchers to identify the ground of being with one of its constituent parts (air, water, fire, etc.) or to reduce “[their] knowledge of the whole to [their] knowledge of one of its parts,” so, too, in the mediaeval and modern eras, the lineages of thought that Gilson traces are episodes, sometimes stretching over several generations of thinkers, in which metaphysical speculation goes awry by means of the self-same errors in thought or misplacements of a unifying principle.³² Being, argues Gilson, is the “first principle of all human knowledge,” and therefore “the first principle of metaphysics.” If that first principle is “either overlooked or misused” by a thinker who is concerned with first principles, that error will lead to a further error in thought, the patterns of which can be identified time and again in the history of philosophy to the present day.³³ It was Gilson’s aim to rescue a particular approach to questions of philosophy with his analysis, namely the non-dogmatic rejection of system-building we find in the metaphysical inquiries of

²⁹ Gilson, *Unity*, 308

³⁰ Gilson, *Unity*, 307-8.

³¹ Gilson, *Unity*, 309-10.

³² Cf. Gilson, *Unity*, 312.

³³ Gilson, *Unity*, 313, 314-16.

Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas.³⁴ It is enough for our purposes here to have identified the underlying finding of that rescue operation, namely that a history of philosophy includes the history of a recurrent pattern of error. Underneath that recurrent pattern is a common structure or logic of philosophical inquiry that perennially determines the results of such inquiry. Gilson's identification of that pattern in history is the evidence.

IV

Alasdair MacIntyre famously argued that in the realm of ethics at least, we in the late modern period are left with a stark choice: Nietzsche or Aristotle.³⁵ That evocation inclines one to pay especially close attention to the latter if one is reading the work of the former. With equal provocation and persuasiveness, Stanley Rosen extends MacIntyre's claim but subtly reverses and in part rejects MacIntyre's dichotomization.³⁶ Consisting of eleven chapters and a Preface, *The Ancients and the Moderns* invites us to consider the "seriousness and difficulty" associated with the "obligation of being a resident of modernity."³⁷ The eleven chapters are in many respects independent essays (some were published elsewhere prior to their inclusion in the volume), and it is surely unwise to

³⁴ Gilson, *Unity*, 317. "Their ambition was not to achieve philosophy once and for all, but to maintain it and to serve it in ours. For us, as for them, the great thing is not to achieve a system of the world as if being could be deduced from thought, but to relate reality, as we know it, to the permanent principles in whose light all the changing problems of science, of ethics and of art have to be solved. A metaphysics of existence cannot be a system wherewith to get rid of philosophy, it is an always open inquiry, whose conclusions are both always the same and always new, because it is conducted under the guidance of immutable principles, which will never exhaust experience, or be themselves exhausted by it."

³⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd Edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 109-120.

³⁶ Stanley Rosen, *The Ancients and the Moderns: Rethinking Modernity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989). Stanley Rosen, *Nihilism: A Philosophical Essay* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969).

³⁷ Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, x.

consider a broad synopsis here. Accordingly, I propose to lay particular emphasis on select pieces of Rosen's extended arguments.³⁸

What does it mean to be a resident of modernity so that it should require from us the virtues or qualities of courage, moderation, and nobility that Rosen enjoins? It requires first and foremost, it seems, that we —some of us— consider carefully what we are doing and the conceptual context in which we are doing it. This consideration —itself the activity of a minority— means to understand the philosophical implications and commitments associated with being a modern in closely articulated contrast to those implications and commitments associated with being a post-Pharaonic “ancient” possessing the requisite virtues to navigate the Socratic dilemma of whether and how to engage in philosophical contemplation and/or political activity.³⁹ Once philosophy emerges as a human possibility, coming onto the historical scene in the twilight of the Pharaohs (who, together with their subjects, formed the civilization that was “antiquity” for the philosophically, comically, and tragically minded Greeks), it is no longer possible to crawl back into the womb of the Egyptian cosmos or any other. Having superseded the cosmic myth, philosophy now articulates the human condition and its various possibilities. In this sense, at the very last, Rosen is in agreement with Voegelin's assessment of the irreversibility of so-called “leaps in being,” the last of which has been the theoretical articulations of pre-theoretical, mythological experiences of human consciousness and existence.⁴⁰

The imaginary possibility of “return” means that to be modern is to carry within oneself the thought, beliefs, discoveries, and existential orientations of the ancients, even if those mappings have been modified, amplified, or even rejected. Such negation is

³⁸ I must set aside, unfortunately, an argument that repeats, in a technically more elaborate manner, Gilson's defense of metaphysics against its substitution by logic in the mediaeval and modern periods. (Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 160-174).

