

Cosmos and the “Leap in Being” in Voegelin’s Philosophy

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For all things outside the physical world language can be employed
only as a sort of adumbration, but never with even approximate exactitude,
since in accordance with the physical world it treats only of possession and its connotations.

Franz Kafka, *Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope, and the True Way*
Aphorism 55

1. Introduction

Of the key terms to be found in *Order and History* signifying certain epochal changes in humanity’s participation in the process of reality, the most prominent and perhaps most misunderstood one is the “leap in being.” In the context of the highly theoretical prose of Voegelin’s *magnum opus*, the “leap in being” stands out as a term obviously intended to illuminate something that seems to have resisted the author’s analysis, which in his own words is supposed to “follow empirically the patterns of meaning as they revealed themselves in the self-interpretations of persons and societies in history.”^[1] In my paper I want, therefore, to take a closer look at the term “leap in being” and pose the question if there is indeed a break in Voegelin’s hermeneutical effort of translating “the meaning of self-interpretation into the language of rational discourse.”^[2] (Gebhardt, 2008, 12) And if it should turn out that the “leap in being” does in fact signify such a break, the question will have to be asked what the reason for this break may be, that is, whether it signifies a possible defect in Voegelin’s hermeneutical analysis or whether it points to an “ontological fissure,” as I would provisionally call it, that may be suggested by the term “leap in being” itself.

Although commentators on Voegelin’s work make frequent reference to the “leap in being,” there appears to be a reluctance to go beyond a definition of the term, a reluctance that extends even to the editors’ introductions of the first two volumes of *Order and History* in the *Collected Works*. Yet already in 1956, shortly after the publication of *Israel and Revelation*, Alfred Schütz told his friend Voegelin in a letter: “There are many points that I would like to question you about. I would like to hear more about the ‘leap in being,’” and again in June 1957: “I have difficulties with the concepts of ‘compactness’ and ‘differentiation’; I would like to hear more about the theory of the ‘leap in being,’ especially about the relationship of this concept with ‘attunement,’ and to the various forms of Metastasis – all this in connection with the extremely exciting theory of time that you have developed.”^[3] The connection made by Schütz regarding these key concepts and Voegelin’s “exciting theory of time” is once again proof of this “silent partner’s philosophical perspicacity, as my subsequent analysis will show. Regrettably, Voegelin’s responses to these questions seem to have been given in personal conversations with Schütz. The only one to take the bull by the horns was Gregor Sebba who devoted an entire segment of his seminal article “Prelude and Variations on the Theme of Eric Voegelin” to a critical discussion of the “leap in being.”^[4] Sebba had an eye for problems that are often easily overlooked by the interpreters of a thinker’s “message,” something that is especially vexing in the case of Voegelin’s work, and he pointed out that the “leap” appeared to him to be an interesting parallel to

the “quantum leap” of twentieth century physics. In physics, the term “quantum leap” is usually defined as “a change of an electron within an atom from one energy state to the next. This is a discontinuous change in which the electron goes from one energy level to another without passing through any intermediate levels.” Voegelin, who had already told Ellis Sandoz in the conversations which were to become the *Autobiographical Reflections* that he took the term from Kierkegaard – I will discuss this in detail in the main part of my paper – did not give much credit to the parallel, opposed as he was in principle to metaphorical comparisons between disparate ontological areas. Sebba, for his part, was quite content with this lack of auctorial endorsement, since his primary focus was on the fact that the “leap in being” signifies discontinuity, that is, the absence of a “gradual transition from level to level.”^[5] But even Sebba only touches on this critical aspect of the leap when he argues that “in modern Western historiography and scholarship the three Western breaks (Israel, Hellas, and Christianity; TAH) did not go unobserved, but too many interpretations gradualize them into ‘transitions’ from polytheism to monotheism, from myth or religion to philosophy or thought, etc., without recognizing the ‘transitions’ as epoch-making breaks.”^[6] This point is precisely the crux of Voegelin’s “discovery”, as Sebba calls it, and it must be moved to the center of any serious analysis of the meaning of the “leap in being,” together with the question whether the leap was really a “discovery,” as Sebba claims, or whether Voegelin’s term is itself to be understood as a further “differentiation” of consciousness.^[7] A discussion of the “leap in being,” therefore, must be conducted in full recognition of the possibility that the break in the continuity of man’s existence in time is a sudden fusion of being and consciousness in the sense that the structure of reality has undergone a change that cannot be described in the symbolic language of what Voegelin calls the “primary experience of the cosmos” but requires an entirely new symbolic language that may even have to go beyond the hermeneutic principle as I have presented it earlier in Jürgen Gebhardt’s formulation. Here lies the reason for my revisiting a question that had for all practical purposes been answered. Why not be content with the symbolic pair of “compactness and differentiation,” why not accept the terminology of the “breakthroughs,” complete or incomplete, as the case may be, and why try to breathe new life into a term that Voegelin himself seems to have favored less and less, after having employed it in the first two volumes of *Order and History*? There, Voegelin’s concern had been with the unique moments when concrete human beings experienced something that disrupted the continuity of their cosmic consubstantiality, something that was not *of* the cosmos, while in his later work he increasingly focused on the process of history as a “movement of reality from the apeirontic depth to man” and the “countermovement of creative organization from the divine height down, with the Metaxy of man’s consciousness as the site where the movement of the Whole becomes luminous for its eschatological direction,”^[8] as formulated in the conclusion to *The Ecumenic Age*.

