Voegelin's *On The Form of the American Mind* and American Pragmatism as a Significant Contribution to World Philosophy

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"The American Open Self: Exploring Voegelin's Experiences with Peircian Philosophy"

Clancy Smith

1. Voegelin's First American Journey

Voegelin's *On the Form of the American Mind* is both frustrating and illuminating.

No reader can doubt the lucid, penetrating, and often lyrical comments of a brilliant young scholar, whose range is extensive, if not breathtaking--indeed at times a range so extensive it is almost baffling, more impressionistic than thematic. Voegelin moves from metaphysics to labor statistics, from poetry to Puritan mysticism, from Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey, from relatively obscure thinkers today to those whom Clancy Smith correctly sees as stalwarts of American philosophy.

But Voegelin's first book is illuminating, perhaps more so from the tone of the work than from any claim or conclusion. Voegelin was clearly, as he would later formulate it, in a state of "questioning unrest," and his encounter with the "American mind" is a dramatic illustration of that questioning unrest. This is of more than simply biographical concern since it is precisely the identification of this questioning unrest--its evocation--and the explication of its structural features, including the poles of its tension, and its norms that constitute genuine philosophy and certainly the recovery of genuine philosophy in the face of the accumulated distortions of the intellectual tradition that has given us the sorry contemporary "climate of opinion" (to use Whitehead's description, which Voegelin often employs in a pejorative context).

It is, therefore, quite instructive to focus, as does Clancy Smith, on the leading American pragmatists whom Voegelin encountered and whose thinking has crystallized a distinctly American approach to philosophy altogether different from the perspective Voegelin was used to in European culture. And indeed Smith has pinpointed a recurrent theme in Peirce, James, and Dewey that would effect a responsive cord in Voegelin, with his questioning unrest, and would evoke in him the powerful symbol of the "open soul."

2. The Pragmatists
So, according to Smith, Peirce formulates a "triadic cycle" that is taken up and enriched by James and Dewey. Peirce emphasizes how those beliefs that support and lead to action can be pierced by doubt, leading to inquiry and eventually to a new equilibrium of beliefs in an ongoing process, where the self involved is neither a self-contained, world-alienated pure Cartesian cogito nor a mere Humean bundle of impressions but rather an agent in dynamic relation to nature and to other inquirers (other minds) in a collaboration to bring about progress.

James uses the vivid analogy of a bird perching with the "settled events" and then "shocked" into "flights" when events become problematic only to perch again with new settled events. Again, contrary to the pure Cartesian cogito, we have experiences with both objective and subjective dimensions that cannot be bifurcated, and, unlike the atomistic Humean non-self, we have the stream of consciousness.

With Dewey, the stress falls on a social psychology in which biological impulse interacts dynamically with the challenges of natural and social environments to form habits.

3. Six Reflections

We must attempt to assess the overall relevance of this "triadic cycle," so admirably presented by Clancy Smith, for Voegelin's effort at philosophy. I would restrict myself to the following six remarks.

First, we must keep in mind the sources at Voegelin's disposal and the weight of his emphasis, given the materials he had to work with. Smith refers to Peirce though a standard work on American philosophy (Mullin's, *The Soul of Classical American Philosophy*) and directly quotes James from an anthology and Dewey from the latter's own book, *Human Nature and Conduct*. It is perhaps noteworthy that Voegelin mentions Dewey only fleetingly, calling him a "sociologist" (whether that was intended to be a slight remains to be seen). Smith concentrates most on Voegelin's quite correct claim that Peirce and James are reacting against Descartes and Hume. As Smith points out, Voegelin comes down hard on Peirce's lack of precision with respect to consciousness. Voegelin does, however, discuss at some length Peirce's metaphysics (what Voegelin refers to as "objective idealism"), including an affirmation of the existence of God, with very little comment. But there is no overt criticism. Voegelin is much more animated, laudatory, and extensive in his treatment of James. Why?

