

ERIC VOEGELIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Universal Humanity and the Tension of Historical Consciousness

James Greenaway

Volume 75, Number 3, September–December 2023

Histoire vécue / Histoire écrite : apports philosophiques et théologiques

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1102501ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1102501ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Collège universitaire dominicain, Ottawa

ISSN

0316-5345 (print)

2562-9905 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Greenaway, J. (2023). ERIC VOEGELIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY: Universal Humanity and the Tension of Historical Consciousness. *Science et Esprit*, 75(3), 319–335. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1102501ar>

Article abstract

Eric Voegelin's philosophy of history is both intellectually illuminating and evocative. It is also voluminous. Therefore, this essay selectively discusses some of the main themes of his mature thought. It begins with an exploration of what Voegelin found to be meaningful patterns in history. Then it elucidates the connection between his discovery of such patterns and the underlying theory of consciousness that he developed earlier, but which acted as a catalyst for his later thought. Voegelin's concern to account for the emergence of historical consciousness was a key part of his philosophy of history, and is discussed here. Finally, the essay concludes with a brief meditation on the significance of his symbol, "universal humanity."

ERIC VOEGELIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY: Universal Humanity and the Tension of Historical Consciousness

JAMES GREENAWAY

Eric Voegelin is best known as a political philosopher. Born in Cologne in 1901, he was educated in Austria and later joined the Faculty of Law in the University of Vienna. It was here that he first began to write critically about the "race idea."¹ This put him on a Nazi hit-list, and after the *Anschluss* in 1938, he abruptly found himself having to flee the country for Switzerland. Eventually, he and his wife made a life for themselves in the United States. He returned to Germany temporarily in the 1960s, founding the *Institut für Politische Wissenschaft* in Munich, but spent most of his career in the United States at Louisiana State University and at Stanford University. He died in California in 1985.

From this minimal biographical sketch, the reader can already grasp some preliminary idea of Voegelin's concerns, and gauge the sincerity with which he thought, taught, and wrote. His status as one of the most outstanding thinkers of the twentieth century was certainly earned by a wealth of insights communicated in a corpus of writings that were not only equal to the level of his times, but whose relevance remains radiant and penetrating, rooted as it is in the perennial questions that arise from the human predicament of having to make sense of existence. He is probably best known for his mid-career work on Gnosticism, a category he employed to capture the roots of ideology as essentially religious.² As such, Voegelin treated modern ideological movements such as National Socialism, Communism, and Progressivism as political religions.

1. See Eric VOEGELIN, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 2: *Race and State*, Klaus VONDUNG (ed.); trans. Ruth KLEIN, Baton Rouge LA: Louisiana State University, 1997 [Hereafter *The Collected Works* will be denoted as VOEGELIN, CW followed by volume number]; also CW 3, *The History of the Race Idea*, Klaus VONDUNG (ed.), trans. Ruth KLEIN, Baton Rouge LA: Louisiana State University, 1998.

2. See especially VOEGELIN, CW 5: *Modernity Without Restraint: The Political Religions; The New Science of Politics; and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, Manfred HENNINGSEN (ed.), Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000.

It was in this mid-career phase that the horizon of Voegelin's thought shifted significantly. In 1966, he published *Anamnesis*, at the core of which is a theory of consciousness that not only enriched his political thought but had the consequence of disrupting the plan for his *magnum opus* already underway, his *Order and History* series.³ The eventual two final volumes contain Voegelin's mature thought on meaningful structures *in* history that a philosophy of history must take account of. It is to this that we turn our attention in this essay, which necessarily must restrict itself to the main lines of this thought. Therefore, we will first present Voegelin's interpretation of those meaningful structures or patterns in history; then we will elucidate the connection between such patterns and the theory of consciousness that acted as a catalyst for his philosophy of history, and especially as this bears on the emergence of historical consciousness; and we will conclude with the significance of what is meant by "universal humanity" as an outcome of such historical consciousness.

Patterns of Meaning in History

For the sake of clarity, let us begin with making two distinctions. The first is the rather obvious distinction between "history" and a "philosophy of history." Voegelin is not an historian. He is discussing neither historiography nor writing an historical description of events, persons or institutions related to any particular place or time, but is grappling with the nature of human existence in the cosmos.

The second distinction is that Voegelin's philosophy of history is, to some degree, at odds with some previous contributions to the field. For example, both Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee had written extensively about the "autonomous internal courses" of civilizations that would appear to be the carriers of meaning in history.⁴ A philosophy of history that adopts this model would then inevitably direct itself toward the multiplicity of peoples, treating each of them as an historical unit arranged on a line of time. The study of particular peoples in particular times and places certainly makes empirical data available and presents a significantly broadened pallet of historical materials, but such a quantitative method does not amount to a qualitative set of insights that capture what is universally human in history.