³⁹ (Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 14)

⁴⁰ “Except for those who wish to return, not to Burkean England or Periclean Athens but to pharaonic Egypt, there is as a matter of moral certitude only one direction in which to move.” (Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 21). For Voegelin's best summary of the meaning and philosophical implications of “leap in being,” see Eric Voegelin, *Order and History II: The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 1-24.

necessarily a part of whatever affirmation we make as moderns. Between the philosophically ancients and our modern selves, there appears to be, then, a “quarrel,” the outlines of which are wont to be obscured in the details of the quarrel and in the defenses at times mounted by the advocates for either side. So, at least, according to Rosen’s acute analysis. It might be best, however, to “redefine” this so-called quarrel as “schizophrenia.” That is to say, once more, that we carry in ourselves at all times both the past as an evocation and the future as that which is imagined in hope.⁴¹ The schizophrenia associated with this ensemble is only possible if we truly are able, in some (as-yet undefined) meaningful fashion, to carry both past and future within us in the present. To do so requires some principle of unity:

The difference between the ancients and the moderns is undeniable at the historical level. But this difference has no bearing upon the possibility of inner structural identity, especially if that structure, commonly known as human nature, is itself an identity of identity and difference.⁴²

There are a variety of ways in which that structure reveals itself. One way is in a set of philosophical problems that seem perennial in their occurrence, importance, intractability, and insolubility. Among these is nihilism.

Modern nihilism, argues Rosen, is a phenomenon that begins in philosophy, but manifests itself also in political and social practice. It is, moreover, in fact and simply, a “contingent historical event.” Nihilism as a general problem and not merely a contemporary appearance in a specific philosophical mode, is a perennial possibility:

The shape of contemporary history is itself a consequence of the same forces which gave rise to contemporary epistemology and ontology. . . . the principle engine of history is man’s conception of the nature of reason, more specifically, of the relation between reason and the good. . . . [and] the transformed conception of this relation, characteristic of the beginnings of the modern revolt against antiquity, underlies the emergence of nihilism in our time.⁴³

⁴¹ Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 1-2. Rosen does not speak of hope, but Plato, whom he invokes *passim*, did, and Rosen rejects despair. (*Ancients and Moderns*, 15).

⁴² Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 2. Rosen later refers to this possibility of intelligibly carrying antiquity and modernity within ourselves at the same time as a “distinction between human nature and its perspectival modification by historical contingency” (p. 11)

⁴³ Rosen, *Nihilism*, 136. See also Michael Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Nihilism and its pernicious political outcomes are a perennial possibility, not a modern fact alone. The argument for this conclusion resides in an extended demonstration that the logic of philosophical argument is a product of human nature in nature at any time and at all times, and not a product of historical contingencies.

If it is the case, under those circumstances and as Rosen claims, that “nihilism has its origins in the nature of man, and not in contingent historical events,” and if it is the case that “in one version or another, [nihilism] may be found in antiquity at various crucial periods,” even if not “in the precise form it takes today,” then “nihilism is a philosophical problem, not merely a historical phenomenon.”⁴⁴ Rosen thereby asserts the primacy of constancy over change in human consciousness and in human nature. It is in that constancy that we carry past and future together in the present. Accordingly, history itself “is a philosophical problem,” since it is contingent (historical) episodes of philosophical argument that have given rise to a nihilism that is perennially possible. To look for a solution to the problem of modern nihilism in one or another of these episodes would be, for Rosen, to “surrender to the very forces which have produced modern nihilism.”⁴⁵ To put it another way, Rosen “regard[s] the fundamental teaching of Plato as in no sense peculiar to his own time and place.” Rather, Plato’s intelligibility to modern ears, let alone the potential help to contemporary difficulties we may find in his philosophical inquiries, is dependent on an underlying continuity between Plato’s concerns, if not to say Plato’s human nature, and ours. That is not, of course, equivalent to denying that Plato’s specific political or social solutions with regard to specific political or social problems are functions of a specific time and space.⁴⁶

An equally important question from the perspective of political philosophy, with equally episodic, contingent answers, is the question of the relation between reason and the good. Are human the passions the rulers of reason (as in the philosophical teachings

⁴⁴ Rosen, *Nihilism*, 137.

