

Voegelin's Use of Metaphor

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—*Man be my metaphor.* (Dylan Thomas)

The importance of metaphors to Voegelin's philosophy of human existence and history may be appreciated by considering certain key symbols upon which his philosophy—especially his mature philosophy—relies. I am using the term “symbol” here in the way that Voegelin himself does—and that usage requires its own preliminary comment.

The word “symbol” is basic to Voegelin's explication of human self-understanding, as it signifies for him all important “language phenomena” through which we represent our understanding of realities in which we existentially participate. Occasionally, to make his use of the term clear, Voegelin contrasts the terms “symbol” and “concept.” “I distinguish concepts,” he writes, “as definitional formulations referring to objects that have existence in space and time.”¹ “Symbols,” on the other hand, in his use are formulations referring to all elements, aspects, structures, or dimensions of reality in which humans are subjectively or existentially *involved*. This makes symbols, of course, an extremely broad category. There are symbols pertaining to interpersonal relations, such as *love* and *justice*; to social institutional order, such as *democracy* and *autocracy*; to modes of self-interpretation, such as *myth* and *philosophy*; and to the encompassing processes or movements in which we find ourselves existentially involved, such as *history*, or *being*, or *the whole*. Symbols in Voegelin's sense embrace both the earliest petroglyphs expressing the basic structure of the cosmos and the most recent articulations of the “mathematical form of the universe.”² To put it simply: symbols for Voegelin are any images, signs, words, phrases, or stories that articulate elements in the

¹ Eric Voegelin, “Responses at the Panel Discussion of ‘The Beginning of the Beginning’,” in Voegelin, *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Writings, 1939-1985*, eds. William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss, vol. 33 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 415.

² Voegelin, “Responses,” 415.

human experience of *participation* in reality. “*Symbols*,” as he writes, “are the language phenomena engendered by the process of participatory experience.”³

In Voegelin’s philosophy, many of the most important symbols are those expressing insights into the basic structure of human consciousness, into the nature of history, and into the character of reality, or being, as a whole. In Voegelin’s mature work, with respect to the structure of human consciousness, we find his analyses relying heavily on such symbols as *participation*, *questioning unrest*, the *tension toward the ground of being*, the *flux of presence*, *intentionality* and *luminosity*, and, of course, *the in-between* (or *metaxy*). With respect to the nature of history, we encounter such key symbols as the *leaps in being* and *lines of meaning* in history. And with regard to reality as a whole, crucial symbols include the *cosmos*, *immanence* and *transcendence*, the *primordial community of being* (with its four “partners”), *the ground of being*, and *the Beyond*—not to mention the symbols of *reality* and *being* themselves. The referential meaning of each of these major symbols is intimately connected with that of all the others, since consciousness, existence, history, and being can only be explicated in terms of their interrelations; and one of Voegelin’s principal philosophical aims has been to develop a sophisticated network, or web, or constellation, of evocative symbols that would be both internally coherent and occasion in the reader helpful, perhaps therapeutic, insights into fundamental truths about the human situation.

Many commentators on Voegelin have discussed his use of the term “symbol,” and much has been written about the important symbols listed above, as well as about others such as *cosmion*, *linguistic indices*, the *poles of existential tension*, *thing-reality* and *It-reality*, *reflective distance*, and *meditative exegesis*. But as far as I know, no one has written about the metaphoric character of some of his key philosophical symbols. This is not too surprising, because most of Voegelin’s central philosophical symbols do not have a predominantly metaphorical function—symbols such as *participation*, *reality*, and *being*, while intrinsically ambiguous or analogical in character,⁴ are not metaphors—and also because Voegelin himself lays no stress on the meaning and importance of

³ Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections: Revised Edition, with a Voegelin Glossary and Cumulative Index*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 34 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 99.

⁴ See Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980), 73-76.

metaphor in philosophical explication, mentioning the topic only a few times. Those few times, though, are telling—as when he refers to the “spatial metaphor” of the symbol of the “between,” a symbol that becomes all-important for his mature philosophy of existence.⁵ It will be worthwhile, it seems to me, to consider Voegelin’s reliance on metaphor for a few of his most important symbols, as doing so will illuminate some elementary truths about both existence and philosophy, while clarifying an important feature of Voegelin’s philosophical language.

Metaphor

It will be best to begin by clarifying what a metaphor is.

A metaphor is a species of analogy. *Analogy*, though originating as a term denoting an equality of ratio in ancient Greek mathematics, in the wide connotations of contemporary usage refers quite generally to a *similarity of characteristics or structural relationships* between different things, situations, persons, attitudes, actions, language, or themes. Resemblance, or parallelism, is the core meaning of analogy, whether the context of analogical thinking is mathematical, scientific, linguistic, rhetorical, literary, or theological. Mathematically, an analogy of ratio could be expressed in the form: as the numerical value of *c* is to *d*, so the numerical value of *x* is to *y*. In the world of literary criticism, one can state that the roles of Leopold Bloom, Stephen Daedalus and Molly Bloom in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* are analogous to those of Ulysses, Telemachus, and Penelope in *The Odyssey* of Homer. In Christian theology, the idea of the analogy of being (*analogia entis*) serves to affirm an indirect understanding of divine reality through the identification of likenesses of proportionality (or attribution) between imperfect, finite beings, on the one hand, and transcendent, perfect being, on the other. In the commonsense realm of dramatic living, one could say that one person’s struggle to resist overeating is analogous to another’s struggle to resist being captious or contradictory in discussion. Finally, in the very broadest sense of the term’s application, analogies include

⁵ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume V: In Search of Order*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 18 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 30.

both synonyms and precise translations between languages: *catastrophe* and *disaster* are thus analogues, as are the English word *dog* and the French word *chien*.