3. See especially VOEGELIN, "Eternal Being in Time" and "What is Political Reality?" in *CW* 6: *Anamnesis*, David WALSH (ed.), Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002. On the disruption to the original series, see Voegelin's introduction to *CW* 17: *Order and History*, vol. 4; *The Ecumenic Age*, Michael FRANZ (ed.), Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000.

4. Voegelin is referring to Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West: Form and Actuality* and Arnold Toynbee's twelve volumes of *A Study of History*.

Another approach is provided by Georg W.F. Hegel and Karl Jaspers who provide a qualitative judgment on what constitutes meaning in history. Hegel had emphasized an "absolute epoch" centered on the incarnation of God in Christ.⁵ Thinking creatively within a more traditional Christian frame, he claimed that the revelation of the Logos in Jesus is universally relevant. Similarly, Karl Jaspers put the emphasis on an absolute epoch which he called the "axis-time" of history, but he preferred not to identify it with the epiphany of Christ. For him, the incarnation of Christ is historically relevant only for Christians. With the universality of humanity in mind, and aware of the parallel spiritual developments of geographically distant civilizations in a spread from Hellas to China, Jaspers focused on a window of time "from 800 to 200 B.C., with a concentration about 500 when Confucius, the Buddha, and Heraclitus were contemporaries."⁶ Voegelin remarks that, in order to elevate the period from 800 to 200 B.C. to the dignity of an axis-time, Jaspers had to deny the epochal character of earlier and later spiritual outbursts. Moses and Christ, Mani and Mohammad apparently have nothing to add the absolute epoch, because—according to Voegelin's comments on Jaspers – "the earlier and later outbursts had only regional importance, while a universal consciousness of humanity, pervading all the major civilizations from Rome to China, had indeed been created by the outbursts of the axis time."⁷ For Voegelin, the problem with conceiving of an axial age as the central event in history is that it obscures the fact that, rather inconveniently, epoch-making spiritual outbursts tend occur off-schedule, as it were, wherever the spirit blows.

Voegelin does not dismiss the value of these quantitative and qualitative approaches but lifts them into a higher integration that a theory of consciousness provides. He writes that there are three fundamental lines of meaning that structure history: the diachronic, the synchronic, and the eschatological. The diachronic refers to the metaphorically linear development of a civilization through time. It admits of genuine technological, economic, political, and cultural progress, as well as spiritual advances. There are indeed "the epochal, differentiating events, the 'leaps in being,' which engendered the consciousness of a Before and After and, in their respective societies, motivated the symbolism of a historical 'course' that was meaningfully structured by the

5. Voegelin writes of Hegel's absolute epoch that "The appearance of the Son of God is 'the hinge around which the history of the world turns,' because through the Incarnation God has revealed himself as the Spirit (*Geist*)." (CW 17, pp. 380-381)

6. He quotes Jaspers: "This age brought forth the fundamental categories in which we think to this day; it laid the foundations of the world-religions in which men live to this day; in every sense the step into the Universal was taken." (CW 17, p. 382). See Karl JASPERS, *On the Origin and Goal of History*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1965.

7. VOEGELIN, CW 17, p. 49.

event of the leap.”⁸ So, a philosophy of history must attend to the intelligibility of development along time-lines.

In addition to the diachronic, there is the synchronic structure of history. The synchronic refers to the “cross-cut pattern of the spiritual outbursts” that fascinated Jaspers.⁹ The empirical fact of several contemporaneous peoples, with their simultaneously unfolding histories presents the historian with equally significant materials. Historical meaning is carried by many peoples, in different places, under widely divergent circumstances, at approximately the same time. If an explanatory account of the meaning of historical existence is to be accurate, its terms and relations cannot stop at diachronic courses of historical events that merely roll forwards, but must embrace these lateral lines of meaning.

However, the diachronic and synchronic together present us with no more than the materials for a set of comparative historical studies. No comparative study, no matter how comprehensive or detailed, amounts to a philosophy of history. What is it that would bring this maximally diversified human field of societies, scattered in place and time, together into a real unity that would make a philosophy of history possible? We are in search of a universal humanity, an insight into human phenomena everywhere and at all times, whose intelligibility is universally human. Yet, what is universal about humanity? In order to rise to a philosophy of history, there must be a third, universal and unifying dimension of meaning that structures historical existence. Voegelin names this dimension the “eschatological.” By this term he means the participation of each human being with the mystery of the Whole of being, the totality of reality, the cosmos. We will consider this eschatological dimension further as we proceed, but for now let us acknowledge that this structure of history is expressive of the abiding concern in all persons and societies with the ultimate conditions of existence, the divine ground of being in which our own existence is a share, and attunement to which is order and life.¹⁰

Thus, a philosophy of history is “definitely not a story of meaningful events to be arranged on a time line.” Rather, if a philosophy of history is to be adequate in raising the vast empirical data to intelligibility and to the truth of existence, it should characterize historical existence as “a web of meaning with a plurality of nodal points.”¹¹ Voegelin invites the reader to consider history as a web, and oneself – precisely as an historical being – as existing in the midst of various nodal points, points where historical existence becomes luminous for its meaning in significant concrete events. However, the con-

8. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 46.

9. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 47.

10. VOEGELIN, *CW* 14: *Order and History*, vol. 1: *Israel and Revelation*, Maurice P. HOGAN (ed.), Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001, pp. 39-40.

11. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 106.

nections between these events run backwards and forwards, sideways, and vertically; and constitute the multivalent web of history. The model of the historian who looks back along a definite line of time towards the past is not nullified, but in a philosophy of history is gathered up into a higher viewpoint where historical existence reveals itself as a web within which each person is a seeker for the meaning of life.

The Process of Differentiation and the Tension of Consciousness

Still, what is historical existence? What calls for an intelligent grasp and reasonable affirmation in a philosophy of history? To exist historically is not a theoretical superimposition upon the daily business of living, but for Voegelin is what issues from a clarification of the abiding relation between the conscious human being and the reality of what we exist within. The clarification of this relation is an ongoing process, characterized by Voegelin as a differentiation of consciousness.¹² It signifies the uneasy course of development whereby human beings come to know with more precision who and what they are as self-aware participants in the presence of the cosmos. As such, it points to a tension central to the drama of human life whose consequences are, in themselves, historical. Let us therefore keep both human consciousness and the cosmos in mind as we consider differentiation. Neither consciousness nor the cosmos can be sundered one from the other because the relation between them remains constitutive of an understanding of both.

The process of differentiation is genuinely epochal. For Voegelin, there occurs an "exodus" from compact meaning, in which myth and genuine understanding are fused, to meaning that distinguishes between mystery and theory. Always in relation to the encompassing totality of the cosmos, of which every person and society is a participant by virtue of existing, the correlative process to differentiating consciousness is a differentiating grasp of the cosmos. Persons and societies, structured by an undifferentiated, compact consciousness, not only imagine the cosmos as the totality within which all things are understood as sharing in the reality that gives rise to them all, but understand the things of the cosmos as more same than different. That is, from gods to stones, the "consubstantiality" that binds and orders all things has the effect of diminishing the boundaries between the being of one thing and another. For example, the divinity of the gods can flow through the cosmos to enchant and blend with the lesser orders of things, and it is never clear where the domain of any one thing might end and another begin.¹³

12. "The structure of history is the same as the structure of personal existence." VOEGELIN, "Immortality: Experience and Symbol," in *CW 12: Published Essays, 1966-1985*, Ellis SANDOZ (ed.), Baton Rouge LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990, p. 78.

13. VOEGELIN, *CW 14*, pp. 41-43.

The process from a compact to a more differentiated consciousness results in the clarification of order where, firstly, things are grasped as existing autonomously in their own natures under the conditions of space and time; and secondly, divinity is experienced as that which is not conditioned by such limitations, but instead as transcending precisely those conditions. Thirdly, and crucially, the soul as the realm of conscious interiority becomes the locus – the “site and sensorium” – where the relation between oneself and the transcendent-divine ground of the cosmos is experienced.¹⁴ To suggest that we exist in the cosmos is to convey that we exist in constant relation with the whole of reality. (This includes the mystery of being, the mystery that nothing in the cosmos is the foundation of its own existence.) While the differentiation of consciousness is a process that impacts our image and understanding of both the cosmos and our place within it, it necessarily follows that the cosmos is what remains the constant matrix against which all differentiations occur.

The In-between of Transcendence and Immanence

Thus opens the fundamental differentiation that gives rise to historical consciousness: transcendence and immanence. Both of these are explanatory terms that refer *noetically* to dimensions of meaning differentiated in consciousness, and correspond *noematically* with the content of consciousness. The unfolding of consciousness and the cosmos in the process of differentiation therefore does not lead to a spurious bifurcation or separation of reality into, let's say, a realm of purely immanent things and a realm of purely transcendent things. The reality of the Whole does not pass away, but endures and abides while consciousness undergoes insight, development, advance.¹⁵ The problem that each of us must contend with, in our own times and places, is how to belong in the cosmos under differentiated conditions where the feeling-laden images and basic conceptual understanding of the cosmos, along with our role in relation to it, changes. Transcendent and immanent dimensions of meaning only make sense in tension with one another. They are two aspects of an abiding cosmos that holds us. How we relate to it is affected in the first instance by how we mediate the tension between transcendent and immanent reality. Effectively, every human being and every society exist “in-between” transcendent mystery and immanent intelligibility.

14. See Voegelin's discussion in “The Beginning and the Beyond” in *CW 28: What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, Thomas A. HOLLWECK and Paul CARINGELLA (eds.), Baton Rouge LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 184-185. Also VOEGELIN, *CW 12*, p. 90.

