

APPRAISAL

The Journal of the Society for Post-Critical and Personalist Studies

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Antonio Casado & Rodriguez-Arías

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Eric Voegelin's immanentism

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William Poteat: the primacy of the person



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across Voegelin's works *The New Science of Politics* (1952) and the three early volumes of *Order and History*. (1956-57). These made an indelible impression on him.

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EDITORIAL

We are still running several months late and I hope we can catch up soon, with the March issue in July-August and the October issue in November-December.

It is some time since we had a Re-Appraisal. In this issue we feature Hans Jonas, one of Heidegger's most prominent former pupils. Our two articles show something of the wide-ranging nature of his thinking, and I hope that we shall have a third article in the next issue.

Sharing wide interests and in Gnosticism in particular with Jonas, was Eric Voegelin on whom we include the first part of a long article on the controversial subject of Voegelin's exact relation to Christianity and a theistic world-view. The second part will appear in the next issue.

Finally David Rutledge provides an appraisal of the work of William Poteat, one of Michael Polanyi's most prominent followers in America.

My appeal in the last issue for help has brought forth a response from Mark Arnold, who lives in Oxford, and who will take up the post of Secretary in the Autumn. For three weeks in March I was incapacitated in hospital, and so this issue was further delayed. Colin Burch is providing valuable help with editing, and I would appreciate offers to take on other tasks, such as those of treasurer, webmaster and conference organizer. I have revamped the website, and payments can now be made via it, which will be of especial benefit to overseas subscribers. If you have not visited it for some time, you may need to click on 'Refresh' on your web browser to bring up the new version.

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HANS JONAS

1. Biography

Hans Jonas (1903-1993) read theology and philosophy in Freiburg, Berlin, Heidelberg and Marburg. He studied under the direction of three of the most influential Continental academics of the inter-war period: Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Bultmann. As a German citizen of Jewish descent, he despised the astounding success of National Socialism in his native country and abandoned it for England in 1934. He then moved to Palestine and returned to Europe in 1940, as a volunteer in the Jewish Brigade of the British Army. He took part in the Allies' invasion of Italy and celebrated the end of the Second World War in Udine. After the conflict, he moved back to Palestine and fought in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. He then taught philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which he left for McGill University and Carleton University in Canada. Eventually he settled in the United States of America, working chiefly at the New School for Social Research in New York. Jonas' early scholarly publications were devoted to the history and theology of Gnosticism. Later, though never abandoning altogether religious and theological issues, he started to write about philosophy of science and became a true pioneer in Anglophone bioethics. In the process, Jonas developed an articulate ethical theory centred upon the notion of human responsibility *vis-à-vis* the threat to life on Earth posed by late-modern socio-economic development. In 1993, not long before his death, he was awarded the Nonino Prize in Percoto, Udine.

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HANS JONAS' CONTRIBUTION TO BIOETHICS: 40 YEARS AFTER HIS 'PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIMENTING WITH HUMAN SUBJECTS'

Antonio Casado da Rocha & David Rodriguez-Arías

Abstract

This article aims to briefly present and assess the contribution of Hans Jonas to bioethics, a lively and expanding interdisciplinary field. Jonas's life spans the whole 20th century and his work is best known as a philosophy of responsibility for the technological civilization, but his contribution to health care and research ethics deserves to be more generally recognized. We claim that he made an important contribution to the birth of bioethics in the United States as a philosophical discipline 40 years ago, when Hans Jonas published a seminal essay about the ethics of human experimentation and organ transplantation. After reviewing the context and main themes in this contribution, in which Jonas opposed some aspects of the neurological criterion to determine death and identified the threat of depersonalizing forces present—then and now—in biomedical research, the relationship with his later work and the overall relevance to contemporary discussions in bioethics are discussed.

Key words

Bioethics, Brain Death, H. Jonas, Organ Transplantation, Research Ethics

1. The birth of bioethics

Although bioethics is generally considered to have been born in the United States of America around 1970, Albert Jonsen argues that it did not begin with a bang:

Even though medical ethics, bioethics predecessor, was shaken by notable and notorious events, it was a slow accumulation of concerns about the ambiguity of scientific progress that turned the old medical ethics into the new paths of bioethics. Contributors to scientific progress began to express their concerns during the 1960s, in occasional writings and at professional meetings and public conferences. They worried that the old tradition of medical ethics was too frail to meet the ethical challenges posed by the new science and medicine.¹

Indeed, the birth of bioethics was a long and complex process. To simplify it, both conceptually and historically, bioethics could be divided into at least three main areas of inquiry: research ethics, health care ethics, and environmental ethics.² Only in the third one the influence of Hans Jonas

(1903-1992) is generally acknowledged; for instance, neither *The Oxford Handbook of Practical Ethics*³ nor the *Research Ethics* reader⁴ do even mention his name once. Indeed, Jonas is considered as a philosopher of biology and of technology, not a bioethicist—at least not in the restricted sense that identifies it as a subfield of ethics *applied* to medicine and health care. However, his better known philosophical contribution is quite in tune with the historical origins of bioethics, with its more general concerns about the consequences of new technologies on human life and the environment. After all, V. R. Potter's original coinage of the term 'bioethics' in 1970 referred to a bridge between science and the humanities,⁵ as 'a global integration of biology and values', 'designed to guide human survival'.⁶

As for research ethics, its historical origin as a discipline is often associated with the controversies raised in 1971 and 1972 about the ethical concerns raised by several research projects in the US, most notably the Willowbrook hepatitis studies and the Tuskegee syphilis study. Of course, those scandals were only made worse by the fact that the international community had already issued the Nuremberg Code in 1947, after the 'Nazi doctors trial'. The Willowbrook and Tuskegee studies were not only violations of today's research ethics, but also of promulgated codes in effect during the time they were conducted.⁷

This moral climate of scandal was behind the establishment in 1974 by the US Congress of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, which set to get things right and define more clearly the structure and guiding principles of research on human subjects. Research was distinguished from therapy, and the essential features of consent were spelled out. In this context, Jonsen comments that 'a famous essay by philosopher Hans Jonas contributed mightily' to the task of demolishing previous 'assumptions about social progress as a rationale to override human rights'.⁸

The essay mentioned by Jonsen was published in the spring of 1969 as 'Philosophical Reflections on Experimenting with Human Subjects' and it deserves a closer look.⁹ Revised by Jonas in 1974 to be included in his collection of *Philosophical Essays*, it

is considered by some a 'classic of research ethics',¹⁰ but it is not widely known. Reviewing a book about ethics codes in medicine and biotechnology, Jonsen was surprised to see that 'no author mentions the profound philosophical analysis of the moral dimensions of research' made by Jonas in this article.¹¹

According to Jonsen, the 1969 essay 'was seminal in the conception of research ethics that prevailed in the United States after 1970' and its description of the social benefits of research as 'melioristic goods', with its implications for the voluntary rather than obligatory nature of research, is the most clear distinction between the world of research and the world of medical treatment. Other authors comment that the essay provides a philosophical overview of the issues pertaining to human experimentation, ranging from subject recruitment, societal vs. individual good, coercion and 'constriction' of consent, medical progress, inclusion of the sick and suffering, and other topics. The conclusion is that the article 'presents a valuable, early humanist perspective on research ethics',¹² but very little more is to be found about it in the literature. In the following sections we will summarize its origin and content.

2. Jonas among the doctors

In his recently published *Memoirs* (2008), Jonas provides a lively account of how he got involved in what today is commonly understood as 'bioethics', even though the term was not used at that time. In 1967, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Boston invited him to speak at a conference on the problems associated with medical and biological experimentation on human beings. 'So I holed up in the Catskills,' Jonas says, 'and meditated during long walks in the woods on this new ethical subject that I'd been confronted with. My talk, which appeared not long afterward in *Daedalus*, made an unexpected public splash'.¹³

Of course, this talk was nothing but the 1969 article mentioned by Jonsen. *Daedalus* was the official Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and so the publication had a great impact and raised a lot of attention. Other contributors included prominent names such as Paul A. Freund, Henry K. Beecher, Talcott Parsons, and Jay Katz. But Jonas also knew that this public attention was partially due to the publication of the findings of the *ad hoc* Committee that was formed at the Harvard Medical School in early 1968 to consider brain death as a means to further transplantation efforts, a subject that Jonas had taken up in his talk.

Let us remember that, in December 1967, Christiaan Barnard had successfully transplanted the first human heart into a patient dying from heart failure in South Africa. Although the recipient died eighteen days later, this well-publicized event led to the development of heart transplantation, with over a hundred attempts the following year. Early failures were attributed to the problems of organ rejection by recipients' immune systems and organ deterioration due to the need to wait for sufficient time after cardiac arrest to ensure that the donor would not spontaneously resuscitate.

In an effort to overcome these challenges, the Committee published its report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* under the title 'A Definition of Irreversible Coma' (1968).¹⁴ The report addressed several items, including the clinical description of irreversible coma, recommended procedures for its diagnosis, and justifications for a new criterion for diagnosing death. The most publicized aspect of the report is the Committee's reasoning behind 'brain death' as a new criterion for determining death. Implicitly, the Harvard Committee justified the criterion on two grounds: (1) it allowed physicians to turn off ventilators on brain-dead patients without fear of legal consequences; and (2) it allowed physicians to procure vital organs from brain-dead patients for transplantations before cardiac arrest.

So when Jonas was asked to lecture and write about human experimentation, this issue was very much in the air, and he felt he had something to say about it. In 1969, he was 66 years old and since 1955 a professor at the New School for Social Research in New York, where he would remain until he retired from teaching in 1976. He was about to become a founding fellow of the interdisciplinary Hastings Center, which would have an influential role in the configuration of bioethics as we know it.¹⁵ Still, he approaches the subject with a sense of humility in front of the complex and obscure nature of the problems he wants to address, and throughout the text of the essay he keeps referring to himself as a 'layman'.

This combination of common sense, scientific modesty and philosophical depth made the essay extremely influential at the time. In his memories, Jonas says that he was made a founding fellow of the Hastings Center 'on the strength of my lecture in Boston', but this was not its only consequence. Devastated that a major philosopher had expressed doubts about something they viewed as an undeniable medical progress, a group of doctors from San Francisco approached Jonas. He met with the group and they allowed him full access to all procedures dealing with organ donations and

transplants. Although this hands-on experience was fascinating to him and the discussions with the physicians were amiable, Jonas recognizes that 'what they were doing was magnificent' but in his essay 'Against the Stream' (1974) he maintained his fundamental objection: 'the interests of the unconscious patient whom the doctors declared dead needed to be protected'.¹⁶

Before turning to the 1969 text itself, just a word about why Jonas felt so compelled to write about these matters. Of course, success and peer pressure might account for it. In 1989, when the autobiographical conversations that made up his *Memoirs* were recorded, he still remembered a letter from a student, who wrote enthusiastically to comment on his *Daedalus* paper: 'This is philosophy as I've always imagined it, philosophy that intercedes in life and provides guidelines for how one should live or what one should do or avoid.' For the first time in his life, he had found himself participating in a debate in which 'philosophy became important in a practical sense'.¹⁷

Still, there might be a deeper reason, something to do with his Jewish background and religious views. His biographer and editor of the *Memoirs*, Christian Wiese, argues that Jonas's position in those emerging debates was based on an insight into the 'dignity of man', not as a perfect, immortal being, untouched by suffering, but precisely based on his vulnerability and mortality. For this, Wiese claims, Jonas referred to the ancient Jewish wisdom expressed in the biblical relation to death, which stresses its inevitability and favours its cardio-respiratory definition—according to the Psalmist, the proper length of a human life is 'threescore years and ten' (Ps. 90:10-12); according to the traditional Jewish interpretation of the Genesis, there is life as long as there is breath in the nostrils (Gn. 7:22). Even today, some Jewish traditions reject the neurological standard as a determination of death. Jonas might be influenced by his religious background in this,¹⁸ while at the same time his affirmation of the frailty and mortality of life 'defines the limits that are to be set for the all-too-intrusive manipulations aiming at infinitely prolonging human life'.¹⁹

3. Main themes of the essay

Jonas opens the 1969 essay with the feeling that the contribution of philosophy to this debate is necessary, 'because the subject is obscure by its nature and involves fundamental, transtechnical issues'. Thus 'any attempt at clarification can be of use, even without novelty. Even if the philosophical reflection should in the end achieve no more than the realization that in the dialectics of this area we must sin and fall into guilt, this insight may not be without

its own gains' (219). It seems that Jonas is grasping the same basic paradox that was formulated by Jean Bernard: 'Experimentation on human beings is morally necessary and necessarily immoral'.²⁰

The text of the essay is divided in twenty headings, which we will summarize here as follows.

3.1. The peculiarity of human experimentation

Because experiments with humans definitively affect the lives of its subjects, it brings about a relationship of responsibility towards them. Jonas sees that the burden of the proof lies with those who want to make the experiment, because the basic assumption is that human beings cannot be used as 'guinea pigs', no matter how noble the purpose of the study is: 'We must justify the infringement of a primary inviolability, which needs no justification itself; and the justification of its infringement must be by values and needs of a dignity commensurate with those to be sacrificed.' (220)

3.2. 'Individual versus society' as the conceptual framework

Jonas finds it hard to be convinced by this way of framing ethical issues in human research. The problem is that we lack 'a careful clarification of what the needs, interests, and rights of society are, for society—as distinct from any plurality of individuals—is an abstract and as such is subject to our definition, while the individual is the primary concrete, prior to all definition, and his basic good is more or less known.' (221)

3.3. The sacrificial theme

Human research involves personal inconveniences and invasive procedures on selected groups of people—the 'subjects' of research who voluntarily enrol in a study. Jonas describes this as the 'selective abrogation of personal inviolability and the ritualized exposure to gratuitous risk of health and life, justified by a presumed greater, social good' (224), and finds something 'sacrificial' in the activity. The subjects could do otherwise and not suffer from such inconveniences and procedures, which are not included in the compulsory obligations demanded of every citizen. And yet they do, for the sake of scientific and social progress.

3.4. The 'social contract' theme

As a social and political theory, contractualism justifies a limitation of individual freedom, so that the observance of certain rules assures general welfare. Jonas is aware of this, but claims also that 'no complete abrogation of self-interest at any time is in the terms of the social contract'. Sheer sacrifice falls outside even the political theory of Hobbes, the most radical of contractualist thinkers. 'Under the putative

terms of the contract alone,' Jonas writes, 'I cannot be required to die for the public good.' (225)

3.5. Health as a public good

In some dramatic circumstances (such as war), public interest can override private interest, and the common good the individual good. Health is sometimes called a public good, and its importance makes it a candidate to be one of those ends 'of transcendent value or overriding urgency' (226), which can justify the kind of intrusion involved in human research. However, Jonas is suspicious of any attempt to frame the debate (or the one on organ transplantation, which appears explicitly here for the first time in the essay) in terms of society owning or having any legitimate claim over the bodies of individuals (227).

3.6. What society can afford

The issue is also sometimes framed in terms like this: Society cannot afford to let people die because an organ is not procured for them. But Jonas's reply is a sober one: Of course it can. 'If cancer, heart disease, and other organic, noncontagious ills, especially those tending to strike the old more than the young, continue to exact their toll at the normal rate of incidence (including the toll of private anguish and misery), society can go on flourishing in every way.' What society cannot afford is an epidemic, severe environmental damage, or a demographical catastrophe. Only in this kind of cases, 'where the whole condition of society is critically affected', can the public interest make an imperative claim (228). This kind of cases, according to Jonas, involves situations of 'clear and present danger', and justifies extraordinary measures in order to avert a disaster. Jonas here is assuming that the prevention of an evil enjoys a certain ethical priority over the promotion of a good: 'averting a disaster always carries greater weight' (223). As long as human research is not necessary to avert such a disaster, but to improve the human condition (what he will call later in the essay 'the melioristic goal'), Jonas suggests that it should not be counted among those extraordinary measures that are justified by the common good.

3.7. Society and the cause of progress

Of course, most human biomedical research is not usually justified by 'saving' society, but by 'improving' it. But Jonas finds scientific progress a poor justification for costly measures, both individually and environmentally. This passage is so characteristically Jonasian that it deserves to be quoted in full:

Unless the present state is intolerable, the melioristic goal is in a sense gratuitous, and not only from the

vantage point of the present. Our descendants have a right to be left an unplundered planet; they do not have a right to new miracle cures. We have sinned against them if by our doing we have destroyed their inheritance—which we are doing at full blast; we have not sinned against them if by the time they come around arthritis has not yet been conquered (unless by sheer neglect). And generally, in the matter of progress, as humanity had no claim on a Newton, a Michelangelo, or a St. Francis to appear, and no right to the blessings of their unscheduled deeds, so progress, with all our methodical labor for it, cannot be budgeted in advance and its fruits received as a due. Its coming-about at all and its turning out for good (of which we can never be sure) must rather be regarded as something akin to grace. (230-231)

3.8. The melioristic goal, medical research, and individual duty

Of course, physicians have special obligations: they are committed to cure (and care), and thus to improve their power to cure (and care) by means of research. Because it is not a social goal, but the particular goal of the medical profession, this is the entry point for Jonas' general solution to the puzzle. Enrolment in human research is not a social obligation, but a supererogatory 'gift' bestowed on the society by specific individuals or communities.

3.9. Moral law and transmoral dedication

The clue lies in transcending moral law and recognizing that there is more to ethics than the Kantian emphasis on obligation and duty. Jonas locates biomedical research within a sphere of human action in which to collaborate is worthy of praise, but not to collaborate is not worthy of blame.