The term *metaphor* refers to a distinctive type of analogy, one that goes beyond mere parallelism. A metaphor is a figure of speech that illuminates or expands the meaning of something by *transferring or applying to it* the properties of something else that, literally understood, has an ontological form different from it.⁶ It is the result of a certain type of “focussed analogical thinking” that issues in a claim—stated, implied, or insinuated—that “*x is y*,” while it yet remains clearly understood that “*x is not y*,” for the principal purpose of augmenting the connotative meanings of “*x*.”⁷ No claim is metaphorical unless it is true both that “*x is not y*” and that the explicit or implicit claim that “*x is y*” clarifies our understanding of “*x*” through greater or lesser suggestive power. Frequently, both of the two terms of a metaphor, the “*x*” and the “*y*”—the “subject” and the “modifier” (or, in the terminology made common by I. A. Richards, the “tenor” and the “vehicle”)—belong to the world of sense-perception or sense-based experience (“your eyes are jewels”). Not infrequently, though, the subject of a metaphor is something abstract or spiritual, and the modifier is imaginatively concrete (“despair is a whirlpool”), which allows something not easily explained to be clarified by its identification with a readily apprehensible image. Finally, less commonly, the subject is a concrete reality that is clarified by its identification with an abstract reality (“your eyes are despair”). The result, in all cases, is the creation of a composite “focal object,” a “meta-image,” grasped “in an instant of time,” whose power to reveal or augment a subject’s meaning or implications derives from the grammatical and imaginative “erasure” of the difference, or distance, between the two parts of the metaphor.⁸

⁶ The original Greek term, *metaphora*, means “transference.” See Willard R. Espy, *The Garden of Eloquence: A Rhetorical Bestiary* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 108.

⁷ Jan Zwicky, *Wisdom & Metaphor* (Kentville, Nova Scotia: Gaspereau Press, 2008), §5 (A). [This text has no page numbers, only section numbers that are the same on each set of facing pages. Numbers on the left-facing pages apply to text entries by the author; those on the right-facing pages mark “corresponding” quotations from various poets, philosophers, etc. I will use the notation (A) to designate left-facing page entries and (B) to designate right-facing page entries.]

⁸ Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 79; Zwicky, *Wisdom & Metaphor*, §4 (A). The phrase, “in an instant of time,” quoted without attribution by Zwicky, comes from Ezra Pound, who described the type of meta-image presented by a metaphor (though he used simply the term “Image,” capitalized) as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” Ezra Pound, “A Few Don’ts” (1913), included in “A Retrospect” (1918), in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 4.

To illustrate, let us consider four very simple metaphorical figures, all taken from the world of poetry:

The music is a house of glass standing on a slope
(Tomas Tranströmer, “Allegro”)⁹

ROMEO: ... what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.
(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II, 2)

... the mill of the mind
Consuming its rag and bone.
(W. B. Yeats, “An Acre of Grass”)¹⁰

Time is the fire in which we burn.
(Delmore Schwartz, “Calmly We Walk
Through This April’s Day”)¹¹

In the first two examples, sensorily-perceived objects are identified with other sensorily-perceived objects. A specific piece of music is, surprisingly, identified with a house of glass standing on a slope, which to the metaphorically-inclined mind clarifies in a peculiar but highly evocative way some aspects of the nature and meaning of this musical piece. It also—and this is an important point to which we will return—identifies or unites two distinct ontological forms in such a way that we are startled with recognition of how the “patterns of meaning in the world intersect and echo one another.”¹² In the second example, familiar to everyone, the beloved Juliet, seen at her lit bedroom window at night, is identified by Romeo with the sun rising in the east. Romeo identifies the form of Juliet’s person and presence with the central object of brilliance in the celestial universe, and her appearance with the emergence of day from night. The metaphor—if we can appreciate it despite overfamiliarity with these lines of poetry—entails a wonderfully hyperbolic expansion of Juliet’s meaning for Romeo through the imaginative fusing of her being with the most magnificent and important object in nature.

⁹ *Friends, You Drank Some Darkness: Three Swedish Poets: Martinson, Ekelöf, and Tranströmer*, trans. and ed. Robert Bly (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 193.

¹⁰ W. B. Yeats, *Selected Poems and Two Plays*, ed. M. L. Rosenthal (New York: Collier Books, 1966), 166.

¹¹ Delmore Schwartz, *Selected Poems: Summer Knowledge* (New York: New Directions, 1967), 66-67.

¹² Zwicky, *Wisdom & Metaphor*, §6 (A).

The third and fourth metaphors use as modifiers experiences of concretely imaginable objects to reveal meaningful aspects of two intrinsically abstract subjects: “mind” and “time.” Yeats identifies the mind with a mill that, as it turns, grinds and consumes the base materials of rags and bones so as to produce a finer, usable substance—which suggests a range of significant insights into, and questions about, mental activity. Delmore Schwartz’s metaphor pushes our thought in a yet more richly existential direction by using the concrete image of a fire that burns, consuming, to enlarge our understanding and feelings about the nature of time and our participation in it. Both of these metaphors manifest the suggestive power of—and the human need for—figurative imagery drawn from sense-based experiences of objects in the world to augment and refine our understanding of realities that are 1) intrinsically abstract or spiritual, 2) central to human existence, and 3) not fully knowable (what *is* “mind?” what *is* “time?”). This point will be central to our later, most important, observations.

Two general features of metaphor ought to be discussed before we turn attention to the varieties of metaphor pertinent to our focus on some of Voegelin’s key symbols.