⁴⁵ Rosen, *Nihilism*, 137.

⁴⁶ Rosen, *Nihilism*, 138. “. . . Plato actually furnishes us with a defense against the emergence of nihilism. . . . The Platonic conception of reason is a defense against the emergence of nihilism, but not an infallible preventive or cure. Nihilism is a fundamental danger of human existence.” (194).

of Plato and Aristotle), or can reason rule the passions in some moderate (reasonable and noble) and not tyrannical (base) manner?⁴⁷ On this register, Rosen's specific purpose in *Ancients and Moderns*, notwithstanding his moderate defense of some version of Platonism in both epistemology and political ethics, is to defend a particular version of Enlightenment modernity (a "modified or moderate enlightenment") against a group of "conservatives" who defend antiquity against modernity by recourse to ancient models of nobility over against modern vulgarity or baseness. In Rosen's view, their effort fails because they fail properly to understand the radical philosophical defense of nobility in antiquity and they fail, at the same time, to appreciate the virtues of enlightenment. It may be as well that these virtues themselves require a defense against their enlightenment defenders: Rosen therefore aims to defend a particular version of enlightenment against ideological arguments on both sides. To do so, he recurs to philosophers of antiquity and of modernity alike:

The Socratic dilemma is how to balance the madness of philosophy with the sobriety of politics. But this is exactly the modern dilemma. We should not allow ourselves to be deluded by the fact that this dilemma takes on a different appearance in different historical ages."

On the other hand, we cannot ignore these differences. Changed circumstances lead to new strategies of action. Revolutions may advance in stages. Thus the inner logic of philosophy may provide a continuity between antiquity and modernity that presents itself as historical opposition."⁴⁸

It seems more than a little presumptuous to summarize here in a persuasive manner a technical argument concerning this inner logic of philosophy that spans several of Rosen's works. Nevertheless, the gist of his argument in *Ancients and Moderns* is this. The constancy of human nature is constituted by a group of poles or polarities revealed in philosophical analysis.⁴⁹ Being and nothingness, or being and the absolute nothing, difference and identity, or difference and unity, or multiplicity and unity are among those

⁴⁷ Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 11-17. Cf. Eric Voegelin, "Autobiographical Statement at Age Eighty-Two," in William Petropoulos and Gilbert Weiss, eds., *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1939-1985*, vol 33 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 437.

⁴⁸ Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 14.

⁴⁹ I use Voegelinian language here to summarize Rosen's argument. It does not seem tendentious to do so.

poles. These polarities serve for Rosen, following Plato and as they do for Voegelin, as indices, not objects.⁵⁰ Their existence or —better— their necessary presence, is determined in part by the observable consequences of ignoring that presence. Thus, if we ignore the being—nothingness polarity, for example, we inevitably end up with a philosophy that is reducible to either silence or chatter.⁵¹ If we ignore difference and unity, we end up with chaos.⁵² If we reduce the aporiai of traditional metaphysics to problems of mathematical expression or of grammar, as in the examples of Gilson, we end up, yet again, with chaos, chatter, or silence. This result comes about, because such reductions relax the tensions of the aporiai that are the foundations of metaphysical questioning, and, implicitly, the foundations of human reasoning.

To my mind, the results of the modern revolution are much worse than those of traditional metaphysics with respect to one crucial point. In each of its versions, the world of traditional metaphysics is defined by fundamental aporiai. But the world of post-traditional postmetaphysics is defined, if anything, but an absence of foundations, and hence a fortiori by an absence of fundamental aporiai. The postmodern world is not a world at all, but a chaos.⁵³

⁵⁰ “I have written this chapter not with the intention to hypostatize Being and nothing but rather in defense of the thesis that, whereas Hegel is correct to say that everything is a mixture of Being and nothing, he is wrong to assert that there is a complete conceptual explanation of this mixture. I myself am a partisan of the thesis that we understand Being and nothing but that we cannot explain them in a rigorous, consistent, noncircular manner. If I am accused of succumbing to rhapsodic speculations, I can only say that, whether my critics are listening or not, the music plays on.” (Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 174).

