



# The Divine's Presence. Conditions for Interpretation in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This text is dedicated to uncovering conditions for interpretation in the philosophy of Eric Voegelin. According to Voegelin, human existence is a matter of interpretation and its essence is constituted in tension towards the so-called divine ground of reality, i.e. nonobjective transcendence. I argue that the condition for any understanding of the human being, as well as the reorientation of human existence, is the divine presence dwelling in language, in history and in the subject itself. However, it is not a presence of some kind of object, content, or being – rather, it is a unrepresentable ‘flow’ or ‘flux’ of presence, a flow that instils a primordial mobility in reality and orients man in his being.

**Keywords:** Eric Voegelin, hermeneutics, the divine's presence, transcendence, interpretation

**Słowa kluczowe:** Eric Voegelin, hermeneutyka, boska obecność, transcencja, interpretacja

In this article, I intend to disclose conditions for 1) interpreting the language of transcendence and 2) reorienting man's existence in the philosophy of Eric Voegelin.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> According to Michael Morrisey's periodization, Voegelin's philosophy could be divided into three stages. In the first – beginning in 1928 and ending around 1950 – Voegelin primarily engaged himself in political and legal sciences; in the nineteen-fifties his efforts were focused at developing the philosophy of political order and history; and in the last phase, which began in the early nineteen-sixties and lasted until the philosopher's death, Voegelin developed his own, unique thought which revolved around the existential theory of consciousness (p. 17). Although sub-phases can be distinguished in the last period, it nevertheless forms a relatively unified whole. In this article, I am going to focus on this last stage of Voegelin's philosophising. M.P. Morrisey, *Consciousness and Transcendence: The Theology of Eric Voegelin*, London 1994.

My subject is hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, and my main focus is the philosopher, Eric Voegelin. Voegelin's philosophy is at odds with theories emphasizing the foundational character of sense perception; in contrast to these theories, he argues that the meaningful experiences requiring interpretation are, in fact, experiences of transcendence. To a certain extent, this transcendence coincides with the divine or rather the 'divine ground of reality'. It would be wrong, however, for one to presume that Voegelin's hermeneutic has a 'regional' or 'peripheral' character on the basis of these few sentences. Quite the contrary, transcendence here means the 'essence of man', that which is the most internal to his being. Following Heidegger, one might say that for Voegelin, transcendence has an ontological rather than an ontic character.

At this point, I must stress that I am not going to investigate the structure or process of understanding and interpretation as such, but instead, I intend to recover the conditions for interpreting the experiences of transcendence. We can say that this condition is what Voegelin calls either the flux or the flow of 'presence'. I am convinced that this 'presence' makes itself visible in three areas: in the object of understanding, in the medium of interpretation (in history), and lastly, in the subject of interpretation. The human being is the object of interpretation, but due to the vicissitudes of history, Voegelin's subject turns to the language in which the human being is expressed. Before going into the three mentioned dimensions, I would like to put the question of conditions in the context of the interpretation itself. Therefore, I will briefly present how Voegelin outlines the historical situation of the contemporary subject and what meaning he gives to hermeneutics.

## Interpretation

Reason constitutes man in his being, though both existence and reason itself are historically conditioned. Modernity – for the present study, its beginning seems to be of secondary significance – is a time of confusion and oblivion, claims Voegelin, a time of madness and loss, "a loss of personal and social order through loss of contact with nonexistent reality," and the oblivion of the 'existential tension' as a constituent of man's being.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, modernity is understood as the age of mindlessness and unreason. However, as Voegelin argues, man does not cease to be a man, the return to reason belongs to man's existence as an internal possibility. If the deformation of genuine thinking goes back for centuries, then modern the philosopher can go back for millennia to restore the proper philosophical question. "[...] the experiences which had been reduced to shadows by dogmatic incrustations, and seemed to be removed from the realm of the living by the successive attacks of antitheologism and antimetaphysycism, have returned from limbo by the back door of historical knowledge. To a field that apparently had been cleared of them so they would not disturb the futuristic dreams of *paradis artificiels*, they are being reintroduced as 'facts of

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<sup>3</sup> E. Voegelin, *Immortality: Experience and Symbol*, [in:] *idem, Published Essays: 1966–1985*, Baton Rouge 1990, p. 56.

history’ – through the exploration of myth, of Old and New Testament, of apocalyptic and Gnostic movements, through comparative religion, Assyriology, Egyptology, classical philology, and so forth.”<sup>4</sup> Modern man has the possibility and a sort of obligation to turn his attention to the texts of ancient authors in order to recover the original meaning of the philosophical question. In this sense, the philosophical restoration of past thinking is a form of *therapeia*.<sup>5</sup> There is a hermeneutical turn that makes the retrieval of classic texts for the sake of saving man possible. It is no exaggeration to say the fate of man hangs in the balance and depends upon *anamnesis*, the recollection of old symbols. Indeed, philosophy practiced by Voegelin is in a certain sense, a search for salvation, not in the afterlife, however, but in the ancient ‘stories’ of the search for truth. In the case of the Cologne born philosopher, these are primarily the works of presocratics, Plato and Aristotle, and in the case of religious figures, St. Paul, St. Augustine and Anselm of Canterbury.

Voegelin’s sees his notion of inquiry as an “anamnetic venture to recover presence from ‘general mess of imprecision of feeling’” but if we do not “immerse ourselves now in the flow of presence [...],”<sup>6</sup> there will be no recovered meaning. The philosopher (interpreter) is like a diver for he must dive into the flow of history and symbols. The latter plays a key role for, according to Voegelin, neither texts nor specific philosophical or religious concepts, but rather symbols are the objects of properly understood interpretation. However, symbols can be briefly described as the language of transcendence or the articulation of the experiences of transcendence. Symbols can lose their meaning – and they actually did in the course of Western history – through the separation of engendering formative experiences from the engendered language. In effect, the word becomes largely incomprehensible.