Second, Voegelin, in fact, brings into the discussion Hodgson, Brentano, and Husserl. It is apparent that Voegelin at this stage in his development is keenly interested in something like the phenomenology of consciousness--and he likes James more than the other thinkers. I would suggest that it is because, for Voegelin, James seems relatively more successful in avoiding something like a subject-object split (what Voegelin would later call the "intentionalist fallacy"). He applauds James's type of empiricism over that of Hume because James did not artificially chop up experience, as did Hume (here we might see the influence of Bergson). The reality of "experience" as a dynamic flow of consciousness, as embracing sensations, images, memories, percepts, ideas, concepts, judgments, evaluations, and decisions, as a directed response to challenges, and as a flow of presence that is not an object to be apprehended in an infinite regress of objectifications--this reality is the key to the meaning of the American "open soul." Decades
later Voegelin could still mention approvingly James's recourse to experience during his lecture on immorality, delivered at James's university, Harvard.

Third, Voegelin's criticism of Peirce was based on the limited access he had to Peirce's writings at the time of his American journey. In light of Peirce's full corpus, we might wonder if perhaps Voegelin shortchanged Peirce. We might consider the use of Peirce by another German thinker of a later generation (albeit on the surface at least much different from Voegelin), Jürgen Habermas. Habermas appropriates Peirce's heuristic ideal of truth as ingredient in the "ideal communication situation" of open inquirers. It is here that Habermas sees the "emancipatory interest" (a term he borrowed from Fichte). This knowledge constitutive "interest" is different from that involved in interaction with nature and is different from that associated with the ordinary hermeneutical encounters in human society and culture. This grounds what Habermas calls his "Kantian pragmatism." His use of Peirce carries echoes of Heraclitus's openness to the "common world" (the koine cosmos). Perhaps, however, Peirce himself, whose metaphysics embraces God as well as the world, has a philosophy more akin to Bernard Lonergan's critical realism than to Habermas's Kantian pragmatism or to "objective idealism." Arguably, the core of Lonergan's philosophy has equivalence to that of Voegelin. On the other hand, Habermas's "methodological atheism" may be mostly a reaction against dogmatism and an effort to return to experience. These are topics for another occasion. But this discussion leads us to the fourth observation.

Fourth, then, Voegelin's questioning unrest would have found affinity with the pragmatists' emphasis on the self-transcending process of oppresses to nature and to other minds. Still, as we have seen in the preceding paragraph, this was not the full horizon of inquiry for Peirce. Nor would it be so for Voegelin. Would he not find a horizon restricted to nature and to other minds as too restrictive? This is not to say that Voegelin at that time necessarily saw pragmatism as so restricted--at least in the case of James. We should recall Voegelin's claim of how American thought is rooted in puritan mysticism and his detailed description of James's account of religious experience. At best, the American experience would free him to pursue inquiry, even beyond the American horizon. But what was Voegelin liberated from?

Fifth, Smith shows how pragmatists were liberated from Descartes and Hume. But Voegelin, who breathed in the air of German culture, would surely have considered himself liberated from Descartes and Hume by Kant. Would he need to be liberated from Kant? The immediate problem for Voegelin, at least according to his later recollections, was how to be liberated from the confining cage of neo-Kantian methodologies (and the positivism of Hans Kelsen, his teacher). Surely his experience of the American thinkers gave him a massive alternative to neo-Kantianism.

Sixth, Voegelin, of course, returned to America--in flight from the Nazis in the 1930's and after holding the Max Weber Chair at Munich in the 1960's. It is interesting to compare his reaction to America in the latter half of the twentieth century to his reaction in the earliest, and formative, visit. He describes with alarm, amazement, and humor the wide variety of bizarre and intellectually preposterous ideas afloat in America, both indigenous (behaviorism and "egalitarian holy rollers") and imported (e.g., "hermeneutical profundities"). In this lunatic asylum atmosphere, there were ideas of such shallowness that, Voegelin claims, they would have
been rejected even by thinkers in the Weimar Republic, as dubious as was intellectual culture in that era. But that was precisely the intellectual culture Voegelin was being liberated from by his American visit in the 1920's!

Did American pragmatism have the strength or the perseverance to cope with the onslaught of ideology? Does it today? Or, to put the question slightly differently, could the notion of the triadic cycle in American pragmatism ultimately satisfy Voegelin's questioning unrest?