⁵¹ “The process I have just summarily described is that in which intellectual perception is replaced by, or dissolved into, language. In classical terminology, *noesis* is assimilated into *dianoia* and *logismos*. . . . Heidegger’s revision of Husserlian phenomenology amounts to an admission of the impossibility of a science of intuition or of *Sinn*. However, instead of retaining the Platonic dualism or the Aristotelian assertion of its overcoming, Heidegger assimilates essences, forms, and meanings into language, which is thus itself transformed from scientific ontology to poetic *Andenken*, a discursive substitute for Platonic anamnesis. The result, oddly enough, is the same in both ontological and the postontological periods: the triumph of interpretation (*Auslegung*) over theory (*theoria*).” (Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 162, 164). Cf. Rosen, *Nihilism*, 232-5.

⁵² “The fact is that a pure or extreme version of the paradigm of enlightenment —when articulated entirely or largely in terms of scientific progress, the mathematization of human experience, and, entirely inconsistently with these, the extreme emphasis on fairness or egalitarianism and freedom from all forms of domination— leads directly to chaos.” (Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 15).

⁵³ Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 165.

That chaos is not alleviated by “the modern tendency to replace metaphysical aporiai with technical artifacts.”⁵⁴

One example of such an *aporia* in metaphysical thought and the consequences of rejecting it may be found in the “altogether not” or *nihil absolutum* that is implied in all acts (including speech acts) of negation. Rosen shows that a concept of absolute negation is implied in the ability to say “not *x*” concerning a condition or quality. He shows, similarly, that the presence in the human mind of such a concept is a philosophical *aporia*, known since Plato, because “if philosophy is ‘giving an explanation,’ or replacing opinion with knowledge, and if no explanation can be given of what is not, philosophy cannot tolerate that what is not either participates in or gives shape or visibility to what is.”⁵⁵ Because of this tension, “*not* in its various manifestations within western philosophy is thus explained regularly in terms of Being or existence; correlatively, the *nihil absolutum*, ostensibly replaced by a finite nothing assimilated to or explained by something, continues to lurk unexplained in the negative dimension of the proffered technical construction.” The damage from this move is, at one level, limited: “The work of analytical thinking, and in particular of logic and mathematics, continues to progress without visible harm from this metaphysical failure.”⁵⁶

At another level, however, the damage is profound. This failure of metaphysics is not equivalent to a rejection of metaphysics, since “metaphysics cannot be overcome, because it is the thinking of insoluble problems.”⁵⁷ Instead, as Rosen shows, an understanding of nothing is required for even the most trivial instances of logical argument. But the truth or validity of an understanding of nothing cannot be demonstrated in technical logic: it appears to be pre-discursive. To reject the *aporia* for what it is—an *aporia*—is to render incoherent or mute (which amounts to the same thing) the underlying principles of our technical, mathematical, or logical manners of

⁵⁴ Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 165.

⁵⁵ Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 167.

⁵⁶ Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 167.

⁵⁷ Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 167.

expressing what we hold to be valid claims about existence. Accordingly, “beneath the neutrality of logic lurk all the traditional problems of metaphysics.”⁵⁸ To ignore them is to achieve either unintelligibility or a permanent begging of the question, which amounts to the same thing:

But the intelligibility of this structure, and so the philosophical significance of the entire apparatus of mathematical logic, depends, as we have already seen, upon the antecedent intelligibility of Being and, more particularly, of nothing. What counts as necessary, contingent, and possible is dependent upon metaphysical considerations that are silently imported into the technical apparatus, which is then used to enforce a quite different technical or precise (as opposed to rhapsodic) understanding of these and related concepts.⁵⁹

Recognizing rather than ignoring or shoving under the rug the persistent *aporiai* that underlie these “technical or precise” manners of understanding is an important means of denying them an authority that can all-too easily lead to tyranny when these modes of understanding are deployed in an absolutist manner in the political realm.⁶⁰

V

We return to Voegelin’s treatment of equivalences, but this time to an exemplar from which to begin the considerations. “The Dispute of the Man who Considers Suicide, with His Soul,” is a second millennium B.C. Egyptian poem that is well-known to Voegelin scholars. Analyses of this poem appear four times in close temporal proximity

⁵⁸ Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 170.