Voegelin sharply distinguishes signs referring to objects of the external world from symbols emerging from the experiences of transcendence. The meaning of the former is understood theoretically and practically, the meaning of the latter is understood only when the apprehension is existential and only when the aforementioned immersion occurs. The proper understanding of symbols cannot be based on a semantic approach because then, all instances of transcendence would be modelled after subject-object relations. If this is the case, the symbols become a mass of ‘dead truth’ and ‘broken images’. Conversely, symbols are meant to evoke in one’s consciousness “[a] corresponding movement of participatory consciousness,”<sup>7</sup> they are supposed to form one’s existence, to draw one into a ‘flow of presence’. All language of transcendence requires re-enactment, a kind of existential internalisation. To put it briefly, symbols need to be understood from within and not from the outside. The truth conveyed by them “must be acquired by an act of meditative articulation and

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> J. Hallowell, *Existence in Tension: Man in Search for his Humanity*, [in:] *Eric Voegelin’s Search for Order in History. Expanded Edition*, S. McKnight (ed.), Lanham 1987, pp. 102–103.

<sup>6</sup> E. Voegelin, *Immortality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 79, 80.

<sup>7</sup> *Idem*, *Wisdom and the Magic of Extreme*, [in:] *idem*, *Published Essays...*, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

thereby made an ordering force in existence.”<sup>8</sup> To understand is to incarnate, to assimilate and to inscribe in one’s own life.<sup>9</sup> However, this does not imply an exact repetition of the motivating experience, for this is impossible and undesirable – the interpreter’s task is to penetrate into the movement of existence as a whole from which the plenitude of experiences and symbols emerge. Finally, symbols are meant to draw man into what Voegelin designates as the ‘*metaxy*’ or ‘In-Between of existence’, i.e. a search for meaning and the truth of existence that occurs neither in the plane of immanence nor transcendence but between them. Thus, interpretation belongs to the area of *metaxy*: “The reflections, in order to evoke the field, had to encounter into the In-Between reality, into the divine movement and counter-movement, and into the meaning of the language symbols arising from the *metaxy* as the articulations of the truth. They had to accept the symbols as the carriers of a truth that could, and should, be made further intelligible by a reflective inquiry into their meaning.”<sup>10</sup> To put it briefly, if symbols belong to the mysterious In-Between, then interpretation must also move in the intermediate area.

## Language

There is a certain magic in language – its power can affect man’s consciousness. Voegelin acknowledges, after Gorgias, that speech is indeed a *dynastes megas*, a powerful thing as within it resides the power to orient man’s existence, speech can lure one into the deformation of existence or push towards the formation. The metaphor of magic, of power to transform, is quite accurate for it indicates the ambivalence of language. This is also precisely why it should be supplemented with a different approach, argues Voegelin. Therefore, he recurses to Plato’s tale of Er the Pamphylian, a hero and messenger who died and came back to life with a tale of the afterlife. After death, men are judged according to the justice of their life: “If, for example, there were any who had been the cause of many deaths, or had betrayed or enslaved cities or armies, or been guilty of any other evil behaviour, for each and all of their offences they received punishment ten times over, and the rewards of beneficence and justice and holiness were in the same proportion.” (*Republic* 615 b-c). At some point of the journey, just before meeting Lachesis, the daughter of Necessity, a prophet emerges with a speech of genius (*daimon*) not allotted to man, but chosen by him instead. An event occurs, somehow beyond the time and space of everyday experience, beyond the routine of everyday life, where and when man chooses his destiny. This is the hour of greatest peril for that is when man chooses his fate and it would be good, Socrates states, that each man should “be able to learn and may find someone who will make him able to learn and discern between good and evil, and so to choose always and everywhere the better life as he has opportunity” (*Republic*

<sup>8</sup> *Idem, What is History?*, [in:] *idem, What is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, Baton Rouge 1990, p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> *Idem, Immortality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem, What is History?*, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

618c). After this, the souls drink from the river of *Lete* and are then scattered across the earth, but Er was spared this fate, he remembered everything he saw and passed this story on, which Socrates later passed on, and Voegelin passes it on many centuries after, this tale is “the tale that was saved and will save if we let us be persuaded by it.”<sup>11</sup> The magical power of language is thus harnessed and supplemented by the gentle persuasive power of salvation. According to Voegelin, this is one of the many stories providing the possibility to recover the original question of existence.

Man desires to understand himself and also the comprehensive reality to which he is bound: “persons living in an order have opinions about the particular meaning that order has. In this sense, self-interpretation is always part of the reality which we live. This is the reality of order, of political order, or as we might say, of history.”<sup>12</sup> In short, to be a human is to be an interpreter.<sup>13</sup> Interpretation is an endless process since one does not establish themselves in being and their life remains an open field of possibilities; there always remains something that eludes understanding, a mystery inherent to existence. And yet man constantly renews his efforts to understand the meaning of existence. This would be impossible without a symbolic language which illuminates and renders the complex structure of man’s being in reality intelligible, claims Voegelin. Language gives us ourselves and articulates the reality. Through language and within it we find our place within the being. It would be helpful, in fact, to point out that Hans-Georg Gadamer underlines the *Sprachlichkeit der Sache*, whereas Voegelin insists on *Sachlichkeit der Sprache*, as Lawrance puts it (Lawrance, p. 326). Certainly, Voegelin would agree with Gadamer that our interactions with reality are ‘worded’ but for the author of *Order and History*, the ultimate subject matter of language is the meaning of existence and man’s position in being – these issues call for expression and understanding.

