Differentiations of Consciousness

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When Eric Voegelin decided to discontinue his work on the history of political thought and shift instead to the history of experience and its symbolizations in his magisterial Order and History,[1] he was well aware of the implications of the shift. What it meant was a shift in the paradigm of thinking. The abandoned work belonged to a way of thinking that conceived of history as driven by a dialectic between a fairly limited conception of experience and the unfolding logic of ideas. The experience that the old paradigm considered was largely confined to the horizon of self-interest as conceived by the heritage of Enlightenment philosophy. The ideas thinkers were assumed to use in pursuit of their interests were thought of as having a rather mechanical logic of their own to which they were subject and which they expressed. Voegelin did not invent the old paradigm, of course; it was what one tended to take for granted in the world in which he grew up and received his education. Even in the abandoned manuscripts, however, it was evident that he was already stretching the framework of the old paradigm by trying to encompass within it a broader than usual conception of human experience, one that included what he called experiences of transcendence.

When his developing thought eventually burst the boundaries of that framework, the result was a new conception of history as a movement that had at its heart the unfolding not of ideas but of consciousness. The difference is profound. In the old paradigm, consciousness was not a variable. It was simply the constant medium of luminous transparency in which perceptions and impulses arose, left their traces, and faded out to be replaced by others. One of the few to comment on consciousness explicitly, David Hume, described it as "a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations."[2] It had no significant life of its own but at most merely added habits of association linking the ideas that passed through it. In the framework of Order and History, on the other hand, consciousness was a dynamic process that had levels of development which could affect the character and function of the ideas it might involve. The idea of the

divine, for example, did not develop continuously in the movement from the cosmologically symbolized cultures to those that took shape on the foundation of what Voegelin called the noetic and pneumatic differentiations of consciousness. Rather, just as the transformed consciousness carried forward what had been contained in the compact cosmological consciousness but added something new, so the symbols that it used to express and take conscious possession of itself added to their earlier content a new character and function that was discontinuous with their old meanings.

It was the discontinuity between what I would like here to call orders of consciousness that made for the problem Voegelin came increasingly, and sometimes uncomfortably, aware of in his own efforts of communication. A thinker who has undergone a differentiation of consciousness, will not be able to communicate fully the insights he develops within the new order of consciousness to those who do not also dwell within it. This is what led Voegelin in various essays written between the first three volumes of Order and History (1956-1957) and the fourth (1974) to begin talking about what he called the problem of secondary symbolism, that is, the tendency of symbolizations of experience to be reinterpreted by their hearers in ways that root them in a more restricted experience than that of the original speaker. The new symbolizations that are engendered when a new dimension of experience opens up and is given voice are what Voegelin called primary symbols; those that may use the same words or forms but attach them to the more limited experiences of the old order of consciousness he called secondary. Voegelin's sense of this problem, and some of his frustration regarding it, found vivid expression in the fourth volume, The Ecumenic Age, where he even spoke of it as the central concern of his work:

> The return from symbols which have lost their meaning to the experiences which constitute meaning is ... generally recognizable as the problem of the present.... The great obstacle to this return is the massive block of accumulated symbols, secondary and tertiary, which eclipses the reality of man's experience in the Metaxy. To raise this obstacle and its structure into consciousness, and by its removal to help in the return to the truth of reality as it reveals itself in history, has become the purpose of Order and History. (P. 58)

My purpose in the present essay is to explore further the problem of understanding differentiations of consciousness and to suggest some lines of approach that might both lead beyond Voegelin's own and point toward a framework within which his too may gain greater intelligibility. I think any sympathetic reader of Voegelin's work will agree that it was genuinely path-breaking in a way that went beyond merely incremental additions to our knowledge of the world. Order and History was itself an expression of differentiating

consciousness as well as a historical study of its movement in the ancient world in Greece and Israel and in the emergence of Christianity. This meant that Voegelin would inevitably have difficulty communicating the essential core of his thought to at least some of his potential readers. I do not think he was naive about the problems he would have with this when he began these volumes, but a reader of the first three certainly does not get the feeling that he thought it would prove to be a problem of the magnitude he attributed to it in the passage from the fourth just quoted. The frustration he felt himself over this problem indicates the need for further thought about ways of understanding and dealing with it.