2. Cosmos and Consciousness

I will begin this section with a point of clarification. This discussion of the “leap in being” is not intended as an exegesis of a philosophical or theological *topos* that will result in a precise definition of its meaning, but as an interpretative approximation of the field of experiences in which this term becomes endowed with meaning. So far, I have even refrained from calling the “leap in being” either a “symbol” or a “concept,” to say nothing of such labels as “idea” or “conception.” I prefer the image of “encircling” the meaning of the “leap in being” by making the narrower and wider context in which Voegelin uses the term present. Consequently, we must begin with the *Introduction to Israel and Revelation*, which, apart from being one of Voegelin’s literary masterpieces, is his quintessential statement on the nature of the cosmic order of reality, as is indicated by the title “The Symbolization of Order.” Let us recall the key elements of this symbolization of the cosmic order of reality. “Man, in his

existence, participates in being,” but this participation is not to be misunderstood as a statement about a connection between two objects, man and being. “There is, rather” Voegelin clarifies, “a ‘something’, a part of being, capable of experiencing itself as such, and furthermore capable of using language and calling this experiencing consciousness by the name of ‘man.’”^[9] Voegelin calls this an act of “evocation,” which, fundamental as it is, “is not itself an act of cognition.” It is important to examine this particular part of Voegelin’s argument regarding the primary experience and man’s knowledge of the cosmos and himself as a partner in the cosmos for the simple reason that it represents the recognition of the “ground of being” as “beyond” the cosmos, but not necessarily beyond the experiencing consciousness. Voegelin’s assertion that the “something” is capable of experiencing itself as part of being and thus differentiates itself from the other parts of being as the “man-thing,” as I would call it, is an act of *evocation* and not of *cognition* invites some critical reflection. Granted, in the context in which Voegelin makes this assertion, the emphasis is on the existential Socratic ignorance, and the point Voegelin is making is that even by differentiating himself from the whole of the “community of being,” man has not gained any essential knowledge about himself, since “knowledge of the whole...is precluded by the identity of the knower with the partner, and ignorance of the whole precludes essential knowledge of the part.”^[10] If one, however, shifted the emphasis from man’s essential ignorance to his imaginative exploration of the reality of which he is part, that is, the various strata of inorganic matter, plant life, animals, other human societies, one might come to the conclusion that, going back to Paleolithic and Neolithic, since “prehistory” man has searched for a common bond with the other partners in being and, as in the case of Shamanism, discovered a common spirit with animals and has consequently been able to take the next step of symbolic abstraction, the idea of a shared invisible reality that was to become accessible to the common sensorium, the “soul.” In other words, the knowledge that man imaginatively “creates” within the cosmos embracing him and everything else is a millennial process that stretches from the human beginnings into an eschatological future in the mode of presence. The primary experience is the matrix of human participation in reality. Voegelin clearly understood this at the time of composing the first three volumes of *Order and History*, but I would argue that in those earlier parts of his work he shifted the emphasis toward the eschatological, because he was concerned with the epochal event of the creation of history more than with the gradualism of man’s exploration of reality, as I had already intimated in the introductory part of this paper.

It needs to be understood that the description Voegelin gives of the primary experience of the cosmos in volumes I and II of *Order and History*, as well as the theoretical analysis given in the chapter “Historiogenesis” of volume IV, primarily addresses its later civilizational manifestations in Mesopotamia and Egypt, a conscious limitation that reflects Voegelin’s original hermeneutical methodology of relying primarily on written evidence for the self-interpretation of the individuals and societies. Thus, the cosmological societies whose symbolic orders Voegelin initially investigated are either part of the “axial age” or immediately precede it.^[11] As we know, Voegelin’s later research led him into the direction of non-literate symbolizations of the cosmos and its participating partners and an understanding that the term “cosmological” required some conceptual refinement, for, as he wrote to Marie König: “This term can still be used, but it is impossible to separate the cosmological from the imperial elements.”^[12] In the planned book *The Drama of Humanity*, that some refer to as “Volume Zero,” Voegelin intended to treat this difference in a systematic form. “In a further work that I am now working on I want to include a section on prehistory in which the specific difference between the symbols in their prehistoric form and the form in which they appear in the imperial civilizations is made clear.”^[13] What Voegelin believed to have found in his studies of Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic societies and research done by Marie König, Carl Hentze for prehistoric China, and Giorgio di Santillana and Hertha von Dechend’s *Hamlet’s Mill*, he formulated succinctly in a sentence addressed to

Jürgen Gebhardt: “When you look at a work like the new one by de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, *Hamlet’s Mill*, the permanence of the structure of human consciousness is now secure at least as far as the beginning of the Neolithic age, so that all the problems of evolution are now reinterpreted into genuine historical problems of differentiation of the compact consciousness.”^[14]