15. VOEGELIN, *CW 28*, 220: “The Being of the cosmos remains the Being that it was, because the Beyond was present in it even before its presence revealed itself in the act of transcendence.”

Voegelin uses the term “in-between” as the translation of the symbol “*metaxy*,” a symbol he borrowed from Plato.¹⁶ The *metaxy* captures the predicament of existence in the cosmos in-between the poles of transcendence and immanence, wisdom and ignorance, eternity and time, immortality and mortality, that which lasts and that which passes. For example, while each human being in each society has a vital foundation in biophysical reality, continuous with the emergence of the entire astrophysical universe, each also exists “in presence under God.”¹⁷ Voegelin writes that “By letting man become conscious of his humanity as existence in tension toward divine reality, the hierophanic events [manifestations of the divine] engender the knowledge of man’s existence in the divine-human In-between, in Plato’s *metaxy*, as well as the language symbols articulating the knowledge.”¹⁸ The divine-human “In-between” is the existential region of consciousness, the ground-zero of intimations, attractions, experiences that prompt differentiations. The “In-between” is another explanatory term that can be descriptively likened to a zone where consciousness not only *encounters* the divine mystery of the ground of being, but *is illuminated* by the flow of divine presence.¹⁹ The meaning of “Eschaton” then is not restricted to the sense of cosmic consummation, but is an original participation in the consciousness of every human being of the divine ground that we call God.²⁰ Historical existence involves this universal divine participation and the correspondingly universal human response. “Historical events,” Voegelin writes, “are founded in the biophysical existence of man in society on earth, in the time of the external world; they become historical through the experience of participation in the movement of divine presence.”²¹ The human response to the movement or “flux” of divine presence is the primordial drama of attunement to sacred order, but where this drama was originally narrated and ritually enacted in the cosmological myth, the drama has now taken on the symbolic form we call history.²²

The differentiation of consciousness is a process that occurs in the “existential time of the *metaxy*,” as the human response to the experienced flux of divine presence. To recognize the human-divine encounter as the tension that structures consciousness is to recognize existence as historical. However, we must be careful. We can go no further than to point to the boundary of

16. PLATO, *Symposium*, 202e4-204a1.

17. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 230.

18. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 50.

19. Voegelin writes that “while the events of history are datable in external time, corresponding to the bodily existence of the man who has the experience, the events themselves occur at the intersection of external time with the flux of divine presence, i.e., in the existential time of the *metaxy*.” (“Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation” in VOEGELIN, *CW* 12, p. 347)

20. See “Reason: The Classic experience,” in VOEGELIN, *CW* 12, p. 271.

21. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 376.

22. VOEGELIN, *CW* 14, p. 165.

transcendent mystery that confronts us. History bears this mark of mystery. While there is no immanent answer to the transcendent dimension of historical existence, the nature of the divine-human tension in the In-between is fundamentally an encounter that gives a direction to history. Historical development occurs in tension with transcendent mystery, and historical events “are experienced as meaningful inasmuch as they constitute a Before and After within time that points toward a fulfillment, toward an Eschaton, out of time. History is not a stream of human beings and their actions in time, but the process of man’s participation in a flux of divine presence that has eschatological direction.”²³ In the In-between of consciousness, there is a metaphorical “pull” that is exercised from the direction of the eschatological ground.²⁴ The resulting symbolization, culturally and religiously mediated in varying degrees of clarification, communicates direction in history: a path, a *Tao*, a logos, an incarnate Word.

In the 1950s, Voegelin had already written that there is no meaning of history that is available to us. He was writing in the context of ideological claims to know such a meaning, and on that basis, to engage in social and political constructions.²⁵ What is intelligible is that we are participants in history, and by extension, in the direction in which history develops. His term for this developmental direction is “transfiguration.” By this term, he means no less than the movement of all reality in the direction of the Eschaton. Again, we must be careful. Voegelin understands the problem of apocalyptic temptations and Gnostic derailments very well. He is expressly *not* talking about metastatic dreams of abolishing the conditions of existence in the cosmos, but is taking seriously the experiences and symbolizations of philosophers and prophets. Rather than the disintegration of the structures of reality, transfiguration involves the clarification of those structures in consciousness by which a transfiguring direction is discerned. Voegelin is paying attention to the heuristic orientation of the In-between toward the transcendent-divine ground, as articulated by those philosophers and prophets.

Transfiguration is the symbol that captures the meaning of existing in a dynamic cosmos, differentiated by the emergence of transcendent and immanent meaning. Reality neither becomes transfigured, nor remains untransfigured. In tension between both, it is transfiguring. The reality we know as consciousness – still founded upon the lower physical, chemical, biological, and psychological levels of the body – strains beyond immanent limitations in the direction of transcendence whose elusive presence has evoked its response. The In-between of consciousness is where history not only emerges as a dimen-

23. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 50.