The space allowed here is, of course, insufficient for a full exploration of a problem of such depth and importance. I will only be able to indicate some approaches that might be worth further thought by scholars of Voegelin's work and thinkers inspired by it. I will begin with a brief discussion of the two differentiations of consciousness Voegelin himself talked about and some of the reasons I think his readers have not always found it easy to understand them exactly as he intended, to discover, that is, what they meant to him as primary symbols. In connection with this I will consider additional ways of thinking about these as well as other possible ways consciousness might go through transformations.

By the noetic differentiation Voegelin meant the discovery that took place in ancient Greece that gave rise to the symbolism of philosophy. This was the discovery of critically self-conscious reasoning. Reason as such, of course, considered simply as a process of thinking, can be assumed to have been a feature of human experience since well before recorded history. The difference in the case of classical philosophy was that reasoners began to reflect explicitly on the process of reasoning and to develop a language with which to analyze its operation. In his 1974 essay "Reason: The Classic Experience," Voegelin described this succinctly as "the adequate articulation and symbolization of the questioning consciousness as the constituent of humanity."[3] In that essay and in the second and third volumes of Order and History, Voegelin offers a brilliant analysis of the process of this discovery and its implications. His analysis of the exact content of the noetic differentiation, on the other hand, was not very explicit. This did not present a serious problem, however, since what he was referring to was not especially difficult and there has been a great deal of philosophical discourse about it. In my own 1981 study of Voegelin's thought[4] I drew on Bernard Lonergan's Insight[5] for its further explication. This was an approach I discussed at length with Voegelin and with which he was fully in accord, since he himself admired Lonergan's analysis and since Lonergan shared with him the key belief that reason could be properly understood only if one conceived it as motivated by a force of questioning that had an ultimately transcendental thrust. Lonergan used the term "transcendental notion" (of the intelligible, the true, or the good) to talk about this directional dynamism of reason. In

Lonergan's analysis reason involves four distinct but interrelated and cumulative levels of operation: experiencing, interpretation, critical reflection and judgment on the adequacy of interpretation to experience, and finally deliberation and decision about possible courses of action within the reality known through the first three sets of operations. The transcendental notions correspond to each of these levels of operation and are the force of questioning that drives them. In a later analysis of what these "notions" precisely are, I suggested they can best be understood as dynamic anticipations of the operations in question.[6] That is, they are not fuzzy ideas of some object to be apprehended but an appetite to perform the operations and a sense of what it would be like to carry them through to satisfaction. Voegelin's noetic differentiation is essentially the realization of what these operations are and the development of skill in performing them distinctly so that they can be carried out critically, that is, carefully and self-reflectively. The challenge in understanding the noetic differentiation lies in one's having had to enact it before one can identify the mental processes its explication refers to. But since it is reasonable to assume that anyone who undertakes so intellectually demanding a process as reading Order and History will already have had considerable experience with these operations, it is unlikely anyone would find it especially difficult to follow Voegelin's meaning when he talks about noetic differentiation, and his readers have not in general found that differentiation a controversial point.

The pneumatic differentiation is a different matter, however. Much of the controversy Voegelin's thought has aroused, especially among his admirers, has been related to the difficulty of understanding exactly what he meant about this. I am referring in particular to the controversy over his relation to the Christian religion. For the sake of economy I will not go into this in detail except to say that to many of his readers Voegelin's discussion of the pneumatic differentiation sounded like a profession of belief in God, which led them to draw the conclusion that he should become a church-going Christian. That he was not seemed anomalous and sometimes rather frustrating to them.

