

THE POLITICS OF THE SOUL

Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience

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Balanced and Imbalanced Consciousness

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One of the most useful of the diagnostic concepts developed by Eric Voegelin for analyzing order and disorder in history is his notion of “the balance of consciousness.” The concept is most fully presented and explained in chapter 4 (“Conquest and Exodus”) of the fourth volume of *Order and History, The Ecumenic Age*, where the context is an analysis of certain dangers accompanying the discovery of divine transcendence.¹

A major problem introduced by the discovery, Voegelin explains, is that the conceptual separation of the cosmos into the two distinct realms of finite world and transcendent reality not only fails to “solve” the mystery of existence—the questions regarding the where-from and the where-to of existence, its meaning and value, and its obligations—but rather makes the human situation even more perplexing and demanding. The human search for purposeful living is now revealed to have the character of a “tension” (as Voegelin describes it) between finite world and transcendent truth; and human consciousness is revealed to be that place in reality where finite being recognizes its orientation and obligation toward a transcendent—and therefore inescapably mysterious—origin and meaning. The burdens of these insights weigh heavily. So there ensues a constant temptation, Voegelin writes, to try to reduce or escape the “tension of existence” by identifying one of the disclosed realms—either immanence (the finite world) or transcendence—with true reality and demoting the other realm to the status of meaninglessness or untruth. To succumb to this temptation, however, is to lose the “balance of consciousness,” where the “balance” consists precisely in appreciating and accepting both the given finite world and transcendent reality as facts; in acknowledging the implications of these facts; and in embracing one’s own, and all of human, existence as a life of tension between the “poles” of immanence and transcendence.²

Although the phrase “the balance of consciousness” doesn’t appear in Voegelin’s work until quite late in his career, the notion itself and the diagnoses related to it are a central concern throughout his mature work.³ His studies often trace a distorted perspective on reality, or a dangerously misguided assumption, to its source in a “loss of balance” in this sense. As a result, the full sweep of his writings provides an extensive survey of modes and consequences of “imbalanced” consciousness.⁴

Regarding different types of imbalance, as already mentioned, the fundamental distinction pertains to which realm of reality, immanence or transcendence, is rejected or ignored—though it is also possible to turn away from both at once, for example in denying that transcendent reality exists while at the same time refusing to accept the world as given. Still, the basic distinction between rejecting immanence or transcendence is helpful, and we will use it to organize a survey of interpretations of reality that reflect imbalanced consciousness. It should be stated right away, however, that this survey of interpretations is most emphatically not offered as science, but only as a suggestive catalogue, a provisional patterning of imbalanced attitudes.

Before beginning the survey, I will discuss more completely the notion of the balance of consciousness itself, and also consider some of Voegelin’s remarks on requirements for maintaining the balance. After the survey, a few remarks will be offered on causes of the loss of balance and on the significance of Voegelin’s analysis.

The Balance of Consciousness

It is the discovery of transcendence, the discovery that the divine ground of reality is somehow “beyond” the world of space and time, that creates the conditions in which the balance of consciousness becomes a requirement for a realistic appraisal of the human condition. The balance needing to be kept is an existential equilibrium in the face of two sorts of experience: on the one hand, experiences of worldly things, of their truth and reality and lastingness; on the other hand, experiences of human consciousness reaching toward and discovering a divine “beyond” as the ultimate source of worldly things. The difficulty of keeping this equilibrium is, as already indicated, the difficulty of not letting the discovery of divine transcendence frustrate or frighten one to the point that one either (1) distorts one’s appreciation of or response to finite reality, or (2) denies or distorts the truth of transcendence.

This problem of equilibrium cannot arise in human living until the explicit identification of transcendent reality dissociates the cosmos into the two realms of finite world and divine beyond. In cosmological societies,

there can be no problem of the balance of consciousness in this sense. Since in cosmological consciousness experiences of the divine ground and of worldly things are still interwoven, still unified in compactness—since divine substance and thingly substance remain to some degree fused in the imagination—the balance is not endangered. One can neither devalue the universe in favor of a beyond, nor deny the existence of a beyond, before an explicit conception of a beyond has arisen. Cosmological myth, then, as the symbolic habitat of peoples preceding the discovery of transcendence, may understandably evoke a certain nostalgia in latter-day students of ancient cultures since through it the elementary human experiences of divine reality and worldly life remain satisfyingly bound to each other. As Voegelin explains, the “cosmogonic” myths—cosmological myths of ultimate origins—“adequately express a balanced manifold of experiences” and thus promote and preserve “balanced order in the soul of the believers.”⁵