24. Voegelin discusses the “pull” in Plato and the Gospel of John in *CW* 12, pp. 184-186, 189-91.

25. VOEGELIN, *CW* 5, pp. 185-186.

sion of existence, but whose direction toward the Eschaton discloses a process of reality already moving paradoxically beyond its own spatio-temporal limitations, through that very consciousness. Perhaps another image will be useful: Just as the North Star is a welcome presence in the night sky for the navigator since it provides direction, so too is the Eschaton for consciousness an orienting but mysterious presence. History witnesses to the transfiguring movement toward mystery.²⁶

Complete and Partial Breakthroughs

The differentiation of transcendence and immanence was the primary differentiation that was nonetheless marked by the various cultural characteristics in which it occurred, as were all further breakthroughs. Voegelin writes that the "discovery" of transcendence and immanence was not achieved everywhere. Nor, where it *was* achieved, did the achievement extend to the same degree of differentiated clarity, leaving the world burdened – in the cultural imagination – with something of a cosmological hangover. Where the breakthrough to transcendence and immanence was partial rather than complete, the world could not be completely disentangled from one in which gods and demons were still imaginatively present as vital forces. Intellectual apprehension of the world by scientific laws and statistical frequencies, for example, was not yet possible. Nor were the conditions in place for the emergence of historical consciousness. The most complete breakthroughs, according to Voegelin, were those that occurred in Hellas and in Israel. He calls these "noetic theophany" and "pneumatic theophany" respectively, where "theophany" indicates the flow of divine presence in consciousness.

When in the revelatory process the hidden god behind the intracosmic gods lets himself become manifest in visionary and auditory experiences, or in the 'sound of gentle stillness,' or in the meditative probing of the seeker, and thus be known against the background of his unknowability, the man who responds to the presence becomes conscious of his response as an act of participation in divine reality. He discovers the something in his humanity that is the site and sensorium of divine presence; and he finds such words as *psyche*, or *pneuma*, or *nous*, to symbolize the something. When he participates in a theophanic event, his consciousness becomes cognitively luminous for its own humanity as constituted by his relation to the unknown god whose moving presence in his soul evokes the movement of presence.²⁷

Let us briefly consider why theophany in these two modes clarifies the differentiation of the cosmos, and brings us into awareness of historical existence.

26. VOEGELIN, *CW* 12, p. 336; *CW* 17, p. 291.

27. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, pp. 52-53.

1. Complete Breakthroughs to Historical Existence

In the noetic theophany of the ancient Greeks, *nous* or reason is what is common to both the transcendent-divine and human partners, and so it can only be by *nous* that the human questioner pursues “the ultimate, non-present Beyond of all divine presence.”²⁸ In the context of noetic theophany, *nous* constitutes the tension of the In-between of consciousness. Though it translates as “reason” or “intellect,” it is also operatively revelational since it participates in-between human and divine poles of the tension simultaneously. Thus, from the divine pole, it is *nous* that seems to reveal that reality as a Whole has a structure and process; and from the human pole, *nous* can know itself as merely a part of that structure and process of the Whole. Therefore, noetic theophany involves both a functional revelation of reality and a rational grasp of reality. For example, it is Plato who, as Voegelin points out, created the symbolism of the divine Beyond (*epekeina*). In a well-known passage from the *Republic* (508c-e), Plato uses the metaphor of the sun as a way to communicate the meaning of the Beyond. The light of the sun is that in which the act of seeing and the object to be seen are joined. It is essential to both for the sake of sight, but not reducible to either. So too the Good (the divine *Agathon*) is neither the knowing of the knower nor the known object, but is that upon which knowledge depends. Yet the Good remains beyond (*epekeina*) all knowledge.

In pneumatic theophany, it is *pneuma* or spirit that moves in-between divine and human partners. Voegelin’s earlier studies of the prophets of Israel and his later analysis of St. Paul’s “Vision of the Resurrected” treat *pneuma* as the symbol of absolute divine transcendence, yet it is by the movement of God’s spirit that there is creation and salvation. Indeed, in the pneumatic theophany of Paul, transfiguration is more emphatic than in the noetic. Where the Greeks could discern a direction in reality toward the transcendent Good beyond being, transfiguration for Paul has become ecstatic. He envisions (in 1 Corinthians 15, for example) the final consummation of reality involving the abolition of death. Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus was so resounding, and the movement of *pneuma* so strong in the direction of the transcendent-divine pole of the In-between, that his vision of transfiguration is not restricted to process but includes culmination.²⁹

Rather than simply chart the divergences of these two modes, Voegelin is concerned to explore the convergences.

28. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 297.

29. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 305: “The accent, however, has decisively shifted from the divinely noetic order incarnate in the world to the divinely pneumatic salvation from its disorder, from the paradox of reality [moving beyond its own structure] to the abolition of the paradox, from the experience of the directional movement to its consummation.”