It would not be at all false to say that Voegelin believed in God, and he did consider himself a Christian of a sort, but the question of what sort of Christian and of what belief in God meant to him is not a simple one. Since I discussed these issues at length in the chapter on "The Philosophy of Religion" in my 1981 book on him, I will not repeat that material here, but I will suggest at the end of this essay another approach to understanding why this issue might be difficult for some of his readers. For the moment, however, I will confine myself to a brief explanation of what he meant by pneumatic differentiation and why his way of discussing it could lead to some difficulties of understanding.

Basically Voegelin used the term to refer to what might be described as spiritual realization of the difference between intracosmic, mythically imaged divinity and the new

conception of extracosmic, radically transcendent divinity that gradually emerged in the prophetic tradition of Israel and was carried forward into Christianity. There are several difficult points in this. One is the question of a spiritual realization. What I mean is that the pneumatic differentiation is not a strictly intellectual matter; it is not a grasp of an idea but rather a reorientation of one's relation to one's existence. In my 1988 study, I suggested that this was something comparable to what Karl Jaspers referred to as Existenzerhellung or "elucidation of Existenz."[7] Contrasting it with "existence analysis" (which is basically parallel in Jaspers's thought to Voegelin's noetic differentiation), Jaspers said that this "involves commitment" and "instead of general insights...conveys possible lucidities, showing the potential of the individual in his unconditional roots and ends."[8] He also went on to comment, rather pertinently to our problem here, that "[i]ts communication has many meanings and may be misunderstood. Its appeal to the man to whom it appeals at all will be to involve his self."[9] That alone could explain much of the difficulty in understanding Voegelin's discussion of the pneumatic differentiation; only a person who has consciously reflected on the source and goal of his existence as such and who has committed himself in decision to some conception of them will recognize what a discussion of pneumatic differentiation is about.

Still another problem for understanding Voegelin's particular discussion of it in its historical origins is the question of what might be meant by extracosmic, radically transcendent divinity. This is the core of monotheism, but monotheism is itself a challenging matter to wrap the mind around. To many people the central question with regard to monotheism seems merely that of how many members might be contained in the genus "deity," but this is not the issue at all. Even if that category were to be thought of as containing only one member, the entity contained in it would still be intracosmic and only relatively transcendent — that is, transcendent in power, enduringness, and so on.[10] In the language of the history of religions, this would be henotheism, not monotheism. The monotheism that emerged in the religion of the prophets involved the notion of something much more radically other, a source and goal of life that is not a particular entity within the totality of entities, that is, within the cosmos. Israel took centuries to grasp this issue. The Israelites who said their Yahweh was a great god and a great king above all gods and called on Him to defeat the gods of their enemies had not yet developed the transcendent monotheism that Israel later came to stand for. There are probably still many believers for whom to conceive a monotheism beyond the idea of a single entitative deity is a challenge, but even this is not all that is involved in the difficulty of grasping the pneumatic differentiation.

Another problem is the inward reorientation that belief in the monotheistically conceived God requires. As Kierkegaard put it when he said that "God is a subject and therefore exists only for subjectivity in inwardness,"[11] this is a shift from an exclusive focus on various types of objectivity, whether deities or systems of ideas, to subjectivity, that is, to the operator's subjective existence as constituted by his operations — not as an entity, that is, but as a dynamic process. The operations on which the noetic differentiation reflects are among these, of course.

Voegelin never got around to discussing the particulars of the pneumatic differentiation in detail, because this was not for him a pressing issue. His own main interest in it was connected, understandably, with the history of politics. For him what mattered was primarily the realization that the ultimate point of orientation of human existence is extra-cosmic rather than something that can be grasped or attained within the cosmos. He believed this was an essential element in the political wisdom that could counter the various forms of political folly he saw around him in modern utopianisms and realized eschatologies such as National Socialism and Communism. Working out all of what pneumatic differentiation involved and implied was not his top priority, and as a result it remained rather sketchy.