3.10. The 'conscription' of consent

But there are no easy solutions. Jonas is aware that consent and supererogatory action are not enough to describe what goes on in human research, because vital individual interests are at stake and therefore 'some soliciting is necessarily involved'. Consent is going to be sought and even 'conscripted', sometimes not by all-too-clear means. 'We have to live with the ambiguity, the treacherous impurity of everything human.' (233)

3.11. Self-recruitment of the research community

If someone is to issue appeals to someone else, Jonas proposes that the first to step forward should be the scientists themselves. This would solve many problems:

The natural issuer of the call is also the first natural addressee: the physician-researcher himself and the scientific confraternity at large. With such a coincidence—indeed, the noble tradition with which the whole business of human experimentation

started—almost all of the associated legal, ethical, and metaphysical problems vanish. If it is full, autonomous identification of the subject with the purpose that is required for the dignifying of his serving as a subject—here it is; if strongest motivation—here it is; if fullest understanding—here it is; if freest decision—here it is; if greatest integration with the person's total, chosen pursuit—here it is. With self-solicitation, the issue of consent in all its insoluble equivocality is bypassed per se. Not even the condition that the particular purpose be truly important and the project reasonably promising, which must hold in any solicitation of others, need be satisfied here. (234)

However, history shows that self-recruitment has its own risks: as a matter of fact, it has been the case that laboratories exerted undue pressure on the researchers to take risks and enrol in their own studies.²¹

3.12. 'Identification' as the principle of recruitment in general

Here Jonas makes explicit his appeal to make use of research subjects only if they wholeheartedly identify with the future collective benefits. This identification is the only way to prevent the risk of depersonalization and reification of the subject involved in human research:

Mere 'consent' (mostly amounting to no more than permission) does not right this reification. The 'wrong' of it can only be made 'right' by such authentic identification with the cause that it is the subject's as well as the researcher's cause—whereby his role in its service is not just permitted by him, but willed. That sovereign will of his which embraces the end as his own restores his personhood to the otherwise depersonalizing context. To be valid it must be autonomous and informed. The latter condition can, outside the research community, only be fulfilled by degrees; but the higher the degree of the understanding regarding the purpose and the technique, the more valid becomes the endorsement of the will. A margin of mere trust inevitably remains. (234)

3.13. The rule of the 'descending order' and its counter-utility sense

Jonas is worried by the possibility of recruiting procedures being dominated by market and utilitarian forces. The more vulnerable and weak a person is, the lesser the price researchers have to 'pay' to recruit her. To neutralize this dynamics of reification, Jonas proposes a non-utilitarian recruitment rule, which he calls *descending order*: 'The poorer in knowledge, motivation, and freedom of decision (and that, alas, means the more readily available in terms of numbers and possible manipulation), the more sparingly and indeed reluctantly should the reservoir be used, and the more compelling must therefore

become the countervailing justification.' (237) Therefore, researchers must fight this temptation to conscript first 'captive' individuals—the more suggestible, ignorant, or dependent.

3.14. Experimentation on patients

Jonas's answer to the question 'who should be conscripted into research' finds then a puzzling answer: 'Least and last of all the sick' (238). He claims that patients should not be called upon to bear additional burden and risk.²² Yet he is aware that patients are the most available 'source', as they are under treatment and observation anyway. Besides, the very scientific procedure requires at the crucial stage trial and verification precisely on the sufferers from the disease. Again, Jonas's ideal solution cannot be put into practice.

3.15. The fundamental privilege of the sick

We enter into the most sensitive area of the whole debate, at the heart of the doctor-patient relation. Jonas thinks that the most solemn obligation of a physician is to her patients:

The patient alone counts when he is under the physician's care. By the simple law of bilateral contract (analogous, for example, to the relation of lawyer to client and its 'conflict of interest' rule), he is bound not to let any other interest interfere with that of the patient in being cured. But manifestly more sublime norms than contractual ones are involved. We may speak of a sacred trust; strictly by its terms, the doctor is, as it were, alone with his patient and God. (238)

Of course, reasons of public health emergency, the prevention of harm to others, may trump this relationship of trust, but Jonas is not concerned with such scenarios, but with the 'business as usual' in biomedical research.²³

3.16. The principle of 'identification' applied to patients

If patients are to be conscripted, the 'descending order' rule can also be applied to them. First come those patients who most identify with and are cognizant of the cause of research (sick members of the medical profession, for instance), followed by those lay patients who are highly motivated and educated, and so on (239-240).

3.17-18 [Application to patients continued]

In these sections (240-243), Jonas develops two consequences of his approach: under normal circumstances there should be no experiments under the guise of treatment, and there should be no experiments on patients unrelated to their own disease.

3.19. On the redefinition of death

Jonas eventually takes up again the controversy over brain death. He has no problems with the limitation of therapeutic efforts, but extracting organs from a person in coma is another matter. For this purpose we must act with the utmost prudence:

to use any definition short of the maximal for perpetrating on a possibly penultimate state what only the ultimate state can permit is to arrogate a knowledge which, I think, we cannot possibly have. Since we do not know the exact borderline between life and death, nothing less than the maximum definition of death will do—brain death plus heart death plus any other indication that may be pertinent— before final violence is allowed to be done. (244)

In other words: 'The patient must be absolutely sure that his doctor does not become his executioner, and that no definition authorizes him ever to become one.' (245) The patient's right to this certainty is an absolute one according to Jonas. So is his right to be able to keep his own organs if he wishes to do so. No one has a legitimate claim to another's body, nor to introduce in another person's death the risk of exploitation.

3.20. [Concluding remarks]

Jonas ends his essay recognizing that his argument points to a slower rate of medical progress, but that this should not be nevertheless a problem. Let us have him say the last word:

progress is an optional goal, not an unconditional commitment, and [...] its tempo in particular, compulsive as it may become, has nothing sacred about it. Let us also remember that a slower progress in the conquest of disease would not threaten society, grievous as it is to those who have to deplore that their particular disease be not yet conquered, but that society would indeed be threatened by the erosion of those moral values whose loss, possibly caused by too ruthless a pursuit of scientific progress, would make its most dazzling triumphs not worth having. Let us finally remember that it cannot be the aim of progress to abolish the lot of mortality. Of some ill or other, each of us will die. Our mortal condition is upon us with its harshness but also its wisdom—because without it there would not be the eternally renewed promise of the freshness, immediacy, and eagerness of youth; nor, without it, would there be for any of us the incentive to number our days and make them count. With all our striving to wrest from our mortality what we can, we should bear its burden with patience and dignity. (243)

4. The relevance to bioethics of Jonas's later work

The contribution of Hans Jonas to bioethics has taken place in a somewhat indirect fashion. By

means of his influence upon younger bioethicists and philosophically minded physicians—such as Leon Kass, Eric Cassell or (even if less explicitly) Alfred Tauber—, Jonas has successfully introduced his emphasis on responsibility as one of the main themes in contemporary bioethics.

As is well known, in his book *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*—the principle or 'imperative' of responsibility—Jonas attempts to consider the global condition of human life after modern technology has introduced possibilities to act of such novel scale that traditional ethics can no longer provide a basic framework of principles.²⁴ He then argues that the enlargements of human power through technology carry with them expansions of human moral responsibility.

This basic thesis is grounded on three 'general conditions of responsibility': causal power (that is, that acting makes an impact on the world), that such acting is under the agent's control, and that the agent can foresee its consequences to some extent. Under these necessary conditions, responsibility appears in two senses: first, responsibility as being accountable for one's *deeds*, whatever they are; and second, responsibility for particular *objects* that commits an agent to particular deeds concerning them. We speak then of two different things when we say that a physician is responsible for what happened to a given patient and that a given person is a responsible physician, that is, someone who honours his or her professional responsibilities.

Jonas calls the first 'formal responsibility', and the second 'substantive responsibility'. *Formal* responsibility concerns actions of the past, the caused damage or other consequences of the action, even if they were not intentioned or foreseeable; it is linked with basic notions in civil and criminal law such as compensation or penalty. On the other hand, *substantive* responsibility tends toward the future, toward the things to be done and the object of responsibility.

This, of course, has an immediate relevance to environmental ethics. But here it also lies a point of contact with health care and research ethics. Alfred Tauber points out that the birth of bioethics was not a cost-free social and cultural phenomenon;²⁵ in particular, the hegemony of patient autonomy as the guiding principle in healthcare caused a problematic shrinking of physician responsibility, which could be understood in Jonasian terms as a replacement of substantive with formal responsibility.

According to Tauber, relational autonomy brings about substantive responsibility, while individualistic autonomy favours the formal sense of the word. If this is correct, Jonas's characterization of substantive responsibility could provide elements for

a better understanding of relational autonomy. For him, the archetype of substantive responsibility is that of parents for their children: it is in this relationship to dependent progeny that Jonas finds the origin of the idea of responsibility in general. This kind of responsibility is 'basically one-sided', that is, asymmetrical, which again is another point of contact with physician responsibility.

This archetype provides another interesting analogy between the parental and the health care relationship. Child-rearing, writes Jonas, has a 'definite substantive goal': the autonomy of the individual, which essentially includes a capacity for responsibility, and with reaching it also a definite termination in time: 'Parental responsibility has maturity for its goal and terminates with it.' It could be said, in the same way, that physician responsibility has the patients' health for its goal and terminates with it.

According to Jonas, the power of the acting agent (or 'subject') over the object gives an objective meaning to responsibility, which in ideal cases is complemented by a subjective emotional commitment, the *sentiment* of responsibility. This sentiment does not originate from the idea of responsibility, but from the rights and needs of the object of responsibility as we perceive them. The 'ought-to-be' of the object calls the subject to responsible and caring action. Thus the object of responsibility is submitted to the subject, but the actions of the subject are controlled by the needs of the object. This is also echoed in Tauber's ethics of responsibility, in which response to need guides the physician's actions.

Finally, Jonas interprets substantive responsibility as a nonreciprocal relation in which the agent's power 'is there to begin with', it is natural. On the other hand, formal responsibility is mostly a contractual relationship of equal partners, and somewhat secondary to the substantive one. This naturalness of substantive responsibility entails that, in parental relationships, the principle of responsibility requires no deduction from a previous or more general principle, 'because it is powerfully implanted in us by nature or at least in the childbearing part of humanity'. Paraphrasing Jonas, it could be said the same about the health care relationship: the principle of responsibility is not reducible to a more general principle, since it is implanted in the very professional identity of the health care professionals.

This use of the parental archetype might lead us to think that Jonas's and Tauber's ethics of responsibility are intrinsically paternalistic. The analogy with child-rearing certainly suggests so, but that is not the only comparison Jonas uses to describe this concept. He finds another example of

responsibility in the 'real statesman', that who 'has acted for the good of those over whom he had power, that is, *for* whom he had it.' The same could be said of the responsible physician: that the paternalistic power *over* patients becomes a responsibility to care *for* them sums up, according to Jonas, 'the essence of responsibility'.

5. Assessing his position today

By way of conclusion, let us now compare Jonas's contribution to the present state of things in the two main topics of his 1969 essay: the regulation of human research and the controversy over the definition of death in the context of organ transplantation guidelines.

5.1. Human research

An editorial by Paul Wolpe provides a helpful overview of how things have changed since 1969 in this field, making it clear that today, at the beginning of the 21st century, the orientation of biomedical research is very different from Jonas's position.²⁶ As we have seen in the preceding sections, he believed that in order for it to be acceptable to treat a human being as a 'token' body, the subject must be fully informed and bestow upon the system the 'grace' of his or her participation. That ideal seems a far away dream in the current competitive research environment. Despite what Jonsen said about Jonas's article destroying the belief in the rightness of pursuing medical progress *per se*, 'medical progress' (often understood as 'new products') is still thriving. This can be seen at least in the following three areas.

Research subjects are a scarce resource. According to Wolpe, close to 80% of clinical trials fail to enrol the required number of patients in the time promised by researchers. Many of the trials competing for these subjects are for drugs that have no appreciable advantage over drugs already on the market. Competition for subjects prompts companies to offer incentives to researchers, and researchers to promise undeliverable benefits, recruit in less developed countries, or unduly expand inclusion criteria.

Clinical research has been corporatized. Medical research is increasingly being funded by big pharma and biotech companies. This causes a blurring of the lines between corporate and academic researcher, which challenges a system traditionally designed for the public sector, but which is being mostly run by private business. This introduces a fundamentally profit-seeking way of thinking, and shows that the current system is not far from being lead by the market forces that Jonas would have wanted to avoid.

Research and therapy are often conflated. Most of Jonas's position in the 1969 paper rested on the notion that the research confers to the subject no direct benefit; if it does, much of his rationale evaporates. However, this makes his critique much more effective, as we are in an era where research and therapy are still so conflated that many subjects enrol because it was their only hope for cure. This 'therapeutic misconception' is not the exception, but the rule in modern research.²⁷

5.2. Brain death and organ transplantation

Despite Jonas' effort and influence, the Harvard Committee succeeded in introducing 'brain death' as an alternative criterion to determine the end of human life. Because it did not eliminate the previous definition of 'cardio-respiratory death', we now have in most developed countries two standards to determine human death. Thus, in the US the Uniform Determination of Death Act (1980) says that an individual is dead when she has sustained either (1) 'irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions', or (2) 'irreversible cessation of all functions of the entire brain, including the brain stem'.²⁸

However, the two standards do not have an equal standing, neither in theory nor in practice. Rodríguez-Arias shows the inconsistency of the official position supported by the law when it claims that respiratory functions are considered to be a sign of life insofar as they are a sign of brain integrative activity.²⁹ Even if the brain has been said to be the necessary integrative organ of the organism as a whole, there are evidences suggesting that brain activity does not play such a vital role in the survival of the organism as an integrated system; as a matter of fact, patients whose brains are declared dead maintain several functions associated with homeostasis.

The accounts of long term survivors of whole brain death cast doubt on the claim that whole brain death marks the end of a unified human organism. Shewmon argues that it is impossible to equate death with 'brain death' on the basis that individuals whose brain is dead have lost any integration capacities,³⁰ and proposes to go back to the pre-1968 scenario, in which only the cardio-respiratory criterion served as a standard for the determination of death. This is approximately the same thing Jonas proposed in 'Against the Stream'.³¹

In the light of this, it seems that Jonas was right to suggest that the Harvard Committee had made a decision based on its own judgement of what was most beneficial to society, without giving a clear rationale for equating brain death to human death. By doing it so, not only did the Committee ignore

society's opinion about what was in its best interest—it also disguised a normative decision under the cloak of a factual or descriptive one. The Committee adopted thus a pragmatist stance, one in which utility is truth's ultimate criterion. Jonas thought otherwise the relationship between facts and norms, between truth and convenience—but that should be the matter of another article.³²

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23. In this scenario, the health care relationship is a process in which patients, professionals, relatives and other third parties engage in taking, assigning and deflecting responsibility within a specific practice. In this process the responsibility is not a 'bilateral contract', as Jonas suggests; society and the state are always present in the patient-professional relationship, and therefore health care is a triangular affair: see Casado, A. 2009. 'Stars and Triangles: Controversial Bioethics in Spanish Film'. In *Bioethics at the Movies*, ed. S. Shapsay. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 328-44.
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GNOSIS, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND RACISM

RE-APPRAISING HANS JONAS AS A POLITICAL THINKER

Giorgio Baruchello

Abstract

This article highlights the political elements contained in Hans Jonas' vast and internally diverse oeuvre. To this end, it follows chronologically Jonas' intellectual career and most significant first-person political experiences, especially but not exclusively with reference to his involvement in World War II. A speech on racism, delivered in Italy a few months before his death in 1993, is used as the ideal conclusion of a politically aware philosophical trajectory that begins with Jonas' perplexity vis-à-vis the Gnostic rejection of corporeal existence, continues with his concerns regarding the fundamentally irresponsible use of science-technology in contemporary society, and ends with genuine hope in the rediscovery of global human solidarity as a morally correct response to the ecological catastrophe that science-technology has unleashed.

Key Words

Baconian (mindset), Bultmann (Rudolf), Gnosis (Gnosticism), Heidegger (Martin), Jonas (Hans), racism, responsibility, science-technology, wisdom

An emergency ethics of the endangered future must translate into collective action the 'Yes to Being' demanded of man by the totality of things

(Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, 1979, Engl. Trans., p. 140; hereafter *DPV*)

Whether wisdom can be taught is a thorny issue that has been discussed in philosophy since Plato's time. What rests assured, however, is that wisdom can be defective or absent in the soul of the ignorant person as well as in the soul of the knowledgeable one. Scholarship and professional competence, in other words, do not translate mechanically into wise conduct. Thus, it was possible for the highly learned Martin Heidegger, leading philosophical mind of the fragile *Weimarrepublik*, to side with the most brutal regime that Europe had the misfortune to witness during the 20th century. Certainly, Heidegger's unthinkable political allegiance allowed him to gain even more power within the German academic world, at least for the duration of Hitler's ruthless

rule, but also to betray the quasi-filial trust of his pupils, especially left-wing and Jewish ones.

Hans Jonas, then a young middle-class German Jew, was amongst Heidegger's most devoted pupils in both Freiburg and Marburg. He was one of his 'children', as Richard Wolin calls four of the most successful disciples of Heidegger: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Herbert Marcuse and Hans Jonas himself. Like the others, he too was forced to escape from Nazi Germany and seek refuge abroad. Yet, he did not hide hopeless on foreign soil, nor did he forget the plea of those who had been left behind, crushed and brutalised by fascist thugs because of their belief in an international liberation from wage slavery or because of their religious and ethnic origin. On the contrary, Jonas soon returned to Europe as a soldier in one of the Jewish Brigade Groups of the British Army. He participated actively in the Allied invasion of Italy, fighting his way north from Taranto to Udine, where he was stationed when the war ended in 1945.

Wounded and inspired by the extreme challenges faced in his personal existence—the primary and ultimate ground of any worthy intellectual endeavour—Jonas matured both as a human being and as a scholar. Working in England, Israel, Canada and the United States of America, where he will eventually spend 40 years of his long earthly existence, he made himself known amongst theologians and historians of religion with an extensive study of the Gnosis, which is still regarded today as a pivotal contribution (*Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, 1934–66).

The Gnosis is probably the most complex and enigmatic expression of early Christianity, for it amalgamates elements of Yeshua's new understanding of Judaism with countless others coming from Persia, Asia Minor, Greece and Egypt, particularly from Neo-Platonic schools. Its English name transliterates the Greek for 'knowledge', as the Gnostics believed that the true path to salvation did not require uncritical adherence to God's will, often mysterious and arbitrary, but careful intellectual study, theoretical analysis and deeper understanding. In this manner, the perceived 'irrationality' of Judaism—centred upon Abraham's 'obedience'—and of Christianity—centred upon

Yeshua's 'love'—was 'rectified' along intellectualist lines.