The first of these concerns the syntax and semantics of metaphor—its form of linguistic construction, and the type of meaning it radiates. A metaphor, in stating or implying that “x is y” while taking it as given that “x is not y,” has the structure of paradox. This is a form of paradox we readily embrace, although we know perfectly well that a piece of music is not a glass house and that Juliet is not the sun. We embrace it because it does not offend our sense of the overall structure of meaning in reality, which includes an awareness of two facts: first, that of the harmonious correspondence, and interpenetration, of significant forms in the world; and second, more profoundly, of the *ultimate oneness* of all distinct participants in reality. Unlike a purely logical paradox—such as the statement “an apple is not an apple”—the paradox of metaphor always hints at the truth of the inescapable *ontological* paradox that, on the one hand, there is a vast multiplicity of objects, persons, events, times, places, and acts in reality and that, on the other hand, as all these are parts of the one Being, or Is-ness, of reality, everything *is* finally one with everything else. Recognition of this ontological paradox of the “identity of identity and difference,” as Hegel called it, is a first principle of a sound philosophical understanding of the structure of reality, so is best described, not as illogical, but (to use a

term of Northrop Frye) “counterlogical”—or, perhaps, supralogical.¹³ And since all metaphors echo this supralogical truth, we embrace them not only for their often-surprising disclosure of formal and emotional correspondences, and for their revelatory expansion of our awareness of the meaning of the metaphor’s subject, the “x,” but for their implicit affirmation and reminder of the consubstantiality of all things—of the fact that we live in a *cosmos* whose underlying oneness is so easily forgotten.

Second, the power of a metaphor to move and enlighten us grows in the measure to which its subject and modifier (or, in complex or extended metaphors, the combinations of these) refer to or touch on existentially significant experiences—objects or events or components in our lives that are especially charged with meaningfulness. Romeo’s ecstatic metaphor arising from romantic love, “. . . and *Juliet is the sun*,” can call up in us—assuming we are in the mood, and sympathetically taking part in Romeo’s state of mind—a host of feelings that pertain to crucial experiences in the drama of human living, feelings both recognizable and inchoate that reach back into childhood and are associated with wonder, love, beauty, and self-transcendence, in such a way that the metaphor *as an integrated image* “carries us away, embodies us in itself, and moves us deeply as we surrender ourselves to it.”¹⁴ The more the integrated image of a metaphor enables us to undergo our own emotional and intellectual integration of diffuse experiences of profound existential importance, the more psychic resonance it will have, and the more illumination it will throw on (1) internal relations in reality; (2) existential truths and possibilities; and (3) the paradox-inflected ways in which language can express the otherwise inexpressible.

Existential Metaphors

Among the most compelling and illuminating metaphors are those in which the “subject” is either the nature of human existence as a whole, or some aspect of reality belonging to existence as a whole. I will call these “existential metaphors.”¹⁵

¹³ Northrop Frye, *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays, 1974-1988*, ed. Robert D. Denham (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 254.

¹⁴ Polanyi and Prosch, *Meaning*, 79.

¹⁵ Northrop Frye uses this phrase in a somewhat different way; see *Myth and Metaphor*, 84, 226.

Of the four metaphors quoted above, “Time is the fire in which we burn” is an obvious existential metaphor, since its subject concerns the nature of existence as an immersion in temporality. The metaphor’s modifier, identifying time as a fire constantly consuming us, directs our attention to an essential fact of our being in a way that heightens our emotional and intellectual apprehension of it. Although conscious existence is not merely bodily being in time, it *is* bodily being, and our bodily-founded existence will exist in time (burning with desire, longing, inquiry, boredom, suffering, joy, hope, despair) until it is consumed away. The metaphor invites us to pay close attention to what existence is and entails—as it also it evokes the existential paradox of participation, in that we remain separate individuals even as we are all identical in our mutual involvement in temporality and in the ground of temporality. Indirectly, it also invites us to reflect on whether there is more to existence than existence in time; whether there is a reality beyond time, a transcendent reality, in which we also participate; but that question remains in the background, mute.

Let us look at a more familiar example of existential metaphor, one that has often been used by dramatists, poets, novelists, historians, theologians, and philosophers: the identification of conscious existence with being an actor in a drama. Shakespeare’s is the most famous articulation:

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts . . .
(*As You Like It*, II, vii)

Voegelin, of course, employs this metaphor with careful deliberateness at the start of his Introduction to *Order and History*. He argues for the appropriateness of the metaphor by elaborating how a number of the elements involved in playing a part in a drama onstage are illuminative of what it is, and what it feels like, to exist as a human being. But he also cautions that the metaphor of acting in a play (a metaphor not only “justified,” he explains, but “perhaps even *necessary*,” since what it reveals about existence is so important to philosophical self-understanding) “may lead astray” if it is taken too literally. For, in acting a part in a written drama, one knows who one is as a character, what one is going to say and choose to do, what the outcome will be, and what

the play as a whole is about. But in human existence, “[b]oth the play and the role are unknown . . . [so that] the actor does not know with certainty who he himself is.” Furthermore, in a play, an actor’s performance is temporary; it is a partial and brief engagement of the self within a larger life. But in the drama of humanity every person is necessarily “engaged with the whole of his existence,” and must remain at every moment an actor “playing a part in the drama of being and, though the brute fact of his existence, committed to play it without knowing what it is.”¹⁶

Both the full meaning of the human drama and the precise meaning of one’s own role in it cannot be known with any certainty for a number of reasons. One is that the future development of both personal life and history must remain unknown because of the unknowable future uses of freedom. Another is that human existence is a participation *within* reality, and enjoys only a “perspective of participation,” with no access to a “vantage point outside existence from which its meaning [as a whole, and thus the meaning of one’s role in it] can be viewed.” And finally—as Voegelin explains repeatedly in his writings—there is the fact that the human drama originates in, and unfolds as a story only as ontologically involved in, a *transcendent* realm of reality whose nature and purposes are mysterious to us. For all of these reasons, there is a permanent “blind spot at the center of all human knowledge about man.” However much we may learn, we will remain ignorant about “the decisive core of existence”—that is, about why, exactly, we exist, and what *ultimate* purposes our individual or communal struggles, inquiries, passions, and achievements serve.¹⁷

Use of existential metaphors, as indicated in the examples from Schwartz and Shakespeare above, need not address the topic of the transcendent basis of the human drama. But if an existential metaphor is meant to help in the elucidation of an overarching philosophy of human existence—or if, in the literary realm, a poet or novelist uses existential metaphors with the aim of illuminating the larger, *spiritual* meaning of existence—then the effort will be successful only if such metaphors contain imagery

¹⁶ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume I: Israel and Revelation*, ed. Maurice P. Hogan, vol. 14 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 39-40 (emphasis added). Voegelin employs the metaphor elsewhere, most notably as the underlying trope of his Walter Turner Candler Lectures of 1967, “The Drama of Humanity.” See Voegelin, “The Drama of Humanity,” in *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1939-1985*, 174-242.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39, 40.

suggestive of, or are contextualized by acknowledgment of, the mystery of transcendent reality.