Symbolical language, the language of transcendence, stores a kind of mobility or restlessness which can move man into a quest for meaning and truth, and thus a good life. Why is this so? Here, Voegelin is in agreement with Ricoeur concerning the linguistic character of religious and religious-related phenomena; for both philosophers, these phenomena are known to us only insofar as they are articulated. However, Ricoeur remains on this level, while Voegelin is convinced that language allows us to explore the experiences motivating given symbolism. For him, it is a reciprocal relationship – language is not simply an access-giving route to experience, it is an experience itself, or rather an event itself, a ‘moment’ in which the human subject responds

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<sup>11</sup> *Idem, Wisdom...*, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

<sup>12</sup> *Idem, Configurations of History*, [in:] *idem, Published Essays...*, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>13</sup> Among scholars it was Frederick Lawrence who emphasised the hermeneutical character of Voegelin’s philosophy. “Voegelin’s reflective stance in the present is anamnetically attentive to the manifold of self-interpretations of human beings from Paleolithic times. So it is a hermeneutic enterprise.” (Lawrance, p. 314). However, Lawrance restricts his interpretation to relating ‘some issues’ of Voegelin’s work to the hermeneutic philosophy. I, in turn, try to prove that this philosophy has a deeply hermeneutic character even though it differs from the hermeneutic phenomenology of early Heidegger and Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy. F. Lawrence, *Voegelin and Theology as Hermeneutical and Political*, [in:] *Voegelin and the Theologian. Ten Studies in Interpretation*, J. Kirby, W.M. Thompson (eds.), New York–Toronto 1983, pp. 314–355.

to the original movement coming from beyond the immanence. Each story, each symbolism – no matter whether it is philosophical or religious – is not only the story of the quest for meaning, it is part of the quest itself.<sup>14</sup> It would be entirely wrong, argues Voegelin, to think of experience and articulation as separated realities. It is inadequate to think there is an experience of transcendence first – an initiation followed by successive phases that would gradually fade away or culminate in some kind of finale – which is then followed by language. In his later works, those from the late 1970s, Voegelin presents this issue in yet another fashion; although it is not necessarily wrong to think of symbols as products of human activity – such an approach is not only insufficient but worse as it doesn't get to the heart of the matter. There is a propositional language that has a referential character and this function is fulfilled in the subject's relations to the objects of so-called external world. However, there is yet another form of relationship between reality and language: the latter is emerging from the former on the occasion of the theophanic event as the illuminative 'word' or 'story'. In this case, the activity of the human subject is left in the background and instead, reality plays the crucial role; the word is spoken by man but only as an answer given to the epiphany of reality – thus man's speech is evoked by the reality:<sup>15</sup> "The emerging word is the truth of the reality from which it emerges; it is what we call a 'symbol' in the pregnant sense."<sup>16</sup>

At this point, we must revert to the concept of *metaxy* since it plays a central role in Voegelin's philosophical project. Experiences of transcendence belong to the *metaxy* of consciousness, In-Between, which is precisely the site of man's movement beyond the objectivity constituted by the intentional consciousness, and at the same time, a place of the arrival of transcendence. Here, in the intermediate sphere, the movement of existence takes place and here the search for meaning occurs, which has a concrete structure of divine movement (the arrival of transcendence) and man's countermovement. This is "tension of the In-Between (*metaxy*)."<sup>17</sup> The experience of tension has many facets and it can be described in more ways than one:

Whatever may be the status of man as the subject of the experience, he does experience in his soul a tension between two poles of being, of which one, called temporal, is within himself, while the other lies outside of himself, yet cannot be identified as an object in the temporal

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<sup>14</sup> E. Voegelin, *The Gospel and Culture*, [in:] *idem, Published Essays...*, *op. cit.*, p. 201; *idem, Order and History IV: The Ecumenic Age*, Columbia 2000, pp. 104–105.

<sup>15</sup> For this reason, I believe, some theses of James L. Wiser are unjustified. He writes: "Not only do symbols fail to capture it [reality] but human consciousness, itself cannot fully explore it". Later he adds that Voegelin should be counted among so-called mystic philosophers which I agree with but Wiser draws a conclusion with which I disagree: "Not only is philosophy personal and not only is language intrinsically misleading, but the engendering philosophical experiences themselves reveal the ultimate mystery of being" (p. 134, 135). Language of reality is analogous, that is true; however, language is not meant to capture, but to evoke as it is not leading us astray, it points to reality instead – partly precisely because symbols arise on the occasion of reality's epiphany or to be more correct, they are epiphany. J. Wiser, *Philosophy as Inquiry and Persuasion*, [in:] *Eric Voegelin's Search...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 128–138.

<sup>16</sup> E. Voegelin, *The Beginning and The Beyond. A Meditation*, [in:] *idem, What is History?...*, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>17</sup> *Idem, What is Political Reality?*, [in:] *idem, Anamnesis. On the Theory of History and Politics*, Columbia 2002, p. 352.

being of the world [...]. In the course of the experience neither does eternal being become reified as an object in time nor is the experiencing soul transfigured from temporal into eternal being.<sup>18</sup>

Symbols emerge in the *metaxy* as the interpretation or, as Voegelin calls it, ‘illumination’ of the search. Language engendered in and by theophanic events has its meaning located in the in-between experiences – symbols express, and thus make known, movements in the intermediary sphere of reality. And, as Voegelin points out, for this reason they have ‘metaleptic status’.<sup>19</sup>

One of Voegelin’s most innovative and original ideas is that within reality, there is a sphere that is neither purely human nor divine. Everything that happens in *metaxy*, including language, has the peculiar character of ‘metaleptic’ or ‘mutual participation’, and thus everything bears the mark of mutuality.<sup>20</sup> The question is now what this means specifically for language? It’s best to give the floor to Voegelin himself: “Language symbols expressing the movement are not invented by an observer who does not participate in the movement but are engendered in the event of participation itself. The ontological status of symbols is both human and divine.”<sup>21</sup> Certainly, Voegelin knew these words would attract attention and demand an answer to the question of how exactly the divine is present in language. He knew the issue called for clarification, although at the same time, he was aware that philosophical thinking reaches its limits here.