As regards the ethnocentrism of the Jewish faith and the universalism of the Christian one, Gnosticism replaced them both with the elitism of the enlightened few *contra* the multitudes wandering aimlessly in the dark. Contrary to the former, the latter were foolish victims of ignorance, superstition, and of the tyranny of their bodily cravings. In point of fact, Gnosticism posited a stark contraposition between the corporeal realm and the spiritual realm, the latter being regarded as axiologically superior to the former to an infinite degree. Humankind, connected with both realms by virtue of our being ensouled bodily creatures, were expected to privilege the spiritual realm above all else.

As a result, on the other end of the Gnostic value spectrum laid the corporeal realm, condemned not merely as contingent and imperfect, but also as the fountainhead of all evils, insofar as the body, with its countless needs, desires and forms of decay, distracted and curbed the full realisation of the human soul. The axiological condemnation of the corporeal realm was so thorough, that several Gnostic texts speak of two separate divinities, one responsible for the creation of spirit, the other for the creation of matter.

In other words, the corporeal realm was so utterly despised that even the fundamental postulation of monotheism, i.e. the singularity of the Supreme Being, could be sacrificed to the goal of its rejection. Ironically, all this was conceived of notwithstanding the presupposition of corporeal entities throughout each and every stage of philosophical and theological activity by the Gnostics themselves.

Hans Jonas had commenced his study of the Gnosis during the 1920s, under the joint supervision of Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Bultmann. He published part of its results before the war, along with few other works in theology, most notably *Augustin und das paulinische Freiheitsproblem. Ein philosophischer Beitrag zur Genesis der christlich-abendländischen Freiheitsidee*, of the year 1930. However, Jonas' conclusive assessment of the Gnosis was to see the light only after the war, enjoying wide circulation amongst the experts and translation into several languages.

From a strictly technical point of view, Bultmann was a less decisive influence than Heidegger, as Jonas utilised mainly the latter's existentialist phenomenology to interpret Gnosticism. Still, it was Bultmann's existence that Jonas cherished and emulated as an example of courage and integrity, not Heidegger's. While the raising National-Socialist tide was flooding the German nation and the European continent, Bultmann put his life on the line and, as an

outspoken minister of religion, opposed Hitler's regime openly and firmly. Against all odds, he survived, becoming one of the first persons that Jonas visited in Germany after the end of the conflict.

Bultmann's noteworthy example convinced Jonas of the opportunity to combine his theological investigations with ethical concerns regarding the social consequences of adopting certain religious and philosophical views. Scholarship was not to be an ivory tower or an excuse from demanding human affairs. In the following years, Jonas did not stop being active in theology (e.g. *Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz. Eine jüdische Stimme*, 1987), nevertheless he increasingly devoted attention to metaphysics, particularly in connection with issues arising from modern science (e.g. *The Phenomenon of Life. Toward a Philosophical Biology*, 1966; *Philosophical Essays. From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*, 1974) and eventually he started to write about ethics *tout-court*, mostly yet not exclusively in connection with medicine and biology (e.g. *On Faith, Reason and Responsibility: Six Essays*, 1978 and the aforementioned *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*).

A calm but determined man, Jonas had come to realise that it was his duty to alert the intellectual community to the dangers contained within the forgotten, life-blind philosophical presuppositions of modern science and technology. Comparing himself to Socrates, Athens' buzzing gadfly, Jonas spoke out at conferences and meetings where inhospitable professionals from public administrations and university departments were typically too busy, too intelligent and too important to listen gladly to the worries of a philosopher and war veteran that reminded them of the inherent value of life and of the potentially suicidal character of the modern faith in technology.

According to Jonas, whereas the Gnostics had neglected the corporeal in the name a purely spiritual God to be encountered *post mortem*, the dominant 'Baconian' mindset of modern humankind was such that the utopian world to come (e.g. the socialist's classless society, the capitalist's ever-wealthier economy, the geneticist's experimenting on future human being by embryonic bio-engineering) was being forced upon the present world by technological means that put unbearable pressures and costs onto the living (e.g. violent revolutions, wars for oil, callous experimentation on animals, prison inmates and the world's poor). The modern age, developing its technological means on the basis of the most evolved science ever possessed by humankind, had attained the highest level of power over nature in the

history of the species, which had never been kind to nature: 'The raping of nature and the civilizing of man go hand in hand' (DPV, p. 2).

For Jonas, it was not unlikely that these modern utopias could bring about the *mortem* of the whole living planet, thus demonstrating the truth of Ioan Culiianu's sarcastic complaint: 'the Gnostics have taken hold of the whole world, and we were not aware of it. It is a mixed feeling of anxiety and admiration, since I cannot refrain myself from thinking that these alien body-snatchers have done a remarkable job indeed' (quoted in Benjamin Lazier, 'Overcoming Gnosticism: Hans Jonas, Hans Blumenberg, and the Legitimacy of the Natural World', 2003, p. 619).

Given that the dominant modern mindset informed most contemporary mainstream ethical-political doctrines and most intellectual attitudes, Jonas found critical elements in all of them. He therefore became an academic eccentric, with more foes than friends, self-condemned to being extraneous to all leading schools and factions, especially in the military-industrial-complex-led United States of America (albeit based in that country, Jonas' work has received much more attention in non-Anglophone countries). Still, tenacious if not obstinate, he continued to be a Socratic gadfly until his death (e.g. *Erkenntnis und Verantwortung: Gespräch mit Ingo Hermann in der Reihe 'Zeugen des Jahrhunderts'*, 1991; *Dem bösen Ende näher: Gespräche über das Verhältnis des Menschen zur Natur*, 1993; *Philosophie, Rückschau und Vorschau am Ende des Jahrhunderts*, 1993). In the end, the scope and the courage of his radical questioning were such a novelty in the philosophical and scholarly reality of his time that, in due course, they were recognised as praiseworthy and groundbreaking even by Jonas' fiercest critics (e.g. Ulrich Melle, 'Responsibility and the Crisis of Technological Civilization: A Husserlian Meditation on Hans Jonas', 1998).

Besides, the leap from a fairly obscure area of early-Christian theology to moral philosophy and philosophy of science must have looked perplexing to many, but it was not so if one considers the capital lesson that Jonas had learnt from his study of Gnosticism and from Bultmann's display of personal virtue: it is the precise responsibility of the honest intellectual to serve the purpose of preserving and enhancing life. In comparison to this imperative, career and reputation become secondary matters.

Massive deforestation, energy crises, booming population and depleted fishing stocks meant for Jonas, amongst other dramatic ecological phenomena to which we have become accustomed today, that

the whole biosphere was facing the threat of extinction. This threat was the result of the derailment of the human spirit [*Geist*] which, arisen from Nature's womb, was now forgetful of its birth and operated as the main cause of her destruction. In brief, the stakes were simply too high to be discouraged by the threat of unpopularity. As Jonas kept affirming around the end of his life: 'To recognise our responsibility *vis-à-vis* the survival of all... problems must not be silenced, not even for a second, and consciences must be alerted ceaselessly' (*Philosophie, Rückschau und Vorschau am Ende des Jahrhunderts*, 1993, It. Trans., p. 50).

Grounding his ethical views around 'the responsibility principle' or 'imperative', Jonas developed a thorough critique of mainstream science, which pretended to have little to do with its destructive applications, whether nuclear bombs or oil-fuelled engines, blamed instead upon politicians and industrialists funding that very same science. Secluded within laboratories like behind walls of deception, the members of the scientific community acted as though they did not bear any responsibility—perhaps their white gowns could protect hands and consciences from any avoidable blood, pain or dirt. Yet, according to Jonas, things were neither so simple nor so benign.

Like his mentor Martin Heidegger, he too was conscious of the fact that science and technology formed a powerful, inextricable binomial both in practice and in theory. Like Heidegger, he too had noted how the modern world, after ages of agrarian docility, had mobilized both humankind and nature, transforming them into potential resources for productive use. Having no other end but perpetual growth for either private or State capital, this modern dynamism was self-referential and wanted more, more rapidly and more efficiently, oblivious to the costs paid by life itself. It therefore spiralled ominously around the axis of its self-improving self-realisation: 'Thus the danger of disaster attending the Baconian ideal of power over nature through scientific technology arises not so much from any shortcomings of its performance as from the magnitude of its success' (DPV, p. 140).

Heidegger had spoken of the binomial science-technology as a destiny; Jonas began to call it a doom, which only a higher degree of self-awareness and moral commitment by the actual persons involved could counter. In other words, ends had to be rethought both individually and socially—by the allegedly 'value-neutral' scientists themselves *in primis*—for fast-paced, perpetual growth was not only a self-referential end, but also a dangerous one (e.g. *Macht oder Ohnmacht der Subjektivität?*

Das Leib-Seele-Problem im Vorfeld des Prinzips Verantwortung, 1981; *Was für morgen lebenswichtig ist: Unentdeckte Zukunftswerte* [with Dietmar Mieth], 1983).

Wisdom had to be regained, looking back at primitive communities as well as to Nature herself, for she acts very differently from technological humankind: 'The big enterprise of modern technology, neither patient nor slow, compresses... the many infinitesimal steps of natural evolution into a few colossal ones and forgoes by that procedure the vital advantages of nature's 'playing safe'' (DPV, p. 31).

According to Jonas, the 'animistic' awe- and respect-inspiring sanctity of life had to be recovered somehow. Interestingly, Jonas suggests that the roots of normativity may be hidden in our animal being, rather than in some abstract true self like Immanuel Kant's. There is in fact a 'timeless archetype of all responsibility, the parental for the child', which cuts across ages, communities and, one could add, all the most complex animal species. It is visible in instinct, rather than in deliberative reason, which explains perhaps why 'responsibility' has been largely absent from the Western moral discourse compared to 'duty' or 'utility' (DPV, p. 130). Cast in Heidegger's terminology, it is 'an *ontic* paradigm in which the plain factual 'is' evidently coincides with an 'ought'—which does not, therefore, admit for itself the concept of a 'mere is' at all' (DPV, Id.). One cannot separate the being of the parent-child relationship from the being of an imperative of responsibility, i.e. a normative command, an 'ought'. 'Being' and 'ought' coincide, in a formidable example of resurgent Natural Law: 'We can point at the most familiar sight: the newborn, whose mere breathing uncontradictably addresses an ought to the world around, namely to take care of him' (DPV, p. 131). Indeed, Jonas goes as far as to claim 'that here the plain being of a *de facto* existent immanently and evidently contains an ought for others, and would so even if nature would not succour this ought with powerful instincts or assume its job alone' (DPV, Id.).

Whether Jonas' foundation of normativity is correct or not is not the subject of this essay. However, it is interesting to observe how the Eastern philosophical tradition, and particularly Chinese Confucianism, has often regarded the parent-child relationship as the paradigm of moral behaviour, which then extends to the relationships between Heaven and Empire, ruler and subject, husband and wife, brother and sister. In its practical applications, the Confucian 'five relations' have often meant a bond of obedience between the more powerful party and the less powerful one, as with Aristotle's and

Saint Paul's master-slave relationship in the Western philosophical tradition.

Jonas' writings reveal how a gulf between life and thought has characterised Western intellectual history. This gulf could be rendered *via* a number of possible dichotomies: wisdom *versus* knowledge, sapience *versus* science, understanding *versus* explaining, intelligence *versus* shrewdness, *homo sapiens versus homo faber*, life-world *versus* idealisations. Standard intellectual distinctions could also be used to the same end: 'theory' and 'practice', 'pure' and 'applied', 'science' and 'technology', 'means' and 'ends', 'public' and 'private', 'professional' and 'personal'. From an ethical perspective, they all share the ability to offer the self a potential escape route from the consequences of her actions; moral self-denial is always a tempting option for the human being. Then again, the best example of the same gulf comes probably from Jonas' own personal experience: the most eminent German philosopher backing the most brutal dictator and his murderous plans.

In this manner, Jonas' work reminds us also of how the scientist's professional virtues of intellectual honesty, co-operative team-work and candid acceptance of criticism do not transfer necessarily onto the private level, as though the professional training of the scientist could have no wisdom to teach to the actual person undergoing it. In other words, not only can phoney racial theories support the planning and implementation of mass extermination. Nor simply can the 'fiduciary duty' to maximising stockholders' returns lead a financier to mastermind a speculative assault onto a nation's currency and the millions that depend on it for their livelihood. Also, the acquisition of academic titles and professional prestige is no guarantee against being a conceited, obnoxious, untrustworthy person. Similarly, the prolonged, methodical study of bullies and alcohol-related violence as societal malaises can teach no humaneness to a social scientist.

Still, whether self-deluding, paranoid or merely hypocritical, scientists have always been human—hence moral—beings. The same is true of politicians, businessmen, lawyers and anyone else that may be tempted to tell herself that what she does as a professional has nothing to do with her moral integrity. Jonas, like Polanyi, Feyerabend and very few other 20th-century thinkers, could never disregard the philosophical relevance of the fact that scientists, no matter what they do, remain persons doing science, and persons have moral rights as well as moral obligations, whether they like it or not (see in particular *Wissenschaft als persönliches Erlebnis*, 1987).

As a theologian, Hans Jonas had observed how the defining element of Gnosticism was the rebuttal of the body in favour of the soul, and the related juxtaposition of knowledge and life with the latter alone. This dualistic view had already emerged in the philosophy of Plato, reaching vertiginous heights with Gnosticism. From there, it had persisted and affected much Christian thought of the Middle Ages. Subsequently, in a subtler yet more virulent manner, it had moved forward, pervading modern thought too. From Descartes to Heidegger, via Newton and Skinner, our civilisation produced a disembodied philosophy unable to answer the question 'Am I hungry?', and a science of the corporeal modelled around quantifiable, inorganic physics, deaf to life as much as to death's sting, to the point of backing the fast-paced technological 'advances' employed for the eco-social devastations of the 20th century (see in particular *The Phenomenon of Life or Organismus und Freiheit*, 1973).

Though not always cast in the dramatic eschatological terms of Gnosticism, Jonas believed that modern Western thought had embarked in a journey that either ignored the corporeal realm in its organic dimension—devoting its attention to issues like mental associations of ideas and linguistic expressions—or attempted to reduce it to its inorganic aspects—i.e. those Galilean particular *affezioni* that abstract, de-spirited physics and chemistry were progressively learning to describe and predict *qua* regular uniformities by means of advanced mathematical equations. However, according to Jonas, God is not a 'pure intellect' that conceived of the universe like a perfect mathematician would do, for the Creation is much more than that which can be understood through mathematical lenses. 'That pure intellect could have, say, a minutely detailed inventory of the composition of the eye, the optical nerve, the cerebral centre for vision, and of the modifications taking place therein when visual stimulations occur, yet... it does not even know what 'to see' may mean' ('Ist Gott ein Mathematiker? Vom Sinn des Stoffwechsels' [in *Organismus und Freiheit*], It. Trans., p. 61).

Swimming against the twin tides of intellectual history and economic power, Jonas shouted a loud 'halt' to the so-called 'development' of today's world. Anticipating if not kick-starting the discussions about 'sustainable development' that have become mainstream in academe during the last two decades, he commented on how the simplest requirements of life and patent biological phenomena like individuation through metabolism, experience and freedom seemed to escape the grasp of the modern philosopher as well as of the scientist, despite the sophisticated subtlety of the former and the

advanced technology of the latter. In truth, Jonas believed that the philosopher's subtlety had made the organic realm unreachable, lost behind a barrier of concepts, words, meanings and symbols to be explained in the first place. On its part, the scientist's technology had been contributing relentlessly to the devastation of the Earth's biosphere, lost within the arrogant and superstitious belief that whatever errors scientific technology may generate, there shall be newer scientific technologies to fix them. The marvels or 'miracles' of technology, more than anything else, have contributed to the widespread success of this modern, secular 'religion' of 'permanent self-surpassing toward an infinite goal. Science, the life of theory, would be much better suited for the role of end-in-itself, but it can be this only for the small band of its devotees' (*DPV*, p. 168).

As concerns the alleged 'progress' of the so-called 'life sciences', Jonas deemed it to be dubious, for in most cases it served the same interests guiding the public and private institutions responsible for the planetary ecological meltdown (e.g. *Technik, Medizin und Ethik. Zur Praxis des Prinzips Verantwortung*, 1985). Moreover, the mechanistic presuppositions of modern science made it difficult not to fall into reductionism (e.g. a patient is not a person but the collection of data in her medical file) and appreciate the peculiarities of organic reality, which set it apart from the inorganic one (e.g. growth, reproduction, goal-directedness, self-definition, identification *via* metabolism). Finally, both modern medicine and biology approached life itself as possessing merely instrumental value. For example, the widely accepted experimentation on live animals and the *ad hoc* redefinition of death in the age of organ transplants were as much instances of utilitarian thinking as the hotly debated patenting of genetic information, whereby the alphabet of life itself is subsumed to the higher value of profit for private investors.

Although important political considerations can be derived from his ethics of responsibility (e.g. the desirability of green taxes, the enforcement of bioethical standards), Jonas is hardly ever described as a political thinker. In part this is due to the topics to which he devoted most time and attention, from the rather obscure early-Christian Gnosis to specific bioethical conundrums. In part this is due to his conviction that all major changes are the result of individual persons making moral and/or immoral choices, rather than to political or economic systems taken as a whole. In part this is due to the technical languages that he uses, i.e. the theologian's and the ethicist's.

The ethicist's language is predominant even in *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*. In Jonas' own words, the end of this book is to help the reader to 'see that *responsibility* with a never known burden and range has moved into the center of political *morality*' (DPV, p. 122; the emphasis on the last word in quotation is mine). As for the therapy recommended vis-à-vis the Baconian 'disease' of the modern age, Jonas highlights distinctive ethical points, such as 'the pursuit of virtue... moderation and circumspection' (DPV, p. 204).