I do not think I am overstating the case when I call this statement one of the key formulations of Voegelin’s theory of consciousness, which has tremendous implications for anyone who is serious about the nature of consciousness and the question of compactness and differentiation. Voegelin’s conclusions, based on such phenomena as abstract grids in the cave drawings preceding representations of sacred animals, result in the rejection of the notion of an evolution of consciousness in *homo sapiens*. This requires a brief digression, because it is of the utmost importance for any serious analysis of both Voegelin’s concept of the “primary experience of the cosmos” and the “leap in being.” Evolution is to be understood in the words of the Swiss biologist Adolf Portmann as an open series of “barely perceptible mutations,” devoid of any content, that ultimately led to the development of the spiritual-intellectual nature of man. Voegelin, who spoke with Portmann on several occasions, shared this understanding and agreed with Portmann’s thesis that “with the realization of the human form of existence we do not simply have another complex kind of mammal, but an entirely new form of life, a new stage of life, higher than that of animals with respect of its degree of internality, i.e., its experience of the world and its impact on the world.”^[15] Portmann’s key point mirrors Voegelin’s ontological position in one sentence, which I will quote in German: “Die Menschwerdung umfasst die Entstehung aller Erscheinungen der Geschichtlichkeit als eines neuen Naturphänomens.” (“Anthropogenesis comprehends the coming into being of all phenomena of historicity as a new natural

phenomenon.”)^[16] The particular mode of human development is not “a simple continuation of organic evolution, but a whole new form of coming to terms with the task of life, and we know it as the sphere of

history.”^[17] Voegelin clearly understood the proximity between his own philosophical anthropology and that of Portmann, as he indicated in a letter written shortly after a visit with Portmann in Basel in 1970. “His [Portmann’s] evidence that a theory of evolution that is focused on the survival values of the attributes of species completely overlooks the problem of species attributes that have no possible utilitarian value as signals or survival conditions, but are the pure self-expression of species and individual, seems to be theoretically particularly valuable. Especially in his views on this point I have the impression that Portmann is something like a contemplative mystic, whose contemplation is

directed to forms of life. So that is very gratifying.”^[18] What Voegelin sees as Portmann’s mysticism is the exact opposite to the reductionist scientism that treats the phenomenon of life as a closed system of chemo-physical processes along the idea of a “God gene.” Portmann represents an understanding of the phenomenon of life shared already by the young Voegelin who wrote in *The History of the Race Idea* as early as 1933: “A ‘theory of evolution’ can never do anything more than point out the external circumstances under which one form changes into another; nothing can explain the fact that a substance exists that has form or is capable of changing into another – here we confront the phenomenon we must accept unexplained. All attempts at explanation are fueled by the desire to reduce the phenomenon of life to a law of inorganic nature – or, to put it ontologically: they deny the reality of life and see only inanimate matter as the one primary phenomenon that has to explain all

other phenomena.”^[19] Since Voegelin wrote these sentences, the study of the basic genetic make-up of life forms has of course advanced immensely, and yet the phenomenon of life remains unexplained. I do of course not mean to imply that any theory of “intelligent design” can fill the void and “explain” what is precisely that which must remain unexplained, for, as Voegelin cogently argued: “The desire for an ‘explanation’ of the phenomenon arises when it is no longer seen itself, when the eyes have become

blind to the event of an autonomous unfolding of the living substance...”^[20]

I regard the connection between the ability to “see” the “event of an autonomous unfolding of the living substance” and man’s existence in the primary experience of the cosmos as the great underrated aspect of Voegelin’s philosophy of existence and consciousness. This may at least in part have to do with the conceptual language of “compactness” and “differentiation,” which seems to place the emphasis on such events of transcending man’s cosmological habitat in the “leap in being” and the “complete” or “incomplete breakthroughs,” but the fact remains that the spectrum of human consciousness is always fully present in man’s experience of the cosmos. And that includes the mystical. Manfred Henningsen was again the addressee of what one could consider one of Voegelin’s most lucid formulations of the issue in a letter written in 1969: “An addendum on human nature in Plato and Paul. I can now, after the analysis of the depth, formulate the problem better. Not only the nous and the passions of the ‘synthetic nature’ belong to human nature, but also the cosmic primary experience (primordial field of reality); the experience of human existence as mediated by society; the historical process of finding truth in society; as well as the possibilities for deformation of person, society, and history.”^[21] The cosmic primary experience, i. e., the “primordial field of reality” is part of human nature and not something that is just a stage on the path to a more and more differentiated consciousness of reality, which would be classic Hegelian gnosis. This was the fundamental problem that Voegelin had to work out in the “Equivalences” paper, and the symbolism of “depth” and “height.” To the mysticism of the depth corresponds a mysticism of height. During the intense preoccupation with these questions in the summer of 1969, Voegelin arrived at insights into the nature of experience – and that ultimately means “mystical” experience -, which he was more able to express adequately in the medium of the personal letter than the formal essay. Manfred Henningsen became the preferred addressee of Voegelin’s reflections at the time, and thus we find only three weeks after the remarks on the primary experience a description of two basic types of mystical experience that puts to rest any notion that the so-called breakthroughs or leaps in being permit a progressive interpretation parallel to a Schellingian theogonic speculation or a Hegelian dialectical process of consciousness. Here is the passage:

It is quite clear in Plato that the depth of the soul is brought into a relationship of “affinity” with the divine depth of the cosmos. Does the depth now dissolve into the mystic’s experience of God? I don’t think so. With the dissolution of the cosmos into the world and the transcendent God, the experience of the God of “height” is clearly differentiated - it is revelation, not a drawing out from the “depth” of the psyche. Rudolf Otto saw in *West-Oestliche Mystik*, the problem of two types of Indian mysticism, even though he failed linguistically in the attempt to differentiate the types: There is a “mysticism of the soul” (type yoga) and a “mysticism of God” (type sankara). One could say, linguistically clearly, that the mysticism of the “height” is a partial experience of God that at least moves towards the dissolution of the cosmos, if it does not exactly presuppose it, while the mysticism of the soul of the “depth” is another partial experience that in principle does not dissolve the cosmos. The two types of experience cannot be reduced to one another because man (1) is not a man of the world that stands opposite the transcendent God (that would be a world hypostasis), (2) is not, as a being of the world, owner of a God-seeking psyche that was placed upon the body from outside (gnostic hypostasis), but rather (3) in his essence as bodily existence is on a search in his soul for the truth. In so far as transcendent being is present in the questioning knowledge and the knowing questioning of bodily existence, God is in the world, and God’s being-in-the-world, I believe, is what one calls cosmos. The persistence of pantheistic metaphysics, Platonic and neo-Platonic anima mundi, etc. can be traced back to this experience of divine presence in a bodily being’s psychic [seelisch] search. Cosmologic and transcendent-revelatory theologies would be two basic types of speculative extrapolation each of which are tied to concrete experiences.^[22]

What justifies this long quote is the fact that Voegelin a) develops there the key notion that mysticism is present in the primary experience as the mysticism of the divine depth of the cosmos and b) shows that the mysticism of the “height” is in principle already a move towards the “dissolution of

the cosmos,” an experience that in my estimation must have been present at least in rudimentary form in those human beings that experienced the “leap in being,” as I will argue in the next section of this paper. The reasons Voegelin gives for the irreducibility of the one form of mysticism to the other are intimately linked to his anthropology and its insistence that the body-soul or body-mind symbolisms are hypostases that hinder rather than further our understanding of human existence defined as “partnership in the community of being” in openness to the ground of being that is later discovered to be “world-transcendent.” The problem of the difference between the two forms of mysticism can be stated with even greater precision if we include, as Voegelin did, the discussion of non-Western mysticism such as R. C. Zaehner’s *Mysticism. Sacred and Profane* (1957). In the fall of 1964, while being on his regular visiting semester at Notre Dame, Voegelin bought Zaehner’s book and reported to Henningsen that the book had made him aware of the differences in types of mysticism. Zaehner distinguished there between “monistic” and “theistic” mysticism as the major types, where the former is primarily equated with nature mysticism manifesting itself for instance in Zen Buddhism, the pan-en-henic experienced produced by Yoga techniques, and Western forms of nature mysticism for which he uses the examples of Proust and Rimbaud. Theistic mysticism, on the other hand, can only be found in the great Christian and Islamic mystical visions and is ultimately seen by Zaehner as the only form of sacred mysticism. What is worthy of note is that Voegelin in his remarks to Henningsen does not even mention Zaehner’s primary concern in writing the book. What Voegelin was interested in is the distinction itself, with the result that he characterizes Zaehner’s “monistic” mysticism “as the experience of consubstantiality (not using this term) with nature,” and “theistic mysticism as consubstantiality with God.”^[23] What Voegelin was further interested in was an idea he was developing in the context of his studies on the Ecumenic age, the idea that monistic mysticism in ecumenical cultures “articulates itself as identification of the I with a universe that is not identical with any one of the contents of the cosmos, and also not with gods in the polytheistic sense.”^[24] In his opinion, Zaehner failed to see that this monistic experience might be the basis of Ionic philosophy.

As is often the case in Voegelin’s thought, the “engendering” scientific or theoretical work that helped set in motion his own reflective movement is left behind to make room for an independent play with the ideas set forth in the “engendering” study. In this case, the results were particularly fruitful, because the problem of mysticism had become one of the last areas Voegelin considered of utmost importance for his theory of equivalences. Thus, Zaehner’s relatively simple distinction became fraught with possibilities. It could be used to get a better conceptual grip on the vexing questions of Indian and Chinese mysticism that had eluded exegesis using the vocabulary of philosophy “simply because it is exegesis of theistic mysticism.” In other words, the vocabulary of a Thomas Aquinas or a Nicolas of Cusa was not applicable to these and other instances of monistic mysticism. This insight enabled Voegelin to formulate with greater precision how he understood the difference between Eastern thought and Western philosophy:

Between cosmic primary experience and its articulation through myth on the one hand and noetic and revelatory experiences on the other lies, as an independent type, the differentiated experience of the consubstantiality of all being, which finds its own expressions, such as Brahman or Tao, in order to articulate the experience on its own level. In its interpretation of self as a result of this experience, reasoning can be just as logical as in philosophy; and the results are interpretative arrangements of being that in this form, to a large extent, touch on philosophy without becoming it.^[25]

The identification of a third type of experience in Indian and Chinese mystical thought is of interest to us in the context of the subject of this paper, since it affects of course the question of the “leap in being” and the “incomplete breakthroughs” in Indian and Chinese civilization. Voegelin saw a possible key to the phenomenon of these experiences in the Parmenidean distinction between *nous* and *logos*. I let him

speak for himself:

Nous designates the experience of the transcendental divine being; *logos* is the instrument of articulation. *Logos* also exists elsewhere, but is not used to apply to *nous* but rather precisely to Brahman and Tao. The resulting symbolism results in the famous “wisdom of the East,” which is closer to philosophy than to myth, without being the same - a type of wisdom whose resonance in the West of our time again throws some light on the monistic experiences in the West, which then speak to the Eastern experiences.^[26]

