

Voegelin Society Panel Discussion:

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The Modern Philosophical Revolution: The Luminosity of Existence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. ix-xv, 1-501.

Professor Walsh has written an unsettling, unusual, and in some ways audacious book. We all are used by now to the many tellings and re-tellings of the story of modernity, from the admiring yet critical analyses and histories of Leo Strauss and his students to the more laudatory work of Hans Blumenberg and beyond¹ [1] . More narrowly, we have come to appreciate the history of modernity as a story of the growth of nihilism² [2] , as a story of the birth of new and sometime terrible regimes³ [3] , as an idiot's tale told in a Gnostic mode,⁴ [4] as an age of unrelenting revolution.⁵ [5]

We all know by now that the story of modern philosophy is not about the growth of freedom, but about coming to terms with limitations (Kant), of egophanic gnostic derailment (Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche), of power after power that ceases only in death (Hobbes and Foucault), and so on. And yet, it is also the story of deep psychological insight (Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, and

1 [1] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1983); Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), esp. 9-94.

2 [2] Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

3 [3] Thomas A. Spragens, Jr., *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1951).

4 [4] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952/1987); Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1968/1997); Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*. 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 320-340.

5 [5] Bernard Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophical sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

Kierkegaard), the story of astonishing technological achievement, and, indeed, of the growth of political, political, and even a story of spiritual freedom in some quarters,⁶ [6] all the murderous disasters of the twentieth century notwithstanding. Now Professor Walsh has added his own unsettling but edifying "and yet" to this never-ending story. Professor Walsh proposes to lead us on a "raid on the inarticulate" (p. 7), to furnish his readers with a "meditation on the priority of existence over all reflection" (p. 461), or at least to show how such a meditation might be undertaken, and to "chronicle" a modern existential turn (p. 161). But what is the problem? What is the question that animates such a raid, that leads us to believe we require such a meditation? Professor Walsh begins his book, as many others do, with a reflection on the so-called "crisis" of modernity. That crisis has been identified in a variety of ways, to the point of becoming a common-place, and nearly a cliché.

To be modern apparently means that what is new is preferred to what is old and that what is constructed by human beings is more meaningful than what was once thought to be given by nature or by God. Adopting the modern attitude allows one to consider one's self as autonomous, independent of nature (or God), and free to create whatever meanings one will. The intellectual vision of modernity is most perfectly expressed by the term "science," which connotes technical mastery resulting in a human regime of freedom. What is indicated by the term "crisis," however, is not first of all this vision and the complex of sentiments, attitudes, arguments, and hopes that make it a reasonable object of belief. Rather, it is the disproportion between the vision or model and the experienced reality of everyday life.⁷ [7]

Walsh agrees with this diagnosis insofar as he accepts that "the dominant force of the modern world is instrumental reason" (p. 1), and that the technical mastery of nature that has been the outworking of this dominance is accompanied by an ironic dependence on that mastery and its technological infrastructure for our very survival and certainly for our day-to-day flourishing. It is a "predicament" of "entanglement" and "dependence" in which "[p]ower and powerlessness seem coeval moments" (p. 1). But that is only the surface of the irony. "The bounded rationality of the iron cage," Walsh argues, "is continuously surpassed by the boundless rationality of the human spirit." "This," he proposes, "is why a technological society is never simply what it

⁶ [6] On the latter, see, for example, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007).

⁷ [7] Barry Cooper, *The End of History: An essay on modern Hegelianism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 13.

appears to be. Its pervasive instrumentalization is haunted by the awareness of its non-instrumental source" (p. 1). In summary, instrumental reason as technological mastery is a kind of nihilism, a process of human reasoning that "cannot furnish its own purpose," and that can "remain rational only if it is subordinate to a noninstrumental finality beyond itself." Since this conclusion about technology is itself "the fruit of modern philosophical reflection" (p. 2), Walsh is not persuaded that the modern crisis of meaningless expansion of power after power is as deep as its most worried critics fear. Rather, a revolution in modern philosophy has occurred, which "consists in the progressive articulation of substantive reason" (p. 3):

In place of the subject standing over against a world of objects, we expand the meditative knowledge of our participation within existence. Illusory superiority is replaced by submission to truth. This is the shift of perspective that has been under way in modern philosophy against the subject-object model whose dominance has been so great that the countermovement has scarcely been noticed. (p. 4).