With the discovery of transcendence, this protection of balance provided by cosmological myth is shattered. In the West, the discovery—flowing from experiential wellsprings in Israel and Hellas into first their own and then into surrounding cultures—gradually establishes the authority of language reflecting the dissociation of the cosmos into a realm of worldly things and a transcendent divine ground. This “differentiation of transcendence,” as Voegelin calls it, turns out to be a decidedly mixed blessing. To be sure, the human search for truth has been rewarded with a transformative leap, a qualitative change in humanity’s apprehension both of the structure of reality and of its own existence. The conceptual dissociation of divine powers from worldly phenomena opens finite being to its study as a network of intelligible structures, causes, and laws; and the sciences of nature are complemented by the recognition and study of the structure of consciousness itself by Greek philosophers. The human soul discovers itself, mapping out its own meaning as the invisible center of the personal and social struggle for truth and dignity, as the passionate and intelligent questioner who inhabits and explores the world while also finding, in its own infinite depths, the transcendent source of all order. The soul recognizes and describes its unique function and status as a participant in both worldly process and divine creativity, as the creative “in-between” of human-divine encounter. But also it discovers its daunting responsibility as the being who may or may not succeed in bringing the order of soul and society into adequate harmony with the truths and values of transcendent being. So the blessing of the discovery of transcendence is also a burden, making it more difficult to appreciate and accept the human situation, and introducing new temptations by which to be drawn away from successful and sanctified living, now measured by the heightened standards of the philosophers and prophets. By considering a

few of these difficulties and temptations in more detail, Voegelin's notion of the balance of consciousness may be further clarified.

First, there are what might be called the intellectual difficulties ushered in by the discovery of transcendence. It is not straightforwardly obvious to just anyone with common sense what symbols of transcendence, whether of Greek, Hebrew, Christian, or other origin, refer to. The most problematic aspect of affirming transcendent reality lies in grasping its radical otherness from finite existence, its nonexistence in spatiotemporal terms. The general human tendency to rely on mental pictures in determining what is real frequently leads people to confuse divine transcendence with some kind of thing or location. This tendency to "hypostatize" (Voegelin's usual word) the transcendent ground of reality leads into a dead-end spiral of misunderstood assertions and misdirected counterassertions, a progression succinctly described by Voegelin in *The Ecumenic Age*:

For whatever the [transcendent] ground is, it must be something; but as soon as the term *something* is introduced it suggests a "thing" of the type of existent things; but as the ground is not an existent thing, it can only be "nothing"; but as "nothing" is really nothing in terms of existent things, the question of the ground is illusory; and so forth, until the pole of non-existence [i.e., transcendent reality] in the experienced tension of reality has dissolved in hypostatic negations of its reality.⁶

And then, even when the profoundly "other" character of transcendent reality is recognized and granted, there are the problems of adequately understanding the relation of divine reality to immanent reality in light of the differentiating insights. Understanding this relation calls for the most subtle discernments. If the discovery of transcendence dissociates the divine ground and the finite universe into conceptually distinct realms of reality, still the structure of worldly things and human existence isn't affected by this discovery in any substantial way. It doesn't alter the practical conditions of living in the cosmos; and especially, the discovery does nothing to invalidate the apprehension of divine reality as experienced in the creation and order of the cosmos itself. How, then, is one to understand a divine reality that is present through the presence of immanent things and is also simultaneously a "beyond" of all immanent things? From this and related questions there arises the long history of speculative efforts to explain and symbolize a structure of reality so complex and, to the human mind, so full of logical insults and impasses, that the best responses to the questions have received only a minimal recognition.

Closely linked with the intellectual difficulties introduced by the discovery of transcendence are what one might call existential difficulties.

As the differentiation of transcendence separates divine perfection from the world, it causes the shadow of imperfection to fall over the whole of finite reality. The world of human life and struggle is revealed to be a partial reality, incomplete. It becomes a land of sojourn, where one's thirst for communion with the truly real, the divine source of truth and goodness, can never be fully satisfied. And the burdensome experiences of pain and suffering, misery and evil, are made even more disturbing as it becomes clear that they have no lasting solution in the world of time—that disorder in worldly existence, for all the order that may be achieved, is permanent and inescapable. To consciously endure and embrace one's own existence as a tension between immanence and transcendence, to accept that under the conditions of earthly existence the highest human aspirations remain unattainable, requires certain virtues of courage and confidence—indeed, as we shall see, of faith, hope, and love—that not everyone is able to muster.

Then there are the difficulties involving the problem of history. The discovery of transcendence impresses itself on the discoverers as a radical, decisive advance in the human knowledge of reality and in human self-understanding. The experience of a radical, transformative leap in the search for truth prompts the question of history: why is there such an advance? Why is there historical development? If the meaning of human existence includes the transformations that human consciousness achieves as it unfolds through time, what is the point or the goal of this historical process?