The idea of the *logos* as the “instrument for discursive articulation” is nothing new, as the discussion of Parmenides in *The World of the Polis* shows;^[27] what is new is that this distinction turns out to be valuable in characterizing “Eastern mysticism” as more than a philosophy manqué. Voegelin’s overall goal, as he indicated in a brief and remark to Henningsen in 1969, was to be able to clarify the “mythical foundation of the areas of the human soul and of the cosmos.” In the same breath he promised a “parallel third piece on mysticism.”^[28] The letter contains an enclosure, the paper on the “Moving Soul, the piece in which Voegelin had attempted to demonstrate that “there is no ‘physical universe’ independent of the perspectival primary experience of the cosmos.”^[29] The other piece referred to in the letter as the clarification of the foundation the area of the human soul in myth was the *Equivalences* paper. What the third piece on the foundation of mysticism in myth would have looked like, we are only able to reconstruct in a piecemeal fashion. It is not unreasonable, though, to assume that part of Voegelin’s research on the Paleolithic and Neolithic symbols was to play an important part in the search for the mythical foundation of mysticism.

If the purpose of this part of the paper has been to show that the foundation of Voegelin’s understanding of consciousness is to be found in the myth, that is, in the primary experience of the cosmos, the “primordial field of reality,” and that the mystical dimension of the primary experience is inseparable from its nature, it remains to be shown how the historical dimension enters this field, signified in the “leap in being.” Given the foundation of consciousness in the myth, could it be that even the historical dimension has a mythical foundation? This will be the purpose of the third and concluding section of my paper.

3. The Leap in Being

In the introduction to this paper, I posed the question whether the “leap in being” represented a kind of ontological fissure, which Voegelin had noticed in the spiritual breakthroughs of the Axial Age and which resisted any “explanation” in the manner of a gradualistic transition of one form of consciousness to another. Early indications were that such was not the case and that instead something had taken place over a relatively short time span of a few hundred years that resulted in a kind of breaking of the cosmic vessel and a revelatory experience of the trans-cosmic ground of being, an experience that occurred in the human psyche, transforming the psyche into the tensional consciousness of man vis à vis the God of Israel in one case, the divine beyond in another, and the experiences of a trans-cosmic reality of the Buddha, Confucius and Lao-tse. These breakings of the cosmic vessel Voegelin would later refer to as the “Epiphany of Man” in his lectures on the “Drama of Humanity.” But if the detailed discussion of the primary experience and its mystical dimension was meant to do anything, it was to show that the modern term “consciousness” cannot replace the depth dimension of experience, symbolized in the term “psyche,” and that the breakings of the cosmic vessel, as radical as they may appear in the experiences of the trans-cosmic Beyond, may in the final analysis not have succeeded in breaking up the “primordial field.” Therefore, the symbolization of this radical break

as a “leap in being” may in fact be the only way to indicate that what has been experienced is something that has not fundamentally altered the primordial field but has entered it, only to be experienced as something with a very tentative foothold in the primordial field, from which it can withdraw as suddenly as it appeared. The attentive follower of my description will have noticed that this is indeed the experience of the people of Israel and its prophets, the experience of Plato’s philosopher, the experience of a Buddha and the Chinese “sages,” and last, but not least the great Christian and Islamic mystics.

I have already made brief reference to Voegelin’s acknowledgment in the *Autobiographical Reflections* that he took the term “leap in being” from Kierkegaard. As with all of such statements, it is imperative that we also look at this one within the context in which it was made. What were the theoretical problems in which Voegelin spoke about the leap in being?

Moreover, the further one traces back the conventional origin of ideas, the more it becomes clear that such symbolisms as myth and revelation can by no stretch of the imagination be classified as “ideas.” One must acknowledge a plurality of symbolisms. A Hesiodian theogony, for instance, is simply not a philosophy in the Aristotelian sense, even though the structure of reality expressed by myth and philosophy is the same – a sameness of structure already recognized by Aristotle. Problems were arising that I tried to express through such concepts as “compact,” or “primary experience of the cosmos,” and the differentiations that led to the truth of existence in the Hellenic Classic, the Israelite, and the early Christian sense. In order to characterize the decisive transition from compact to differentiated truth in the history of consciousness, I used, at the time, the term *leap in being*, taking the term *leap* from Kierkegaard’s *Sprung*.^[30]

Voegelin here identifies the theoretical problem as the “plurality of symbolisms” which express the same structure of reality but in quite different ways, on different “levels of consciousness,” one might say. Paying attention to Voegelin’s language, we notice that he speaks of “the decisive transition from compact to differentiated truth,” a transition in fact so “decisive” that it can only be symbolized with the term that Kierkegaard employed whenever he wanted to characterize a qualitative change that occurs suddenly and unexpectedly. Kierkegaard mentions the original example of such a leap in the *Concept of Anxiety*, - a work with which Voegelin was familiar already in his early years - when he discusses the concept of First Sin in Genesis. The discussion is in fact quite interesting on its own merits, because Kierkegaard begins by taking issue with the idea that was already being floated in the first half of the nineteenth century, the idea that “the Genesis story of the first sin...has been regarded somewhat carelessly as a myth.”^[31] And, as Kierkegaard notes: “When the understanding takes to the mythical, the outcome is seldom more than idle prattle.” But Kierkegaard does not fall into the trap in which someone like Bultmann found himself a century later; the trap of “demythologizing.” Instead, he takes the myth seriously:

The Genesis story presents the only dialectically consistent view. Its whole content is really concentrated in one statement: *Sin came into the world by a sin*. Were this not so, sin would have come into the world as something accidental, which one would do well not to explain. The difficulty for the understanding is precisely the triumph of the explanation and its profound consequence, namely that sin comes into the world in such a way that by the fact that it is, it is presupposed. Thus sin comes into the world as the sudden, i. e., by a leap; but this leap also posits the quality, and since the quality is posited, the leap in that very moment is turned into the quality and is presupposed by the quality and the quality by the leap. To the understanding, this is an offense; *ergo* it is a myth. As a compensation, the understanding invents its own myth, which denies the leap and explains the circle as a straight line, and now everything proceeds quite naturally.