The political philosopher and the political scientist encounter the ethicist even when he tackles the issue of which State would better serve the end of preventing the environmental collapse of our planet; the socialist or the capitalist State? In theory, according to Jonas, Marxism would be more likely to prevent ecological disaster than capitalism, which is bound instead to pursue growth at all costs. Frugality, sacrifice and a more articulate understanding of the human being *qua* sensuous organic creature are much easier to retrieve in Marx than in the liberal-capitalist tradition. Moreover, the top-down, authoritarian socialist State would probably attain the desired results much more rapidly and unfalteringly than the bottom-up, consumer- and voter-based liberal-capitalist State. However, the practice of Marxism has been very disappointing. Not only has it flourished in a number of Baconian utopias, of which Bloch's is just a patent example. It has also shown how national interests have the absolute priority over international concerns. This means that countries like Soviet Union and China have pursued their own productive aggrandisement like big private conglomerates. In other words, Real Socialism has meant State capitalism, and the disastrous environmental record of these countries is now well-known amongst the scholars.

It is therefore a rare event to retrieve writings by Jonas tackling exquisitely political issues in the terms characteristic of a political thinker. One such rare event is the text examined hereby, namely a brief paper entitled 'Racism', given on 30 January 1993 at Percoto, Italy, upon conferral of the Nonino Prize to Hans Jonas. Delivered in English shortly before the author's death, it encapsulates Jonas' long philosophical journey and key-concerns, yet approaching them from a political angle, as the title implies. Moreover, since this paper has been published exclusively in an Italian translation by Maurizio Vento, it is desirable to make it better known beyond Italy's borders.

As typical of Jonas, philosophy and life are closely tied together also in this paper, which opens by revealing the reasons why he had decided to travel to Percoto from the US, notwithstanding his old age:

first of all, Percoto is near Udine, where the war had ended for him; secondly, in Udine, he had been told of an amazing example of solidarity, which he had 'kept for the whole life like a sacred task' ('Racism', 1993, It. Trans., p. 45).

The amazing example at issue tells that, soon after the Fascist government of Italy began the forcible deportation of its Jewish nationals to German extermination camps, two Austrian-born bourgeois sisters from Trieste found shelter in Udine, thanks to the intercession of the Catholic Archbishop of that town. There, in time, they sold all their valuables, in order to buy foodstuff on the black market. They feared deportation already, now they feared hunger as well. The two sisters did not know what to do. Likewise, they did not know the Archbishop, or the other local citizens that, having heard of their difficult situation, started to help them to keep hidden and fed until the conflict was over. Evidently, their unfortunate plight was enough to justify the stranger's benevolence.

From this concrete example of solidarity Jonas does not derive an optimistic philosophical anthropology. After all, many more people were busy participating in the expulsion of the Italian Jews or did not care enough to take any risk. During 'the darkest night of Europe' shone only 'some solitary lights' (Ibid., p. 46). As for racism, Jonas believes it to be practically unavoidable, insofar as 'racial differences' are part of the history and culture of humankind (Id.). Indeed, 'their disappearance would impoverish humankind' (Id.). Whether scientifically unsound or morally reproachable, 'one cannot deny the reality of race' (Id.).

Certainly, 'antagonisms and tensions, whether reciprocal or unilateral' do not justify the 'unspeakable crime' of genocide (Id.). Rather, Jonas wishes to acknowledge that 'for some psychological strangeness, a racist automatic reaction will always be within us' (Id.). Not even the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution succeeded in eradicating it; why should we 'post-moderns' succeed? Quite the opposite, Jonas tells us that we should not expect to be able to build a world devoid of such antagonisms and tensions, but hope that we all, both as individuals and as communities, may be able to cope with such antagonisms and tensions 'better than we did in the past' (Ibid., p. 47).

This is particularly important for the allegedly 'developed and much-celebrated Euro-American white civilisation', which has prided itself of having found and enshrined in its constitutions the universal rights of man and citizen (Id.). The 'scabrous heritage of slavery in contemporary America' and the 'hell' of the Holocaust are recent testimonies of how little weight these rights have in the 'recesses of

the collective mind' of that civilisation (Id.). One can only wonder about Jonas' possible reaction to the recent invasion of independent Iraq by just 'Euro-American white' nations in the name of those rights and the ongoing bloodshed resulting from it.

In order to make 'tolerance' or, if we prefer, toleration possible, 'all forces of moral education and a vigil political attention' must be employed, for we are set against an untamed 'beast hidden within our imperfect human condition' (Ibid., pp. 47—8).

An unexpected ally in the fight against racism comes from a phenomenon peculiar to 'the second half' of the 20th century (Ibid., p. 48): the planet's ecological meltdown.

Race, in the face of this terrible new 'challenge', becomes 'anachronistic, irrelevant, almost farcical' (Id.). 'A shared guilt binds us, a shared destiny awaits us, a shared responsibility calls for us': either we react and act together as 'one', or we will perish and, with us, the Earth as we know it (Id.).

Jonas does not believe that racial divides will vanish because of a higher sense of human unity due to the threat of extinction, but he does think that such an unprecedented threat is likely to reduce their relevance in world's affairs.

Significantly, in the face of this terrible new challenge, a new picture of 'the human condition' emerges as well (Id.). Whereas the lexicon of religion had connoted this condition for centuries, it is now the lexicon of 'ecology' that serves the same goal (Id.). In the past, the doctrine of the original sin taught to humankind that 'we were all sinners' (Id.). Today, it is the crippled environment of our planet that passes the same accusation, for we have abused of our ingenuity. Analogously, religion used to frighten us with notions of infernal punishments and 'the Last Judgment' (Id.). It is now 'our tortured planet' that tells us that the end is near, without the need for any 'divine intervention' (Id.). The 'last revelation' is not to come from a Messiah or a novel inspiration, but from 'the Creation' itself, lest 'we will all die' (Ibid., p. 49).

It may sound surprising to hear Jonas using such a strong language. He is known for his insightful scrutiny of the Gnosis and his finely crafted ethics of responsibility, not for a particularly forceful rhetoric. Yet, what we have come to refer to today under the umbrella of 'global warming' elicited very dramatic words from Hans Jonas, which should cause us to ponder very carefully.

Jonas had witnessed enough drama in his youth not to be easily upset by human problems. As seen with regard to racism, he was even willing to accept it as a fact of life; racism is merely one of our many faults. Veritably, he invited us to be more careful about this 'psychological strangeness' of ours, yet

avoiding any utopian dream of its elimination from public life.

When it comes to global warming, though, Jonas' tone is far less accommodating and the reason is pretty obvious: the survival of planetary life—and of ours in particular—is at stake. Moreover, the threat is not a future one; it is a present one.

As concerns the disputability of global warming, there is actually little dissent within the scientific community about it, as the recent conclusions of the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have highlighted once more. The little dissent that exists is typically amplified by the political hypocrisy of governments and corporate think-tanks, which at one end want 'global warming' erased from official documents *in lieu* of the more neutral 'climate change', while at the other end fund research on how to fight the wars bound to arise from the ecological catastrophes already occurring across the globe (see Giorgio Baruchello, 'Deadly Economics: Reflections on the Neo-Classical Paradigm', in Charles Tandy, ed., *Death and Anti-Death Volume 5*, 2007).

Jonas' strong language, coming from a calm, erudite, conservative thinker—indeed the mentor of republican Leon Kass—should resound powerfully and, hopefully, stay with us. It should lead us to consider what we can do, individually as well as collectively, in order to rescue the planet and our species from destruction: 'we are the only possible saviour of both' (Jonas, op. cit., p. 48). It should lead us to restrain and free us from politicising such a vital issue, for no significant political game can ever be played if the planet's life support systems are to collapse. It should lead us to avoid and condemn economic gambling as well, even though nations have already started squabbling about who owns what in the melting Polar Regions on behalf of powerful industrial lobbies, while at the same time monetising the current carbon-dioxide pollution within the European Union's Emissions Trading Scheme and yet promoting no substantial reduction of the undesired emissions. If only few 'solitary lights' are going to shine today and in the near future, then the darkest night ever is bound to fall upon us all, white as well as black, rich as well as poor, wise as well as knowledgeable.

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ERIC VOEGELIN'S IMMANENTISM: A MAN AT ODDS WITH THE TRANSCENDENT?

PART I

Maben Walter Poirier

Abstract

My objective in this paper is to present an alternative interpretation of the thought of the renowned political philosopher, Eric Voegelin (1901-1985). He has been understood by many of his most devoted followers as a classically based Christian thinker, and sometimes simply as a deeply spiritual person, who was critical of modernity for its abandonment of Christian-inspired political and social standards. In this article, I demonstrate that Voegelin was not only not a Christian in any sense of the term that is acceptable, but he was not a theist or even a deist. I argue rather that Voegelin was a modern thinker and an atheist, who, curiously, unlike a number of modern thinkers who are also atheists, rejected the idea of any kind of immanent or earthly fulfilment for mankind. Of course, any kind of transcendent fulfilment was also out of the question for him. I further argue that his seeming support for Christianity in his writings stemmed from his desire to use a modified or immanentised understanding of Christianity as the basis on which to erect a civil theology that would serve as a substitute for what he viewed as the contaminated civil theologies of the left and right that issued out of the Enlightenment era, and which, according to Voegelin, have proven to be so very devastating for political order and common civility in our time.

Key words

Voegelin, immanentism, atheism, the sacred, civil theology, modernity.

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

- Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*

It is difficult to undo our own damage, and to recall to our presence that which we have asked to leave. It is hard to desecrate a grove and change your mind. The very holy mountains are keeping mum. We doused

the burning bush and cannot rekindle it; we are lighting matches in vain under every green tree.

- Annie Dillard, *Teaching A Stone To Talk*

Introduction

I have been interested in the thought of Eric Voegelin for longer than I care to recount, and, during most of this time, I have had a rather traditional understanding of what many perceive to be at the core of the thinking of this great master of the last century, namely, his experientially based focus on *the Ground* of being. In short, like a good many North American Voegelin scholars, I understood Eric Voegelin to be a deeply religious person, not in any denomination sense of the term, to be sure, and he was certainly not a Christian, as far as I could tell—in this regard, I differed with those Voegelin scholars who believed then, and still believe today, that he was deeply Christian—but he was, in my estimation, someone who was dedicated to retrieving God from the exile into which He had been sent by modern man. I also understood him to be saying that many of the most serious problems of our age—problems both of a personal and societal nature—are directly attributable to modern man's refusal to accept the implications of something about which he is all too aware, namely, the ineluctable experience of the presence of the Transcendent in man's life. Here the focus, for me, was on the word and the reality that is the 'Transcendent.' In the interests of being adult, mature and free, Voegelin informed us that modern man elected to shun God by denying His existence. In fact, modern man surfaced when, like the Marquis de Sade, he concluded that his enemy was not the establishment, not the state and not the Church, but God Himself, and that he (man) could neither be fully human nor wholly free unless and until he banished God from his life. God was the enemy of mankind, and as long as He was around, man would never be who he is called by destiny to be. And so, God would have to go. Of course, coming to this decision was one thing, successfully achieving the objective was quite another, and, in my estimation, Voegelin made this patently obvious. In fact, Voegelin saw both the decision to pursue this goal and the efforts made to achieve it as megalomaniacal, the essence, for him, of the modern dementia.

Now, were I to have written on this subject a few years ago, I would also have gone on to say that Voegelin's entire corpus was driven by the need to challenge at its source this modern mental illness which has had such devastating consequences.¹ More than that, I would have said that Voegelin's writings were largely directed by his need to demonstrate that not only was this effort to dismiss God wrong in some abstract sense, that is to say, feasible but undesirable, but, most importantly, it was impossible experientially, in the sense that it was not even feasible. The experience of the Transcendent is not something that man can choose to have or not to have. Yet, it was precisely this that was being presumed by the modern and misguided intelligentsia who saw in their move something that was intellectually worthy. Of course, this was an exercise that was futile and fundamentally pathological inasmuch as it sought to have us deny the very existence of an important element of our experiential life, and, as such, it was the source of many of the personal, social and political diseases and even disasters of our time. I would also have informed you that Voegelin held that when modern man attempted to become the equal of God in part out of pride and in part out of his felt need to dismiss Him in order for man to realise his calling, man, in fact, always ended-up lowering himself to a level that was beneath his dignity as man. I would additionally have pointed to the fact that Voegelin believed that we have all been paying the price personally and collectively for this affront to the truth about our condition as human beings. And so, in order for us to return to some sort of harmoniousness within ourselves and with our fellow human beings, in order for us to get a proper fix on just who we are, and what it means to be human, I would have held that Voegelin's entire undertaking revolved around modern man's need to invite the eclipsed Transcendent back into our world, a world from which It could never be dismissed no matter how hard we might try to dismiss It. Finally, I would have stated that Voegelin's objective here was not for us to return to some past and more humane era, and forget about everything having to do with the modern era. That would be impossible and fatuous if it were. Rather, it was for us to explore who we are anew, beyond the confines of modern ideological thinking, which so distorts our modern vision of ourselves and the world, and reacquaint ourselves with the achievements of the past in this regard, not so as blindly to copy these advances, but in order for us to see how what was done in the past might be of help to us in the resuscitation of our human dignity.

However, of late, I have been having second thoughts, disturbing second thoughts, you might say, about Voegelin's thesis and the enterprise that flows from it.² While I still think very highly of Voegelin—indeed, how could it be otherwise when even 'the errors' that Voegelin makes can be repeatedly mined for the profundity of their insights into the predicament that is modernity³—I have become aware of a dimension of his thinking that makes him out to be a more contemporary and very different sort of thinker from the one I had initially understood him to be—a thinker who has a share in sustaining the problem that he correctly identifies as well as a share in its solution.⁴ Now, in itself, this may not be a problem for some, but it is a problem for me owing to the direction I now see Voegelin's thought taking. This direction, unfortunately, leads him, and would lead me too, onto a terrain on which I cannot comfortably travel.

I.

Let me begin my critique of Voegelin by stating that everything that I have said about his thinking in my opening paragraphs is both true and false—depending upon how it is read—and this, I have come to believe, is an ambiguity on which Voegelin counted. Voegelin very much did want to invite the experience of the *Ground*, or the Transcendent, back into the lives of modern human beings. He very much did want to end the eclipsing of the experience of the Transcendent. I do not think that there can be any doubt about that, for he repeatedly says so. However, I have come to realise that it is our explicit acknowledging of the *subject-based experience* of the Ground that Voegelin wished to invite back into our lives, and not the *Ground* Itself, or, more appropriately, Himself. This is an important difference that we cannot allow ourselves to ignore or elide.⁵ As regards the Reality that is the *Ground* or the Transcendent, and the invitation of that Reality back into our lives, Voegelin reasoned in a thoroughly modern fashion. Voegelin did not think that any kind of human contact with that Reality, at any point in history, was even a remote possibility. He made it patently clear that there was no communication or contact possible between man, on the one hand, and the actual *Ground* or Transcendent, on the other. What contact there was between man and the Ground was entirely intra-personal, and 'the Ground,' for him, was a subject-based experiential phenomenon that was proper to, and that unfolded within, the structure of man's alienated and alienating consciousness.⁶ Actually, Voegelin said more than this. He acknowledged that he did not believe in

the independent existence (that is, existence apart from its presence in the structure of man's consciousness) of 'the *Ground*' when he spoke against the hypostatisation of *the Ground*, and this too he made unequivocally clear in both his writings and particularly in his private conversations.⁷ But, as we say this, notice also that we are not dealing with a simple-minded denier of God, who belligerently argues that there is no God and who makes it plain that he is at war with religion, when we are dealing with Voegelin. We are dealing with an extremely sophisticated thinker, that is to say, with one who is by no means aggressively atheist. Voegelin understands both the need for religion, and the role that it plays in man's life and in society, as well as the fact that religion is one of the symbolic expressions of the structure of human consciousness which is eclipsed at the cost of human decency and civility. Indeed, it is owing to this latter point that Voegelin speaks so knowingly and even positively about religion, despite his being of the view that 'there is no God,' and in the process puzzles many of his followers as well as opponents about his true views.⁸ And so the central question for us is: How do we correct the confusion around the question of Voegelin and 'the *Ground*' or 'the spiritual,' where the word 'spiritual' is conventionally understood?⁹ We do this by taking into account everything that Voegelin said, and not only those things that happen to satisfy our personal and present political needs.