Plato and Paul agree that meaning in history is inseparable from the directional movement in reality. "History" is the area of reality where the directional movement of the cosmos achieves luminosity of consciousness. They furthermore agree that history is not an empty time-dimension in which things happen at random but rather a process whose meaning is constituted by theophanic events. And finally, they agree the reality of history is *metaleptic* [participatory, from *metalepsis*]; it is the In-between where man responds to the divine presence and divine presence evokes the response of man.³⁰

With these modes of noetic and pneumatic consciousness, the historical process of differentiation achieves a tenuous completeness. Grasping that differentiation is a process that occurs "in" the tension of the In-between is crucial for avoiding deformative temptations such as Gnostic and ideological visions of perfection on earth. It is from the In-between that we can think about what a philosophy of history entails because it is here that the two poles of existential tension exert their attraction: one pole is, of course, the human person who remains intrinsically conditioned by the limitations attendant upon the bodily predicament; and the other pole is the unconditioned, transcendent-divine ground, symbolized as absolute freedom and sacred creativity. From the perspective of the human partner, such differentiations of consciousness and cosmos manifest the range of human existence: from the personal to the sociopolitical to the historical. From the pole of the divine partner, the eschatological direction of the process of reality reveals itself, and it is this revelatory quality that we call historical. History therefore is itself a process that is more than merely human, derived as it is from the human-divine tension. History is the drama of existence, the story that begins in a divine initiative, evoking the human response. Nor is the human response merely this or that person's or society's response, but a responsiveness that is universal among all human beings, even where awareness of history has not emerged.³¹

2. Partial Breakthroughs

It may appear to the contemporary reader of Voegelin that his comments on noetic and pneumatic theophanies betray a Western chauvinism, yet one cannot easily get around the fact that an awareness of historical existence emerges only from the symbolic forms of philosophy and revelation which have themselves broken completely with the compactness of cosmological consciousness. Where that break has not been sufficiently thorough to distinguish between the presence of the divine in the mode of transcendence and divine presence as a worldly force, or has not discerned the participatory intersection of transcendence and immanence in consciousness, the development of historical exis-

30. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 306.

31. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 376.

tence lags or does not emerge at all. "Around the islands of Israel and Hellas extends the sea of other societies with their rich manifold of approximations and intermediate forms, of tentative breakthroughs and compromises."³² In discussing the *Enuma elish* from Mesopotamia, and the *Theogony* by Hesiod in late Mycenae, Voegelin introduces the term, mytho-speculation. Mytho-speculation is an intermediate form between the *mythopoesis* of cosmological compactness and noetic philosophy. It is characterized primarily as the seeking for the highest god as the ultimate or originary source of all things. It is a form of speculation that makes its way through the tiers or ancestries of the gods to reach the beginning. The coiled serpent, the primordial egg, the first god: all of these are images that symbolize an intracosmic beginning that does not break through to the meaning of a beginning that transcends the chain of etiological causality. In mytho-speculation, there is an attempt to render an explanatory account of reality, but the *tremendum* of divine presence within the world saturates the intelligibility of its structures and the range of existential meaning. Historical awareness cannot emerge because the requisite freedom and imaginative autonomy to respond to the revelation of reality in its transfiguring movement toward the transcendent-divine ground has not yet emerged. Imagination and conceptualization have not yet surfaced above the ocean of divinity in which the world remains steeped. Historical existence becomes meaningful only in the context of the tension in-between transcendence and immanence.

A more advanced breakthrough that lacks completeness appears with the Upanishadic literature in the Hindu Vedas. The Upanishads are a later contribution to the Vedic writings whose insights into the meaning of transcendent mystery comprise genuine development, but have not issued in a historical grasp of existence that participates in that mystery. Between the world and transcendent reality, there remains a gulf. Voegelin discusses a representative episode recounted in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* between the young Gargi and an old sage.

Then Gargi Vachaknavi asked.

"Yajnavalkya" she said, "everything here is woven,
Like warp and woof, in water. What then is that in
Which water is woven, like warp and woof?"

"In air, O Gargi," he replied.

"In what then is air woven, like warp and woof?"

Gargi proceeds to question the Brahmana, pursuing the chain of causality through the ever higher worlds to the highest world of Brahman, and ultimately out-questioning all available answers. Gargi, one might say, has arrived

32. VOEGELIN, CW 17, p. 354.

on the border of transcendence, and awaits the Brahmana on the significance of such an arrival.

Yajnavalkya said: "O Gargi, do not ask too much, lest thy
Head should fall off. Thou askest too much about a deity
About which we are not to ask too much. Do not ask too much,
O Gargi."