The question cannot be answered definitively, for not only does history remain open-ended toward the future, but its origin and ultimate meaning rest in a divine source of meaning beyond time. Nevertheless, the fundamental clue regarding the direction of historical development is given with the decisive, transformative leap from cosmological consciousness to differentiated consciousness, to consciousness explicitly aware of its participation in transcendent meaning. History in general is the process in which divine presence meets human response. The differentiating responses constitute a qualitative leap in human knowledge of and attunement with divine transcendence. With the decisive event in historical advance being this emergence within finite consciousness of an explicit grasp and affirming embrace of its own participation in and obligation toward transcendent divine reality, the movement of history would appear to be above all a movement in which the finite world, through the medium of human consciousness, advances toward fuller, more emphatic participation in the timeless divine ground. History is a process of "transfiguration," to use Voegelin's term, in which finite and perishable being is drawn into more complete, more eminent, participation in the imperishable divine ground. And finally, with the recognition of this as the struc-

ture of historical advance, there comes the suggestive image of a completion to the movement: of arrival at some final, transfigurative participation of finite in transcendent being. This is a promise that has no consummation so long as the world and human history continue to exist. But ever since the discovery of transcendence, it is a promise that has haunted the human imagination with dreams of a transfigured and glorified existence, of a new heaven and a new earth, of a redemptive conclusion to the long, bloody, perplexing story of human effort and achievement. Thus the awareness of history, and especially of its permanently unresolved relation to transcendence, complicates the challenge of sustaining a realistic and balanced view of the human situation.

What I have identified here as intellectual, existential, and historical difficulties are quite obviously not discrete but overlapping concerns; and their scope has merely been adumbrated. But enough has been stated to indicate the formidable challenge of orientation in existence posed by the discovery of transcendence. Voegelin's summary way of referring to this challenge, in his later writings, is to describe it as the task of ordering one's life as "existence in the tension of the *metaxy*," with the Greek word *metaxy*, "in-between," referring primarily to the in-between of immanence and transcendence.⁷ Every dimension of human concern unfolds in the tension of the *metaxy*. The search for individual happiness and dignity, for political order and the social good, for redemptive historical achievement—all unfold in the tension between the imperfections of life in time and the apprehension of timeless perfection. Existence in cosmological society, it should be stressed, was already if not consciously this tension. It is the very nature of human consciousness to be structured as the in-between of immanence and transcendence, whether or not that nature is identified and known as such. But the postcosmological awareness of one's own consciousness as precisely such an in-between *heightens* the tension of existence, by making explicit that one's consciousness participates in the mystery of transcendence. To consciously acknowledge one's own life as existence in the tension of the *metaxy* and to order it accordingly, therefore, requires embracing the mysteriousness of transcendence. And herein lies the principal obstacle to maintaining the balance of consciousness.

The mystery of reality is hard to bear. The discovery of transcendence reveals an unavoidable "blind spot at the center of all human knowledge about man," an "ignorance with regard to the decisive core of existence" that frustrates our desire for answers to our deepest questions about our origins, purposes, and destinies.⁸ We long for certainty: for absolute knowledge about what we are and where we came from, for assurance that our lives have some permanent meaning in the scheme of things, for immortality. The revelation of transcendence makes it certain merely that

we *cannot* humanly know the ultimate truths about human origins and destiny; that our yearnings for truth, righteousness, and goodness are uncertain of consummation; and that though we do participate as long as existence lasts in the permanence of transcendent meaning, we know nothing of our future or ultimate relation to imperishable being. The *metaxy*, the human-divine in-between, is also the in-between of ignorance and knowledge, of imperfection and perfection, and of contingency and permanence. Nothing is more true of existence in the *metaxy* than that it has no resolution, no solution, in worldly time. All human accomplishment is an unfinished search within a horizon of divine mystery. This is a most disturbing fact to admit, one that understandably gives rise to anxiety. But to face this anxiety and respect the truth of the *metaxy* is precisely what is involved in maintaining the balance of consciousness.

The balance of consciousness, then, is psychological and existential equilibrium in full openness to the mystery of reality, honoring the truth of transcendence, while remaining committed to the search for truth and goodness in worldly existence. Slipping away from the balance is easy. The *mysterium fascinans et tremendum* of transcendence may lead one to the conviction that it is transcendent reality alone that counts, that the transfigurative process in history revealed through the differentiating insights is as good as completed, that concern with existence in the world is misplaced in light of the differentiating "theophanies" that have revealed the truth of the transcendent beyond. Conversely, love of the world and commitment to the struggle for human dignity and well-being can lead one to reject transcendence as a danger to that very commitment, to regard it as a misplacement of the divine in a false beyond, a conceptual error undermining a sense of responsibility to the world, an illusion created by haters of their own lives. Either of these false resolutions to the tension of existence in the *metaxy* makes the human situation easier to understand and to live with: the mystery of reality is reduced; a responsible course of action is more readily discerned; and enemies—the promulgators of untruth—are more easily identified. But either alternative is a betrayal of the more difficult truth of the actual human situation. The balance of consciousness requires one to reject both alternatives as distortions of reality, and thus to preserve, in Voegelin's words, "the balance between the experienced lastingness [of the cosmos] and the theophanic events" in such a way that neither discredits the other.⁹ The balance is finally, then, a matter of accepting one's human role *as a mediator between immanence and transcendence*, loving the world while acknowledging it to be oriented toward a transcendent meaning and fulfillment.