Here we arrive at the issue of revelation. Conventionally, the term is associated with Christianity or monotheistic faith as such a revelation is opposed to ‘natural reason’, and therefore to philosophy. Accordingly, in his early writings Voegelin employed the term with reference to Israelite-Christian, or ‘pneumatic’, experiences of transcendence in contrast to the Greek, ‘noetic’, development of experiences of order.<sup>22</sup> However, he later abandoned this view in favour of an inclusive approach – revelation is a constitutive element of all theophanic events and thus of all instances of the search for meaning and order. In short, revelation signifies the presence, the manifestation, or the movement of transcendence in either man’s consciousness or in the cosmos, i.e. comprehensive reality. Furthermore, it would be wrong, to think of revelation as concerned only with the arrival of the divine since it also renders visible the particular structures of existence furnishing man’s ‘conditions’ for receiving and comprehending revelation as well as the structure of reality (the cosmos) which

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<sup>18</sup> *Idem, Eternal Being in Time*, [in:] *idem, Anamnesis...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 321–323.

<sup>19</sup> *Idem, Order and History IV...*, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem, Structures of Consciousness*, [in:] *idem, The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers 1939–1985*, Columbia–London 2004, pp. 356–357.

<sup>21</sup> *Idem, The Gospel...*, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>22</sup> “When the modal accent is put on the human seeking-and-receiving pole and expressed in a way that the knowledge experienced about the *metaxy* and the order of things becomes dominant, we speak of philosophy. When the modal accent is put on the divine giving-and-commanding pole in such a way that human knowledge of the experience is reduced to a communication of the divine irruption, we speak of revelation”. *Idem, Eternal Being...*, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

guides the general quest for meaning of which revelation is a part.<sup>23</sup> For this reason, all theophanic events are events of appearing or, as Voegelin prefers to call it, ‘luminosity’, and as such they are constitutive for thinking. Revelation does not come down to showing the anthropomorphic God. The term signifies the non-objective manifestation of transcendence, the coming of divinity devoid of any content, or as Voegelin himself says: “the fact of revelation is its content.”<sup>24</sup> God means here a divine ground of reality, or simply transcendence, the origin of reality, and it can be called an *arche*, *aitia*, or *causa sui*. Thus, Voegelin does not hesitate to write that God reveals himself as the *Nous* and, as a consequence, man’s life of reason (philosophy) is grounded on revelation.<sup>25</sup> As I have already written above, this leads to the conclusion that the philosopher’s ground is the same non-reality that appears in manifestations commonly labelled as religious. “Unless we want to indulge in extraordinary theological assumptions, the God who appeared to philosophers, and who elicited from Parmenides the exclamation “Is!”, was the same God who revealed himself to Moses as the ‘I am who (Or: what) I am’ as the God who is what He is in the concrete theophany to which man responds.”<sup>26</sup>

Going back to language, we must note that Voegelin was convinced that the ancient texts express an awareness of the metaleptic character of symbols. He found traces of this consciousness in Plato’s *Laws* in the Myth of the Puppet in the passage in which an Athenian Stranger sums up his speech “when it has received such an account either from a god or from a man who knows” (*Laws* 645b), and in the writings of the Old Testament when the prophets write about the word spoken by God, for example “Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah” (Is 38:4).<sup>27</sup> These passages should not be taken literally, as if God would physically speak a word to a Jewish prophet or convey a story to some Greek philosopher. Symbols express

phases of the movement as it becomes articulate in its self-illuminating process. There is no In-Between other than the *metaxy* experienced in man’s existential tension toward the divine ground of being [...] there is no Saving Tale other than the tale of the divine pull to be followed by man; and there is no cognitive articulation of existence other than noetic consciousness in which the movement becomes luminous to itself.<sup>28</sup>

In order to show how the revelatory character of the symbols should be understood, Voegelin utilises the symbol of ‘immortality’ as an example.<sup>29</sup> The symbol of immortality does not present to man an object or property of an object, it rather evokes the emergence of ‘a consciousness of participation in a non-existent reality’. Its function is existential and evocative, not representative. On the most basic level, immortality can be understood as a property of a subject commonly known as ‘gods’ or ‘soul’ (or

<sup>23</sup> This is stressed by Keulman. See K. Keulman, *The Tension of Consciousness: The Pneumatic Differentiation*, [in:] *Voegelin and the Theologian...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 87–89.

<sup>24</sup> E. Voegelin, *The Beginning...*, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>25</sup> *Idem*, *Order and History IV...*, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 292–293.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem*, *The Beginning...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 179–180.

<sup>28</sup> *Idem*, *The Gospel...*, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>29</sup> *Idem*, *Immortality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

at least its noetic part); in the Christian context, it can also mean a bodily resurrection of man assured by the resurrection of Christ – in each case, it designates the duration of a certain thing. However, immortality can also articulate a human being towards a reality that transcends the categories of time and space, a reality not limited by the processes of coming into being and perishing. According to Voegelin, the language of transcendence in its proper function does not denote the objects of the external world, but expresses the dynamics of mutual participation in the *metaxy* of consciousness. Revelation signifies the very movement of the divine, the arrival of transcendence, the pull of the golden and sacred cord.