⁵⁹ Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 172. A rhapsodic understanding, if it ignores the *aporiai*, is, of course, equally untenable: “Nietzsche characteristically overlooks the fact that the eternal return of the same depends upon the nonillusory or irreducible presence of unity and hence of mathematical or formal structure in each returning element. Without this, sameness would dissolve into chaos. Nietzsche is therefore wrong to maintain that logic is a human product or complete fiction. When Nietzsche says that there is no genuine conceptualization in mathematics, as we ‘conceive’ only where we understand motives, this mistake is of the greatest importance. The mathematical element of Platonism cannot be reduced to the poetical element of Nietzsche’s own teaching. And this is a mistake that Nietzsche has transmitted to his progeny. The Ariadne-thread is also the medium of the nihilism from which it seeks to rescue us.” (Rosen, *Ancients and Moderns*, 221).

⁶⁰ Cf. Thomas A. Spragens, Jr., *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).

in Voegelin's corpus. The first occurs in *Israel and Revelation*, the first volume of *Order and History*. The second instance is found in "The Drama of Humanity," which Voegelin delivered as the Candler Lectures at Emory University in 1967. The third and fourth occur in "Immortality and Symbol," originally published in 1968.⁶¹ In each of these four instances, Voegelin distinctly and deliberately draws out parallels between the articulated experiences of the Egyptian poet and his near-contemporaries, between the poet and other writers of antiquity, and between the poet and modern writers.

The poem is a reflection on the social breakdown of Egyptian society during what is called the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2181-2055 B.C.). Central Pharaonic rule had disintegrated, so that two competing power bases, one in the north and one in the south, vied for supremacy amongst a number of smaller principalities. Archaeological evidence indicates widespread institutional disintegration, resulting in general economic and social hardship.⁶² In this context, a man contemplates suicide, arguing with his soul concerning the moral implications of doing so. Finding neither comfort nor persuasive arguments in the remonstrances of his soul, he prepares to proceed with his original intent. The poem is a carefully constructed series of discourses and counterarguments, with wonderfully descriptive narrations of the socio-political conditions that provoke the discourse and the moral considerations it entails.⁶³

Given the poet's "home" in the Egyptian cosmos, the details and grand outlines of which alike cannot help but seem to us deeply foreign, not to say exotic or even

⁶¹ Voegelin, *Order and History: Vol 1: Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 98-101; Eric Voegelin, "The Drama of Humanity" in William Petropoulos and Gilbert Weiss, eds., *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1939-1985*, vol 33 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 194-96; Voegelin, "Immortality," 58-68, 91-93.

⁶² For descriptions of the economic, social, and political difficulties of the period, see Sir Alan Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 109-20; and James Henry Breasted, *A History of Egypt* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), 143-52.

⁶³ The complete poem, translated by John A. Wilson, is found in James B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient and Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 405-408. To my knowledge, Wilson's rendering remains the only available translation of the poem.

outlandish, what equivalences to our own experiences can one possibly detect in his complaint? Consider the following tristich from the poem:

To whom can I speak today?
One's fellows are evil;
The friends of today do not love.

To whom can I speak today?
Faces have disappeared
Every man has a face downcast toward his fellows.

To whom can I speak today?
There is no one contented of heart.
The man with whom one went no longer exists.

On the one hand, we recognize in this complaint the experience of “an acute suffering from alienation” and the emotional response of “the desire to preserve existence in truth against the pressure to conform to a deficient mode of existence.” That recognition requires little imagination to actualize, residing as it does —or so it appears— in a common humanity across space and time. Indeed, it seems to me that the very foreignness of the Egyptian cosmos makes these human commonalities all the more compelling. We can easily imagine ourselves in similar circumstances.