Loving the world, while loving divine transcendence: this is a primary requirement for keeping the balance of consciousness. It was the loving search for, and loving responsiveness to, the divine source of reality that

led to the discovery of transcendence in the West by Greek philosophers and Hebrew prophets, as Voegelin points out. And it is only loving openness toward the whole of reality that can at the same time sustain fidelity to the presence of divine transcendence as apprehended in consciousness and also to divine presence revealed through cosmic order.¹⁰ Such openness acknowledges that the goodness and fulfillment we most long for are not to be granted in the time of existence, that our expectation of them must rest on hope; and so hope, too, plays its part in keeping the balance. And finally faith—basic trust in reality and confidence in its ultimate meaningfulness—is needed to remain open to the mystery of reality. So Voegelin argues that faith, hope, and love, the familiar triad from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, are elementary requirements for suffering openness to reality in its fullness, and thus deserve to be called "the virtues of existential tension": habits of orientation without which the anxieties and uncertainties of meaning belonging to existence in the tension of the *metaxy* would be unbearable.¹¹

Many do lose their equilibrium. Frustration and anxiety in the face of mystery; desire for absolute certainty and control; intolerance of ambiguity; moral passion that cannot bear waiting for the envisioned, possibly unattainable good; a longing to escape the burden of human responsibility; all of these can contribute to a flight from the tension of the *metaxy* and a loss of the balance of consciousness. It must not be thought, either, that intellectual talent, or purity of moral intention, is a safeguard against that loss. In fact, as Voegelin's portrayals of such figures as the prophet Isaiah, Hegel, and Nietzsche indicate, it is sometimes the moral fervor witnessing to a supreme sensitivity to human distress, or an intellectual sophistication that penetrates the mystery of reality so deeply that it imagines it to have solved it, which inspires devotion to a distorted interpretation of reality. As the following survey will show, the modes of imbalanced outlook are many and derive from many motives. As to the two major orientations of these modes, in general it may be said that imbalanced outlooks from the ancient world tend toward devaluation of the world in favor of transcendence, while among moderns the tendency is toward the reverse, favoring the denial or misconstrual of transcendence. The descriptions and examples in the following brief survey will indicate these trends (and the extent of exceptions to them), and also in passing testify to human ingenuity, so successful in devising interpretations of reality that assuage the unease of differentiated consciousness.

Attitudes toward Reality Reflecting Imbalanced Consciousness

The most basic distinction for identifying imbalanced attitudes reflects the two directions in which escape is sought from the tension of balanced

consciousness. One may, through fascination with transcendence, turn away from the challenge of living in the world and so adopt an attitude that devalues worldly reality; or one may attempt to eclipse the troublesome truth of transcendence. The following survey includes five examples of each of these modes of escape. Each example given, it should be stressed, is merely an *attitude*, perhaps functioning as merely an assumption or habit of perception, though an attitude capable of expansion into a sophisticated argument or worldview. Further, these attitudes, as shall be noted, are frequently complementary. It is possible, for example, to view the immanent realm as both irrelevant and ultimately illusory—while it is also possible to hold only one of these attitudes and not the other. Also, the two basic modes of imbalance, rejection of transcendence and rejection of immanence, are not always mutually exclusive. A person may be closed toward transcendence and also reject the truth of worldly order—an example being Karl Marx, who both dismisses transcendence as an illusion and rejects the given structure of the world in favor of an unrealizable ideal. A final, eleventh example in the survey will in fact be an attitude that combines both forms of imbalance in the extreme position of what I call "absurdism," constituting, I suspect, a certain limit to the suppression of awareness of the *metaxy*.¹²

Attitudes That Devalue Worldly Reality

The discovery of a divine beyond, by imaginatively splitting the cosmos into finite and transcendent realms, can create the impression that the divine is no longer present in the world. In this way the discovery of transcendence—which led, inevitably, to the waning of belief in the gods of cosmological myth—is allowed, quite unjustifiably, to radically dedivinize the finite universe altogether. "By a non sequitur," as Voegelin puts it, "immanence may become perverted from a world empty of the gods of polytheism to a world empty of divinity."¹³

Common to these viewpoints is a gap in perception: to some degree, the experience of divine reality *as present through the presence of finite things* is lost or obscured. Thus they evidence a lack of respect for the world, and for the conditions of human existence.

1. *Immanence as irrelevant.* Once a distinction is made between immanent world and divine transcendence, the finite world's incompleteness, imperfection, and perishability stand out in sharp contrast to the perfect and imperishable divine ground. The conviction may then grow that only the transcendent source of the world is truly meaningful, and that the imperfect and perishing world does not deserve our deep concern—that worldly existence is a mere waiting period in an inconsequential abode, while our transcendent homeland alone deserves our real attention. "Lay

up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:20) can be taken to mean that existence under worldly conditions is not to be granted real importance, that poverty, injustice, inequality, and other worldly evils should not too much distract us as we stay focused on our transcendent destiny; likewise the world of nature should not be considered too significant or unduly fussed over.

Here the loss of balance involves, among other oversights, forgetting that the transcendent ground is only discovered through consciousness searching for the ground of the world it experiences—that the divine ground is *the ground of the world*, which therefore, for all its imperfections, enjoys the sanction of divine perfection.¹⁴ An otherworldly focus leading to indifference toward such evils as poverty, disease, oppressive social conditions, and exploitation and destruction of the natural environment, betrays a desire to reduce the tension of existence by rendering the immanent pole of experience irrelevant. Balanced consciousness, on the contrary, accepts the responsibility of being a mediator between transcendent and immanent reality, and so also the duty to "shepherd" the world into as close an attunement as possible with transcendent values and ideals.