Literary examples manifesting recognition of this fact from the world of poetry, both Western and Eastern, are easy to come by. In English letters, the poems of John Donne, George Herbert, Emily Dickinson, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, to name just a few obvious figures, are rich in existential metaphors whose imagery guides attention to the supervening transcendent context of life in the world. Emily Dickinson writes:

The Infinite a sudden Guest
Has been assumed to be –
But how can that stupendous come
Which never went away?¹⁸

Again, in Chinese and Japanese poetry influenced by Buddhism, we find a long tradition of the use of metaphors to illuminate both (1) the nature of existence as a quest for the eternal and (2) the transcendent realm of meaning as the true essence of all consciousness and reality. Here is an example from the T'ang poet Han Shan (ca. 8th -9th c. AD), whose name, which literally translates as "Cold Mountain," both refers to the hard-to-reach mountain retreat of his retirement and serves as a metaphor for his spiritual quest and its attainments:

I climb the road to Cold Mountain,
The road to Cold Mountain that never ends. . . .
Moss is slippery, though no rain has fallen;
Pines sigh, but it isn't the wind.
Who can break from the snares of the world
And sit with me among the white clouds?¹⁹

Existential metaphors that focus our attention on the *full meaning* of existence, then, cannot dispense with reference to, or evocation of, transcendence. And one consequence of this is that when a person is obtuse or resistant to the fact of transcendent mystery, it may reveal itself in an obtuseness or resistance to the use of existential metaphors in a manner meant to enhance awareness of the transcendent context of the

¹⁸ *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, Ma: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 517 (poem #1344).

¹⁹ *Cold Mountain: 100 Poems by the T'ang poet Han-shan*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 58 (poem #40).

human situation—whether such metaphors are encountered in literature, philosophy religious symbols, theology, or art. Let me illustrate this point with a personal anecdote.

I own a large, sumi-style ink painting of a Japanese ink-pot, made and sold to me many years ago by a poet-painter friend. Calligraphed near the ink-pot, in two short lines, is the text: “Two poets – / One ink bottle.” The piece was framed and hanging on a wall of my home some thirty years ago when a middle-aged screenwriter with whom I was working briefly stopped by on an errand. He looked at the painting and, after a reflective moment, said in reference to its text: “What the hell is that supposed to mean?” He was genuinely puzzled, though not really seeking an explanation.

The problem for my acquaintance was that the short poem of the text with its ink-bottle illustration presented an existential metaphor, and he was not accustomed to recognizing or responding to existential metaphors. To a philosophical or literary mind—especially one familiar with the Zen Buddhist tradition from which the ink painting with its text is derived—the gist of the metaphor is obvious: just as two poets draw ink for their writing from the same ink-bottle, so they both draw inspiration, poetry, and—most fundamentally—existence itself from a single ontological origin, the common source of persons and things. The phrase—“Two poets – / One ink bottle”—metaphorically articulates an essential truth about human existence: that all conscious and creative existences are a *participation* in the one, shared ground of being, and that all commonalities of feeling and insight, activity and vocation, are rooted in an even more elemental ontological identity. And what exactly is this shared ground of being for which the ink bottle (or ink) is a metaphor? It is a subject that is, in itself, an unnameable mystery, beyond direct knowledge or expression—it is the mystery of transcendent reality. What the text actually gives us, in fact, is only the multi-part modifier (or “vehicle”) of the metaphor; the subject as such, which is the mutual participation of all persons in “transcendence” or “the mystery of origins,” is only *alluded to* by means of a compound image drawn from the world of familiar objects, persons, actions, and ideas. Such poetic allusion hints at the facts that both 1) the mystery of transcendence and 2) the precise nature of human participation in the mystery of transcendence lie beyond direct understanding or expression.

Primal Metaphors and Philosophy

Existential metaphors that intentionally symbolize *the ultimate basis of reality or existence as participating in ultimate reality*—such as the metaphor of “Cold Mountain” in the text above—would seem to warrant their own special term, so I will call them “primal existential metaphors,” or “primal metaphors” for short. Given that the ultimate basis of reality is a transcendent dimension of meaning, and that existence takes its essential meaning from its conscious participation in transcendent reality, it is the proper task of primal metaphors to direct our attention to, and to guide our quest to understand our lives in relation to, the transcendence that is the common ground of all persons and things. Primal metaphors that do this (or attempt to) are common enough in poetry and other literature, and necessarily ubiquitous in the religious language of myth and scripture, commentary and theology, devotion and prayer. But philosophical writing, too, cannot do without the use of such primal metaphors, insofar as a philosopher is open to the fullness of reality as grounded in a transcendent realm of meaning, and is engaged in the attempt to explicate the elementary facts of the human situation as well as the most far-reaching questions and challenges with which conscious existence is faced.

