

Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin: Reflections on Philosophy and Mysticism

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Background:

I had the pleasure of presenting a paper on the concept of philosophy and what most essentially constitutes “a philosopher” in light of the thought of Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss, at the APSA/EVS meeting in 2010. And then, in 2012, I presented my thoughts on the relationship between mysticism and politics. This paper continues the reflections embarked upon in those two papers, and will together with them constitute a larger article to be finalized later this fall. Please excuse the unfinished nature of these remarks.

Leo Strauss is well-known for his strong insistence that “Jerusalem” and “Athens” represent two starkly divergent ways of answering the most basic questions of life: about right and wrong, good and evil, the human condition, and “the whole” of existence. Indeed, the two even represent different and incompatible ways of life, according to Strauss.

Jerusalem stands for revelation, that is, the way of life characterized by the idea that ultimate answers to those largest and most intractable of questions do exist, but only as revealed by a deity, and thus only available if one takes a leap of faith and believes in God and the accompanying story about God. Taking monotheistic religion in general and Judaism in particular as his point of departure, Strauss holds that man can never really dispute or ask questions of such a deity or its accompanying tradition, and that obedience to revelation thus must be absolute. Hence, philosophy in the full and true sense is no longer an option if one accepts the call of revelation.

Athens, on the other hand, represents the philosophical viewpoint, according to which such questions *can* indeed be freely asked – Strauss several times speaks of the quest for “knowledge of the whole” – and the human mind is ideally speaking free to explore them, even if only a few actually have the stamina and wisdom to do so. According to this way of thinking and this way of life, no deity or divine commands can circumscribe this philosophical activity, and this way of life is therefore utterly opposed to the way of life characterized by revelation, since it cannot let itself be dictated by an outside, divine authority – presumably unless that authority can be proved to be fully rational, fully reliable, and fully understandable by human beings, which is not possible (and which would indeed gainsay the entire idea of a truly divine and omnipotent God, according to Strauss).

At the same time, philosophy cannot *prove* that revelation is not the real answer to the large questions about “the whole”, or that revelation is not possible. And revelation can likewise not prove that it represents the only answer or the right way of living – hence, revelation cannot refute the claim of philosophy that open inquiry and questioning is the right way of life.

The two thus find themselves in a stalemate, but it is a fruitful one. According to Strauss, the vitality of Western thought to a large extent comes from this opposition between Athens and Jerusalem. This is worth noting, since most commentators on – and arguably most followers of – Strauss more or less explicitly take it for granted that Strauss himself ultimately sided with Athens in this fight between the opposite sides. I, too, find that to be the only reasonable interpretation of his many statements on the question of reason and revelation. But with such a conclusion, it is easy to ignore the repeated statement of Strauss’s that the *tension* between reason and revelation is the well-spring of what is best in Western thought and Western civilization. This means that pure philosophy without the challenge of revelation would not have been the same as philosophy having to live in constant tension with the claims of revelation. A Socrates or Plato without the challenge of the traditional and mythical beliefs of the city, or a Maimonides or Farabi without their strong religious traditions, would not have been the great philosophers that Strauss holds them to have been.

To this must be added the point, well known from Leo Strauss’s thought, that the philosopher, in order to be accepted (and indeed, in some societies, survive) cannot be seen as an iconoclast who destroys the beliefs of the city or state. In other words, philosophy must learn how to come across as open to and respectful towards revelation, and hide radical claims that many in society would see as undermining not only religion but society as a whole. Teachings about right and wrong based on religious tradition and/or revealed teachings are after all dearly held, are often closely aligned with political power, and can be socially useful. Hence, the philosopher must find a

way of communicating his or her thoughts without coming across as an atheist or as an opponent of the traditions and beliefs of the city. Whether this means that Strauss himself, as an individual human being, was an atheist or not, or whether Strauss held that all the greatest philosophers actually were atheists, is not for this essay to discuss.

The correspondence between Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss, first published 20 years ago, brings out gradually and slowly – as the two men get to know each other’s work better – yet with admirable clarity the differences between the two when it comes to the relationship between reason and revelation, or between philosophy and faith. For Voegelin, the beginnings of what we call Western philosophy in Greek thought have their roots in a mystical experience of the whole, and finds expression as a tension toward the divine (even if this experience is often compactly and incompletely differentiated). In all of his philosophical studies, reaching their apex in the landmark historical studies found in the five volumes of *Order and History*, Voegelin continues this tracing of a “tension toward the divine” and “divine presence” in serious philosophical thought. Against this background, it is for Voegelin deeply inaccurate to speak of reason and revelation as two opposite activities, necessarily at odds with each other. His way of understanding this very relationship could, in short, not be more different from Strauss’s, in spite of the many other points of convergence between the two thinkers.