2. *Immanence as evil.* Once the divine ground recedes to a beyond, the shadow of imperfection that falls on the world can be misconstrued as the shadow of evil. Goodness then becomes identified with transcendence, while existence in the world, with its dangers, accidents, pain and sickness, poverty, hunger, war, and death, is perceived as imprisonment in evil. In this view, what is good in ourselves is "spirit" or whatever in us that is not "of" the world; while whatever binds us to the finite universe—our bodies, sense-based desires, worldly concerns—is a demonic burden. Existing only as a hell to be escaped from, the given world is regarded as darkness, delusion, and evil, the antithesis of divine light, truth, and goodness.

An example of this attitude, and in Voegelin's view a particularly telling symptom of imbalanced consciousness, is the viewpoint of ancient Gnosticism. In the ancient Gnostic writings, the physical universe is portrayed as the creation of an evil divinity and as a prison into which our spirits, "sparks" of transcendence, have "fallen," and from which they must find their way back to their proper abode beyond this universe through action based on the right knowledge (gnosis). Human spirits are sparks of goodness, deriving from a supratranscendent divinity, while the order and history of the existing world are alien to goodness.

Voegelin treats in some detail the existential motives underlying the ancient Gnostic images of reality and the enduring appeal of various types of gnostic vision, ancient and modern. At times he presents them as understandable responses to profound anxiety in the face of the miseries and

mysteries of existence.¹⁵ Still, a severe loss of balance is indicated in the Gnostic rejection of the significance and goodness of participating in world and history. The rejection—which again depends on a misleading reification of transcendent meaning—is a betrayal of the fact that existence in the world is the very condition of human concern for the good. Any *questioning* about purpose, goodness, and the where-to and where-from of human existence belongs to the structure of the human psyche as it emerges, within the hierarchy of being that includes finite being. Consequently any "beyond" discovered as an *answer* to such questioning cannot reasonably be considered alien to the cosmic process in which the questioning has emerged. The Gnostic rejection of the world is an attempt to escape the tension of existence and its uncertainties by irresponsibly aligning the self with transcendence in an aggressive posture against immanence and declaring solved the mystery of existence in the *metaxy*.

3. *Immanence as illusory.* This response to existence is similar to the preceding attitude, only in this case the accent falls on truth and illusion rather than on good and evil. Again a strict dichotomy is imposed: only the transcendent dimension and insights regarding it are accorded the status of "truth," while the immanent realm and knowledge pertaining to it are reduced to the rank of "illusion." Meaning that does not perish must be transcendent, so transcendence is alone accorded the status of *true* reality, while the world known through the senses is dismissed as a flux of appearance, a shifting mirage mistaken by the ignorant for true reality. The essential struggle of existence is that of escaping from this ignorance, and most fail in the task: all humans begin life subject to the illusion that the world of the senses is something solid and enduring, and this illusion is reinforced by sensory pleasures and attractions that typically keep people from discovering or acknowledging that true reality is the imperishable oneness beyond the world of multiplicity and perishability.

This attitude is sometimes associated with Hindu culture, where the Vedantic tradition identifies truth with *Brahman*, the one transcendent reality, and subsumes all of physical reality and individuality under the heading of *maya*, or cosmic illusion. The Vedantic reduction of immanence to the rank of illusion is certainly more benign than the Gnostic condemnation of it as evil; it allows room, after all, for a loving and respectful posture toward the world. But it, too, is based on a misleading hypostatization of immanence and transcendence. Transcendence, as Voegelin might say, is not elsewhere; its truth is not that of another world.¹⁶ Transcendent truth is the real completeness of meaning attested to by the finite universe, whose incomplete meaning awakens consciousness to the divine self-sufficiency that grounds both universe and consciousness. As completeness of meaning, it is neither "here" nor "there";

it is the ineffable fullness of divine presence suggested by divine presence as experienced. Indeed, the significance of the world is guaranteed, rather than made spurious, by the truth of transcendence. The designation of immanence as *maya* leans away unjustifiably from balance in the *metaxy* toward escape into transcendence, and by doing so devalues the very real, if difficult, problems of worldly and historical responsibility.¹⁷

4. *Immanence as an abandoned mechanism.* In the early modern period, with the rise of natural sciences based on or inspired by mathematical analysis, it became possible to conceive of the physical universe as a vast machine whose workings could in time be exhaustively known through application of the proper scientific method. The resulting mechanical model of the universe was especially attractive to philosophical materialists, for whom reality can on principle be fully explained in terms of matter and motion. But a machinelike universe may also be understood to imply by necessity a machine-maker, a divine inventor. Granting both machine and divine maker, then, how ought one to understand the relation between the two? If the disclosure of causal relations and predictive laws through scientific investigation is accepted as promising, in time, a complete explanation of all finite phenomena, what role is left in an explanation of reality for transcendent divinity? Nothing more, it may seem, than that of one-time manufacturer of this fabulously intricate machine, who, after having set it into motion, remains apart from and uninvolved in its functioning. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such a view of world (immanence) and God (transcendence) had entered Western popular imagination.