Specifically, the best way to approach this is for us to state forthrightly that it is time that we open up new territory—which was not 'new territory' for Voegelin—and speak candidly about Voegelin's *Ground*. This will not only lead us all to address the issues in a serious manner—in a manner that will oblige us to cease referring to Voegelin over and over again as being an enigmatic thinker where religion is concerned,¹⁰ it will also lead us to reconsider whether or not it is time for us to reposition Voegelin in the history of western intellectuality. Needless to say, I do not think that this is likely to be territory on which Voegelin himself would have felt uncomfortable or would have even viewed as alien. To the contrary, as we will see, he felt perfectly at home in this land where there is no independently existing real *Ground*, for he knew it to be, after all, a land that is well trodden by many present-day men, including himself.¹¹ And what is most important here is the fact that there is a good deal of evidence to show that Voegelin knew exactly what he was up to in his speculation. He left us a number of far-from-hidden clues, and, in some cases, outright

affirmations of his views regarding these matters that were of ultimate concern to him.¹²

As an example of what I have in mind when I say that Voegelin did not affirm or believe in the separate or independent existence of the Transcendent, consider what he said to his long-time friend Robert Heilman, the great Shakespeare scholar of the 1940s and '50s.¹³ In a memoir entitled *The Professor and the Profession*, recently published by the University of Missouri Press, Professor Heilman reported that Voegelin, on one memorable occasion, said to him: '*Of course there is no God. But we must believe in Him.*' Now, if the issue here is whether Voegelin believed or did not believe in the independent existence of the *Ground*, in short, whether he was or was not a deeply spiritual person in the traditional, and, some might even say, naive sense of the word 'spiritual,' namely, a person who wished to rekindle man's relationship with the independently existing Reality Who is the Divine, then the answer, it seems to me, is unambiguous. His words to Heilman are clear.¹⁴ He was neither a spiritual person in the traditional sense, nor was he someone who sought to revive man's relationship with an independently existing Divine Reality. Voegelin was a variation on the modern atheist, who may have had an experience of the *Ground*, but, for him, the *Ground* that he experienced did not exist in the world beyond the experiencing subject, namely, the specific human beings doing the experiencing. It (the *Ground*) existed only as an expression of the existential consciousness of the experiencing subject. It had existence only as a subjectivity for Voegelin, a shared one perhaps—shared with all other human beings who share the same structures in consciousness—but still only a subjectivity. We will return to this point when we speak of Voegelin's theory of consciousness.¹⁵

Now, we need not imagine here that by speaking in this way Voegelin was trying to shock his friend Heilman, the way many people today try to, and, indeed, enjoy shocking a partner in conversation, or, more commonly, an audience that is listening to them speak. Voegelin was not irresponsible in that way. Indeed, the truth is that he knew the consequences of speech like this, and he did not casually speak it to the masses, as he explained to John East.¹⁶ And yet, for him, this was not a secret to be known only to the few. It was far too important a matter to be dealt with in this way. So important was this that he himself chose *knowingly* to live by a standard that he knew to be no standard at all, that is, he chose to live his life by placing all of the emphasis and focus on his *experience* of a *Ground* that, for him, did not

exist independently of his experiencing consciousness. Moreover, he would have the rest of us *knowingly* do likewise, for he understood that the repercussions of our *not* living in a manner true to our *experiential life*, but instead living the truth, namely, that 'there is no God,' were just too horrendous for him, and for any of us who are decent, to contemplate. He had the Twentieth Century to prove it. Man must acknowledge God, not because there is a God, but because our consciousness, and the concomitant experiential life that arises therefrom, is structured that way, and also because if we were not to acknowledge this Subjectivity, this *Ground*, and instead live by the truth, we would become savages of the worst sort, of which there are a large number of examples in modern times.¹⁷

Echoes of Leo Strauss's esotericism, only softer, some might think. Not really. Strauss, if we are to believe Allan Bloom, would and did recommend that we keep secret the fact that there is no God, a secret to be spoken of only amongst those called 'philosophers.' Had Strauss been speaking to Heilman, we might have heard him say: '*Of course, there is no God, but let us not tell everyone. Let us keep it a secret, a secret to be discussed only amongst the cognoscenti.*' For Strauss, non-philosophers, the lesser beings, those who have not been or who are yet to be metastatically transformed, i.e., the great majority of human beings, are to be encouraged to believe that there is a God. Only the transmogrified philosophers know the truth as regards this all important matter. Now, this is not and never was Voegelin's position. Voegelin, to his credit, never saw the philosopher as a transmogrified being—for him, there were not two types of human beings, ordinary human beings and the cognoscenti—and he never claimed that the philosopher was in possession of esoteric knowledge. And so, Voegelin was prepared to speak the truth about this matter to all, to philosophers and non-philosophers alike, provided they were prepared to do what was required of them to receive it, i.e., undergo conversion (*metanoia* and not *metastasis*), and then act discreetly, responsibly, and without any intention of shocking. The truth should not be bruted about when the occasion does not demand it, or when all one wants to do is titillate one's audience. However, when the occasion does call for it—as he clearly thought it did when he was speaking to his friend Heilman, and also often when he spoke to an academic audience—although even here he shows discretion by speaking the truth to those who know how to listen (consider the discretion he exercised in his words to John East)—he tells both philosophers and

non-philosophers that, although *there is no God* as such, if we mean to have political stability and be humane in our dealings with one another, all of us have to abide by the standards of our experiential life and maintain the pretence that 'there is a God,' i.e., in his own words to Heilman, '*but we must believe in Him*'—even when we all know it to be otherwise—for the preservation of our own sanity and the well being of the community.

Parenthetically, one of the implications of Voegelin's prudential approach to this most important of issues is that it forces us to conclude that Voegelin was primarily not a philosopher, if, by 'philosopher,' we mean someone who devotes himself to speaking candidly about as much of the truth as is available to him regarding the human condition, and damn the consequences. Voegelin never damned the consequences. Voegelin was a social and political thinker who deeply wanted his fellow human beings to experience civility in their relations with one another (a far from unworthy goal in these modern and violent times) more than he wanted them to live by what is true, and unfortunately this civility, in Voegelin's estimation, could only be purchased by their *knowingly* pretending to credit what he, and they, conceived to be an untruth. This is the cost of civility, for Voegelin, and we have no choice but to pay the price if we mean to be decent and moral. Simply put, the origin of civility is in the lie that we knowingly tell ourselves about this most important matter, namely, '*there is no God, but we must believe in him*' even if there is no God, for the alternative is too terrible to live through. And so, in a subtle way, Voegelin was a specifically *modern variant* of Aristotle's 'continent man' (*spoudaios*) more than he was a philosopher. He was someone who believed that under current conditions, which may be the norm at all times, it is not appropriate to dwell solely on speaking the truth. In fact, it may be reckless for us to do so, which is something that one ought never to be. It would almost seem as if Voegelin's sense of morality demanded that the horrendous consequences of speaking the truth be brought to the attention of those who may be inclined to be irresponsible and improvident enough to want to speak it, and this alone should suffice to induce them to be prudent where speaking the truth is concerned. Evidently, Voegelin saw a conflict between being moral and being truthful, which is something that no classicist or scholastic would acknowledge.

I would hold that Voegelin's deeply prudent and deeply moral character goes a long way towards explaining the widespread misconception amongst Voegelin's many followers to the effect that he was

a Christian, when powerful indications are that he was not a theist, or even a deist, and, hence, far less a Christian. Almost every Voegelin scholar has heard this story. Voegelin informs us that when asked about what sort of Christian he is by people who pestered him after a talk, at first his answers invariably skirt the question, in an effort to keep the matter private and unresolved, and, if pressed, he frequently replies that he is 'a pre-Nicene Christian.' Voegelin's Christian supporters—Voegelin himself informs us, in a tone that almost sounds boastful—are always delighted to hear this, ...and, it seems, many still are. 'See,' they say, 'Voegelin himself says that he is a Christian, indeed, a pre-Nicene one,' and all are confident that they have things right and that he is someone whom they can trust. But this is not how I read Voegelin's reply to his interrogators. I see this as an example of Voegelin's effort to be both prudent and to tell the truth. To decompress all of this, we need to ask ourselves: What is there precisely about the Council of Nicea that offends Voegelin's sensibilities to the point that he feels forced to hide his beliefs, and, if pressed to speak, say that he is a pre-Nicene Christian? I submit that what there is, is that prior to the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) it was possible to hold that Jesus was strictly human, and nothing more than human, and still be recognised as Christian (at least in Arian circles, and maybe even outside of Arian circles as well), whereas, after the Council, those who held this view were formally no longer Christians. They were Arians and heretics. The Council of Nicea declared Arianism to be heretical and its adherents to be 'outside' of the Church. Nicea affirmed that Jesus is both Divine and human (*homoosios*), and Voegelin rejected this and its implications, and thus rejected the principal affirmation of the Council of Nicea. For Voegelin, Jesus is *strictly* human, namely, a being who likely realised a maximal measure of the human potential, but it is His human potential that was maximised. Indeed, on a few occasions, Voegelin stated that Jesus exhibits the maximum of illumination to date. Of course, how could it be otherwise since, as he says in his words to Heilman, '...there is no God...'? And so, Jesus is still a being who is very much like the Buddha, Socrates, the Hebrew prophets, and the others. Indeed, He is someone who is fundamentally like the rest of us. Simply put, the fact is that for Voegelin, there can be no other way of being human. Jesus is fully man, and He is most certainly not God incarnate.¹⁸ And so, by the standards of the Council of Nicea, Voegelin knew that he was not a Christian at all, and, more generally, not a religious person either. Hence, his artful answer to his

would-be followers. Of course, in reply to this, Voegelin's Christian supporters will say that Voegelin is deeply religious and Christian, and that he only affirms his 'pre-Nicene' beliefs in order to draw attention to his opposition to dogmatic thinking and dogmatism of the sort that emerged following the Council of Nicea. I do not dispute the fact that Voegelin himself said something like this, and I also acknowledge that Voegelin did oppose the congealing of man's experiential life which he associated with dogmatism's gaining the upper hand on occasion, perhaps on too many occasions. But I also do not accept that his stated reasons for defining himself as a 'pre-Nicene Christian' are as straightforward as this. For one thing, interpreting the decisions of the Council of Nicea as dogmatic, i.e., capricious, seems to me to be a little too reminiscent of beliefs that were popular in the Nineteenth Century to the effect that God could not act 'unnaturally,' and that if it were said by some that He acted in an 'unnatural' fashion, then that had to be a dogmatic and therefore suspect statement which ought not to be credited. In addition, we must not forget that Voegelin was well aware of the differences between the realities 'dogma' and 'dogmatism.' He himself recognised that dogma, as opposed to dogmatism, does not necessarily eclipse the experiential. In fact, on rare occasions, he even acknowledged that dogma is important inasmuch as it registers and thus preserves for posterity a correct linguistic formulation or articulation of man's experiential life.¹⁹ And so, why, in this instance, does Voegelin simply assert, without offering any reasons for his assertion, that the dispute between the Arians and the followers of Athanasius involved dogmatism, and was not a matter of dogma, i.e., a matter of registering the experiential life of the early Church? Might it be because Voegelin thought *ab initio* that the experiential life of many of the early members of the Church was an impossible experiential life, impossible, of course, because it was at odds with modern immanentist thinking, and specifically *his* modern immanentist thinking? I submit that Voegelin arrived at the view that there was dogmatism, and not just dogma, present at and following the Council of Nicea for reasons having more to do with his immanentism and with his theory of consciousness, rather than for reasons having to do with the facts. In fact, I would go further and suggest that what Voegelin really wished to convey by speaking of dogmatism here, and by his use of the expression 'pre-Nicene Christian,' and other similar expressions from his repertory of phrases, was his support for an experiential life that is immanentist, which was what was present in the Arian belief that

Jesus was strictly human, and was not God incarnate.²⁰ Although Arians were not atheists, Voegelin here recognised that the Arians—and not the followers of Athanasius—said the sorts of things that he would say about who Jesus was, although perhaps not for the reasons that he would proffer. Voegelin's modern immanentist belief that there is no world transcendent God was what led him to the view that Jesus was a man like all others, and so, Jesus—as the Arians contended—had to be strictly human and nothing more than that. More generally, it can be said that Voegelin's opposition to dogmatic thinking and dogmatism had little to do with Voegelin wanting to interpret correctly the events surrounding the founding of Christianity and the first few centuries in the history of the Church, and a great deal more to do with his opposition to modern ideological thinking, which he equated with dogmatism, and may even have believed had its source in Christian dogma, which Voegelin associated with *the will to believe the impossible*. Voegelin correctly feared ideology, it having destroyed so many human lives in the past century and a half, and so, if ideology had to go in order for us to live in an more experientially focussed and humane manner, so did dogma—at the cost even of misrepresenting it as dogmatism, if need be—according to Voegelin. One has to question Voegelin's decision here. The fact of the matter is that Voegelin would have done much better had he distinguish between dogma, on the one hand, and dogmatism and ideology, on the other, *in a consistent and sustained fashion*, if his objective was to speak the Christian experience and reality, something which he apparently found difficult if not impossible to do, despite his stated desire to do just that.²¹

One final quotation from Voegelin may be in order here. It is a quotation that was recently drawn to our attention by someone wishing to demonstrate to us Voegelin's profoundly Christian character. In *The Collected Works*, Vol. XXXIII, p. 85, Voegelin wrote: '...one can have the spirit of Christianity without being a church member.'²² Again, more evidence of just how non-dogmatically Christian Voegelin is, it is said. Now, if Voegelin were a superficial person, given to making superficial statements, we would agree. It would be correct to read this sentence, and sentences like it, in a superficial way, and thereby come to the conclusion that Voegelin was affirming his allegiance to Christianity, although not to any specific Christian church. But, as we know, Voegelin was very far from being a superficial person. Nor was he someone who was given to speaking in a thoughtless way. And so, this is a statement that has to be placed in the context of Voegelin's

thinking. What this means is that when one takes into account Voegelin's theory of consciousness, and his interest in 'symbolic equivalences,' this phrase by Voegelin, has a meaning that is completely different from the one that Voegelin's Christian supporters believe it has. What I mean here is that, for Voegelin, the expression 'the spirit of Christianity' is not specific to Christianity. It is a spirit that is present in the thought of all who live an open experiential life. It is present in the thought of Plato, the Hebrew prophets, the Buddha and Buddhists generally, etc., and so, of course, one does not have to be a member of a church to express 'the spirit of Christianity,' as far as Voegelin is concerned. The truth of the matter is that one does not even have to be a religious person of any sort to express 'the spirit of Christianity,' according to Voegelin. One can be a non-dogmatic atheist and exhibit 'the spirit of Christianity.' The expression 'the spirit of Christianity' is completely disconnected from Christianity, and hence is utterly devoid of any specifically Christian religious meaning and content. In fact, the expression 'the spirit of Christianity' is a euphemism for *non-dogmatic thinking*, for *openness to the world*.²³ And so, the sentence in question could easily have been phrased as follows: 'One can be a good man without being a church member.' Indeed, one can be. Religiosity of whatever sort, and more specifically Christian religiosity, is not essential to one's being a good man. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were good men. Voegelin himself was a very good man in a century in which there were many very evil men. Today, many atheists are good men—indeed, some are better men than are many Christians—but this does not make them Christians in disguise, nor does it entitle Christians to claim them as theirs.

One cannot help but draw attention here to certain affinities between Voegelin and Spinoza. In a letter to Heinrich Oldenburg, Spinoza wrote: 'I say that for salvation, it is *not* absolutely necessary that we know Christ according to the flesh [i.e., know Christ as the Incarnation of God on earth]; whereas it is quite another thing in regard to the eternal son of God, which is the eternal wisdom of God, which has manifested itself in all things and in supreme fashion in the human mind, and in an altogether particular way in Jesus Christ.' (My italics.) There is more than just a resonance of this view in Voegelin's writing. Spinoza and Voegelin here are almost speaking the same language and are almost coming to the same conclusion, namely, that Jesus had a particularly well articulated *experience* of the Transcendent, but this does not make Him the one whom Christians believe Him to be, that is to say, God incarnate. And so, the

result is that one can have the 'spirit of Christianity' or 'the eternal wisdom of God, which is manifest in all things...', without being formally a Christian, namely, without believing in what Christians believe, i.e., in the Divinity of Jesus, or even that there is a God. The one place where Voegelin and Spinoza differ is with regard to whether one need be non-denominationally religious at all to have 'the spirit of Christianity.' In conformity with 'the climate of opinion' of his times, Spinoza would likely have said 'yes,' whereas Voegelin, I hold, says 'no.' For Voegelin, one can have 'the spirit of Christianity' and yet be an atheist.²⁴

To be continued in the next issue of *Appraisal*, Vol. 7, No. 3.

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Notes

1. I still hold to this belief. In fact, I am more than ever convinced that the entire body of Voegelin's work, even as reinterpreted in the manner in which I propose to reinterpret it, is comprehensible only as a response to the atrocities of the modern era.
2. The fact is that I was never completely happy with the traditional approach to Voegelin. I sensed that it was forcing Voegelin to say things that he was likely not saying. I even sensed that Voegelin's thinking did not resonate well with orthodox Christian thought. Yet, I compelled myself to believe that I was on the right track. Since the majority of North American Voegelin scholars, not to mention, Voegelin's most vehement critics as well, held that Voegelin was deeply orthodox and Christian in his thinking, there had to be something that I was overlooking. And so, at the time, I would not let myself entertain the possibility that Voegelin's supporters and critics might be wrong about Voegelin's religiosity.
3. I am reminded here of a short phrase by Nietzsche in *Fragment of a Critique of Schopenhauer*, dated 1867. See *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited by Walter Kaufmann, p. 30. Nietzsche writes '...The errors of great men are venerable because they are more fruitful than the truths of little men....' It is difficult to imagine that truer words could have been spoken or written about Voegelin.
4. This is something that the majority of Voegelin's supporters in North America will have difficulty to accept, but I cannot see how it can be otherwise.
5. When I use the word 'subjective,' or one of its variants, in connection with 'the Ground,' I am *not* saying that the experience of 'the Ground' is a subjective thing in the sense that some people, by virtue of their habits of being, are more inclined to experience 'the Ground' than are other human beings. Nor am I saying that it is a matter of choice whether a person chooses to experience 'the Ground' or not. I am very explicitly stating that the experience of 'the Ground' is something that all men have, whether they like having it or not. Of course, whether they will all admit to having it is, of course, quite another matter. So true is this that the pursuit of immanent utopian objectives is, from Voegelin's perspective, but another way in which inveterate secularists, who think that they are immune to anything so ethereal as experiencing 'the Ground,' express their search for 'the Ground,' albeit the case that this way of pursuing 'the Ground' is not approved of by Voegelin. In other words, man's experience of 'the Ground' is a distinguishing feature of the structure of human consciousness, which means that it is the expression of an experiential reality that is shared by all human beings. And so, it can be said that experiencing 'the Ground' is experiencing something that is 'objective,' in the sense that it is the experience of something that is real and common to all human beings. However, if one says that the experience of 'the Ground' is something that is 'objective,' one has also to acknowledge that it is also not the experience of something that exists, or is capable of existing, apart from, or in the absence of, human consciousness, according to Voegelin. Where there are no human beings and hence where there is no human consciousness—prior to the emergence of the species *homo sapiens*, for instance, or after the end of our species, should such a terrible fate befall us in the future—there is no "experiencing of "the Ground", and there is no Ground in existence somewhere. 'The Ground' is a reality, a something, that is intrinsic to the structure of human consciousness, according to Voegelin, and that is all that it is. It most definitely does not exist in the world beyond the structure of human consciousness. Why else would Voegelin have gone out of his way repeatedly to affirm that he objected to hypostatizing 'the Ground's', i.e., to claiming that it is an experiential reality that refers to a something that exists as an otherness in the world beyond human consciousness? And so, it is in this sense that it can be said that 'the Ground' is the experience of something that is subjective (i.e., intrinsic to the structure of the consciousness of the species called man) and wholly immanent.
6. When I speak of 'alienating' consciousness,' I aim to draw attention to the fact that for Voegelin human consciousness is structured in such a fashion as to give rise to two symbols, the symbol *man* and the symbol *Ground*, and the symbol *Ground* is experienced as wholly apart (i.e., alienated) from the symbol called *man*. Of course, the crucial word here is the word 'experienced,' for the symbol *Ground*, according to Voegelin, is not really wholly apart from the symbol *man*. In fact, these two symbols can not exist independently of one another. Their seeming independence from one another is a feature of the structure of consciousness. In short, Voegelin is speaking about subjective, i.e., in the sense of shared intra-personal and experiential matters when he speaks of 'the Ground' and 'man,' and he is not speaking about the trans-personal reality who is 'man' alienated from the trans-personal reality who is 'Ground' or God. The