For those who associate Kierkegaard with the so-called “leap of faith,” a term he actually never used, it may come as a surprise that he conceives of the “leap” as an ontological change, or more accurately, as a sudden “irruption,” as Voegelin would call it, into reality, a moment of timelessness that changes the

very nature of temporality. Voegelin's familiarity with Kierkegaard, and especially the *Concept of Anxiety*, is documented in his discussion of the idea of anxiety in his fragmentary "Theory of Law"

("Rechtslehre").^[32] However, I would like to add a word of caution. Voegelin was not the kind of thinker who would adopt another thinker's argument wholesale, just because he found an imaginative formulation of a problem that addresses some aspect arising in his own reflective effort. With the same justification one could argue that Voegelin may have taken the "leap" from Karl Jaspers, who uses it extensively and with similar meanings in his early work *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*. Voegelin always thought very highly of this particular work of Jaspers, and his copy is marked with copious underlinings, including passages in which the word "leap" occurs. In short, the notion of a "leap in being" probably came to Voegelin in the course of a meditative process in which he was actually searching for as precise a term as possible to describe what was taking place in the consciousness of a relatively few human individuals when they became aware – either through a direct revelatory call or at the end of a meditative process – that the source of cosmic order was not located within the cosmos itself but "beyond" the cosmos, even though it was experienced by a human being within the cosmos, who had thus become privileged and elevated as a human being and had thus ceased to be just like the other cosmic "things" with which he shared his habitat. Indeed, this was a "differentiation" of reality, occurring in the psyche and thus making the psyche aware, that is, conscious of its own status in the structure of reality. Voegelin wanted to indicate unmistakably that this event was not simply a matter of "cognition," that was not merely *Erkenntnistheorie* but an ontic event. The concept of the "leap in being" suggested itself as the best possible linguistic solution to this problem.

The numerous passages in volumes I and II of *Order and History* in which Voegelin makes reference to the leap in being seem to corroborate this brief interpretation of meaning and use of the term. But the few remarks Voegelin made about the meaning of the term in response to direct questions also support such a reading. When he was asked for instance, whether the leap in being could be understood as referring to a society or only to individuals, he gave an unequivocal reply: "It is always done by individuals and spreads from there. We do not know of any collective leaps in being but only of experiences represented in concrete personalities. In the person of Confucius, as attested by his work, such a leap has taken place. Or in the life of the unknown author of the *Tao Te Ching* as attested by that text. Or in Plato's dialogues we can see it. But it's always a matter of individuals as far as we know."^[33] It is precisely this aspect of the experience of transcendence represented by the leap in being, its occurrence only in "concrete personalities" that makes it "inseparable from the understanding of man as human" and ultimately leads to its Platonic and Christian differentiation that says that a "personal soul as the sensorium of transcendence must develop parallel with the understanding of a transcendent God."^[34] Nothing illustrates this highly personal aspect of the leap in being more beautifully than Voegelin's discussion of Abram's changing his berith-master from Baal to Yahweh. In making his berith with Abram Yahweh changes the nature of the compact from one of bondage to one of freedom. But unlike Yahweh's berith with Moses, this first berith remains confined to Abram's soul, and yet it is already pregnant with the future that makes this event one to be told by the descendants of Abram as the paradigmatic story of Yahweh's future compacts with his people in history. What this paradigmatic aspect of the Abram story consists in is eloquently described in the following passage of *Israel and Revelation*:

At the time of its inception it is no more than the life of a man who trusts in God, but this new existence, founded on the leap in being, is pregnant with future. In the case of Abram's experience this "future" is not yet understood as the eternity under whose judgment man exists in his present. To be sure, Yahweh's berith is already the flash of eternity into time; but the true nature of the "future" as transcendence is still veiled by the sensuous analogues of a glorious future in historical times. Abram receives the promise of numerous descendants and their political success in the

dominion of Canaan. In this sense the experience of Abram is “futuristic.”^[35]

The “flash of eternity into time” gives history its soteriological “future,” a future that is a promise for the living and the descendants and ushers in an eschatological dimension that would eventually bring about a growing concern with the “mystery of death and immortality,” something that was not immediately given to Abram, Moses and the prophets of Israel but that emerged in Greek philosophy from Pythagoras to Heraclitus and Plato and found its ultimate formulation in the Paulinic formula of the resurrection.