The view is misleading in numerous ways. A general problem is that it tends toward reductionist interpretations of psychological, intellectual, and spiritual phenomena, interpretations that claim to explain all of reality strictly in terms of the “building blocks” of physical elements, chemical compounds, and/or biological structures and functions. With respect specifically to its devaluation of the immanent realm, though, the point is this: if the mechanical analogy is taken to mean that finite reality is a closed system, in relation to which divine transcendence is no more than an absentee First Cause, then it distorts the relation between immanent and transcendent reality by obscuring the human experiences of divine presence as costructuring consciousness and as informing cosmic order. Again a reified transcendent ground and reified world are divorced from each other, falsely positioning the divine in a spatial “elsewhere” and eclipsing the human-divine *metaxy* of consciousness through the imaginal incorporation of conscious existence into an immanent mechanical scheme. Any affirmation of divine transcendence that also affirms the universe to be an autonomous mechanism reflects an imbalancing dullness of sensitivity to the divine presence in world and consciousness.

5. *Metastatic faith.* A final and dramatic example of human attitudes that devalue worldly reality is *metastatic faith*. Voegelin coins the phrase in *Israel and Revelation* to describe the prophet Isaiah’s conviction that God will reward a faithful Israel by intervening in worldly affairs on its behalf, an intervention that would in fact entail a transfiguration of the conditions of worldly existence to bring them into conformity with divine will and perfection. This faith in an impending alteration, or *metastasis*, in the constitution of finite being through divine grace reflects Isaiah’s impatience with the conditions of the actual world, an impatience magnified by his trust in Yahweh into the certainty that his own desire for a new world coincides with the divine plan. Out of this mix of passion and presumption comes Isaiah’s “vision of a world that will change its nature without ceasing to be the world in which we live concretely.”¹⁸

For Voegelin, such a faith is unfounded, involving as it does a denial of the experienced truth and lastingness of the order of mundane existence, as well as a confusion about the implications of transcendence. But it should be noted that Voegelin’s critique of Isaiah on this issue is more complex than some commentators have assumed. He emphasizes that the existential roots of metastatic faith lie in the sublime realizations of the prophets about the true nature of personal harmony with divine reality and in their painful sensitivity to the disparity between the order realized in their own souls and any actual—or actualizable—social order. Transfiguration, Voegelin reminds us, has actually occurred in the souls of the prophets; the prophetic insights into the nature of true existence under God were “essentially metastatic.”¹⁹ The problems arise when the metastatic *experience* erupts into faith in a *concrete metastasis of worldly order*. The balance of consciousness is lost when the value of living in the world is ignored in impatient anticipation of its miraculous transfiguration.

The problem of metastatic faith, writes Voegelin, “is of importance for the understanding not only of Israelite and Jewish order but of the history of Western Civilization to this day.” For not only have symbols of world-transformation and organized activity deriving from metastatic experience been a constant in Western religious life—the Christian elaboration of metastatic insights animated heresies throughout the Middle Ages, and has continued to give birth to millennialist and chiliastic expectations among religious groups of the most diverse and colorful persuasions—but they have also become in recent centuries a crucial force in secular culture and politics. Voegelin mentions “progressivist metastatic faith,” and also the heralded “communist metastasis,” as recent examples of the expectation of a miraculous perfection of world or society.²⁰ In these secular instances, faith in world transfiguration has become divorced from acknowledgment of divine transcendence, but the perspective is structurally

identical insofar as the world's order as given is rejected in favor of its miraculous metastasis.²¹

Attitudes That Eclipse Transcendent Reality

In secular forms of metastatic faith, the given world is rejected, but not in favor of transcendence—transcendence is ignored or dismissed as an illusion. The eclipsing of transcendence is a second major means of obscuring reality and fleeing the tension of the *metaxy*. Though, as we see, it can be combined with devaluing the truth of the world, usually the rejection of transcendence is linked to a willful embrace of the immanent realm as acceptable, good, and even sacred.

Resistance to the fact of transcendence may be quite innocent, merely a result of its elusiveness. As stated earlier, it is not immediately clear to just anyone what language about transcendence signifies. Unless a person has undergone experiences in some degree parallel to those of the original discoverers of transcendence, the language symbols arising from those discoveries may well seem unpersuasive, if not fantastical.²² On the other hand, the rejection of transcendence is not always so benign. It may be the reaction of a consciousness frustrated, or enraged, by its awareness of a transcendent truth that causes the world's and its own imperfection, dependence, incompleteness, and perishability to stand glaringly forth. Imbalanced attitudes that eclipse transcendence, then, arise from existential origins ranging from gross ignorance to conscious revolt against divine power and authority.