After that Gargi Vachnaknavi held her peace.³³

This Upanishad has clearly encountered the mystery of transcendence, but the significance or meaning of such an encounter is left unexamined. As Glenn Hughes puts it, "how existing things are finally related to their 'non-existent' [transcendent] ground does not receive a definitive answer simply with this distinction being reached."³⁴ While Gargi's questioning consciousness is established as "the ordering force of existence," it is not sufficient to break through to an epochal consciousness. That is, within the hermeneutic range of Hindu culture, all possibilities of human belonging to the world and to the divine are accommodated, and everything from the earlier mythopoeic and to the later Upanishadic differentiations take their place alongside one another. "There is no doctrine in Hinduism that attaches itself to a historic theophany like the Christian dogma to the epiphany of Christ."³⁵

The void between the transcendence that is glimpsed by Gargi and the finite world seems to be a theoretically compelling reason for the absence of historical consciousness and of historiography generally in Hindu culture. The subjective differentiation of the structure of consciousness has its objective correlate in the differentiation of the "content" of the cosmos we exist within. That is, the tension of the In-between of consciousness correlates with the tension of the cosmos as it opens into transcendent and immanent reality. The Hindu "void" manifests the incompleteness of the breakthrough where the tension of existence that is intrinsically historical has not grown acute. The world, a "thing" unconnected with transcendent reality – and precisely *not in tension* with transcendence – is left to the endlessness of its cycles of *samsara*. Wheels that ceaselessly spin do not generate historical epochs. "In the culture of Hinduism, historical consciousness is muted by the dominance of late-cosmological speculations on the cosmos as a 'thing' with a beginning and an end, as a 'thing' that is born and reborn in finite sequence."³⁶

33. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, pp. 392-293.

34. Glenn HUGHES, *Transcendence and History*, Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003, p. 78.

35. "The culture of Hinduism accommodates equally the devotees of Vishnu or Shiva, and the Brahmanic mystics; it has room for polytheism, monotheism, and atheism; for orgiastic cults and ascetic discipline; for a personal God and for an impersonal ground of being." (VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 394).

36. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 394. "The Brahmanic 'breakthrough which does not quite reach its goal' can now be more adequately characterized as a truth of existence that, in its differentia-

Universal Humanity, Universal Divinity, Universal World

Historiography concerns itself with an adequate method to collect and record the developments of history accurately. The condition for such an enterprise is historical consciousness, without which the understanding of human existence as historical is simply unintelligible, and the writing of history a pragmatic record-keeping at best. What Voegelin's philosophy of history emphasizes is the tension of existence in the In-between of transcendence and immanence. The "In-between" is an explanatory symbol for the experience of fullness and flux of human-divine participation, whose insights and developments in the truth of existence can also function as the "unseen measure" of human blindspots, biases, obtuseness, oversights and stupidities, recklessness, evils, and failures of all kinds, at all times and in all places. In cultural and spiritual contexts where the existential tension of the In-between did not sufficiently differentiate, there is no evidence of historical consciousness having emerged as a structure of human existence. Without noetic or pneumatic theophanies, history does not, as a matter of fact, appear. If Voegelin's analysis is correct, then this would mean that a philosophy of history that does not take noetic and pneumatic differentiation seriously cannot account for the development of history. However, where a philosophy of history does indeed grapple with the drama of the In-between – however symbolized – and consequently where the range of human existence opens into all of its personal, social, and historical dimensions, the prospect of a universal humanity presents itself. The term "universal humanity" can be explored for its many meanings, but we must recognize that such a symbol is foremost an achievement of historical consciousness.

Universal humanity "is no concrete society at all."³⁷ Indeed, its lack of concreteness also removes it as a candidate for the *telos* of any ideological program for world government. Nor is it a handy category denoting an "aggregate of members of a biological species."³⁸ Universal humanity is a symbol for the common basis of being human – of existing humanly – that omits no person and no society. It is a symbol with a transcendent meaning because it bears upon what is universal about being human across all times and places, and beyond all racial, ethnic, linguistic, sexual, religious, tribal, temperamental, and environmental differences. Voegelin emphasizes the In-between of consciousness whereby what is always common is human participation in the transcendent ground that already participates in every human being.

tion, stops short of the theophanic event that constitutes epochal consciousness." (*Ibid.*, p. 395) Glenn Hughes notes that "The prospect of endless rebirth, then, focuses Hindu thought upon the goal of *moksha*, 'liberation' from the cycles of existence into union with the transcendent beyond, with 'true' reality." (Glenn HUGHES, *Transcendence and History*, p. 78)

37. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 50.

38. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 377.