Voegelin states: “the spiritualists who go through the experience all agree on the sacrality of a language in which the truth of divine reality becomes articulate. The experience and the language of truth belong together as parts of a process that derives its sacrality from the flux of divine presence in it.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, if symbols really do affect consciousness if they appeal to man, then this is due to the presence of the divine in language, to the peculiar mobility and restlessness residing in the language. This is, obviously, a presence that cannot be represented, that cannot be objectified, a presence devoid of content – it is an attraction, a pull coming from beyond. Voegelin insisted that “the fact of revelation is its content,” thereby meaning that symbols reveal nothing but the movement of revelation – a presence that is invisible. This is the paradoxical manifestation of the “non-present Beyond of [sic] all divine presence.”<sup>31</sup> Symbols draw the interpreter into the reality of transcendence – not into another world (other-world of different objects; a world behind our world), but into conscious participation. This is why, Voegelin claims, philosophical works worthy of this name, as well as Christian stories and myths from all over the world, although they may use very different words and may have different content, all have a divine presence hidden and trembling within them – a call, an appeal to transcend, to enter into conscious participation into the divine ground.

## History

All great stories that provide man with the possibility to rediscover the meaning of existence come from the past and thus belong to history. “For experiences and their symbolizations are not self-contained units, carrying the whole of their meaning in themselves, they are events in the process of reality and as such are related to the past and future.”<sup>32</sup> What is true for symbols is also true for an interpreter. Only insofar as that the reader is a historical being who can turn his attention to history. Of course, he cannot go beyond history, he knows it only from within, being always involved in it with his whole existence. There is a full agreement on this between Gadamer and Voegelin. The latter, however, considered himself the philosopher of history *par*

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<sup>30</sup> *Idem, The Beginning...*, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>31</sup> *Idem, Order and History IV...*, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 234.

*excellence*. This raises a burning question: what is history for Voegelin and how did he understand it?

History is not an object, its beginning and end are beyond our reach; for us, it is a definite infinity which is happening all the time. One important thing Voegelin insisted on was the conviction that although the past is decisive for history, it is not solely concerned with it. There is a specific experience of the present, a moment when events unfold, decisions are being made, and things simply happen. At this point emerges an experience of history as happening now, in the present, when constellations of events are understood as ‘memorable’ and as historical in the sense of making history. On these occasions “present is constituted as a past to be remembered in the future.”<sup>33</sup> Only later, claims Voegelin, does history dissociate into *res gestae* and their account. Some events are epochal because their occurrence is accompanied by an awareness of their historicity.

However, one may ask what such events may be? Voegelin found history to be something different from political history, or from the history of wars and conquests, or of cultures and societies. History is constituted in theophanic events, in experiences of transcendence, in which emerges the luminosity, awareness and symbolical expression of the constitution of reality, i.e. the tension between immanence and transcendence. Correlatively, instances of transcendence’s experiences are not unrelated singularities, or odd occurrences limited to one’s psychic life. Each experience is an experience of a concrete person, nevertheless, experiences form a whole – later experiences are related to the earlier ones and they assume, revise, criticise, or supplement them. For example, the Ionian insights function as the ‘background of consciousness’ in the case of later instances of thinking of Plato or Aristotle – neither Plato’s symbolism of the *metaxy* nor Aristotle’s notion of desire to know can be apprehended without taking into account earlier philosophy: “The Ionian discovery constitutes a field of noetic consciousness in which the thinkers advance from compact truth of the process to the differentiated truth of the discovering consciousness. What begins as an insight into mystery and structure of the process leads on to the experience that has become articulate in the insight, and further on to its recognition as an act of consciousness by which man participates in the process of reality. The ‘thing’ that is called man discovers itself as having consciousness; and as a consequence, it discovers man’s consciousness as the area of reality in which the process of reality becomes luminous to itself.”<sup>34</sup>

Thus, experiences of transcendence form a series, a chain of repeating encounters between man and transcendence and this series is characterised by increasing the clarity of insight – earlier insights lose (but only to a certain extent) their validity in favour of more acute discoveries. Voegelin was convinced that the ontological structure of reality remains constant; what varies and changes is the consciousness of it, a degree of so-called ‘differentiation’.<sup>35</sup> Theophanic events are events of differentiation of consciousness; history is a process of transition from ‘compact’, mythical

<sup>33</sup> *Idem, What is History?...*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> *Idem, Order and History IV...*, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

<sup>35</sup> *Idem, The Gospel...*, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

conceptualisations of reality to differentiated insights – at the centre of this process stands the discovery of transcendence as the grounds of reality and, correlatively, the awareness of discovery as occurring in a special structural element of man's being later expressed by Plato through the symbol of *metaxy*.<sup>36</sup> There was a major development in Voegelin's thinking, in the 1950s, he was primarily interested in uncovering the order of history as it emerges from the history of man's search for order and the meaning of existence; while from the beginning of the 1960s, he devoted himself to the study of the experiences of transcendence of consciousness by virtue of which man is allowed to participate in the ground of order. This theoretical revision is marked by a break in the publication of Voegelin's opus magnum, *Order and History*, for the second and third volumes, *The World of Polis* and *Plato and Aristotle*, which were published in 1957, the fourth volume – *Ecumenic Age* – was published only in 1975. In the first period, Voegelin was inclined to understand history as a process of quasi-linear differentiation – although it was occasionally disturbed by periods of regression and opposition and recurrence to mythical symbolisation, the order of history was, in fact, discernible in the history of order. In turn, in *Ecumenic Age* and also in later writings, Voegelin admitted that though there is certainly such a thing as meaningful advance in man's understanding of reality, this process cannot be arranged in a single, unified line of development; therefore, he claims it is justified to think of history as a mystery engaged in the process of revelation.