It was in Israel where the leap in being became the founding moment that called into existence the Chosen People under God, an existence far more precarious than that of any single person’s, if only because it comprises the dimension of history and the increased possibility of a rejection of the original experience under the stress of temporal events, thus also heightening the possibility of God’s withdrawal from history, an “eclipse of God,” to use Martin Buber’s phrase, and the flight into Messianic hope and apocalyptic expectation. Voegelin emphasized this possibility repeatedly in *Israel and Revelation*, beginning with what he calls Isaiah’s “metastatic faith.” As he points out already in the introduction to the volume, “a change in being actually has occurred, with consequences for the order of existence. Nevertheless, the leap upward in being is not a leap out of existence. The emphatic partnership with God does not abolish partnership in the community of being at large, which includes being in mundane existence.”^[36] As Voegelin notes in his account of the principal phenomena associated with the leap in being, it does not establish “an ultimate order of mankind” and there may be repetitions of the leap in being that will “correct the initial insight and supplement it with new

discoveries.”^[37] Thus Voegelin makes the strongest possible case against any apocalyptic misunderstanding involving the leaps in being, for “mankind has not come to the end of its history, but has become conscious of the open horizon of its future.” But even more importantly, the order of the societies in which leaps in being have occurred, while being affected by these events, responds with its own “indigenous history of repetitions on the new level of existence,” which is an unequivocal rejection of any assumption that the leaps in being abolish the histories of the societies in which they occur, thus culminating in the kind of one history of mankind that was the brainchild of the Enlightenment and its even less enlightened successors. We must of course not confuse this development with the idea of universal humanity, which did issue from the original leap in being in Israel. But it is within the context of universal humanity that Voegelin conducted his theoretical analyses for the *Ecumenic Age*, looking for a parallel to this idea in the Chinese Ecumene. Even though everything suggested to him that the leap in being had not been as radical and complete as in Israel and Hellas, he was certain that the Chinese search for order of the Axial Age is in fact characterized by the occurrence of leaps in being that distinguish it from other civilizations of that time period. Why should China be singled out as having had such a leap in being, albeit different and less complete, Voegelin asks in the Chapter on the Chinese Ecumene. His answer may appear surprising, given his insistence that the differentiation of reality has so far reached its culmination in the West.

The reason is that no other civilization is distinguished by such a galaxy of original, forceful personalities, engaging in spiritual and intellectual adventures that *might* have culminated in a radical break with cosmological order but invariably got bogged down and had to succumb to the prevailing form. In its pre-imperial phase, China is characterized by the immense pressure of an early established order on all movements of the soul that occur within it; in its imperial phase, by the incredible strength of the Confucian style of orthodoxy, which overcomes *all* rivals in the end.^[38]

This is perhaps more of a philosophical homage to the Chinese search for spiritual and political order than we get from those cultural historians who made Chinese thought their specialty. For Voegelin,

China has “the marks of a classic culture of the Hellenic type” and he credits it with having developed an ecumenicism of its own, something that he had put to the tests by his doctoral students, Peter Weber-Schäfer and Peter Opitz at the Munich institute. The eventual dissociation of the Chinese “compact cosmological order into power and spirit,” the appearance of power politicians and their legalists advisors on the one hand, and the two types of Confucian and Taoist sages turned out to be irreversible, even reaching into the present, and it is overwhelming proof “that Chinese society had moved toward and anthropological conception of order through a leap in being, even though it was not radical enough to break the cosmological order completely.”^[39]

In moving to the conclusion of this paper, I have highlighted the question of the Chinese leap in being because a) Voegelin’s formula of the “incomplete breakthrough” in China remains a vexing problem, especially to all those of us who have love and admiration for classical Chinese culture, and b) the very idea of an “incomplete breakthrough” strikes many readers of Voegelin’s work as an unnecessarily severe judgment, when it is by no means clear that the complete breakthroughs have not had rather disastrous consequences in the West, as Voegelin’s own critique of modernity attests to. Yet my reason for focusing on this controversial topic is anything but sinister. On the contrary, Voegelin’s treatment of the Chinese ecumene in volume IV of *Order and History* is meant to make the point I have been trying to make throughout this paper: The leap in being is the symbol for a mystical kind of event that recurred in the past of humanity in different places and at different times, though clustered around the so-called Axial Age, a kind of event that manifests itself as a theophany in one case, as the end point of a noetic process in another, as the epiphany of man in all cases, and always as an event in which something happens that is interpreted by those to whom it happens a break in the continuity of cosmic time, something that will be remembered as entering time, being timeless itself. The memory constituted by this kind of event may itself then constitute a new experience of time, an experience that may take the form called “history.” The reason why the term “leap in being” is the most appropriate one to denote the entire spectrum of this kind of event has to do with the fact that the concrete human beings who consciously experience this irruption of the timeless into time lived under very different cultural and social conditions, so that their responses to the experience varied from that of a Moses who became the leader of a people to a Plato who decidedly did not want to become the leader of a polis or an even larger political unity, to a Confucius who wanted to teach those who were already leaders of a people, to name just three of the most prominent recipients of the experience.

That these events of ontic intersections may lead to “breakthroughs” in the understanding of the reality in which their recipients live has less to do with the nature of the “irruption” than with the continuation of the primordial field of reality that comprehends everything. It is perhaps a relic of the progressivist thinking of the Enlightenment that we sometimes assume that an “incomplete breakthrough” is to be seen as a deficiency. But mystical events have nothing to do with “progress” except that of the pilgrim who finds “fulfillment through grace in death.” The leap in being is not a leap forward or backward but a leap *in being*, that is, a disturbance of the primordial field by something that is experienced as other than any of the things that make up the field. Once this experience has entered consciousness nothing is as it was before; history begins.