On the other hand, the cosmos of the poet is indeed foreign. As we continue in the poem, we modern readers note immediately that the poet is unable to imagine what we now find impossible to see otherwise: a conceptual “escape” from the cosmos. His considerations and dispute are conducted entirely within the cosmic order of gods in the “upper” region of the cosmos whose divine substance of order —*maat*— is transmitted through Pharaoh into Egyptian society in the “lower” region of the cosmos. If that transmission has broken down, with the resultant social ills seen in the cited passage, that fault can only be repaired, it seems, by having the man report the breakdown to the gods. Hence the need to commit suicide so that his soul may be freed to take the required journey to the Beyond to conduct the divine interview.

The man, in Voegelin’s language, lives in a “compact” reality in which the various tensions and forces of human consciousness of existence have not yet been further

differentiated, as they would be, for example, in Greek philosophical articulations and Christian theological ones (to name only two). Accordingly, the poet has an experience of a cosmos, its time and its duration, an experience of intracosmic gods, and an experience of a myth that tells, in its characters and its plot, a (cosmic) truth about human existence.⁶⁴ When this “primary experience of cosmic reality” is analytically disaggregated⁶⁵ into its constituent conceptual but experienced parts, a new, counter-matching and extra-cosmic set of symbols emerge. Cosmic time is “polarized” into “the time and the timeless” of human existential tension. The intracosmic gods are replaced by a world-transcendent God. The language of the cosmic myth is replaced by “the language of noetic and spiritual life.”⁶⁶ What to make of these two modes of expression? Voegelin’s argument is that “the two experiences” —the one belonging to the Egyptian poet and the other belonging, for example, to a Greek philosopher such as Plato— “do not pertain to different realities but to the same reality in different modes.” Even more sharply, “the experience of cosmic reality includes in its compactness the existential tension; and the differentiated consciousness of existence has no reality without the cosmos in which it occurs.” Accordingly, “compact symbolisms . . . may become obsolete in the light of new insights, but the reality they express does not cease to be real for that reason.”⁶⁷

From these beginnings of similarity in experience, Voegelin insists on a further level of abstraction and equivalence. If the differentiated consciousness of existence requires an order, on the basis of which the truth of its experiences are “secured,” and if that order gave rise in the first place to less differentiated but no less “truthful” experiences, then we can look for commonalities at a higher level of generalization. Thus, the primary experience of the cosmos expressed in the Egyptian poem concerning disputes about suicide and a philosopher’s examination of the meaning of participation in the cosmos both lead to intimations of immortality. In the one case, that intimation is

⁶⁴ Voegelin, “Immortality,” 92.

⁶⁵ I recognized the mild redundancy of the phrase.

⁶⁶ Voegelin, “Immortality,” 92.

⁶⁷ Voegelin, “Immortality,” 93.

expressed in cosmic symbols such as the soul's departure to the realm of the gods. In the other, it is expressed as a human being being "conscious of his consciousness as both the site and the sensorium of participation in the divine ground."⁶⁸ "Intimation" is perhaps a bad choice of words: that intimation is made articulate by philosopher and poet alike, albeit in very different ways. Accordingly, it is not merely a self-authenticating instance of "internal" thoughts or feelings: it is shared with others in symbolizations that those others can take up for their own inasmuch and insofar as they share the experiences out of which the intimation arises.

Immortality is, furthermore, not simply self-standing symbol, but a constituent in a complex of symbols, all of which can vary from time to time and place to place. One reason Voegelin insists so strongly on paying attention to the *experiences* that underlie the appearance of any symbols is that the symbols themselves may be equivalent, and even one or more aspects of their engendering experiences, without the entire apparatus being therefore equivalent. For an example, consider the problem of alienation, which we see in the experience of the Egyptian poet. We also find alienation in the symbolic complexes of gnosticism, Marxism, stoicism, and cynicism, to name only four. In each case, alienation arises out of somewhat different orientations, which results in quite different outcomes: a contemplation of suicide in one case, a resolution to abandon the public realm and mind one's own business in another, and a decisive move toward world-historical revolution in a third.⁶⁹ "The relations between the complex and its variants, as well as the relations between the variants, are problems in the logics of experience and symbolization, too intricate to be suitable for treatment" Voegelin found, even in an extended essay.⁷⁰ It would have to suffice, he concluded,

"to state that the variants of the complex are not individuals of a species, but historical variants in a technical senses: they have a recognizable pattern in common because they all express the tension of existence between time and the timeless; and they are variants of the pattern because they express modalities of the tension. The flow of presence

⁶⁸ Voegelin, "Immortality," 90.