6. *Transcendence as irrelevant.* Divine transcendence is by definition a reality beyond the reach of direct, or substantive, human understanding. Through the discovery of transcendence, the divine ground takes on "the ambiguity of an unknown that becomes known as the unknown," an ambiguity that can easily be misconstrued.²³ For example, knowing of the divine's essential unknowability may lead to the conclusion that, whatever the divine is, it is not worth thinking about at all. Or there is the more reasoned error of the agnostic, the "nonknower," who mistakes human ignorance about the *what* of the divine ground for lack of evidence as to *whether* there is a divine ground, and so declares that our search for the divine is and must remain inconclusive. In both cases, the "no-thing" of transcendence is reduced to a mere blank, something irrelevant to our search for direction in life.

Dismissed as irrelevant, the transcendent ground sinks below the horizon of acknowledgment. But all the time concern with ultimate meaning persists. The consequence is a collapse of human yearning for ultimacy into a concern with finite objects and considerations, and a consequent distortion of values and goals reflecting the assumption that only the worldly is significant.

7. *Transcendence as evil (Prometheanism).* In Greek tradition, Prometheus was a divinity who rebelled against the community of gods by stealing the divine fire and giving it to humans, a transgression for which Zeus, leader of the gods, imposed a terrifying punishment. Aeschylus, in *Prometheus Bound*, portrays a chained Prometheus staunch in his defiance: "In one word, I hate all the gods who received good from me and wrongfully returned evil."²⁴ One may with a little license, then, define as a "Promethean attitude" one in which divine power and authority are seen as an encroachment on human freedom and dignity, justifying the rejection of the divine for the good of human self-determination.

Prometheanism as just described is an attitude made possible through the differentiation of immanent and transcendent being, since a human revolt against divine will can only be based on the apprehension of independent human powers of reason, judgment, and decision—that is, on the clear distinction of human will and divine will achieved through the conceptual separation of immanent nature and divine transcendence.

Since the Promethean stance only makes sense on the presumption that divinity is real, its rejection of divine transcendence is essentially an act of defiance: a refusal to give allegiance to a divine reality perceived to be a threat to human dignity. It is imbalanced consciousness in the purest posture of revolt against transcendence.

8. *Transcendence as illusory.* Again, one may become convinced that transcendence is a hoax, that there can be no reality beyond the reality intrinsically conditioned by space and time. To the hardheaded materialist, a term such as *transcendence*, or *God*, or *nirvana* is just the symbol of an illusion, born of human gullibility or mendacity. In the early nineteenth century, Ludwig Feuerbach explained that transcendent divinity is only a projection of human desires and capacities onto a fictional "beyond" of the world. Karl Marx further developed Feuerbach's thesis by identifying the origins of religious projection in the oppressive social and economic conditions that create the need for soothing illusions of an omnipotent divinity and a just afterlife. As atheists, Feuerbach and Marx argue that all conceptions of divinity originate in human creativity, aspiration, and community; as materialists, they view the immanent realm—the physical universe including human consciousness—as the whole of reality.

It is possible to regard transcendence as an illusion and not be an atheist: as we shall see in the cases of our next two categories, there are those for whom denying transcendence is part of a religious response to the world and an effort to reawaken awareness of divine presence in nature. But in modern culture the most familiar denunciations of transcendence as an illusion belong to the atheist intellectual current that flows from late Enlightenment materialism, through Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and

Freud, into the popular materialisms and vague scientisms of our contemporaries who find notions of divine reality both incredible and quaint.

Voegelin's response to atheist materialism, or to any portrayal of reality as "wholly immanent," rests on the critical realization that *immanence* and *transcendence* are not separable descriptive terms, but in fact a single, linked notion, the notion of *immanence-transcendence*, originating in meditative experiences in which the one complex of reality experienced in the tension of consciousness becomes conceptually differentiated into a world of things and their incommensurate ground. The experience of a ground of things is always an element in the human awareness of reality: consciousness is always conscious of there being a ground of its own and worldly being. *Transcendence* is merely the designation of this ground following the insight into its incommensurability with finite and limited being, which in contrast with the ground becomes *immanence*. *Immanence* and *transcendence* are linked exegetical concepts that only together explain an experience of reality. Neither term means anything in isolation.

But the image of a "wholly immanent" world, however nonsensical, maintains its appeal, since human consciousness prefers to think in concrete images, and so creates for itself a "world" of immanence and a second "world" of transcendence of which one may quite justifiably become suspicious.

9. *Pantheism*. Pantheism asserts that the totality of things is identical with God or divinity. From Voegelin's standpoint, such a view may be charged with an indiscriminate fusing of immanence and transcendence, arising from either an unwillingness or an inability to acknowledge the real incommensurability of the divine ground and finite things.

The viewpoint of pantheism is only attainable once the divine has dissociated from specific entities and powers in the natural world—that is, once the compact cosmos of cosmological consciousness has differentiated into nature and transcendence. Only then is nature free to have divinity dispersed throughout it in a general fashion rather than identified with particular forces, object, and locales; and again only then is divinity vague and impalpable enough in its characteristics to be able to be thought of as being present everywhere. Pantheism, therefore, employs the differentiated categories of nature and transcendent ground only to mismanage them by refusing their distinction, insisting on an identity between the nature that attests to divine presence and the ultimate and ineffable divine ground of being. It eclipses transcendence by identifying it with immanence.