One example of such a primal metaphor in philosophy would be Karl Jaspers’s image of “the Encompassing,” a metaphor taken from the realm of spatial experience which he uses to enable or enhance our apprehension of that “which never appears as an *object* in experience” but of which we are aware as “the most extreme, self-supporting ground of Being, whether it is Being in itself, or Being as it is for us.”²⁰ As Jaspers’s definition indicates, the metaphor of “the Encompassing” is meant to assist us in appreciating the inescapably present and yet non-contingent character of transcendence: “the most extreme, self-supporting ground of Being.” Embedded in this definition we may notice a *second* metaphor for transcendent reality, whose character as a metaphor could slip past us if we are habituated to a certain style of philosophical language: the image of the “ground” of Being. “Ground” is an image taken from our experience of the physical world; and a philosopher such as Max Scheler, who also employs it, is perfectly

²⁰ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, trans. William Earle (New York: The Noonday Press, 1955), 52; for exposition of the notion, see 51-76.

aware of the metaphorical status of the term when he writes that “the center” from which a human being is able to understand the realities of body, psyche, and spatiotemporal world cannot *itself* “be located in space or in time: it can only be located in the highest Ground of Being itself.”²¹ And Voegelin, too, of course, relies consistently on the metaphor of “the ground of being” to refer to the transcendent basis of existence and world (perhaps with Scheler’s work as a major influence).

All three philosophers—Jaspers, Scheler, and Voegelin—understand that the primal metaphors they use to signify transcendent reality may be misconstrued by being taken literally. Voegelin is continually warning his readers that “the ground” is not to be taken as “a spatially distant thing” or as a “datum of experience . . . given in the manner of an object of the external world,” but is merely an image helpfully suggestive of a transcendent reality “that incomprehensibly lies beyond all that we experience of it in [existential] participation.”²² All three are satisfied to rely on such metaphors, nevertheless, because they agree that their semantic paradoxicality (transcendence is an “encompassing” reality / transcendence has no kind of spatially encompassing quality; transcendence is a “ground” / transcendence is nothing like a spatial ground) is appropriate, and *seemly*, since it reflects two facts: (1) consciousness’s awareness of the oneness of the *cosmos* and the ontological paradox of participatory existence (each existence is consubstantial with all reality in its identity with transcendent Being / each existence is a distinct, individual “partner” in Being, founded in a body located in space and time), and (2) the usefulness, for a philosophy that explicates with sufficient probity and completeness the truth of the human situation, to signify the unknown of ultimate, transcendent reality through the metaphorical use of images and symbols drawn from familiar experiences.

Not all philosophers are in agreement about such use of metaphors. We find in the works of some philosophers, as in Hegel’s references to transcendent reality as “Absolute Idea,” or in Martin Buber’s description of transcendent being as “the eternal Thou,” terms

²¹ Max Scheler, *Man’s Place in Nature*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 47.

²² Eric Voegelin, “Reason: The Classic Experience,” in Voegelin, *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 271; *Israel and Revelation*, 39; “What Is Political Reality?” in Voegelin, *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, trans. M. J. Hanak, based on the abbreviated version originally translated by Gerhart Niemeyer, ed. David Walsh, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 396.

used to signify the transcendent mystery that are indeed *analogical* but not, strictly speaking, metaphorical: that is, there is no *transfer* to the subject (i.e., transcendence) of the properties of something *formally* different from it, but rather an affirmation that there is an analogical correspondence of form between transcendence (Absolute Idea, or Absolute Act of Understanding; eternal Thou) and an ontological form familiar from everyday experience (a human idea, or act of understanding; a human Thou). Again, other philosophers—such as Schopenhauer and (the early) Wittgenstein—although they would not deny the reality of the mystery of transcendence or the ground of being, have claimed that philosophy simply has no business attempting to signify it, since to ask the question of what it is cannot be answered in any manner that is adequate to the communication of its ontological content—and “whereof one cannot [adequately] speak, thereof one must be silent.”²³ And finally, there are philosophers (Holbach, Marx, Sartre) who, in their ontological accounts of human existence, deny outright that there is a transcendent dimension of reality, and would reject primal metaphors such as “the Encompassing” or “the Ground of Being” (in Scheler’s and Voegelin’s sense) as invalid and delusory.

In Voegelin’s view, of course, thinkers included in this last group share a profound deficiency as philosophers insofar as they are “closed” to the recognition and affirmation of transcendent reality, for whatever reasons. A properly responsible philosophy of existence, he would argue, must acknowledge and illuminate as far as it is possible both the structure and the significance of human existential involvement in transcendent being, and can only use either analogical symbolisms or primal metaphors to do so. Now, Voegelin’s own comfortableness with the use of primal metaphors—the use of imagery drawn from experiences of spatiotemporal objects to signify transcendent reality and our human involvement in it—is noteworthy. What, we may ask, is the basis of his tolerance of, and readiness as a philosopher to rely on, primal metaphors? Before attempting to answer this, let us mention a few primal metaphors central to his mature philosophical work.

²³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, Inc., 1922), 189.

Voegelin and Metaphor

We have already mentioned that the metaphor of “the ground of being” is Voegelin’s preferred way of referring to ultimate, transcendent reality. He also consistently uses the term “the Beyond” to signify the realm of transcendence—another spatial metaphor that, he cautions upon occasion, must not be taken in the literal sense of spatial distance: “the Beyond is not a thing beyond the things [of the world],” but is the non-spatiotemporal origin and basis of all things, which is discovered and encountered only as an “experienced presence” in consciousness in the course of its search for the ultimate (divine) reality “which constitutes consciousness by reaching into it.”²⁴ Again, in order to symbolize the fact that human consciousness, though bodily founded in space and time, is in fact co-constituted by the transcendent reality that is the ultimate goal of its quest for meaning, and must be philosophically explicated as such, Voegelin relies on primal metaphors, including “luminosity” and (most importantly) “the In-Between” (or “*metaxy*”). He uses the light-metaphor of “luminosity” to signify that “structural aspect” of consciousness in which it experiences itself, not as the subject and originating center of its own intending operations, but as a “predicative event” within reality, an “event of participatory illumination,” whose existence and intentional activities have been *given to it* by the “subject” that is reality itself—whose basis and origin is the transcendent ground of being.²⁵ Finally, Voegelin’s later philosophy may almost be said to revolve around his description of human consciousness as an “In-Between” of immanence and transcendence. Though the term “In-Between” is a spatial metaphor, what is intended by Voegelin is obviously not a spatial description: the term signifies “not an empty space between immanent and transcendent objects” but consciousness’s experience and understanding of itself as a (non-imaginable) reality *co-constituted* by participation in both temporal and eternal meaning, in world and divine transcendence.²⁶

²⁴ Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 44; “The Gospel and Culture,” in *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 188.