It is this shift and countermovement that Walsh proposes to trace in this book. He wants us to take notice. But Walsh is ultimately not convinced that we should even be speaking about a "crisis:" "The reality," he argues, "is that modernity cannot overcome the problematic that is the permanence of crisis within itself. In other words, there is no crisis." Instead, "[t]here is simply the insufficiently understood constitution of a world that periodically erupts into consciousness as a crisis to be addressed or solved." The resolutions that emerge from these periodic eruptions are "oblique," and we know this to be the case, because we learn in the resolutions themselves that "solving the crisis would require the abolition of the modern world." If this is true, then "the so-called crisis of the modern world is nothing less than the failure to recognize the inexorability of the process of objectification by which we have succeeded in dominating much of the world in which we live. . . . Only when we begin to recognize that our situation is inescapable does the sense of crisis begin to evaporate." (pp. 10-11). But a feel-good beach novel --or its philosophical equivalent-- this book is not.

What does this conclusion (or is it a hypothesis?) about the unreality of the so-called modern crisis mean for philosophy and politics? Surely the widespread, politically validated murderousness of the twentieth century was/is a crisis? Yes, it was, but Walsh wants to argue that once we have realized that instrumental reason is unable to provide its own purpose, the crisis does not begin, but is over. At that point, philosophically at least, "the burden of creating

meaning has been replaced by the openness to its reception." This growing openness is another way to describe the modern philosophical revolution whose history Walsh traces from Kant to Derrida and back to Kierkegaard. That revolution, as the original meaning of the word implies, is also a kind of return. "The luminosity of existence as participation" (p. 11) may remind us in certain important ways of the thought of Socrates/Plato, and it should. The modern philosophical advance out of instrumentalism is also a return to what had already been known (and lived) in that era in which philosophy as a way of life had first been discovered and practiced among the Ionian Greeks, and especially with Socrates of Athens. But the return, Walsh cautions us, is not obsequious validation:

Modernity may have made its confrontation unavoidable, but the issue of using immanent language to speak about what transcends the boundary of discourse begins with its first differentiation in Greek philosophy. It was the unsatisfactory state in which the classical thinkers bequeathed the problem that necessitated the modern struggle. (p. 12)

All fine and good. For those who have read a philosopher and interpreter like Eric Voegelin closely and well, none of this should be surprising or even especially difficult. But now, as Professor Walsh proceeds to track his quarry in this tome, which is, in fact, the third volume of a trilogy, we may begin to wonder through what swamps he is leading us.

To follow these eight thinkers through the labyrinthine ways of philosophical recovery, Professor Walsh cautions that "We must reach beyond what they said to the dynamic of questioning that in many cases yielded developments the thinkers themselves had never acknowledged and sometimes even distorted." As we launch into this five-hundred page philosophical mystery thriller, we feel the trap begin to spring shut as we come our first methodological problem: How is this reaching beyond either: (a) not a claim concerning "false consciousness," or, to use a different phrase, (b) sheer inventiveness on the part of the interpreter (in this case, Professor Walsh)? We all recall the infamous and now largely waning "secret writing" debates of political theory interpretation in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Professor Walsh protects himself against this questionable method by noting that it is not he himself, but philosophical successors who frequently point out the missed opportunities of their predecessor or, in the case of Kierkegaard, anticipate such opportunities (For a wonderful account of how *not* to "get" this point in a philosophically and existentially admissible manner,

see Richard Rorty's incisive critique concerning philosophical succession in his examination of the succession worries of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger in contrast to Proust).⁸ [8] The kind of "reaching beyond" that Professor Walsh advocates will require a special kind of reading, an especially subtle interpretive touch that avoids distorting the writers and thinkers in question at the same time that it finds traces of meaning and directions of purpose those writers themselves may not have fully understood. Hence an audacious and certainly unsettling book.

Let us begin, then, at the end. We are permitted to do so, according to Walsh's own claims, because the priority or finality of the philosophical discoveries in modernity are not strictly chronological. Søren Kierkegaard, while he is chronologically followed by four of the eight philosophers examined here, receives the last word. Accordingly, we begin with him: "If we think of the modern philosophical revolution as the displacement of theoretical reason by practical reason, as the reversal of the priority of the subject in intentionality to include the luminosity of existence that precedes it, then Kierkegaard was the one who most fully lived within that ineluctable shift" (p. 394). "Where others grasped the philosophical priority of existence that ethics precedes ontology," argues Walsh,

[Kierkegaard] had understood that even such an interest in the philosophical implications jeopardizes the purity of heart that existence requires. Philosophical illumination recedes in significance, as it must, when the mandate of existence is conceded. The reason Kierkegaard occupies such an extraordinary position in the modern philosophical revolution is that he complied most completely with its logic. Not even philosophy could come before the imperative of existence. (p. 395).