In arguing that the “leap on being” is a mystical symbol I have paid attention to the ambiguity of the term. It is not a concept, for it lacks the concept’s definitional clarity. As a language symbol it is almost devoid of content, it hints at the *analogia entis*, while not even mentioning that concept anywhere in its vicinity. In reflecting on the leap in being, I am reminded of Voegelin’s characterization of mysticism in a letter to Gregor Sebba, written in February of 1973. Sebba had responded to the manuscript of “Reason: The Classic Experience” and had asked Voegelin the direct question whether he considered himself a mystic. Here is Voegelin’s answer:

Regarding “Mysticism” I have given no more than the brief reference, in order to suggest this further field of differentiation. In a strictly technical sense, the term “mystica” appears for the first time in the *theologia mystica* of pseudo-Dionysios (ca. 500). The problem, of course, older. In Origen, there is still a very conscious combination of dogmatic theology with a mystic theology; and mysticism is a strong ingredient in Plotinus. In such contexts, “mysticism” means the awareness that the symbols concerning the gods, and the relations of gods and man, whether Myth or Revelation, are secondary or derivative to the primary experiences of divine presence as that of a reality beyond any world-contents and beyond adequate symbolization by an analogical language that must take its meanings from the world content. In that sense, Thomas is a mystic, for he knows that behind the God of dogmatic theology there is the tetragrammatic abyss that lies even beyond the *analogia entis*. But in that sense also Plato is a mystic, for he knows that behind the gods of the Myth, and even behind the Demiurge of his philosophy, there is the real God about whom he can say nothing. It may horrify you: But when somebody says that I am a mystic, I am afraid, I cannot deny it. My enterprise of what you call “de-reification” would not be possible, unless I were a mystic.

Otherwise, the “de-reification” would be no more than enlightened psychologizing. ^[40]

It was the defining characteristic of Voegelin’s philosophical search for the order of reality that he knew when to reify and when to “de-reify.” The Leap in Being represents a conscious choice on Voegelin’s part to preserve this distinction and thus the mystery of being.

[1] Eric Voegelin, *CW* 17, p. 106.

[2] Jürgen Gebhardt, “Political Thought in an Intercivilizational Perspective: A Critical Reflection,” in: *The Review of Politics* 70 (2008), p. 12.

[3] Alfred Schütz, letters dated October 21, 1956 and June 26, 1957. Both appear in the forthcoming edition of the Schütz – Voegelin correspondence, translated by William Petropulos, University of Missouri Press.

[4] Gregor Sebba, “Prelude and Variations on the Theme of Eric Voegelin,” in: Ellis Sandoz, Ed., *Eric Voegelin’s Thought. A Critical Appraisal* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1982), pp. 3 - 65.

[5] Sebba, p. 30, n. 52.

[6] Sebba, p. 31.

[7] There is good reason to be critical of Sebba’s idea of a “discovery” in light of a comment Voegelin made to Schütz regarding Bruno Snell’s well-known book *The Discovery of the Mind* where he says: “The discovery, or better the differentiation of the Soul, is the most important event in the history of the human race; it took place in all the higher civilizations between 800 and 300 B.C.” Letter dated October 7, 1951.

[8] *CW* 17, p. 409.

[9] *CW* 14, p. 40.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] I use the term “axial age” in the broader neo-Weberian sense of S. N. Eisenstadt’s studies, and am deliberately refraining from a discussion of Voegelin’s critique of Jaspers’ original concept. For a more on this question I refer the reader to my forthcoming paper “A Disturbance in Being.”

[12] Letter dated October 14, 1968, in: *CW* 30, p. 577.

[13] Letter to Marie König, dated September 28, 1970, in: *CW* 30, p. 669.

- [14] Letter to Jürgen Gebhardt, dated November 24, 1970, in: *CW* 30, p. 684.
- [15] Adolf Portmann, "Das Ursprungsproblem," in: *Biologie und Geist* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982), p. 70 f. [My transl.]
- [16] *Ibid.*
- [17] *Ibid.* p. 71.
- [18] Letter to Manfred Henningsen, dated November 12, 1970, in: *CW* 30, p. 675.
- [19] *CW*, 3, p. 20.
- [20] *Ibid.*
- [21] Letter to Manfred Henningsen, dated June 20/22, 1969, in: *CW* 30, p. 605.
- [22] *CW* 30, p. 613 f.
- [23] Letter to Manfred Henningsen, dated December 26, 1964, in: *CW* 30, p.
- [24] *Ibid.*
- [25] *Ibid.*, p. 488.
- [26] *Ibid.*
- [27] See especially the brief discussion "From Parmenides to Protagoras" in the chapter on the Sophists, *CW* 15, p. 366 f.
- [28] The context of this reference can be found in the "Editors' Introduction" to *CW* 28, p. xxiv ff.
- [29] Eric Voegelin, "The Moving Soul," in *CW* 28, p. 172.
- [30] *CW* 34, p. 104 f.
- [31] This and the following passages are taken from Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety. A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. and transl. Reidar Thomte (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 31 f.
- [32] Cf. *CW* 32, pp. 404 – 406.
- [33] "In Search of the Ground," in: *CW* 11, p. 243.
- [34] *CW* 14, p. 281.
- [35] *Ibid.* p. 239 f.
- [36] *CW* 14, p. 49.
- [37] *CW* 15, p. 69.
- [38] *CW* 17, p. 354 f.
- [39] *Ibid.*, p. 369 f.
- [40] Letter dated February 3, 1973, in: *CW* 30, p. 751 f.