²⁵ Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 30.

²⁶ Voegelin, “What Is Political Reality?” in *Anamnesis*, 375. The conscious communion, or interpenetration, of immanence and transcendence is what Voegelin is commonly referring to when he describes consciousness or human existence as an “in-between” (or *metaxy*, the Greek term he draws from Plato). He often expands its application to other aspects of the human situation, explaining that existence also has the “structure of a tension” in-between imperfection and perfection, ignorance and knowledge, untruth and truth, disorder and order, and other existential “poles” or “indices.” The “in-between” of

The question is: why is Voegelin convinced of the philosophical appropriateness and heuristic advantage of the use of such metaphors at the center of his explication of existence and reality, while many (or most) philosophers would eschew them? What accounts for Voegelin's ease with metaphorical language in speaking of ultimate and non-imaginable realities, and his confidence that, despite the ever-present danger that readers or listeners will literalize and hypostatize such metaphoric symbols (a danger he is constantly warning about), they have an evocative precision that, in his view, cannot be bettered, and so belong at the very heart of a philosophical exegesis of the human condition?

As briefly as possible, I would like to suggest five interrelated reasons that, taken together, help to explain this feature of Voegelin's outlook and work.

First there is the fact, about which his writings and reflections leave no doubt, that from his earliest years Voegelin's development as a person was characterized by a fascination with the mysterious, the inexplicable, the "sphere of the ulterior unknown, of the unexplored and strange, of the undefined surplus of significance and momentousness," to use a phrasing of Bernard Lonergan.²⁷ The roots of this fascination in character-orienting childhood memories centered on evocative images are poignantly explored in Voegelin's "anamnetic experiments" of 1943.²⁸ Its mature issue was an adult mind permanently open to the recognition of transcendent mystery; intrigued by and drawn to the study of religious and philosophical expressions (both Western and Eastern) of the quest for, and the experience of participation in, a mystery of transcendent ultimacy; an appreciation of the history of mysticism; and, from early in his career, a conviction that "the philosophical problem of transcendence [is] the decisive problem of philosophy."²⁹ The attraction to metaphors pertaining to transcendence, then, first of all

immanence and transcendence remains, however, the elementary referent of the metaphor, and founds its other meanings, since "perfection," "knowledge," "truth," "order," and other positive "poles" of the existential in-between identified by Voegelin (such as "immortality," "life," "joy") point toward what is only unqualifiedly realized, or complete, or absolute, in divinely transcendent being.

²⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, vol. 3 of *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 556.

²⁸ Eric Voegelin, "Anamnesis," in *Anamnesis*, 84-98.

²⁹ Eric Voegelin, from a letter to Alfred Schütz of September 17-20, 1943; published as "Appendix to Letter 10" in *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin*,

reflects a lifelong responsiveness to all kinds of symbols capable of quickening the imagination of both child and adult to apprehensions of an ineffable but real mystery “beyond” both experienceable world and human comprehension.

Second, Voegelin had a poet’s sensitivity—not so common among philosophers—to the power of metaphorical imagery. He understood keenly its capacity to move and inspire the psyche in searching engagement with the real complexities of existence, and to evoke feeling-laden recognitions of the layered depths of significance both in the drama of everyday life and in the cosmos as a whole. This sensitivity showed itself, and was nourished by, Voegelin’s lifelong love of literature, about which we have plenty of biographical information, as well as the nuanced studies of or references to, in his writings and letters, works by Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Henry James, T. S. Eliot, von Doderer, Musil, Broch, Goethe, Proust, Joyce, Valéry, Wedekind, Beckett, and Thomas Mann, among many others, not to mention ancient Egyptian poetry, classical Greek tragedy, and the poetry of the Bible. Literary criticism, he once said, was one of his “permanent occupations”; and his appreciation of excellent literary style and well-turned figures of speech is reflected in the most impressive rhetorical passages of his own writing, which at their best have an equal among philosophers in the work of only a few, including Plato, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche.³⁰ These passages often rely, not surprisingly, on metaphorical flourishes: his description of the contemporary unification of mankind “into a global madhouse bursting with stupendous vitality,” of the “grotesque rubble into which the image of God is broken today,” of the “intellectual mud that covers the public scene,” of “activist dreamers who want to liberate us from our imperfections by locking us up in the perfect prison of their phantasy.”³¹ The power of such metaphors derive from a lifetime’s study of the rhetorical modes and effects of great literature.

1934-1964, trans. and ed. Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (University Park, Pa: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 34.

³⁰ Eric Voegelin, letter to Robert B. Heilman of December 19, 1955; in *Robert B. Heilman and Eric Voegelin: A Friendship in Letters, 1944-1984*, ed. Charles R. Embry (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 142 (Letter 57). For expansion, see Charles R. Embry, *The Philosopher and the Storyteller: Eric Voegelin and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 13-33.

³¹ Eric Voegelin, “Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” in *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 55, 56; “The Gospel and Culture,” 178; “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation,” in *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 315.