All we have to worry about now is just what this description/interpretation of Kierkegaard and the modern "philosophical revolution" means. So, what do the following four key phrases from this initial yet final account concerning Kierkegaard and the modern philosophical revolution mean:

1. "the reversal of the priority of the subject in intentionality to include the luminosity of existence that precedes it"

⁸ [8] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 96-121; cf. his opening comments in the following chapter, 122.

2. "the displacement of theoretical reason by practical reason"
3. "[in] the philosophical priority of existence . . . ethics precedes ontology"
4. "the imperative" or "the mandate of existence"

1. "the reversal of the priority of the subject in intentionality to include the luminosity of existence that precedes it"

We need to be cautious with our question of what these four key phrases mean: Walsh's analysis --if it is correct-- implies that at a certain point, the meaning of these phrases can only emerge from the activity of philosophizing in the new mode itself. Their meaning is not, in other words, to be extracted from a metaphysical lexicon. That would be precisely, if I take Walsh and his philosophical friends correctly at this point, to misunderstand the discovery of the modern philosophical revolution, namely that existence is luminous ultimately only in our living in it, not in our defining and saying what it is. And we cannot ultimately define and say what it is, because that would be for us to step outside of something greater than ourselves, of something of which we are a part.⁹ [9] This statement should remind the present audience of the opening "actor on the stage" metaphor of Voegelin's first volume of *Order and History*,¹⁰ [10] which ends with this caution:

Man's partnership in being is the essence of his existence, and this essence depends on the whole, of which existence is a part. Knowledge of the whole, however, is precluded by the identity of the knower with the partner, and ignorance of the whole precludes essential knowledge of the

9 [9] "Our study cannot stand apart from the movement it seeks to understand, for there is not understanding outside of the movement toward it. To the extent that this is the great insight of modern philosophy, it spells the end of scholarly externality as the medium of discourse. Philosophy, it insists, lives only from within itself. . . . Even the assurance that reason knows itself is exposed to withering scrutiny. There is no higher viewpoint from which science or scholarship might master the materials of investigation, for it is precisely the possibility of such mastery that is under investigation. The task that philosophy has taken up is nothing less than the inquiry into its own possibility of inquiry." (Walsh, p. 14).

10 [10] Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Vol 1: Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 1-2. "

part. This situation of ignorance with regard to the decisive core of existence is more than disconcerting: it is profoundly disturbing, for from the depth of this ultimate ignorance wells up the anxiety of existence" (p. 395).

But as Voegelin goes on to argue, we are not left without resources in this circumstance. While existence is not an object to be studied from a distant, Archimedian point of objectivity, and whose meaning is completely to be grasped, it does open itself to our inquiry by means of exploration and symbolization of that which cannot be said. Just how this is true, and what it means, and how it has been said in modern philosophical inquiry is the burden of Walsh's book. It also leads to some of its most difficult, if not impenetrable language. Walsh does not advocate (indeed, quite explicitly rejects) the Nietzschean version of nihilism, which claims not that nothing exists, but that we cannot give an account of what exists.¹¹ [11] The call is not necessarily for a "definition," but for an account, for an explanation, perhaps by way of a story, concerning what it is to which the statements, symbols, analyses, and critiques are pointing. And a story Professor Walsh does give us.

2. "the displacement of theoretical reason by practical reason"

Immanuel Kant, Prof. Walsh claims, is the first of the modern philosophical revolutionaries, the "turning-point for the development of modern philosophy" (p. 27). The most important feature of that turning-point is not Kant's reasoning focus on reason itself, but his realization that human existence, if it has any qualities of freedom at all, is first and foremost an ethical existence. And if *that* is true, then practical reason has priority over theoretical reason. Indeed, the latter is an *expression* of the former, and not the reverse, as has so often been assumed in early modern philosophy. For philosophers and intellectuals, this can be a disconcerting realization, and that disconcertment may itself be a sign of just how badly we have misunderstood the purpose and prospects of the philosophical enterprise. Or so, it seems to me, Professor Walsh is arguing.

3. "[in] the philosophical priority of existence . . . ethics precedes ontology"

¹¹ [11] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Wille Zur Macht*, ◆1, ◆3.

The truth of existence is that its truth can only be lived. This is the re-discovery of Kierkegaard as it had been the original insight of Socrates. (pp. ,395-396, 397, 446, 449). This statement of priority is, for Walsh, "the conclusion of the existential revolution of modern philosophy" (p. 449).