- meaning of these remarks will become clearer as we move further into this paper.
7. I have to say here that I prefer Michael Polanyi's handling of this complex matter that is the issue of the *Ground*. Polanyi was a philosopher and a true theorist in the original sense of the Greek term *theoria*. He did not fall into the trap that is modern experiential subjectivism. In his famous work *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (1958), as well as in his numerous articles on the subject of consciousness and knowing, Polanyi makes it patently obvious that he believes that practitioners of the natural sciences, while relying on their subject consciousness, are able to transcend their subject consciousness in their quest to know the real and the true, and, hence, they do make contact in some sense with what is real, i.e., with what *is* as it exists independently beyond their person. By relying on what Polanyi refers to as 'tacit knowing'—the kind of knowing, which, with the passage of time, roots itself in the very way of being of a scientist and transforms the scientist's way of being so as to dispose him or her (properly) to know *the other*—a scientist comes to know—inadequately, to be sure—a something and ultimately a Someone Who transcends subject consciousness. Simply put, a scientist comes into contact with the other—the real—that exists apart from himself. Thus, he transcends his *self*, i.e., his subjectivity. As I interpret Voegelin's position, this sort of knowing and knowledge is simply not possible (he will say as much in a passage I quote later, see footnote 15), and hence science (*épistémé*), as it is understood by Polanyi and the great classical tradition, is not possible for Voegelin. For Voegelin, man's knowledge is restricted to what is available to his *subject* consciousness, and, thus, man's knowledge sadly does not achieve the quality of being *theoretical*.
 8. It is interesting to note here that it is not only a majority of his Christian followers who hold that Voegelin was a Christian. His atheist opponents also think this to have been the case, despite the fact that Voegelin is often much more in accord with them than they realise. The fact is that he usually differs from his 'atheist opponents' only to the extent that he wishes to draw on his immanentised understanding of Christianity—read solely as a civil theology—to mitigate what he sees as the disastrous effects of the civil theology that is modern millenarianism, whereas they see little that is wrong with the pursuit of metastatic solutions to man's problems. In short, he is more prudential than they, but he is no less of an atheist.
 9. I speak of the word 'spiritual' in its conventional sense, because I am well aware that this is a word that has lost almost all of its meaning over the past fifty years, to the point where self-acknowledged atheists speak of 'their spirituality,' when the expression 'atheist spirituality' seems wholly inappropriate by any reasonable standard. For an analysis of the shifts and turns that the word 'spirituality' has undergone in recent times, see Charles Taylor, 'Spirituality of Life—and Its Shadow: Today's spiritual innovators turn away from the transcendent,' *Compass*, Vol. XIV No. 2 (1996).
 10. It is not true that Voegelin was an enigmatic thinker when speaking about religion and spirituality. There is little that is enigmatic about his views on religion and spirituality if one starts out holding the right set of assumptions. His views are all very clear and consistent, as we will see. He appears to be enigmatic only if one begins with the assumption that he was someone who was deeply spiritual, and then discovers that this is something that cannot be squared with his words, and yet one wants to hold on to both one's belief in Voegelin's spirituality and his words.
 11. In a letter to his friend Alfred Schütz, dated January 1, 1953, Voegelin makes it very clear that his 'concern with Christianity has no religious grounds at all,' and he goes on to demonstrate just how true this is by speaking about a number of symbols that are central to the beliefs of an orthodox Christian from an entirely immanentist and secular perspective. At no point in this letter does Voegelin affirm the trans-personal truth and reality that these Christian beliefs and symbols point to. He simply explores the connections between and implications of these Christian symbols as they bear on his understanding of the universal structure of human consciousness, and, in the process, he assesses whether or not the Christian symbols are more articulated than the comparable non-Christian or secular symbols. And, he often finds that the Christian symbols are more articulated. But nowhere is he saying that owing to the degree of their articulation, Christianity is superior to other religions or that he is a Christian or even a religious or spiritual person on this or any other account. It is a purely intellectual assessment that he is carrying out. Any atheist, with a range of interests similar to Voegelin's, could and would have expressed himself or herself exactly as Voegelin does here. More to the point, we have to acknowledge that immanentist interpretations of normally trans-personally significant Christian symbols like the ones in his letter to Schütz abound throughout Voegelin's writings, and it is inappropriate to denature Voegelin's thinking about these symbols by attempting to give them a special religious status within Voegelin's thinking. Cf., Eric Voegelin, 'On Christianity' (letter to Alfred Schütz, January 1, 1953), in *The Philosophy of Order: Essays on History, Consciousness, and Politics*, ed. Peter J. Opitz and Gregor Sebba (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 449-50; also in *Collected Works, Vol. 30, Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984*, letter #38, Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2007, pp. 122-132.
 12. Speaking of the North American scene, a small minority of Voegelin scholars will, when questioned, acknowledge that Voegelin was an atheist. However, the great majority of them believe him to have been deeply spiritual, and maybe even Christian, 'although not in the conventional sense,' they add, and amongst these, there are those who want to see him as Christian, but have difficulty viewing him as such. In fact, they do not quite know how to make sense of it all, and they say so. They frequently make reference to Voegelin's treatment of Christianity as 'deeply disappointing,' and Voegelin himself is described as 'enigmatic.' It seems to some of us that their

disappointment could easily have been overcome had they begun their study of Voegelin with a different set of assumptions about who Voegelin was. See Gerhart Niemeyer, 'Eric Voegelin's Philosophy and the Drama of Mankind,' *Modern Age*, 20 (Winter 1976), 34-35; David Walsh, 'Voegelin's Response to the Disorder of the Age,' *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 46, no. 2 (April 1984), 266-287; David Walsh, 'Review: Eric Voegelin and Our Disordered Spirit,' *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 1, pp. 133-134; Harold L. Weatherby, 'Myth, Fact, and History: Voegelin on Christianity,' *Modern Age*, (Spring 1978), 144-150; The one person who appears to have read Voegelin correctly almost from the start on this issue, and who also wrote about what he saw, was Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, a man much disliked for his clearly intemperate attacks on Voegelin. See Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, 'The New Voegelin,' *Triumph Magazine* (January 1975), 33-35. Wilhelmsen understood that Voegelin was an atheist. However, he apparently did not detect (or did not care about) the motive behind Voegelin's advocacy of an immanentised Christianity, namely, Voegelin's desire to have 'his' Christianity act as the basis on which to erect a new civil theology, a civil theology that would be less millenarian than were the civil theologies that issued out of the Enlightenment. All Wilhelmsen saw was that Voegelin misrepresented Christianity, which was, of course, true and very much intended by Voegelin, for Voegelin saw aspects of mainstream orthodox Christianity as contributing to the problem that culminated in the violence of the Enlightenment era and after.

13. Eric Voegelin came to know Robert Heilman while both were teaching at Louisiana State University in the 1940s and '50s, and both men remained friends for the remainder of their lives. It was Heilman who introduced Voegelin to Henry James' short story *The Turn of the Screw*, which caused Voegelin to produce, within a space of twenty-four hours, one of the most insightful essays ever written on James' story. See Eric Voegelin, 'The Turn of the Screw,' *The Southern Review* (Winter 1971), 3-48.
14. Note that this is a casual conversation that Voegelin is having with Heilman. Voegelin and Heilman are not discussing whether it is appropriate to attribute 'existence' to God. He is not saying to Heilman that existence is not one of the attributes of God, in the way that it is of all things material and empirically knowable to man. One cannot save oneself from having to recognise that Voegelin was an atheist by this sort of intellectual slight of hand. He very bluntly, and in an almost matter-of-fact way—the way friends exchange basic information with one another—says 'Of course, there is no God.' Could the meaning of his words be clearer?
15. Note here that if I am right when I say that Voegelin was a modern atheist, then we should see this reflected in his understanding of the metaxic experience—man's experience of living in the *in-between*, i.e., man's experience of himself as 'being in the world, but not [wholly] of the world.' The metaxic experience for Voegelin should have a completely different meaning from the one it has for Christians and religious

people generally. The point I am making here is that man's experience of 'being in the world,' but also of being 'not of the world,' ought not to be an experience that speaks of a trans-personal reality for Voegelin, a reality other than the reality of the experience itself. It ought only to be an experience that man has—an experience that has man as its subject and its object—and that is all it is. It ought to say absolutely nothing about what is real and transpersonal about man's other-worldly or transcendent calling. It is an experience that unfolds entirely within the immanent order of man's consciousness, and thus we are not justified in arguing that it says something about man's transmundane connections. And Voegelin confirms precisely this when, in his *Autobiographical Reflections*, he writes: 'The term *consciousness*, therefore, could no longer mean to me a human consciousness which is conscious of a reality outside man's consciousness, but had to mean the in-between reality of the participatory pure experience which then analytically can be characterised through such terms as the poles of the experiential tension and the reality of the experiential tension in the *metaxy*. The term *luminosity of consciousness*, which I use increasingly, tries to stress this *In-Between* character of the experience as against the immanentising language of a human consciousness which, as a subject, is opposed to an object of experience.' (My italics) See Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, p. 73. Notice how Voegelin immanentises and subjectivises (i.e., intra-personalises) the expression 'the in-between.' Now the expression 'the in-between' does not refer to man's being an entity who is 'in the world, but [is] not of the world,' as many might expect. Rather, it is about the character and quality of human consciousness and experience. If there is any doubt about this, consider the following passage from Voegelin's article 'The Gospel and Culture.' Voegelin writes: "There is no In-Between other than the *metaxy* experienced in a man's existential tension toward the divine ground of being; there is no question of life and death other than the question aroused by pull and counter pull; 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 the noetic consciousness in which the movement becomes luminous to itself." There is nothing enigmatic here. This is very clear, and the implications are as well. (See also 'The Gospel and Culture,' in Donald G. Miller and Dikran Y. Hadidian, ed., *Jesus and Man's Hope*, (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1971), p. 75.) This is hardly the view of a theist or even a deist, not to mention, a Christian.

16. See footnote no. 18.
17. Notice that what is experiential is real, and what is real is experiential. But what is real and experiential may not be true. So, 'Of course, there is no God [true]. But we must believe in him [experiential and real].' At this point, some might even wonder, 'from where does the phrase 'Of course, there is no God...' originate? Presumably not from Voegelin's experiential life. But if not from there, then from where?', one asks.
18. In Voegelin's own words, see how, in a calculated way, he disguises his thinking about these matters. In a

letter Voegelin sent to North Carolina's Republican Senator John East, he writes: "The 'pre-Reformation Christian' [label you mention] is a joke. I never have written any such thing. These canards arise because I frequently have to ward off people who want to 'classify' me. When somebody wants me to be a Catholic or a Protestant, I tell him that I am a "pre-Reformation Christian." If he wants to nail me down as a Thomist or Augustinian, I tell him I am a "pre-Nicene Christian". And if he wants to nail me down earlier, I tell him that even Mary the Virgin was not a member of the Catholic Church. I have quite a number of such stock answers for people who pester me after a lecture; and then they get talked around as authentic information on my "position." Letter from Eric Voegelin to John P. East dated 18 July 1977 (in *Hoover Institution Archives, Eric Voegelin Papers*, microfilm reel 10.23.) The question that we have to ask ourselves here is: What is the great secret that Voegelin feels he has to covered-over by these dexterous moves? Might it be his atheism? But why should he worry about revealing that he is an atheist? We no longer burn people at the stake for being atheists. Perhaps not, but were Voegelin and others to declare outright that they sanctioned atheism, it could—in the long run, and were the majority of the population to follow them down this path—have the effect of destabilising the moral life of the state, which is something that Voegelin fears more than anything else. So, why be transparent about one's atheism. Is it not of greater benefit to be silent about this matter and allow religious faith to be placed at the service of the state? In other words, let religion be a stabilising civil theology, i.e., a stabilising element in society, which is all it can ever be in any case. Notice how what was originally a Protestant inspired Reformation idea, namely, the subordination of religion to the state, becomes a philosophically mandated idea in the hands of the Voegelin. In light of the 'fundamentalist Christian' versus so-called 'liberal' conflict presently raging in the U.S., notice also just how right Voegelin was in his advocacy of prudence around the issue of atheism.

19. But, on balance, Voegelin saw dogma in a negative light, that is to say, as the congealing of our experiential life in a constraining formulation, and in that respect he deemed that dogma had overstayed its welcome.
20. It is Voegelin's modern immanentist views that dictate the meaning of the dispute between the Arians and Athanasius.
21. I will return to this matter in Part II, for there is more to this than I am able to express at the moment.
22. Originally written in German, this passage is from an essay entitled, in English, 'The Spiritual and Political Future of the Western World,' delivered by Voegelin at the *Amerika-Haus* in Munich on June 9th, 1959. William Petropoulos is responsible for the English translation.
23. There is a growing literature on the relationship of Voegelin's thought to the thought of Henri Bergson. By way of an example, see references to Bergson in Eugene Webb's piece entitled 'Eric Voegelin at the End of An Era: Differentiations of Consciousness and

the Search for the Universal.' in *International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Eric Voegelin*, ed. Stephen A. McKnight and Geoffrey L. Price. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1997), pp. 159-188.

24. For this quotation from Spinoza, I am indebted to Massimo Borghesi, who in an article entitled 'Gnosis, a Faith Without Reality,' *30 Days*, No. 5 (1996), speaks of 'idealism, or modern gnosis, as the speculative basis of 'the philosophy of the non-event,' the philosophy of the Resurrection without the bodily risen Christ.' In this article, Professor Borghesi argues that David Friedrich Strauss in his famous work *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (1835), as well as Rudolph Bultmann, a century later, along with many other great luminaries of the German enlightenment, in the interests of defending the view that 'God cannot act in history through 'particular actions' (miracles), or even less can he become a 'particular man,' completely denature the Gospel story by having 'faith make real what never happened'—Voegelin would have said 'dogma made real what never happened'—and could not happen, given what we know of modern science. In short, according to D. F. Strauss, *et al.*, faith (dogma) created the object, which, in this case, is the Resurrection, and not vice-versa, as the Gospel account very explicitly states, when it informs us that the Resurrection gave rise to faith. Now, I am not saying here that Voegelin was in agreement with D. F. Strauss' scientism. He very clearly was not. But I am saying that Voegelin did arrive at a remarkably similar conclusion to that arrived at by D. F. Strauss, Bultmann, *et al.*, as regards what is and what is not possible for God and for man, and this is assuming that he believed in God's existence, which was not the case, if we credit his words to Heilman, which find support in the overall structure of his thought. (Parenthetically, was Frederick Wilhelmsen's disagreement with Voegelin not precisely over Voegelin's interpretation of the Resurrection as a 'non-event'? Wilhelmsen's oft repeated question to Voegelin was 'But is He risen? [for] ...if He [Jesus] is not risen'—in the words of St. Paul—'then I for one don't give a damn about St. Paul's experience of Him.' (Voegelin had focussed on Paul in the fourth volume of *Order and History: The Ecumenic Age* [1974].) Voegelin, we are told, remained silent when confronted with Wilhelmsen's often too aggressive questioning, ...a prudential silence, one suspects. Others report that Voegelin said that he would discuss this matter with Wilhelmsen in private. And so, if Borghesi is correct, does this mean that Voegelin shared something in common with 'idealism' and 'modern gnosis'? Is Voegelin's philosophy 'the philosophy of the Resurrection without the bodily risen Christ'? See Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, 'The New Voegelin,' *Triumph*, January 1975.)

WILLIAM POTEAT: THE PRIMACY OF THE PERSON

David Rutledge

Abstract

I propose to introduce you in this article to the thought of William Poteat, a provocative and fertile American thinker who has cleared a path to recovering the richness and solidity of the human person as the centre of all knowing and meaning-making. An early admirer of Michael Polanyi, whose work decisively influenced his own, Poteat adapted and extended Polanyian insights in new, even revolutionary, ways. Despite having a relatively low profile in today's Academy, Poteat's work offers one of the twentieth century's most distinctive and important efforts to re-establish social and intellectual values within the person, thus helping us to escape our 'ripening flirtation with godhood, with infinity, restlessness, tumult, and madness.'¹ After a brief description of Poteat's context and the problem that gripped him, I will devote the bulk of the essay to some of his central ideas, before concluding with a brief evaluation of his work.

Key Words

E.M. Adams, Descartes, disenchantment, Ronald Hall, logic, Merleau-Ponty, mindbody, morality, Poteat, Polanyi, Pascal, rationality, space/place.

1. Poteat and his Problem

William H. Poteat (1919-2000) spent most of his career as Professor of Religion and Comparative Studies at Duke University, though he also taught philosophy at the University of North Carolina, taught at an Episcopal seminary, and held visiting professorships at Stanford and Texas.² Through his co-editing of a major collection of essays on Michael Polanyi's thought, and the supervision of numerous doctoral dissertations on Polanyi and others concerned with the issue of personal knowing, Poteat was prepared at the end of his career to publish three volumes of his reflections, and assist with a volume of his essays published over a thirty-year period.³ What is distinctive about Poteat's intellectual life is the persistent, tenacious focus on the problem of finding a suitable home within the modern ethos for the human person, a home that would allow that person to claim his or her knowledge, belief, actions and creations as real, as true, as full of meaning as they are prior to entering upon reflection *about* them. In his doctoral dissertation on 'Pascal's Conception of Man and Modern Sensibility' (Duke, 1951), Poteat opposed Pascal's search for the *esprit de finesse* behind our

rational powers to Descartes' claim that the *esprit de géométrie* lay behind such powers. He later recalled that 'Here was shaped for me the problem that has occupied me now for more than thirty years: the nature of rationality and logic in an intellectual climate in which Descartes' legates have prevailed and left us culturally insane.'⁴ What is this problem with Cartesian rationality and logic, whose effects would merit the charge of 'insanity'?