In a paper I presented at a conference at the Voegelin Center in Manchester in July 1994,[12] I suggested that Voegelin's discussion of differentiations of consciousness was incomplete and that even the two differentiations he did discuss require the complementary understanding and practice of a third with which both of the others are closely connected and which I think was at least implicit in what he said about the others. The third differentiation I have in mind has to do with what we might call "appetitive consciousness" as distinguished from the noetic "questioning consciousness" and the pneumatic "spiritual consciousness." Appetitive differentiation of consciousness as I conceive it is the realization, both experienced and reflectively understood, of the distinction between two modes of desire. One is what Thomas Aquinas calls desiderium naturae, as when he describes the "wonder" that Aristotle said was the beginning of philosophy, as a "natural desire" and speaks of humanity as having a desiderium naturae to know God in His existential actuality.[13] It is also the disio that Dante the pilgrim speaks of as moving him to ask questions of Vergil, to follow him up the mountain of Purgatory, to love Beatrice and God, and to ascend finally to the empyrean. This mode of desire I shall call simply "appetite." The other mode of desire, which consists of the various forms of disordered craving, as I will call it, that Dante's pilgrim had to purify by his journey through the inferno and purgatory. The Commedia as a whole depicts a process of the education of desire based on Christian and Aristotelian teachings by which the pilgrim comes to know the

difference between his genuine appetite for life in God and the deceitful cravings that dominate him while his mind is not yet clear. The purification in question is precisely the achievement of this differentiation.

The pertinence of this appetitive differentiation to understanding the pneumatic is that it indicates an important dimension of the spiritual challenge the pneumatic involves. The discrimination between true desiderium naturae and false cravings is an important aspect of the pneumatic differentiation's existential elucidation and commitment to seek one's fulfillment not in one's relation to objects but in one's relation to one's subjectivity and to the radically transcendent God that is its source and goal. Pneumatic differentiation necessarily involves a recognition of the true movement of love in the soul and requires the ability to discriminate between that and cravings that would seek a God less than absolutely transcendent.

The connection of the appetitive differentiation with the noetic is also fairly obvious. Questioning consciousness is motivated by particular questions as well as by what Voegelin called "the Question," and questions are appetites. As Aristotle said, in a famous sentence that may well have inspired Aquinas's idea of desiderium naturae, "All men by nature desire to know."[14] And also, as Herr Settembrini liked to say to Hans Castorp, "Placet experiri." Attention to experience, the effort to organize experience into interpretive patterns, the urge to try to get interpretations of experience right, and so on, are all functions of cognitive appetite, and all are subject to derailment by cravings that might truncate the operations of knowing in order to find satisfaction not in truth but in some illusion.

The interconnectedness of all three aspects of consciousness and their corresponding differentiations is indicated in Voegelin's discussion of the dynamism of "the Question" in volume four of Order and History. He speaks, for example, of "a live critical consciousness in the mythopoetic act" and says that "the creators of the myth reflect on the adequacy of the myth as an expression of the questioning they are experiencing."[15] Mythopoesis may not have been philosophy, but it involved the same noetic operations. The difference the noetic differentiation made when it gave birth to philosophy was simply to render these operations self-aware in a new way. This was something recognized by Aristotle when he said that "the philomythos is in a sense philosophos."[16] But neither myth nor philosophy have as their only aim to understand the shape and contents of the world around them. Both strive also for an orientation of the self in relation to its ultimate source and possibilities. This is why Voegelin says, "the Question will not rest until the ground beyond the intracosmic grounds offered by the compact myth is found."[17] That is, it will not rest until it discovers itself within the order of consciousness associated with the pneumatic differentiation and thus comes to know itself

as having its goal not finally in the possession or knowledge of objects but in the relation of its subjectivity to itself and to the ultimate source of subjectivity. Without the appetite to perform noetic operations there would be no noesis, and without the appetite for communion with the extra-cosmic source, there would be no pneumatic differentiation.