The insight, barely glimpsed by Kant, that theoretical reason constitutes a principle obstacle to practical reason, has now become unmistakable. What the status of the insight is, theoretical or practical, cannot finally be determined for it partakes of both, a sure indication that the distinction cannot ultimately be maintained. There is no getting outside the practical imperative of existence, even to theorize. Once the unsurpassability is acknowledged, we gravitate toward that horizon that can never be reached, because we always remain in it (p. 449).

What it means to not quite reach the horizon animates especially Nietzsche and Derrida in Walsh's book, but also Schelling and Levinas. It can be stated in more explicitly religious language, or in much less explicitly religious terms; it can be sung, rhymed, and novelized; most of all, it sets a limit to the possibility of philosophy. That limit includes the recognition that human freedom and the ethics such freedom philosophically demands in order for its realization to be coherent is at the core of all philosophizing. It means there can be no "concluding conceptualization" (p. 443), no ultimate historical disclosure (p. 445), no ultimate system that puts all the parts in their place(s) (p. 443). There is more than mere wonder, but much less than finality.

4. "the imperative" or "the mandate of existence"

This imperative, Kant discovered, is a moral one, and it arises as simply "a part of the order of being"(p. 62-3). In Voegelin's reading of Kant, it was the core of his philosophical enterprise, indeed, the motive of his philosophizing.¹² [12] From this moral imperative arising out of

12 [12] Cf. "Das Sollen im System Kants," in *Gesellschaft, Staat, und Recht: Untersuchungen zur Reinen Rechtslehre: Festschrift für Hans Kelsen zum 50. Geburtstag*, ed. Alfred Verdross (Vienna: Julius Springer Verlag, 1931), 136-73. English translation, "Ought in Kant's System," in Thomas W. Heilke and John von Heyking, eds., M J. Hanak and Jodi Cockerill, trans., *Published Essays, 1929-1933, Volume 8: The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

existential freedom all else in Kant's philosophy follows (for example, see. P. 69). From this moral imperative, according to Walsh, all else in the modern philosophical revolution follows. In it, our existence becomes luminous to us. This luminosity is not a finality, nor does it provide us with a certainty: it provides us with an approach to the most important questions, and most of all it furnishes us with a best understanding of how we should then live (for example, pp. 465-66).

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A review of this kind can barely skim the surface of a tome as densely astute as the one Professor Walsh has written. I have said nothing or nearly nothing, for example, about language, philosophical systems, subjectivity, repentance, patience, anxiety, egotism, irony, skepticism, and freedom, all of which play central roles for Walsh in the drama of the modern philosophical revolution. Nor have I so much as mentioned the two primary categories/metaphors of political-philosophical understanding, namely time and space, which also play a lively role in his analysis. I have likewise done no justice whatsoever to the intricate examinations Professor Walsh offers of the eight and more philosophers considered in this genealogy of philosophical revolution. Especially noteworthy is the charity with which Professor Walsh treats certain figures who are much more likely to be wearing the black hats than the white ones in many contemporary accounts, or who at best are sources of confusion and irritation rather than enlightenment.¹³ [13] In light of this all too-brief inspection of Professor Walsh's meditative "raid on the inarticulate," however, I have would pose the following five questions. They are intended not as points of critique, but as beginnings for a conversation:

1. What is the difference between philosophical speech and mystical utterances? How do we know? What does "uniquely articulate self-awareness" (p. 27) mean?
2. What, precisely, was it about the bequeathment of antiquity that was inadequate, and how has the modern revolution remedied this inadequacy? How do we avoid falling backward

¹³ [13] For an example, see his remark on Heidegger that he "fails to take his own discovery seriously enough" (p. 269 and 266).

from this revolution? The comments on the final two pages don't quite get me there, in part, perhaps, because the limitations of the Greek achievement are never made quite clear.

3. Where is the political in all this? Are we, like Hannah Arendt, thinking what we are doing? (p. 14 seems to say "no"), or are we doing something else? What, if any, are the political implications of this modern philosophical revolution? There are hints (pp. 64-65, 463-4), but a deeper discussion would be desirable. What does Walsh make of Richard Rorty's claims concerning the cruelty of irony and of its non-utility for public purposes (pp. 73-95; 120)? Or, again, what does he make of Hannah Arendt's claim that the Platonic myths, to which we might point as an exemplar of trying to say what cannot be said, are, in fact, highly politically motivated. In other words, what is the relationship of the modern philosophical revolution (seemingly an astronomical term now taken into politics) mean for politics?
 4. What accounts for the impenetrability of the language of this revolution, of its downright weirdness at times?
 5. What might we learn from a comparison of the characters of Kierkegaard and the characters of Theophrastus or of later imitators such as La Bruyère?
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