Such a strong claim cannot be unpacked briefly without distortion, but at least a sketch, a short version of the story must be attempted if we are to appreciate the restorative task to which Poteat devoted his energies. Beginning with the late medieval period and continuing into the early modern, we find western thought gradually replacing communal solidarity with solitary individuality, replacing knowing as a harmonious union of faith and reason with a purely mental picture of reason guided by methodological doubt, and replacing a sense of the mystery of the world with an aim to render knowledge of the world fully explicit.⁵ When the 'disenchantment of nature' began with the Copernican revolution, theology and philosophy had already begun to withdraw human beings from their rootedness in a world that accredited myths, stories, poetry, history, drama and art as sources of knowledge about that world, in order to sharpen the tool of critical rationality. That such a critical reason was still believed to be the gift of God did not prevent later thinkers from thoroughly secularising it, which accelerated the transition from a society which unproblematically practised a humanistic personalism to one which elevated scientific objectivity as the guarantor of all meaning and truth.

For Poteat, the chief figure in this transition was René Descartes, whose elevation of an isolated, individual *cogito*, his use of radical doubt as the primary instrument for investigating the world, and his severing of body and mind in a metaphysical dualism all contributed to the shaping of a new vision of what knowing was, and who human beings are. Coupled with the mathematization of physical theory effected by Galileo and Newton, Descartes' philosophical anthropology, while rarely explicitly stated, nevertheless provided a powerful justification for the triumph of critical reason not only in science, but throughout wide areas of western scholarship. For Poteat, this triumph of 'exteriorization' was far from beneficent. As he states elsewhere:

...it is the perennial temptation of critical thought to demand total explicitness in all things, to bring all background into foreground, to dissolve the tension between the focal and the subsidiary by making everything focal, to dilute the temporal and intentional thickness of perception, to dehistoricize thought...to lighten every shadowy place, to dig up and aerate the roots of our being, to make all interiors exterior, to unsituate all reflection from time and space, to disincarnate mind, to define knowledge as that which can be grasped by thought in an absolutely lucid 'moment' without temporal extension, to flatten out all epistemic hierarchy, to homogenize all logical heterogeneity....⁶

Here the problem of western intellectual society is described as precisely and intriguingly as an Escher drawing, and the strength of Poteat's work comes from his single-minded focus on 'recovering the ground' of meaning that we lost to the critical model of knowing. A massive displacement of the person had occurred, a chronic amnesia of the spirit in which what it actually meant to be a human being was forgotten. In a letter to a colleague, Poteat once wrote: 'In *Polanyian Meditations* and *A Philosophical Day Book* I have labored mightily – not always with success – to arraign the whole philosophical tradition lock, stock, and barrel. I have said this repeatedly, but either people don't listen or they refuse to believe what they hear.'⁷

Perhaps the best example of the way Poteat re-reads the history of the western intellectual tradition is his 1974 essay, 'Persons and Places: Paradigms in Communication,' where he traces carefully the transformation of perspective that occurred in the Italian Renaissance in which science and art combined their emerging visions of reality to elevate *space* as the fundamental arena within which human being must be understood, above the sense of *place* that had held this position prior to the Renaissance. This was a fateful moment in the displacement of persons from human culture:

...let me repeat, the common-sense view of spatiality that has come down to us from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, and which has tacitly become for us the ontologically *primordial* view, is radically incoherent. What is worse, its incoherence is humanly intolerable. Persons have *places*. The conception of space under review systematically pre-empted the notion of *place*.⁸

Using the work of Alexander Koyré and Sigfried Giedeon, philosophically applied to the Cartesian revolution through the insights opened up by Pascal, Poteat shows how fundamental to our sense of ourselves as persons is a notion of our place in the world, a "whence" from which all other ordinations – such as the geometrical quantifications of modern

science – are grasped. Our relationship to our own bodies is *not the same* as our relationship to external objects in space, either logically or experientially. This fundamental truth was obscured by Descartes when he wrote that '...the nature of matter or of body in its universal aspect, does not consist in its being hard, or heavy or coloured...but solely in the fact that it is a substance extended in length, breadth and depth.'⁹ Poteat comments on this 'paralyzing incoherence':

I have argued that 'extensions' or the perception of 'extended' things presupposes a prereflective oriented *whence* from which radiating vectors distinguish length, breadth, and depth, which is to say that 'extended' things are derivative, while the prereflective oriented *whence* ... is radical All this then means that for me, existentially, as the concrete person I am, *extension* is not first of all space, but rather is *place*.¹⁰

The replacement of place, so understood, by space in our thinking was a major step toward the 'disenchantment of the world,' the 'dissolution of the cosmos' which has been so often remarked by modernity, and which caused Auden to term our time 'the Age of Anxiety.' Poteat then shows the relevance of this moment by tracing signs of the dissolution in John Donne ('The Sun is lost, and the earth, and no man's wit/ Can well direct him where to look for it.');

in Franz Kafka's Gregor Samsa, suddenly transformed in his bed one morning into a gigantic insect; in David Riesman's outer-directed man in a 'lonely crowd;'

in Salinger's Holden Caulfield, afraid to cross a street in New York City, lest 'I'd just go down, down, down, and nobody'd ever see me again...';

and in Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Flies*, where Orestes admits to Zeus's charge that he is insubordinate: 'Foreign to myself – I know it. Outside nature, against nature, without excuse, beyond remedy....Nature abhors man, and you too, God of Gods, abhor mankind.'¹¹

The litany could be extended, of course, (think of Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov or Kirilov, or Camus' *The Stranger*) showing the overwhelming sense of loss, of lostness, that characterizes persons in modernity: 'In fact, as we can now begin to see, the whole of modern culture could be described as an assault upon place, status, and room for personal action by the abstracting intellect.'¹²

Ironically, this loss of his place in the universe made modern man desperately uneasy, seeking 'a deliverance from every particular place, every particular status, and the ambiguity of every particular moral action.'¹³

Despair may issue in restless passion, as well as in passivity, as Michael Polanyi saw in his description of 'moral inversion.'¹⁴

However helpful such revisioning of the accepted history of philosophy is in understanding the problem

Poteat found in our culture, he is emphatically not interested in simply correcting the record by undertaking a full-scale historical or archaeological project; there is a strong sense of mission in his effort to recover a sane place to stand. Let me now turn to some of the major motifs in Poteat's effort at recovering the personal.

2. *The Way Back to Firm Ground*

Perhaps the most salient of Poteat's signposts on the path of recovery are the following (necessarily somewhat distorted by my stating them so simply and bluntly): (1) that the infection of western language by critical assumptions forces him to use a strange and awkward vocabulary to impeach those assumptions; (2) that we must demur not only to the dominance of the spatial arena in critical thought, but also to its emphasis on the timeless, eternal moment; (3) that speech – the oral-aural reciprocity of ordinary conversation – is the proper home of thought, rather than in the abstractions of the printed page; (4) that what place, temporality, and speech reveal to us is the prereflective omnipresence of the body in all our formal articulations – our knowing can only be incarnate; (5) that the mind/body dualism of the critical tradition must be understood to be overcome in the unity of the two, for which 'mindbody' is an appropriate term; (6) that grasping our mindbody as the ground of all orientation, sense, and meaning-making is the first, major step in recovering our personhood. Let me take up just a few of these elements, so that my reader can get some sense of how Poteat's thinking proceeds, and can hear him articulate that thinking.

One of the most irritating features of Poteat's work is that he refuses to write and think within the normal patterns laid down by the academic orthodoxy within which almost all his readers were trained, but he has reasons for this practice. Poteat works outside the professional philosophical guild because it is hopelessly in thrall to critical assumptions ('The more deeply I indwell the new place in the world that this book [*Polanyian Meditations*] provides, the less I find it possible to read books on philosophy. I feel like a man who believes the earth is round reading books by authors who think it's flat. I am utterly tongue-tied in philosophical colloquy.'¹⁵ Poteat's 'extra-territorial' posture toward the tradition gives him, however, a good ear for the dissonances in other thinkers, and he writes perceptively on the critical assumptions of authors who should know better (Karl Popper, George Steiner, and Walker Percy, among others).¹⁶ If the customary way of doing philosophy does not get us beyond critical thought, then we must find a new way to think and talk that will not betray our

best instincts. This Poteat attempts to do in what may be one of the most controversial of his strategies, namely the adoption of a written style that he admits is an 'extraordinarily mixed bag' of rhetoric. Very attentive to matters of form and style, he is led to write 'meditations,' a 'daybook,' a series of reflections in epistolary form. In speaking of the style of his last book, *Recovering the Ground*, he writes:

In its style – awkward syntax, nonlinear progression, reflexivity, dialectical reduplication, an unfamiliar and often deliberately "atonal" diction congested with what will appear to be pretentious or merely clever coinages that, together, allow my radical insight lucidly to oppose itself to the conceptual landscape from which it has been elicited and to impede yet another bemused lapse into our familiar dualisms – I have obeyed the demand upon me of this primitive reality to educe and then body forth the logos that endows my mindbody with sentience, motility, and orientation, both before I have yet spoken and after I do, as itself the condition of speech. (p. xiv)

Is this really necessary, we might ask? Only if, Poteat would answer, you *really* want to escape the confines of a critical worldview, to experience yourself united once more, body and mind, as one whole person. He sees the acts of writing and reading not as reports about meaning we have conceptualized, and merely need to express—even if these are properly post-critical reports—but as themselves actual experiences of making or finding meaning. 'I aspire to place the reader in an agonistic relation to the text' (xv), meaning that the book must work on us, 'dismembering' our Cartesian cogito in order to allow new possibilities for knowledge to appear.

In language that intentionally attempts to force us away from conventional, comfortable ways of thinking, Poteat tries to show how Polanyi's placement of the person in all his richness and complexity at the centre of knowing leads to revolutionary perspectives that are at the same time the familiar and ordinary understandings that gave our world meaning before we were bewitched by critical assumptions. In his evocative words in his *Meditations*, 'It is my view that rationality, that is, the 'hanging togetherness' of things for us, and logic, that is, the articulated form of the 'making sense' of things for us, is more deeply and ubiquitously, though inexplicitly, embedded in our ordinary thinking and doing than we are likely to notice...' (9). Conceptual innovation is reflected in misleadingly simple language: 'reason' equals 'things hanging together for us,' while 'logic' is the articulate expression of this 'hanging together,' or 'making sense' of things for the knower. This is a broad notion of rationality

and of logic that would include most poems, songs, novels, jokes, sermons, and musical compositions as fully rational, an assertion that we only find odd in the setting of critical philosophy.

With some sense now of the reasons for the way he writes, we can turn to other of Poteat's motifs. He points in the essay mentioned above, 'Persons and Places,' to Kierkegaard's treatment of Mozart's opera Don Giovanni, which discloses another of his major themes, the substitution in the history of critical thought of sight for sound, of the printed page for the act of speech on which it is based. In *Polanyian Meditations*, Poteat explores the way in which the critical tradition has construed knowing as an instantaneous, or better, timeless, phenomenon. With the mathematical image for knowledge on which Galileo and Descartes insisted, critical thought argued that clarity and distinctness must be hallmarks of real knowledge, as they are of number. The perceptual moment is ideally depicted as a timeless instant, excluding the possibility that objects of our cognizing could change while we investigate them. This assumption coheres naturally with a visualist sensibility, in which sight is elevated above the other senses as the paradigm of knowing: 'The static, visual model dominates the epistemological exposition of the (atemporally) logical structure of the conditions of knowledge, conceived as an established fact' (175). What this leaves out of the account of knowing, of course, is the rich oral-aural world of actual speech, of language as it exists prior to its being fixed in printed form by reflection. The work of Walter Ong and Jack Goody on oral cultures, and the ways in which literacy obscures the spoken roots of language, led Poteat into a new appreciation of how experience cannot be made, logically, to yield an act of knowing completely divorced from temporality, because it is part of the very form of hearing, and so of language and thought. Analyzing J.S. Bach's First Prelude in C in the *Meditations*, Poteat concludes that music has a logic (a sense, a 'hanging together,' a 'connectedness'), and that this logic is inherently, unavoidably temporal. So the visual picture of rationality that has dominated Western thought is not the only possibility; that we have restricted our reflections on logic ('form,' 'order,' 'whole,' 'integrity,' etc.) to a visual rather than an auditory model is a matter of history, not of eternal necessity.

To the recovery of the importance of place and time to the human person, Poteat adds a third crucial ingredient, the body that actually constitutes our place in the world. The stimulus and conversation partner in this effort is M. Merleau-Ponty's exploration of the irreducible coherency of body, mind, and perception in *The Phenomenology of*

Perception. Through his own phenomenological examination of his bodily being in thinking, writing, bike-riding, and playing tennis, Poteat reveals in the *Meditations* the insidious tendency of the critical tradition to make us think of our body as a thing like other things, when in fact it is, for us, radically unlike anything else in the universe. It is the centre from which all our stretching forth toward the world commences, beginning

in my mother's womb, within which her beating heart rhythmically pumps the blood of life through my foetal body, forming itself toward my primal initiation into the very foundation of my first and most primitive cosmos....These forms are for me, even still for conscious, reflective, critical me, archetypically the forms of measured time: tempo, beat, strophe, pulse....There is then an archaic prejudice far older than I in my prereflective and unreflecting mindbody to indwell all form, meaning, and order in the world as the kindred of the first order I have known, the order of my mother's beating heart (22-3).

The ground of the human notions of order, measure, 'connectedness,' of 'hanging together' (that is, logic) lies in this prelingual level of awareness, which is inescapably ours, which never leaves us, and from which all the articulations of higher thought are educated. Where else would the human sense of pattern, order, rhythm have come from, if we were not already, long before formal reflection, immersed in a world that gave us meaning?

...it is clear that if the tonic mindbody is the omnipresent and inalienable matrix within which all our acts of meaning-discernment are conceived and brought to term, if, that is to say, the new picture of ourselves as beings in the world actively engaged in asking, seeking, finding, and affirming clearly situates us in the moil and ruck of the world's temporal thickness, marinating there in our own carnal juices, then our rationality can only appear here, inextricably consanguine with our most primitive sentience, motility, and orientation (246-7).

In thinking about this radical suggestion, we are led necessarily to consider the role of language in our lives, particularly in our intellectual lives, and I will conclude this section with a description of Poteat's re-instatement of speech at the heart of language.

Having already noted the tendency of the critical tradition to construe the arena of knowing in spatial, visual, timeless, purely mental terms, we should not be surprised to find Poteat gravitating to the ignored role of human speech, and the oral-aural arena within which it occurs. Against the abstracting linguistics of a Chomsky or Skinner, Poteat argues that knowing cannot be made intelligible without attention to the language in which such knowledge is expressed, and that language makes no sense if it does not always acknowledge, even tacitly, its

prelinguistic rootage in our bodies. Though the term 'mindbody' and its cognates are awkward at first, Poteat coins these terms to insist upon the 'prelingual performing' of our minds in our bodies, as Polanyi described it in PK (pp. 70ff.). He is extending Polanyi's cryptic assertions by constantly 'leaning against' the terms and patterns which are regnant in philosophical discourse so that space might be created for a new way of thinking. Our knowing is not just mental, it is not just bodily, it is always both together, as our mindbody, a 'mindedbody,' an 'embodiedmind' that is knowing. He writes further:

I claim that language – our first formal system – has the sinews of our bodies, which had them first; that the grammar, the syntax, the ingenuous choreography of our rhetorical engagement with the world, the meaning, the semantic and metaphorical intentionality of our language are preformed in that of our prelingual mindbodily being in the world, which is their condition of possibility. (9)

'Language has the sinews of our bodies.' In this synaesthetic commingling of human experience, Poteat tries to overcome the discarnate, disembodied mentalism of critical philosophy. Beginning his meditations by reflecting on Polanyi's own dependence on his mindbody in writing PK, Poteat continues with numerous examples of experimental data from language acquisition studies (by Church, Lewin, Trevarthen, and Condon) to echo his points, and uses extended analogies of listening to music and playing tennis to drive home the ubiquitous mutual entanglement of mind and body:

The structure of this picture is expressed in 'language': in the style of our movement; in the bearing and mien, the timbre and mood of either our erect or of our recumbent bodies; in the pitch and the colour of our voices; in the key, the tempo, and phrasing of our gaits; in the resonance and the hue of our glance; in the pace, the diction, weight, momentum, and metaphorical intentionalities of our speech. (PM, 14-15)

Here Wittgenstein's 'form of life' is fleshed out, incarnated, in language that itself attempts to perform, to create, a vivid experience and example of the power of words to make meaning: 'A sentence uttered makes a world appear,' (Poteat, quoting W. H. Auden, 116).

Beyond the helpful term 'mindbody,' (which seems both natural and necessary to those who have immersed themselves in his writings) Poteat attempts to re-think language as speech and hearing rather than as written grammar, and uncovers the insidious distortions of the model of visual perception which has been the standard vehicle for knowledge in the critical paradigm. By stressing speech—'lively oral-aural reciprocity' (113)—rather than sight as the

faculty that makes us human, Poteat is able to re-direct knowing from the individual mind in contemplation of the world, to the dialogue between the knower and the one who calls him or her into personhood through address, through summons. While Poteat's radical re-statement of central terms in philosophy may not speak to everyone, he does make clear, I believe, how fundamentally revolutionary Polanyi's work was, and his own extension of that work is, preventing an easy domestication of personal knowledge into a trite truism.