Third, Voegelin's readiness to rely on metaphor to express ultimacies of meaning is connected with his recognition of what he refers to as the "equivalency of symbolizations."³² This is the recognition that a diversity of language symbols (and sometimes other types of symbols) can signify the same or similar experiences and insights, constituting an "equivalency" of formulations that can be verified through the reader or listener successfully penetrating to the "engendering experiences" from which the diverging symbolic expressions have arisen, and recognizing the identity or equivalence of these experiences through allowing the symbols to "reconstitute" these experiences in his or her own soul.³³ Appreciation of the equivalence of key symbolizations across the range of human cultures and within the world's religious and philosophical traditions became one of the foundational principles of Voegelin's philosophy of consciousness, and of his method of both interpretative exegesis and philosophical exposition. It was an appreciation that allowed Voegelin to accept such metaphors for transcendent reality as "the Ground" and "the Beyond" as the functional equivalents—given appropriate conditions of intention in use and interpretative reception—of such abstract symbols as "Absolute Spirit," "Pure Act," or "That than which no greater can be thought." It also enabled Voegelin to avoid, throughout his career, the all-too-common philosophical mistake of assuming that only one philosophical language can claim to be the "correct" linguistic vehicle for exploring and communicating insights into the most profound realities. The issue is not whether this or that key symbol is imaginatively metaphorical or conceptually abstract, but whether or not it has the potential to communicate a sufficiently sophisticated, or differentiated, insight into the relevant truth.

Fourth, Voegelin's awareness of the evocative power and importance of metaphorical figures reflects his attention to, and deep interest in, the *developmental* aspect of consciousness, both in personal life and in human history. Both in individual consciousness and in the drama of history there is a "primary experience of the cosmos," where the experiential emphasis falls on a sense of the oneness of reality, on the felt

³² See especially Eric Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," in *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 115-33.

³³ Voegelin, "Immortality," 52-53.

interwovenness of all being including mysteriously powerful ultimate or divine being.³⁴ In this primary experience, before the emergence of any later development of “differentiated” experience, a mystery of transcendent (or world-incommensurable) meaning is *present* and is *felt*, but any interpretation or elucidation of it relies (and is felt to satisfactorily rely) on the resources of spatiotemporal imagination. When, however, personally or historically, a “differentiation of consciousness” augments the primary experience through introducing conceptual recognition that ultimate reality has a world-transcendent character, symbolizations of the transcendent mystery are no longer restricted to images drawn from sense-based experiences of concrete objects.³⁵ But—and this is the crucial point—the “primary experience of the cosmos” does not “go away”; our sense of the oneness and completeness of reality remains always our *foundational* apprehension of it, underlying and making possible any “differentiation” of its immanent and transcendent dimensions. Because this is so, and also because it is only through the power of emotionally evocative concrete images, including metaphors, that we *feel immediately and massively* our engagement with reality and the significance of our actions in the drama of our lives, “differentiation” does not annul the appropriateness of the use of properly orientating concrete images for expressing the truth of transcendence and of existential participation in transcendence. As Bernard Lonergan has put it: The abstract terms expressing the differentiated insights of scientific or metaphysical or theological understanding will be effective in our “concrete living” only if those insights “can be embodied in images that release feeling and emotion and flow spontaneously into deeds no less than words.”³⁶ Primal metaphors such as “the Beyond” and “the In-Between” invite the reader to experience *a felt completeness of existential attunement* with the basic realities of our human situation, speaking as they do simultaneously to (1) our primary experience *and* (2) our differentiated experience of the wholeness of reality.

A fifth and final reason helping to explain Voegelin’s use of primal metaphors is his conviction that a sound philosophy of existence must explicate the fact, and must urge

³⁴ On the “primary experience of the cosmos,” see Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume IV: The Ecumenic Age*, ed. Michael Franz, vol. 17 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 118-28, and *Israel and Revelation*, 40-50.

³⁵ On the “differentiation” of reality into immanent and transcendent realms, see (for one of many accounts) Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 52-54.

³⁶ Lonergan, *Insight*, 570.

the reader to remember, that human consciousness, while co-constituted by transcendence, is at all times a “concretely embodied consciousness” incapable of transcending its immersion in the world and the limited perspective of incarnate participation.³⁷ Because of our ability to understand the spiritual dimension of our natures and to discover and use abstract concepts to refer to spiritual realities, including both the mind and transcendent reality itself, philosophers (and others) can be tempted to presume that such concepts give them a direct, substantive understanding of the reality conceived. In fact, transcendence—and so the nature of our participation in it—remains a mystery inaccessible to direct or substantive insight; it is a reality that we experience *only* in a “tension” of participatory relatedness toward it, with transcendence itself “[lying] incomprehensibly beyond all that we experience of it in participation.”³⁸ Primal metaphors such as “the Beyond” and “the In-Between” (1) explicitly acknowledge transcendent reality, while (2) implicitly acknowledging, through the use of metaphor, that all understanding we have of it is both indirect and reliant upon language that is inadequate *in any form* to represent the mystery of transcendence, and so (3) work against the temptation to suppose that we can eliminate the “blind spot” at the center of our understanding of self and reality—reminding us, through the paradoxical “is” and “is not” of metaphor, that both ultimate reality and the essential meaning of existential participation in it are both known (as facts) and unknown (as to content or substance).

Reality and Metaphor

There is one further facet of Voegelin’s understanding of the useful place of existential and primal metaphors in philosophy that must be treated, even in so cursory an examination of the topic as this one. This is Voegelin’s recognition and exposition of the fact that symbols, analogies, or metaphors used by a philosopher to explicate elemental truths about reality and existence are not simply the product of the philosopher’s creative imagination, since that imagination itself is a “predicative event” within, and primordially belongs to, the comprehending reality within which it has emerged. This means that, on

³⁷ Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 29.