The breaking forth does in fact not occur as a single manifestation of truth in history but assumes the form of an open historical field of major and minor divine-human encounters, widely dispersed in time and space over the societies who together are mankind in history. Nevertheless, in spite of the pluralistic historical form, what breaks forth in this field is the one truth of the one reality.<sup>37</sup>

Let us now take a look at two ways of conceptualising history. In the 1960s, Voegelin wrote that in and through experiences of transcendence, the structure of reality becomes luminous to man – the arrival of transcendence reveals that reality is permeated with the presence of the transcendence, i.e. a mode of non-objective being. "Once an experience of transcendence has actually occurred that is sufficiently intense and articulate to disintegrate the primary experience of the cosmos and its symbolism, events can be discovered as affecting the order of man and society in its relations to eternal being."<sup>38</sup> These events are historical and 'epochal' says Voegelin, for in them, the truth of reality and human existence become luminous, i.e. visible and known. On the one hand, the events occur in a definite setting, in a specific time and place, and they are suffered by a concrete man. On the other hand, they occur in

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<sup>36</sup> "The insight of noetic experience dissolves the image of reality produced by the primary cosmic experience. A de-divinised world takes the place of a cosmos full of gods, and correlatively, the divine is concentrated into a world-transcendent ground of being. In the post-noetic dispensation, 'immanent' and 'transcendent' are spatio-metaphorical indices attributed to realms of reality that have become, respectively, the world of things in space and time, and the divine being of the ground beyond space and time". *Idem, What is Political...*, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

<sup>37</sup> *Idem, The Beginning...*, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

<sup>38</sup> *Idem, What is History?...*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

the *metaxy*, in the site of transcending or, as Voegelin would like to say after T.S. Eliot, at the intersection of time with timelessness. Thus, Voegelin recognises the ‘transcendental stratum’ of history – the word ‘transcendental’ here does not designate the subjective condition for historical occurrences, but “the realisation of the eternal being in time.”<sup>39</sup> Or, to put another other way, according to Voegelin ‘transcendental’ does not signify the condition for divine presence; conversely, it is the presence that has a transcendental character. On its part, the transcendental element ensures a unity of history and unifies the dispersed actions of man. “It is particularly important to note that the dimension of time in which history constitutes itself does not correspond to the time of the external world, in which the life of man with its somatic foundation leaves its trace, but to the dimension which is immanent to consciousness.”<sup>40</sup> Here ‘immanent’ designates the essence of consciousness – *metaxy*.

However, it seems that Voegelin realised that transcendental language might not be best suited to express his view. The categories of *metaxy* and presence emerged at the forefront of conceptualisation of history instead. As early as in *Ewiges Zein in der Zeit* we read: “We remain in the ‘in-between’, in the temporal flow of experience in which eternity is nevertheless present. This flow cannot be dissected into a past, a present, and future of world-time, for at every point of the flow there persists the tension toward eternal being transcending time,”<sup>41</sup> and in *Ecumenic Age* he stated: “Although historical events are founded in the external world and have calendar dates, they also partake of the divine lasting out-of-time. The historical dimension of humanity is neither world-time nor eternity but the flux of presence in the *Metaxy*.”<sup>42</sup> As I have noted earlier, this presence is nothing like Heidegger’s *Vorhandenheit* or Derrida’s notion of presence, the presence of some object, content or ‘transcendental signified’. The flow or flux of presence designates the experience of transcendence’s arrival out of its remoteness into the existence of man and through this, the disclosure of “presence that is the flow of the presence from the beginning of the world to its end.”<sup>43</sup> In all historical events in a proper sense, and thus in all meaningful stories, there is the same element – a constant. This is the presence of transcendence, of divine ground, that according to Voegelin’s reading of Plato, was named in *Republic* as the *parousia of epekeina*. This *parousia* is responsible for the unity of history and all human responses to the call of transcendence. All quests for meaning and truth, as well as all stories of them, have the aforementioned magical power of draning one into existential search due to the presence. Past events and yesterday’s tales are not so past – they have ability to move and affect man in his existence because all men are constituted in tension toward the transcendence.

So all past events are present in the sense of the indelible presence and therefore belong to the same structural problem and the same reality in the historical process of compactness and

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> *Idem, What is Political Reality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

<sup>41</sup> *Idem, Eternal Being...*, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

<sup>42</sup> *Idem, Order and History IV...*, *op. cit.*, p. 375.

<sup>43</sup> *Idem, Immortality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

differentiation. And therefore do we have a history – and, you see, a history that is intelligible. What makes the history intelligible is the *parousia* in all cases.<sup>44</sup>

The past is accessible to us, it presents an opportunity to our present for reforming our existence and entering into the search for truth – the condition for this is the ‘indelible presence’ of the divine ground. History – and everything that can be described as historical – is permeated with the presence of transcendence. The presence is neither lost nor gone, instead, it still resides within the accounts of the past, but it flows equally through our present.

## Subject

Modern man is one who interprets the various symbolisms transmitted from the past. He is one who turns his attention to late stories to embark on the path for truth. But why? We need to ask Voegelin what it is in the subject that enables him to seek the truth and why he is able to move beyond the present state of knowledge or opinion and ask about his own existence and interpret the odd language of transcendence.

The issue comes down to reason. Or rather, the issue comes down to the question of what is the reason? Firstly, to ward off possible misconceptions, Voegelin acknowledges that reason should not be considered in itself, for it is bound to being (‘structured reality’) as the ‘*organon*’ of its exploration and ‘clearing’ of existence. Secondly, reason is not an object, a thing nor a property of the subject, but a ‘thing-less something’, a ‘field of nonexistence inherent to existence’. This non-objective character attributed to reason is correlative to the main function of thinking, i.e. unveiling, understanding and expressing the “tension toward its [man’s] ground.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the non-objective character of reason is responsible for generating multiple meanings of *nous*, which is at the same time, an awareness of existence out of ground, the movement of transcending toward the ground, the capacity to produce concepts, and an effort to incorporate reason into one’s own life, i.e. the virtuous life of the ancients, and this is by no means an exhaustive list.