What I would like to offer here, based on this short introduction, are two observations related to our theme of mysticism:

Firstly, one of Strauss’s most poignant formulations of the theme here under scrutiny is the following:

Now turning to the biblical alternative, here the basic premise is that one particular divine code is accepted as truly divine; that one particular code of one particular tribe is the divine code. But the divine character of all other allegedly divine codes is simply denied, and this implies a radical rejection of mythology.¹

I’ll leave aside here Strauss’s complex concept and discussion of “mythology” and concentrate instead on the tension between this understanding of revelation and a mystical understanding of revelation. Strauss throughout his reflections on religion and faith privileges an understanding of

¹ “The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy”, reprinted in *Faith and Political Philosophy – the Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin 1934 – 1964*, eds. Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1993), pp. 218 – 233; this quote appears on p. 219.

revelation as receptive rather than experiential. By this I mean that revelation as a source of truth is not understood to manifest itself as experiences that human beings participate in, interpret, and differentiate through their lives and thought, but rather as the reception of narratives that emanate from an omnipotent God, who, because of that very omnipotence, cannot be questioned and cannot appear in any other guises – indeed, then omnipotence would be lost. It is in this very context that Strauss uses the word “mysterious”: “a truly omnipotent God must be a mysterious God” (ibid. 220). A few lines later in the same essay, the Biblical covenant between God and man is likewise labeled as “mysterious”, and he adds that the Biblical God “is known in a humanly relevant sense only by his actions, by his revelations” (ibid.).

This is certainly a relevant and recognizable way within the philosophy of religion of using the adjective “mysterious”. But it is at odds with what we think of as *mysticism*, by which I mean a way of understanding revelation which concentrates on *the state of mind and the experience of the individual in his or her meeting with the divine* – the “divine-human encounter”, as Voegelin calls it.² A mystical experience of God in the latter sense would be one that is willing to go beyond the concrete manifestations of God’s revelation in, say, written sources or institutionalized traditions. It would admittedly not claim that human beings can fully know God through experience, but it would likewise not claim that there is no room for interpretive penetration on the part of human beings into understandings and experiences of transcendence. In other words, a philosophical, open, and questioning, yet deeply reverential encounter with revelation is possible. Through such an interpretation of revelation, inspired by and often actualized in religious mysticism, we can even move beyond the different and concrete symbolizations, dogmas, narratives, and histories of the different religions (which, we remember, in Strauss were necessarily at odds with each other, which is what makes a truly philosophical attitude towards revelation impossible, according to Strauss).

In this way, the purely “receptive” understanding of revelation that we find in Strauss is seriously challenged. Revelation is seen by Voegelin as an experience in which human beings can partake, and which is not necessarily categorically different from the religious or “metaphysical” meditations of, say, a Plato or a Plotinus. In spite of occasional references to the experiential basis of religious belief,³ Strauss never – from my knowledge – seriously discusses this aspect of belief in

² For a fine analysis, to which I am indebted, of Voegelin’s understanding of mysticism, see Ellis Sandoz, “Mysticism and Politics in Voegelin’s Philosophy”, in: *Give Me Liberty* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2013), pp. 70-76.

³ See David Walsh’s useful essay in *Faith and Political Philosophy* (op.cit.), and not least Walsh’s reference to and discussion of Strauss’s dismissal of the skeptical critique of religious knowledge in “Preface to Spinoza’s Critique of Religion”.

revelation, or this way of interpreting revelation, even though he must have been conscious of it from his studies (and at times immersion) in Jewish tradition.

This difference between Strauss's and Voegelin's understanding of revelation is further brought out by Strauss's juxtaposition of Socratic ignorance on the one hand and revelatory demands on the other. Where Socrates in the end suspends judgment about the most important things, because they are unknowable, Biblical religion commands assent on the basis of God's authority. Thus, the possible common ground between philosophy and religious faith due to their common openness to essentially unknowable transcendence is ruled out because faith is forced to take a stand and thus has to dismiss the openness and the tension.

Indeed, this is probably the best way to understand the basic conflict between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin: for the latter revelation is not only possible to understand but even best understood as man's loving and open-ended reply to an experience of transcendence. For Voegelin, this is not categorically different from the reply of Greek philosophers to the experience of living in a universe they have not themselves caused, and the openness to the call of, for instance, the Socratic *daimon*. For Strauss, faithful adherence to teachings professedly based on revelation, most notably in their monotheistic form, constitutes a farewell to this openness and thus must stand in tension with philosophy in its true and real form.⁴

This leads to my second observation, which is important to our understanding of political philosophy.