Still another point Voegelin makes is that "[t]he Question capitalized is not a question concerning the nature of this or that object in the external world, but a structure inherent to the experience of reality. As a consequence, it does not appear in the same form at all times, but shares by its varying modes the advance of experience from compactness to differentiation."[18] What he evidently had in mind when he said this was that the Question will be experienced as having further dimensions in the orders of consciousness generated by the noetic and pneumatic differentiations. But there may be additional implications to this idea about changing modes of the Question in relation to "the advance of experience" that Voegelin did not himself discuss or perhaps even think about, at least explicitly. This, at any rate, is what I would like to suggest as material for further reflection.

Consciousness may be analyzed from a variety of angles and may be seen as developing in numerous ways in addition to those described in terms of noetic and pneumatic differentiation, or appetitive as well for that matter. And it is possible that such other takes on the development of consciousness may throw additional light both on these differentiations and on some of the difficulty Voegelin had communicating his thought. What I am thinking of is the way differentiation of consciousness may be understood from the point of view of developmental psychology. Since space is short, I will confine myself to summarizing briefly the bare essentials of a schema worked out by Robert Kegan in two books, <u>The Evolving Self</u>[19] and <u>In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life</u>.[20]

Basically this is a scheme of mental development that moves through five orders of consciousness. The first is the consciousness of a child who sees everything strictly in terms of his or her own needs, feelings, and so on and has little sense of the difference between self and other. The second is that of a developing self that becomes capable of realizing there are other people with points of view of their own, but it still cannot take its own point of view and another's simultaneously. The third order is the first level of entry into what Kegan calls "abstract thought," in which holding two points of view in mind simultaneously becomes not only possible but a fluent skill and in which it becomes possible to "reason about reasoning" and "think hypothetically"[21] (note the parallel to Voegelin's noetic differentiation here). It is also in the third order that one becomes capable of adopting a system of thought and of values and of committing oneself to it. Such a mind is capable of finding its adequate expression and satisfaction in a relation to tradition.

The movement from the second to the third order begins in adolescence and, ideally at least, should be completed by adulthood. In fact its completion is the essential mark of psychological as compared with merely physical adulthood. Although there are many people "in therapy," as one says these days, because they are having difficulty developing to this sort of psychological adulthood, it seems safe to assume that Voegelin's readers have generally negotiated this transition successfully, since it seems unlikely they would be reading something so comparatively "abstract" as Order and History if they had not. But there are also fourth and fifth possible orders of consciousness which are not necessary to adulthood or to mental health and are not nearly so widely arrived at, and I suspect that their presence or absence, or at least their rudimentary development, may have a bearing on whether a reader of Voegelin's work is going to be prepared to grasp all of its dimensions and trace his meanings back to their primary symbolism.

The fourth order is a level of what might be called meta-abstraction. It involves operations of abstraction about abstractions, the ability to stand outside systems of belief and value and think about them objectively, to compare them, assess them, select from them for various purposes, and so on. Kegan argues that the conditions of modern life make great demands on people to operate on this fourth level, since they confront them with situations in which conflicts between systems of thinking and of value can be dealt with only by stepping back from one's primary systematic commitments in order to compare them with other possible ways of making sense of one's world and in order to prioritize a variety of possible commitments. In the fourth volume of Order and History I think such fourth order thinking became very explicit. The first three volumes could still be read as glorification of tradition; the fourth volume was distinctly more detached and critical.

The fifth order takes a step still further back from systems and questions them more radically. It asks not only about their relative merits and adequacy, but about the distortions implicit in systematic knowing as such. A thinker operating in the fifth order questions not only particular categories but category itself as a vehicle of thought. The result is a view of reality not as made up of various categories of entities, each a whole related to others, but as made up of continuously fluid processes. Here the hard-won self of the third and fourth orders begins to loosen its claims on itself and on its place in its world. Rather it begins to discover itself as process rather than entity and to let itself belong to the process that makes up the world as a whole. Here we can recognize, I think, the place of the fifth volume of Order and History's "It-reality" and "the process of the whole."