In summary, William Poteat argues rationality as construed by the modern Academy has so truncated, refined, isolated, abstracted knowing from the people who do it that persons can no longer affirm what they know with the full sense of their being. People who know lots of things, and live quite unproblematically relying on such knowledge, are suddenly stricken mute and disoriented when the modern intellectual tradition demands an accounting of this knowledge, on *its* terms. What an absurd situation! The dynamic, temporally situated, oral-aural reality of our minded bodies/embodied minds, richly entangled in a place and a world of speech, memory, and hope, is ruled illegitimate to speak before the bar of critical reason, which demands an explicit, timeless report of fixed and certain objects, fully illuminated and thus exhaustively available to sight, delivered by a discarnate mind in a universal theatre of reflection. To help us recover from this alienation from our ordinary selves, Poteat has overcome a wrongheaded notion of 'logic' that is shaped by a static, visual, discarnate model of knowing, and rooted logic instead in the mindbody. In the setting of everyday life, then, we see people doing all kinds of things in organized, patterned ways that people around them find sensible, so full of meaning that these others engage quite naturally with them in conversations on all sorts of topics, and activities of all kinds. He is therefore able to say, at the end of his agonistic reflections:

In a sense nothing has changed: everything remains essentially the same. We may go on talking as we pretty much always have...The world remains pretty much what we have always commonsensically thought...What an effortful way to declare that we are incarnate beings, irreducibly carnal spirits, actually existent mindbodily persons! (166)

3. *Evaluating the Critic*

This concluding section of the paper can be relatively brief, in part because there has not yet been a great deal of critical examination of Bill Poteat's work—the emphasis has been on understanding

what he is trying to say.¹⁷ Three important questions have been raised by interlocutors.

First, E. M. Adams, a friend of Poteat and his colleague in philosophy at North Carolina, has argued that Descartes cannot, or should not, be made the villain of modern Western thought as Poteat has done.¹⁸ Adams points out that Descartes was not the first to separate the mind and knowing from the body; that he does not find the influence of Cartesianism so prevalent today; and that the malign effects of modernity are more the effects of 'a shift in the governing values of the society,' than any epistemology stemming from the Enlightenment: 'Modern Western culture was generated not so much by the work of philosophers as by the development of a new form of life, what we may call bourgeois life, focused on materialistic values—values grounded in our materialistic needs....'¹⁹ While it is certainly true that social, political, and economic forces would have to be taken into consideration in any account of the rise of 'modernity,' Poteat's brief, occasional comments on Marx suggest that he would find behind any such social change in values a philosophical anthropology whose very language about human beings and their actions would be formative influences on the individuals in that society.²⁰ One could suggest that the very reason sociology presumes to be a science is that it abstracts from actual human persons in a way that renders it helpless when trying to apply its 'scientific findings' to those persons, precisely because it ignores the issue of its own anthropology, and those of its subjects.

A second question about Poteat's work is raised by Ronald Hall, one of his students, who worries that the late emphasis in Poteat on the 'mindbody' has occluded the importance he gave earlier to speech and language as the centre of human being.²¹ In a letter to Poteat, Hall once wrote:

I sometimes get the impression, Bill, that you think that the mindbody is our access to the Real. I think we might part company here, for I am inclined to think that words are our access to the Real...There is a difference in saying that the mindbody is the centre of the Real and saying that it is its ground. I quite agree with you that the pre-reflective mindbody is the ground, and that we need to recover it, but I remain convinced that it is in words that we find its absolute centre.²²

Hall, who is well acquainted with all the subtleties of Poteat's thought, senses an ambitious desire to give the *coup de grace* to modernity, and that the 'mindbody' became in Poteat's mind the silver bullet to do that. But isn't there an important distinction to be made between the prelingual biological realities of infants, and the spoken and written words of adults

that form culture, that allow the extraordinarily complex reflections of the *Meditations* to occur? 'Mindbody' is certainly to be preferred to a mind/body dualism, but it is speech, after all, that unites mind and body. Is not the mindbody of a reflective adult sufficiently different from that of a pre-speech infant to justify Hall's concern? I doubt that Poteat would want to elevate one aspect of our being-in-the-world, either speech or the mindbody, but would rather insist on the thorough, complete entanglement of both in everything a person does or says, so unified that 'no relativizing scepticism can get a foothold.'²³

Finally, let me mention one further question that has been raised about Poteat's work, concerning whether or not he gives sufficient attention to the sociality, the inter-personal relationships, that lie at the heart of human life.²⁴ Poteat's intellectual companions in his work—Pascal, Descartes, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty—are not thinkers known for their attention to the social dimension of existence, though none of them avoid it completely. Only Michael Polanyi perhaps, in his study of the scientific community in SFS, in his chapter on 'Conviviality' in PK, and in parts of *Meaning*, gave adequate attention to the social. There are no references to 'society' or 'community' in the indices to Poteat's books, and little attention to these topics in articles about Poteat. Yet his insistence on recovering life as it is lived prior to reflection would seem to require attention to the social, to people in relation, to the networks of mutuality that language and the nurture of infants entail. In *Polanyian Meditations*, in contrasting the Greek focus on sight with the Hebrew on sound, Poteat draws close to the relational aspects of human being, but the mention is brief, and never followed up: '[A speech-act, at]...its heart, as *speech-act*, is the absolutely novel and underivable act of owning one's words *before another*. Indeed, ...to *be* a person is nothing other than to be able before another to own one's words....'(126). Yet he gives this crucial social situation—I and another—none of the careful, detailed, exhaustive attention that he gave to the spatial, oral, and temporal features of the mindbody.

Poteat does, in *Philosophical Daybook*, briefly respond to this criticism, but only in one brief entry (for 8/10/87) that somewhat querulously, to my mind, argues that the problem of sociality is a function of the modernist, critical temper, with its emphasis on the isolated *cogito*, and thus social relations are not a problem for his post-critical perspective, in which all meaning derives from the same source, the mindbody:

For *Polanyian Meditations*...it is our integral, sentient, oriented, motile mindbodies, bonded in their efferent intentions to a world prior to reflection, which are the *radical* given....In other words self and other, I and you, solitude and society, individuation and socialization have at bedrock the same provenance for *Polanyian Meditations*.

This hardly seems adequate, however, as a display of how each of us begins and goes through life tied to others, implicated in their lives, taking our cues and making our plans with others 'in mind.' It would seem a natural extension of Poteat's wonderfully insightful use of research on the speech and movement of infants to see what research says about the necessarily *social* character of early life, but this has not yet been ventured. Though his argument is not weakened by this omission, it would certainly be strengthened by further work in this area.

While other comparisons could be drawn between Poteat's work and the work of those he studied – Heidegger, or Wittgenstein, or Polanyi; and though we could try to place him in the usual shorthand catalogues of the professoriat – is he a 'hedgehog' or a 'fox'? an 'edifying' philosopher or a 'systematic' philosopher? a 'splitter' or a 'lumper'? is he primarily concerned with epistemology or with ontology? etc., I hope that the issues raised both in exposition and in criticism convince you of the richness, the distinctive originality, and the tantalizing promise of William H. Poteat. I encourage you to read his books.

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Notes:

1. William H Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), 4.
2. A fuller account of Poteat's biographical details can be found in *The Primacy of Persons and the Language of Culture: Essays by William H. Poteat*, ed. By James M. Nickell and James W. Stines (Columbia, MO: The University of Missouri Press, 1993), pp. 3-5.
3. In addition to *Polanyian Meditations* and the essay collection *The Primacy of Persons*, Poteat published *A Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical Investigations* in 1990 (University of Missouri Press), and *Recovering the Ground: Critical Exercises in Recollection* in 1994 (State University of New York Press).
4. Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations*, p. 6.

5. See also the account of Poteat's intellectual perspective given by Jim Nickell and Jim Stines in their excellent 'Introduction' to *The Primacy of Persons*, pp. 6-10, which describes this period as replacing theonomy with autonomy, community with solitary individuality, and a sense of reality as an expression of God with a sense of reality as an object of thought and of sense perception. For brief 'Persons and Places: Paradigms in Communication' in *Primacy of Persons; Polanyian Meditations*, pp. 6-9 and 252-254; and William H. Poteat, *Recovering the Ground: Critical Exercises in Recollection* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), Appendix, esp. pp. 202-203.

Other scholars have, of course, traced this same history. See, for example, Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (NY: The Free Press, 1990); Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), Part II, and *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004), ch. 3; and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard, 2007).

6. Poteat, 'George Steiner: The Extra-Territorial Critic', in *The Primacy of Persons*, p. 261-262.
7. William Poteat, Unpublished letter to Houston Craighead, September 1, 1989, p. 1.
8. 'Persons and Places,' p. 33, in *The Primacy of Persons*.
9. *The Primacy of Persons*, p. 31; quoted from *The Principles of Philosophy*, 2.4, italics added by Poteat.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-41.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
14. See, PK, 231-235.
15. Letter to author, June 25th, 1987.
16. See essays in Part 3 of *The 'Primacy' of Persons*.
17. See the most recent issue of *Tradition and Discovery*, 2009
18. E.M. Adams, 'Poteat on Modern Culture and Critical Philosophy,' *Tradition and Discovery*, XXI:1 (1994-95), pp. 45-50.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
20. See his discussions, for example in *A Philosophical Daybook*, pp. 30, 92; and *Recovering the Ground*, p. 140.
21. Ronald L. Hall, "Remembering Bill Poteat," *Tradition and Discovery*, XXVII: 3 (2000-2001), pp. 11-15.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
23. *Polanyian Meditations*, p. 162.
24. The first person to raise this question about Poteat for me was Professor Martha Crunkleton, though I do not think she has published on this suggestion.

BOOK REVIEW

Dominic Hyde

Vagueness, Logic and Ontology, Hampshire, Ashgate, 2008, 226pp, ISBN-13: 978-0-7546-1532-3

The topic of vagueness seems to be a contemporary heritor of philosophical topics of indeterminacy, of the paradoxes of logic and of the theories of the semantic and logic of natural language. The volume investigates the matters related to vagueness and the paradox of vagueness (the sorites paradox), proposing avenues for future revisions in semantics, metaphysics and logic an opening perspectives in related fields of philosophy, linguistics, cognitive science and geographic information systems.

The book is structured in 7 chapters: Vagueness, Russell's Representational Theory, Descriptive Representationalism, Going Non-classical: Gaps and Gluts, Ontological Vagueness, Vague Individuation and Counting, and The Logic of Vagueness.

This analysis is based on a series of differentiations and nuanced arguments concerning the perspectives of logic, semantics and ontology. Vagueness is introduced as an ambiguous term. Nevertheless, there is a more clearer sense of vagueness when we differentiate the notion from the lack of specificity, exactitude and precision. The specificity of vagueness, in this sense, is construed starting from a description of the borderline or penumbral cases. The author is concerned with the vagueness of predicates. He underlines that the characterisation of borderline cases is construed in terms of 'an agent's inability to apply predicates, rather than in terms of the semantic properties of the predicate'. (p.3) As a consequence the book unfolds a *paradigmatic concept of vagueness*, applied to predicates and characterised by the presence of borderline cases. It is a concept present in many of the works of many of greatest philosophers of communication seen from the perspective of logic: Peirce (1902), Russell (1923), Black (1960), Church (1960), Quine (1960), and Alston (1964).

The author agrees with Menges and Skala (1974) that the concepts of the social sciences tend to be more vague than those of the natural sciences, but insists that their point is more related to the different nature of disciplines, to the greater importance of interpretation and sometimes of ethics at the core of social sciences disciplines. Yet, his interest focuses on the sorites paradox as a symbol for all borderline cases. This paradox is actually the development of a

puzzle, the *sorites puzzle* developed as a series of questions about the predicate 'heap.' Its very name comes from the Greek word for 'heap', 'soros'. The puzzle goes as following: Would you describe the presence of one grain a heap? No. What about two grains together? No. What about three grains together? No. What about... What about ten grains? Maybe, a very small one. Where do we draw the line? The related *falakros puzzle* is similar, addressing baldness.

The argument continues by explaining the road from puzzle to paradox and then to classical soritical cases, to arrive at a very interesting discussion of the relationship between soriticality and vagueness. Hyde leaves open the question that all vagues predicates are 'typically' soritical. (p. 15) This space for comments raises the interpretation of the distinction between what Alston (1967) calls 'degree-vagueness' and 'combinatory vagueness'. The first type refers to the cases where vagueness is caused by the lack of precision in what concerns the boundaries between the application and the non-application of the case along a dimension. For example, 'bald' does not draw a sharp boundary along the dimension represented by 'hair quantity.' Combinatory vagueness is explained starting from the word 'religion.' One needs to list the clear cases considered religions, the rituals, the sacred objects, the differences among them, the moral code sanctioned by Gods, the feeling of awe and the sense of mystery, the prayers, the specific worldview, the more or less thorough organization of individual and social life on the basis of all the above mentioned elements. Each of these conditions is necessary but not sufficient, and only the combination of elements becomes sufficient to define 'religion.' Even when some elements are missing a subset might be sufficient. The vagueness arises from the lack of precision as to what characteristic, or combination of, is necessary.

Another distinction is between linear and multi-dimensional vagueness. Linear vagueness is illustrated by means of qualities which form a continuum: defining blue does not clarify situations such as the presence of a blue-green. (Burke, 1946) Multi-dimensional vagueness is defined with the example of chair: how much back a chair needs to be a chair and not a stool?

He also distinguishes between vagueness of application (for instance, 'mountain(s)' as topography) and vagueness of individuation (for

example, 'mountain' as one, two, or many more mountains).

There are many more logical questions to be raised. Thus, one may wonder about the logical connections, could these be vague? Is the vagueness of a singular term sufficient to determine the vagueness of any sentence in which it figures? (p.19)

The extension of the concept of vagueness leads to a general principle stating that precision is inherited. 'If all but one of the constituent sub-phrases of a complex phrase are precise, then if the complex phrase is vague so is that one remaining constituent sub-phrase.' (p.23-4) To give a more accurate impression of the complexity of the debates on the subject, on the one hand, given a vague sentence, if the predicate is precise, then the name is vague and if the name is precise then the predicate must be vague. On the other hand, when the predicate is vague the name might be just passive, not necessarily precise.

Dominic Hyde identifies three directions for his analysis. The first is an epistemic perspective on vagueness. Williamson (1994) and Sorensen (1988, 2001) sustain that the lack of clarity concerning the boundaries of the predicates is a manifestation of human resilient ignorance. From this perspective, 'the sorites is valid but unsound.' (p.31) The second one perceives vagueness as a semantic matter. The third deals with the ontological perspective on the subject.

Russell is an exponent of the semantic perspective, mainly given his 1923 paper 'Vagueness.' He places the source of vagueness in the representational nature in language and, for this reason, in representations, but not in what is represented. Russell defines a representation vague when the relation of the representing system to the represented system is not one-one, but one-many. Hyde notices that the representational nature of vagueness is related at Russell to a celestial nature of logic. This semantic perspective does not urge a revision of the classical metaphysical view that the world is not vague, nor of classical logic or semantic. The criticism brought to this position is given by confusion between connotation, the application of a term and denotation the clear significance of the term. Another criticism states the lack of reference to borderline cases. These and many other instances of criticism led to descriptive representationalism, which shows that vague descriptions shadow the precise ones. The ideal language to clear vague terms and descriptions does not exist, but within the celestial logic of Russell's.

Then, Hyde investigates the answers given to the matter of vagueness by super- and subvaluationism, considering them inadequate. He suggests that non/classical semantics and an associated logic should deal with the phenomenon, but should look to 'strongly paracomplete and strongly paraconsistent systems for a more acceptable logic of vagueness.' (p.103) The insight is in my view strongly related with the idea that the vagueness of language and the vagueness of representations are possible to be sourced in what is represented. Hyde argues that objects, properties and relations could be vague even if not all of them at all times. There is an ontological basis of vagueness! His position relies on the explanations of Burks (1946), Rolf (1980), Burgess (1990), Tye (1990, 2000), van Inwagen (1988, 1990), Zemach (1991), Akiba (2000, 2004), Dummett (2000), Parsons (2000), Moreau (2002), and Rosen and Smith (2004). First he addresses vague identity starting with split indeterminate identity the Evans criticism for the vagueness of objects, the characterization of vague objects, the relation between vague composition and vague existence, the vague identity thesis, vague properties. All these analyses lead to the interesting dilemma: vagueness 'in the world' or 'of the world'? Hyde supports Sainsbury's stand that there is no intelligible notion of the world independently of our concepts. This is the reason why the dilemma is solved. The two apparently irreducible aspects overlap. At the same time, this is a damaging conclusion to the traditional metaphysics. Vagueness is a semantic phenomenon of ontological import. (p.209)

Then, observing that the ontological source of vagueness does not quite answer the Russell's problem of denotation, the investigation relating vagueness, logic and ontology leads to a perspective where vague predicates could designate with precision vague properties, and vague terms vague objects. In turn the observation underlines the importance of the paracomplete approach in modelling vagueness: the truth-value-gap approach to vagueness.

Hyde's compelling, well documented and argued book is a definite gain in making 'the streets of speculation just a little bit safer for the philosophers of tomorrow' (Sorensen, 1989) even though he does that not by banishing it, but by placing speculation into quite a different and complementing logical-ontological limelights.

Henrieta Anisoara Serban

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References to books by Michael Polanyi:

Because of the particular interest in the work of Michael Polanyi, and in order to avoid unnecessary repetition, please make references to his books by means of the following abbreviations followed by the page number:

- CF = *The Contempt of Freedom* (London, Watts, 1940; reprinted New York, Arno Press, 1975)
- FEFT = *Full Employment and Free Trade* (London, C.U.P., 1945; 2nd ed. 1948)
- KB = *Knowing and Being* (London, Routledge; Chicago, University of Chicago Press; 1969)
- LL = *The Logic of Liberty* (London, Routledge; Chicago, University of Chicago Press; 1951)
- M = *Meaning* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1975)
- PK = *Personal Knowledge* (London, Routledge; Chicago, University of Chicago Press; 1958)
- SFS = *Science, Faith and Society* (London, OUP, 1946; 2nd ed. U. of Chicago Press, 1964)
- SOM = *The Study of Man* (London, Routledge; Chicago, University of Chicago Press; 1959)
- TD = *The Tacit Dimension* (London, Routledge; New York, Doubleday; 1966; reprinted Gloucester, Mass., Peter Smith, 1983)

Also:

- SEP = *Society, Economics and Philosophy: Selected articles by Michael Polanyi*, ed. R.T. Allen (New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Publishers, 1997).