⁶⁹ Cf. Voegelin, "Immortality," 82-86.

⁷⁰ Voegelin, "Immortality," 81.

with its changing modalities of experience is the common source of both the single variants and their sequence.”⁷¹

That which provides the stable ground for identity amongst difference, unity in diversity, and constancy amongst change is nothing more solid than the “flow of presence” in which we must “immerse ourselves” . . . “in order to recover the meaning” of whatever complex arises in the articulation/symbolization of experience.⁷² The complex of symbols that Voegelin identified in the “Dispute” and at which we have only hinted here is quite extensive; Voegelin located corollaries or historical variants in several traditions. Those variants “do not actualize the several groups all in the same manner or with the same relative weight.” Alienation, to repeat, can lead to suicide, resignation, and revolution, and each of these responses leads, in turn, to the development of its own symbolic complex in varying ways in various historical episodes, even while the underlying commonality of motivation and the underlying commonality of response remains discernible. The flow of presence, which is to say, consciousness of our existence in time and space, structured by a constant set of poles that include the aporetic “truths” of metaphysics, is the constancy that underlies our assurance of commonality. This flow and the truths that emerge from it are not a possession under our control, but “a consciousness of existential tension” that can atrophy under the pressure of dogmatization, or that can suffer destruction at the hands of a systematization aimed at taking it into possessive control of human beings. The latter is an operation of magic, since those who would seek to control in from without it have their existence within it.⁷³

V

What, then, to say about the structure of existence in Professor Leidhold’s thesis? Does that structure change, and if so, how, and how do we know? The thesis would have to be laid out in more detail for us to be sure we are not engaging with a straw man. At a

⁷¹ Voegelin, “Immortality,” 81.

⁷² Voegelin, “Immortality,” 80.

⁷³ Voegelin, “Immortality,” 89.

minimum, however, we can offer a cautionary comment. The structure of existence is no object of cognition for Gilson, Rosen, and Voegelin alike. For Gilson, the aporiai of metaphysical inquiry establish for us the limits of rational analysis, as they do for Rosen. Gilson traces three historical episodes of philosophical inquiry in which those limits are discovered to the consternation and creative but flawed engagement of philosophers who make the error of misunderstanding the nature of the aporiai. What remains constant for Gilson is, in part, the inescapable open-endedness of philosophical inquiry and the ineluctable irreducibility of such inquiry to some form of technical (logical, scientific, or mathematical, for example) mastery. Reality is not an object conceptually to be conquered in Gilson's recounting of philosophical experience, but a presence to be explored.

So, too, in Rosen's more technically proficient analysis of modern philosophical and political-philosophical problems. The aporetic nature of philosophical inquiry leads not to despair, but to wisdom. That wisdom understands that as parts of a whole, we humans can never know that whole absolutely. Hegel's systematization as a means to grasp the entirety of reality as it is given to us was profoundly mistaken, the many insights gained in the attempt notwithstanding. Similarly, attempts to reduce wisdom either to technical mastery or rhapsodic gestures and utterances while setting aside the metaphysical aporiai that appear in every philosophical account of such attempts leads only to incoherence and/or silence.

None of these findings will be a surprise to those who have read Voegelin closely. They validate in a metaphysical and straightforwardly philosophical register the findings concerning symbolization and experience that Voegelin emphasizes in perhaps a more historical measure. Both, with equivalent symbols, return us to the "flow of presence" in which we must stand to hold to our bearings, and which provides the ineluctable structure of our existence. In the midst of contingency and change, the experiences of consciousness in time and space retain a trans-temporal constancy. That constancy is indicated in the ability of the symbolizations of those experiences—from paleolithic cave paintings to modern abstract frescoes, from an Egyptian poem of the First Intermediate

Period to the epics of Homer to the poetry of T. S. Eliot, from a drum ceremony to the piano sonatas of Beethoven— to unfold their meaning to us as we stand in the flow.