With each advance in the order of consciousness there is a corresponding differentiation between subject and object. At each stage of development one's subjectivity is immersed or embedded in some particular way of knowing and relating, and with each

advance one's subjectivity emerges from that embedding to discover itself in a new form, confronting an object (an impulse, a tradition, a code, and so on) that it had previously been too closely involved in to reflect on. As one reads through the five volumes of Order and History I think one sees the author going through such processes of differentiation, and one is led to accompany him in them to the extent one is capable. One way to interpret Order and History as a whole is as a massive exercise of fourth and fifth order thinking which was evoked by precisely those demands of modern life that Kegan refers to. But readers who come to it can be expected to approach it from the point of view of third order thinking as well as from that of the fourth and the fifth. This could explain why some readers seek Voegelin for the assistance he can offer as a critic of false systems (such as communism and other modern ideologies) or as a reinforcer of their own somewhat anxious commitments to churches or parties. Such readers tend to miss the really radical dimension of Voegelin's work, and many of them also seem to end up feeling frustrated with him for not holding systematic commitments of the sort that they look to his work to help them maintain. There is also a much larger public that chooses not to read Voegelin at all and dismisses him because they assume he represents the kind of cultural conservatism some of his frustrated admirers try to make him represent. Certainly they are missing something, but so are those whose main interest in him is to enlist him in the defense of their particular systems. If fourth order consciousness is indeed a demand of modern life that, as Kegan suggests, presses on us all, then we need the help that Voegelin's work at its most searchingly critical has to offer us. And if some should ever begin to sense the appeal of what Kegan calls the fifth order of consciousness and associates with "post-modernism" and that Voegelin associated with the self-transcending process of the whole, then they will find in Voegelin a thinker whose fidelity to his calling as a "mystic philosopher" helped open a new dimension of mind and spirit for their own explorations.

NOTES

[1]Five volumes (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University, 1956- 87).

[2]Treatise of Human Understanding, Book I, part 4, section 6. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), p. 256.

[3]Reprinted in Anamnesis, translated and edited by Gerhart Niemeyer (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), pg. 93.

[4]Eugene Webb, Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History, (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1981), ch. 3.

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[5]Insight: A Study of Human Understanding, 3rd ed. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970).

[6]Eugene Webb, Philosophers of Consciousness: Polanyi, Lonergan, Voegelin, Ricoeur, Girard, Kierkegaard (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1988), pp. 70-71.

[7]Philosophers of Consciousness, pp. 113-14

[8]Karl Jaspers, Philosophy, translated by E. B. Ashton. 3 vols. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969-71), p. 71.

[9]Ibid.

[10]This is why Thomas Aquinas denied that God is in any genus and in his discussion of the names of God said that the name "God" applies to God only analogously and that the best name for Him is actually the Hebrew Tetragrammaton, which by its meaninglessness indicates His utter transcendence. Summa Theologica, I, q. 3, a. 5 and q. 13, a. 9 and a. 11, ad primum. This work will subsequently be abbreviated as ST.

[11]Concluding Unscientific Postscript, translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 178.

[12]To be included in a volume of papers from this conference being prepared for the University of Missouri Press under the editorship of Stephen A. McKnight and Geoffrey L. Price.

[13]ST, I, q. 1, a. 1.

[14]This is the opening sentence of the Metaphysics.

[15]P. 317.

[16]Metaphysics 982b18, quoted by Voegelin in "Reason: The Classic Experience," Anamnesis, p. 93.

[17]Order and History, 4, p. 319.

[18]Ibid., p. 317.

[19]The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[20]Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1994.

[21]In Over Our Heads, p. 30, Table 1.1.