Reason as ‘clearing’ should not be identified with intentional consciousness and the process of the constitution of meaning, instead it explores the reality in the *metaxy*. Therefore, while it is legitimate to say that man is its carrier, it cannot be said that he is its subject. The most basic function of reason, as Voegelin understands it, is not a cognition of the object, but rather an awareness of coming out of transcendent reality and being directed toward it. *Nous* is the faculty of man that recognises the transitional character of existence, it is a self-consciousness of being a site of the arrival of transcendence – an unrepresentable movement of the spirit. In later writings, Voegelin argued that man emerges as an event of participation, i.e. an event of openness within the reality, and this event-character belongs to the clearing now called

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<sup>44</sup> *Idem, Structures of Consciousness...*, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

<sup>45</sup> *Idem, Anxiety and Reason*, [in:] *idem, What is History?...*, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

the luminosity of consciousness.<sup>46</sup> So for Voegelin, at the most basic level, clearing means a consciousness of coming from and being oriented towards the ground of reality – reality that is out of immanence. Transcendence cannot be seen, for it is not a thing among other things, it also cannot be presented as an idea or a concept; it's coming manifests only within reality and within existence and it therefore becomes known as the 'direction' of existence and correlatively as man's exposure to it.

Not surprisingly, according to Voegelin, reason is not self-sufficient, autonomous and purely natural. However, it would be equally wrong to suppose the opposite, namely that reason is dependent and somehow supernatural. Indeed, claims Voegelin, great difficulties arise "from the constitution of reason through revelation" although he had no hesitation in recognising that "the life of reason is, thus, firmly rooted in revelation."<sup>47</sup> As we remember, *metaxy* is the site of the encounter between man and the ground – the place of their mutual participation. This implies that reason, within the limits inherent to *metaxy*, partakes in the divine ground, and conversely, that ground is somehow present in reason and understanding. "The ground is constitutive of existence through being present in it. This structure of consciousness is expressed, with regard to personal existence, through the Platonic and Thomasic ideas of *methexis* and *participation* with regard to existence of man in society, through the Aristotelian idea of *homonoia*, the participation of all men in the same *nous*."<sup>48</sup>

Certainly, divine ground is present in man's consciousness as far as theophanic events are concerned, but this is not our issue now. We are interested in a condition for more or less fully developed theophanic events, a sort of primordial presence of the ground in consciousness – a presence from which emerge the later phases of the search for ground. We ask, rather, whether Voegelin distinguishes a kind of ontological presence? In order to answer this question, let us turn to Voegelin's interpretation of St. Anselm's *Proslogion*. We should note that the author of *Order and History* is disinterested in ontological proof for the existence of God. Voegelin rather aims at recovering a certain moment that lurks behind and drives the whole enterprise of quest for truth and *fides quarens intellectum*. Anselm already believed in God before he developed his proof. For Voegelin, meditation is a reflective response to the grace of faith, i.e. to the divine appeal. "*Proslogion* is not a treatise about God and his existence, but a prayer of love by the creature to the Creator to grant a more perfect vision of His divinity."<sup>49</sup> Anselm does not pray to God for any object or being; meditation (an effort to achieve a better understanding of God) is here both an end and a means to an end. Through reflection, the Christian thinker arrives at the understanding of God as absolute perfection. If, however, God is apprehended as absolute perfection, something must have led the thinker to recognise man as an imperfect being, stresses Voegelin. And Anselm has no doubt that man is imperfect: "Come on, little man, get away from your wordly occupations for a while, escape from your tumultuous thoughts." (I) How then does the idea or even a mere

<sup>46</sup> *Idem, Structures of Consciousness...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 356–357.

<sup>47</sup> *Idem, Order and History IV...*, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

<sup>48</sup> *Idem, Anxiety and Reason...*, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>49</sup> *Idem, The Beginning...*, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

premonition of absolute perfection appear in the mind of man and how, correlatively, does an awareness of man's imperfection arise? According to Voegelin, this is due to the divine illumination: "the divine reality lets the light of its perfection fall into the soul; the illumination of the soul arouses the awareness of man's existence as a state of imperfection; and this awareness provokes the human movement in response to the divine appeal."<sup>50</sup> Here, we touch the primordial presence of the ground in the subject; it is a presence that mobilises and guides further search – a presence that enables us to recognise our own imperfection. On the one hand, not much can be said of this presence for it is not something to be represented, exposed to the light of intentional consciousness, or included in the definition. It is a presence that stirs the consciousness and evokes the anxiety that can motivate the search, it is an original *kinesis*. On the other hand, this primordial presence can be understood in different ways and it evokes a plenitude of interpretations.

The classic philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, claims Voegelin, also embraced an experience of man's deficiency. Man is not his own *aitia*, he does not generate his own being and his fate is to perish at some point. From this basic experience arises the search for ultimate ground and the truth of existence – a quest that is inherent to human existence. It is not much, Voegelin seems to say, and he is well aware these experiences are not spectacular, but nevertheless, they are at the roots of the search and philosophy in general.<sup>51</sup> Actually, the problem stems from the oblivion of the aforementioned experiences in the philosophy of previous centuries, therefore their anamnesis and re-collection is a task of modern philosophy.