What comes into view, so to speak, is a set of terms and relations as a unit of intelligibility: universal humanity is only grasped in relation to a universal transcendent divinity. Voegelin notes that "There is only one divinity, the one world-transcendent divinity, to be found nowhere within the world. Thus, you have an idea of universal divinity corresponding to the universality of man."³⁹ Furthermore, along with universal *humanity* and universal *divinity*, there arises a universal *world*. "You get the three as a unit or you get nothing at all. If you surrender one or the other, that whole system, or this whole apparatus of ideas which is inherent in the exegesis of such an experience, will collapse."⁴⁰ Together, this three-part unit is the field of history, each part symbolically mapping onto the differentiated dimensions of the Whole: human consciousness, transcendence, and immanence, respectively. The emergence of humanity, divinity, and world as universal *and intrinsically related* categories is played out as the three-fold condition for the ongoing, heuristic drama of history. Of the drama of history, Voegelin writes, "Hence, the play of order is always enacted, not before the future but before God; the order of human existence is in the present under God even at the times when the consciousness of that present has not yet disengaged itself from the compactness of the myth. [...] The millenniums in which the mystery of history has reached the level of consciousness have not diminished the distance from its eternity."⁴¹

Conclusion

It is not possible in an essay of this length to do more than paint brush strokes of Voegelin's philosophy of history, especially since this was one of the major themes that occupied his attention throughout his career, and with keen emphasis in the last fifteen to twenty years of his life. There is value in spending time studying his historical thought. In understanding it, one acquires a key that opens a door to the rest of his work. For example, an abiding concern from his experiences as a student right through to the end of his days as an internationally significant thinker was with ideology. If one has grasped his philosophy of history, one has also grasped the differentiation of consciousness, the tension of existence, and the transfiguring process of reality; and therefore, one is better able to understand what "derailments" are, how they can happen "in" history, and why ideology is always an especially pernicious form of derailment. Only in the breakthrough to the glimpse of reality that is transcendent mystery can the "refusal to apperceive," or the "eclipse of reality," or the "immanentization of the eschaton" make sense; all of which are phrases

39. VOEGELIN, *CW 33: The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1939-1985*, Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004, p. 204.

40. VOEGELIN, *CW 33*, p. 206.

41. VOEGELIN, *CW 15: Order and History, vol. 2: The World of the Polis*, p. 71.

of Voegelin throughout the years, and all of which he uses to characterize pathological thinking. Ideologies, as antithetical to the existential time of the In-between as it is possible to be, are deformations of personal, political, and historical existence.

Two closing thoughts are inspired by the following comment of Voegelin: “If mankind is to have a history, its members must be able to respond to the movement of divine presence in their souls. [...] A scattering of societies [through place and time] [...] is discovered to be one mankind with one history, by virtue of participation in the same flux of divine presence.”⁴² Firstly, universal humanity suggests a universal belonging. It includes a belonging of oneself to the common humanity of every person and society who has ever existed or who ever will; it includes a belonging of one’s own society to a humanity of all concrete societies; and it includes a belonging of every human being and society to the cosmos, in its immanent conditions of contingency, mortality, and spatio-temporal boundedness, and in its transcendent-divine ground that mysteriously brings forth, sustains, guides, and transfigures all things.

Secondly, universal humanity suggests a sacramentality. Voegelin does not use the term, but “sacramentality” would be a fitting symbol, considering the vista that his philosophy of history opens. There is a sacredness that such a philosophy of history inevitably probes, and it invites the reader to re-evoke in their own soul the sense of existence as a sacramental participation in, and belonging to, the cosmos. One of Voegelin’s great achievements is his study of the differentiation of historical existence in which our intrinsic membership of universal humanity makes sense.

St. Mary’s University
San Antonio TX 78228, USA

SUMMARY

Eric Voegelin’s philosophy of history is both intellectually illuminating and evocative. It is also voluminous. Therefore, this essay selectively discusses some of the main themes of his mature thought. It begins with an exploration of what Voegelin found to be meaningful patterns in history. Then it elucidates the connection between his discovery of such patterns and the underlying theory of consciousness that he developed earlier, but which acted as a catalyst for his later thought. Voegelin’s concern to account for the emergence of historical consciousness was a key part of his philosophy of history, and is discussed here. Finally, the essay concludes with a brief meditation on the significance of his symbol, “universal humanity.”

42. VOEGELIN, *CW* 17, p. 377.

SOMMAIRE

La philosophie de l'histoire d'Eric Voegelin est à la fois intellectuellement éclairante et évocatrice. Elle est également volumineuse. Par conséquent, cet essai discute sélectivement certains des principaux thèmes de sa pensée mature. Il commence par une exploration de ce que Voegelin a trouvé être des modèles significatifs dans l'histoire. Ensuite, il élucide le lien entre sa découverte de tels modèles et la théorie sous-jacente de la conscience qu'il a développée plus tôt, mais qui a agi comme un catalyseur pour sa pensée ultérieure. Le souci de Voegelin de rendre compte de l'émergence de la conscience historique était un élément clé de sa philosophie de l'histoire, et est discuté ici. Enfin, l'essai se termine par une brève méditation sur la signification de son symbole, « l'humanité universelle ».