As already pointed out, while Strauss in practice dismisses a mystical understanding of religion, he famously ends up with an understanding of philosophy that forces philosophers to be circumspect and careful in their public presentation of their teaching, so as not to offend the religious (or other, such as patriotic) sensibilities of most people, especially those who believe in the necessity and/or rationality of religious or other traditional beliefs. This, in turn, leads Strauss to his controversial understanding of the nature of political philosophy, namely, that political philosophy is not primarily philosophical reflection on politics, but rather and primarily asks the question of the place of philosophy in the polis, and about the possible survival of philosophy. Philosophy must find a way to be seen as useful and friendly to the affairs of the city, and to hide its heterodox and, in the eyes of many, agnostic or atheistic teachings. Thus, we are confronted with a dismissal of the

⁴ I am also indebted here to several useful observations and analyses in John Ranieri, *Disturbing Revelation: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the Bible* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009).

mystical aspects of religion combined with what is arguably a mystical understanding of the essence of philosophy.

For Strauss, this seems to mean that the truth about human existence is only available to a selected few – at least this comes across as a reasonable interpretation of his many (even if often obscure and circumspect) statements on the place and role of the philosopher. How does this relate to the idea that each individual, regardless of his or her philosophical bent or abilities, has the same inherent dignity, to borrow the words of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights? There certainly seems to be a tension here. Indeed, when Strauss uses the word dignity, it is, from what I have found, with reference to the superior dignity of philosophizing, that is, of employing the human mind in philosophical activity,⁵ or to the dignity of politics as an activity where the common good is safeguarded *at the same time as philosophical activity is made possible*. Dignity is thus linked directly to philosophy, and indirectly to politics, but not to the human being *per se*. Maybe this is an unfair conclusion, since Strauss did not write much about the concept and idea of dignity at all. Yet, the observation is worth making.

For Voegelin, on the other hand, all human beings are part of the quest for meaning and truth, and as part of that same idea – clearly influenced by Christian teachings – Voegelin stresses that all human beings have the same dignity. This, as Voegelin sees it, is possibly the most crucial differentiating insight of the Christian gospels vis-à-vis Greek philosophy. In his essay on the Latin Averroist Siger of Brabant, originally published in 1944, Voegelin boldly attacks “the inclination to treat the non-philosophical man as an inferior brand and even compare him to animals, an attitude which seems to crop up as soon as the Christian insight into the equal dignity of all men is abandoned”.⁶ The same line of thought comes up in the letters to Strauss, not least (and poignantly so) in one of his wartime letters (Letter 4, December 9, 1942): the universalization of the image of man is the decisive reason for the superiority of the Christian anthropology over the Hellenic.

Voegelin’s understanding of the relationship between philosophy and faith essentially implies that philosophy in its true form is not the purview of only a limited amount of people. Through participation in revelatory experience, as transmitted through institutional traditions and communities but also through individual experiences in the present (as witnessed in Voegelin’s own “anamnetic” experiments in his *Anamnesis*), all human beings can partake in openness towards transcendence and thus in a basic and very real quest for truth. This surely has political ramifications.

⁵ See *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 137; *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 8.

⁶ *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 20, ed. Peter von Sivers (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), p. 192.

If political philosophy concerns itself with how we can foster attitudes and develop societies that make such a serious quest for truth possible, then it must also be concerned with how we respect and preserve *the individual human being* as a carrier of the dignity and potentiality that ultimately make that quest possible and meaningful. If insight into truth is only possible for a select few, on the other hand, and the traditional beliefs of the many and of the world's religious traditions stand as the radical opposite of that philosophical quest for insight into the truth, then political philosophy does not concern itself with the dignity of all human beings except as an instrumental, inner-political concern. This may seem to be a harsh conclusion, and many followers of Leo Strauss would of course protest and refer to their teacher's deep commitment to liberal democracy. I hear that protest and take it seriously. And indeed, the need to maintain the *tension between reason and revelation* for the vitality of our societies, means in practice that the possibilities of both reason and revelation must be safeguarded in society – arguably through the protection of individual human rights and not least the right to free speech and assembly.

Yet, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Voegelin's openness to the experience of revelation as something in which all human beings can potentially partake, and also his openness to the mystic's insight into the ground of these experiences, leads us to a more egalitarian and less elitist understanding of philosophical activity as well as of life in the polis. That conclusion is not without significance in an academe where Strauss and his many often admirable students (and students' students!) hold significant sway over many. In short, the views on dignity, philosophy, and truth of Leo Strauss and the school of thought he has inspired deserve to be rigorously studied and challenged.