"The philosopher feels himself moved (*kinein*) by some unknown force to ask the questions; he feels himself drawn (*helkein*) into search. Sometimes the phrase used indicates the urgent desire in the questioning, as in the Aristotelian *tou eidenai oregontai*, and sometimes the compulsion to raise the question that rises from the experience is grandly elaborated, as in Plato's *Parable of the Cave* where the prisoner is moved by the unknown force to turn around (*periagoge*) and to begin his ascent to light."<sup>52</sup> The search for the truth of existence and God is conditioned by the divine presence in the subject. This *parousia* instils restlessness in the subject; it opens the possibility of knowing God and being known by God in events of mutual participation. The question is whether God's presence solely stimulates the search for divine, or whether it is a condition for understanding in some broader sense. The answer to this question is suggested by one of Voegelin's later texts, *The Structures of Consciousness*, where he reflects on the mystery of *metaxy*. Here, the notions of both In-Between and transcendence acquire a more general and, it seems, ontological meaning. The zero point, beyond which one can go no further, is the simple experience of reality man has. However, when we talk about knowing and knowledge, these simple experiences are not nearly enough, they must be supplemented by a certain desire and awareness. Firstly, one needs to want to know something in order to search for it. Secondly, one must be aware that he does not know it yet, but simultaneously he

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 195.

<sup>51</sup> *Idem*, *Reason: The Classic Experience*, [in:] *idem*, *Published Essays...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 268–269.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 269–270.

must be moved by some sort of preliminary knowledge for otherwise there would be no search at all. One is in a state of ignorance, but at the same time, he finds himself moving towards knowledge. Subject transcends his ignorance, or rather is involved in the process of transcending it, and this going beyond occurs in *media res*, in the In-Between. There is an actual ‘horizon of consciousness’ and what lies beyond it, claims Voegelin, and man in his search for knowledge finds himself in tension toward the as yet non-actual goal of cognising. We must conclude – not against Voegelin’s own words – that *metaxy* and transcendence are constitutive not only for the search of God but for all cases of understanding. Actually, as notes one of Voegelin’s former students, although we can talk about the proper experiences of transcendence, we are inclined to affirm the ‘experience in transcendence’, i.e. the fact that man in his existence always goes beyond what he currently knows and has at his disposal.<sup>53</sup> There is a kind of ‘transcendental’ restlessness that evokes the whole process of understanding, of transcending one’s own ignorance, and this condition is the *parousia*, the presence of the divine. For that reason, the classical philosophical question of the world’s order finally turns into a search for the ground of the world. The ground itself, says Voegelin, manifests in the unrest that motivates the inquiry. Man simply needs to discover this primeval presence. “He [man – T.N.] discovers the something in his humanity that is the site and sensorium of divine presence [...] When he participates in a theophanic event, his consciousness becomes cognitively luminous for his own humanity as constituted by his relation to the unknown god whose moving presence in his soul evokes the movement of response.”<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusions

Voegelin is quite clear: the tension of consciousness is not a tension of independent, autonomous theoretical reason but tension inherent to existence, as such it is an ‘existential tension’. *Nous*, intellect, reason – or whatever name we choose to use – is an ‘instrument of interpretation’ and part of existence in equal measure.<sup>55</sup> Or in other words, existence has a noetic (i.e. interpretative) structure. Existence should not be identified with a plain being for it is a being illuminated with interpretation. Thus, the creative restlessness of the reason imparts *metaxy* and transcendence to the structure of existence. Let us give the floor to Voegelin:

If anything, existence is nonfact of disturbing movement in the In-Between of ignorance and knowledge, of time and timeless, of imperfection and perfection, of hope and fulfilment, and ultimately of life and death. From the experience of this movement, from the anxiety of losing the right direction in this In-Between of darkness and light, arises the inquiry concerning the meaning of life. But it does arise only because life is experienced as man’s participation in

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<sup>53</sup> W.C. Havard, *Voegelin’s Changing Conception of History and Consciousness*, [in:] *Eric Voegelin’s Search for Order...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>54</sup> E. Voegelin, *Order and History IV...*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>55</sup> *Idem*, *On Debate and Existence*, [in:] *idem*, *Published Essays...*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

movement with direction to be found or missed; if man's existence were not a movement but fact, it would not only have no meaning but the question of meaning could not even arise.<sup>56</sup>

Man is a seeker, his existence is based on movement in search for the meaning of life. As researchers note, it was precisely the question of the meaning of existence that became the driving force of Voegelin's philosophy.<sup>57</sup> Due to the vicissitudes of history, the search for meaning became obsolete, but meaning can still be recovered. Man is affected by the primeval presence under any circumstances and history presents to him more than one opportunity to enter into the quest by the means of language. The Saving Tale of Er was preserved by Socrates, and it was then passed to Plato, and now it has been re-collected by Voegelin: "Our present, like any present, is a phase in the flux of divine presence in which we, as all men before us and after us, participate."<sup>58</sup>

Voegelin remains a relatively unknown philosopher, and not only among philosophers of religion, but this seems undeserved. Certainly, his thought challenges our habits of thinking and marks a shift from at least part of modern philosophising. In *The Gospel and Culture* he argues that there is no need to justify the presence of God in philosophy for God is already present in man's existence, even when under proper conditions it turns into a philosophically formed existence.<sup>59</sup> God is neither an unreasoned object of irrational faith nor a dead being. He is present in man, in history, and in language – notwithstanding, it is an elusive presence – a presence that demands interpretation. This, perhaps, should be an important point. The presence of transcendence is a condition for interpretation, God is indispensable to understanding, but man is the one who interprets. Aside from the obvious necessity of actual interpretation and of actual effort on the side of man – God's presence is not the only condition for understanding. According to Voegelin, although man is not the subject of reason, he is the one endowed with it.

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<sup>56</sup> *Idem*, *The Gospel...*, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>57</sup> W.C. Havard, *Voegelin's Changing...*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> *Idem*, *Order and History IV...*, *op. cit.*, p. 405.

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