³⁸ Voegelin, “What Is Political Reality?” in *Anamnesis*, 396.

the one hand, the metaphor of, say, “the Beyond” is the result of Voegelin’s effort to find a true and persuasive image to signify and evoke the true nature of ultimate reality and of our human relationship to it. On the other hand, it means also that “the Beyond” is a metaphoric symbol belonging to, and arising from, “the reality that comprehends bodily located man” and his imagination. The metaphor, paradoxically, both “does begin in time” (in human imagination) and “does not begin in time” (as its ultimate origin is divine transcendence), and reflects the paradoxicality of existential participation itself, that is, the fact that it is both a separateness within and a oneness with the cosmos and its transcendent ground.³⁹ So, as a primal metaphor emerging from Voegelin’s quest to tell an essential truth about reality, it must be seen also as, simultaneously, a product of reality’s (and the transcendent ground of being’s) “movement” toward the illumination of its own truth. In Voegelin’s words: the metaphor (along with other existential and primal metaphors in Voegelin’s work) “participates in the paradox of a quest that lets reality become luminous for its truth by pursuing truth as a thing intended.”⁴⁰

This does not mean, however, that every existential or primal metaphor issuing from the creative imagination of a philosopher is appropriate and reliable—is a *true* metaphor. An existential metaphor such as that expressed by the title of the French philosophe La Mettrie’s book, *L’Homme machine* (*Man a Machine*) (1747), or a primal metaphor that ignores transcendence and figuratively suggests that ultimate reality is something intrinsically conditioned by space and time (through the use, perhaps, of an organic metaphor, or a mechanical metaphor), distorts and misrepresents both human existence and ultimate reality. A thinker of immanentist or materialist persuasion can invent “substitute images” to replace true images of reality, “counterimages” or “dream images,” that imaginatively eclipse transcendence and immanentize existence.⁴¹ In such cases, Voegelin states, the “creatively formative force” of human imagination will have

³⁹ Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 42.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 31. This *Collected Works* edition of *In Search of Order* contains a typographical error in the last word of this sentence—substituting “tended” for “intended”—as may be seen by comparing it with the original edition of the volume (Louisiana State University Press, 1987, page 17) and by the expository context.

⁴¹ Voegelin, “What Is Political Reality?” in *Anamnesis*, 368; “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme,” 318, 319.

become subject to “deformative perversion” as it relegates transcendence to “imaginative oblivion.”⁴²

But one might ask with regard to such “deformed” images, whether they are metaphorical or not: since they also arise from, and “belong to,” the comprehending reality in which human existence and imagination is a “predicative event,” then don’t they equally carry the index of reality’s “self-illumination?” The answer requires making an important distinction. The deformed images or metaphors certainly emerge within reality, and can have significant personal and cultural impact; but they are *not* part of the movement of reality that, through the human questing movement, “becomes luminous *for its truth*,” since their “dream” imagery does *not* illuminate, but rather obscures, what ultimate reality truly is and what existential participation in ultimate reality truly entails. The fact is that, through the free creative use of his imagination, a person can deformatively “out-imagine himself and out-comprehend the comprehending reality”—enacting, to a greater or lesser extent, a sort of imaginative self-excommunication from existential attunement with being. This is a phenomenon encountered all too frequently in modern philosophy, where we often find the human partner in the creative process imagining himself or herself to be “the sole creator of truth,” while the mystery of transcendence is eclipsed through imagining the ground of reality to be some kind of immanent reality that is in principle fully knowable.⁴³ A *true* philosophical quest, by contrast, will always enable both (1) the comprehending reality with its transcendent ground and (2) existence as a participation in the in-between of immanence and transcendence, to become articulate in appropriately truthful symbols, analogies, and metaphors—or myths.

It is appropriate, as we have just done, to mention the topic of myth at the conclusion of this meditation on Voegelin’s use of existential and primal metaphors. It is, after all, in the figurations of myth—as Voegelin frequently explains—that human efforts to articulate the awareness of transcendence, and of the surmised meanings or purposes of existential involvement in transcendence, inevitably find their most full and satisfying expression. Primal metaphors such as “the Beyond” and “the In-Between” are still only

⁴² Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 53, 55.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 53; “What is Political Reality?” in *Anamnesis*, 369.

metaphors, but they are, we might say, “proto-mythical” insofar as their imagery opens up these “areas of reality” to the further filling in of the meaning of the “story” of existence and reality by mythical imagination.⁴⁴ Understanding that story to have its ultimate origin in a transcendent ground of being, human discernment and imagination will express through mythic symbolizations its best surmises about why “the Beyond” has initiated a story at all, and what purposes “the In-Between” of existential participation in world and Beyond might have. As Voegelin writes: if we remain faithful to the human quest for meaning as far as seeking some kind of apprehension and articulation of ultimate meanings, then “[t]here is no alternative to the symbolization of the In-Between of existence and its divine Beyond by mythical imagination.”⁴⁵

This is to touch on a major topic in Voegelin’s philosophy: his analysis of myth, both cosmological and post-cosmological, and his analyses of various myths—notably from Plato and from Biblical texts—in which he discerns the movement of reality to have become most profoundly and provocatively “luminous for its truth.” But since our concern here is restricted to Voegelin’s use of existential and primal metaphors, we will conclude simply by emphasizing that Voegelin’s decision to employ primal metaphors at the core of his philosophy is consonant with his recognition of the unchanging human need for “true myths” that orientate human consciousness as it attempts to understand its situation within, and to live in attunement with, the cosmos. And so we can recognize that, not unimportantly, his use of such metaphors functions as a rhetorical and ontological corrective to a widespread cultural attitude that imagines it possible to adequately describe and explicate human existence and reality without the use of either metaphorical *or* mythical language, because reality is imagined to be wholly immanent or material. It is thus not going too far to say that Voegelin’s use of primal metaphors constitutes, at the scholarly level, “a profoundly political act,” since through its influence on his readers it contributes to therapeutic resistance against certain existential and social disorders emanating from “a culture that believes truth”—including the most important truths—to be “the exclusive property of non-metaphorical sentences.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Voegelin, “The Gospel and Culture,” 188.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Zwicky, *Wisdom & Metaphor*, §84 (A).