10. *Neopaganism*. We may describe as *neopagan* a religious attitude guided by the attempt to re-evolve experiences of, and to reestablish practices of worship relating to, intracosmic divinities. The neopagan attitude views the historical displacement of the cosmological gods and goddesses

by the world-transcendent God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as an error and a curse, a replacement of natural religion opening the way to a debased, mechanistic view of nature and to an arrogant indifference to environmental values that shows itself in greedy exploitation of the natural world. A remedy is seen in the recovery of outlooks and beliefs characteristic of the cosmological religions of ancient, Native American, and to some extent Eastern cultures. The recovery of cosmological-mythic experiences in resistance to doctrines and institutions that teach divine transcendence is a goal common to numerous contemporary grassroots and "new age" spiritual movements.

The goal is unattainable. The discovery of transcendence, whatever its consequences for good and ill, was not a mistake; the disappearance of the cosmological gods and goddesses cannot be reversed, however intense the nostalgic devotion to their original truth as experiences of divine presence; and one cannot in full sincerity ignore the cultural and linguistic heritage of the differentiating insights and "play existence in cosmic-divine order" as if they had never occurred.²⁵ The eclipse of transcendence in the neopagan outlook involves a willful denial of the *metaxy* that can only maintain itself by ignoring the omnipresent symbols and vastly complex articulations of differentiated spiritual truths in the major Western and Eastern religious traditions.

An Attitude That Both Devalues Worldly Reality and Eclipses Transcendent Reality

11. *Absurdism*. Finally, it is possible to hold both that transcendence is an illusion and that there is nothing either sacred or even intrinsically meaningful about worldly reality—that nothing at all in reality bears witness to enduring value or purpose. Neither a world-transcendent truth nor the world of nature is understood to provide a measure or standard for determining what constitutes meaningful direction in life. The human situation then appears absurd: not absurd in the noble sense of Kierkegaard or Camus, each of whom had faith in some kind of enduring meaning, but absurd in the sense of pointless or meaningless: a situation without aim beyond the obvious psychological urges toward pleasure and power.

In this final attitude of absurdism, a certain limit would appear to be reached in the dulling of sensitivity to the tension of living in the *metaxy* and thus to the value of achieving a "balance of consciousness" in Voegelin's sense. Intransigent denial of both transcendent reality and the world's value, total closure to enduring meaning, would appear to constitute the antithesis to the existential openness that values the world's truth while acknowledging and loving the transcendent source of its order.

Conclusion

There is no need, after this survey of attitudes, to argue Voegelin's point that the balance of consciousness is a rare achievement. The appeal and widespread acceptance of imbalanced viewpoints is obvious. And scarcely less obvious is the principal cause of the loss of balance. Every one of the attitudes sketched above simplifies reality and reduces existential uncertainty at some cost to the truth about the human situation. Each attitude attempts to lessen the mystery of existence—by turning away from the truth of transcendence, by diminishing the importance of the given world, or by doing both at once—and so induce a sense of greater human control over our situation and destiny. The balance of consciousness requires above all a high tolerance for uncertainty about the outcome and ultimate meaning of personal existence and historical transformation.

Two concluding points may be made about Voegelin's analysis of the balance of consciousness. First, he stresses that, although the achievement of the balance is relatively rare, since the time of classic philosophy it has successfully provided a normative critical perspective from which to recognize as deformed those attitudes or philosophies that either devalue the world or deny transcendence, and in so doing "has determined the life of reason in Western civilization up to our own time."²⁶ Second, Voegelin's own study of the balance of consciousness, an essential component of his analysis of human existence in the *metaxy*, constitutes a unique theoretical clarification of that critical perspective and is thus—as this essay has tried to indicate—a particularly useful instrument in the contemporary effort to diagnose disorder and unreason.

Notes

1. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 4, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), chap. 4, § 3, "The Balance of Consciousness," 227–38.
2. For one of Voegelin's most concentrated and sustained accounts of human life as a "tension of existence" between "poles" of immanence and transcendence, see his essay "Eternal Being in Time," in Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, ed. and trans. Gerhart Niemeyer (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), esp. 124–36.
3. As far as I can tell, the phrase proper first appears in *The Ecumenic Age* and "Reason: The Classic Experience," both published in 1974. See Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12, *Published Essays, 1966–1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 266. Related notions of psychological, or existential, balance appear in earlier works. For example, in *Plato and Aristotle* (1957), Voegelin describes the "balance of openness and separateness" that must be achieved if

myth—as the expression of openness to the cosmic ground of being—is to help one endure the separateness of finite existence; and in "What Is Political Reality?" (1966), Voegelin writes of the mystic's "balance of tolerance . . . between the areas of silence and of symbolic expressions" that preserves awareness of the ineffability of the divine ground of reality while acknowledging or using symbols to evoke it. See Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 3, *Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 188; and "What Is Political Reality?," in *Anamnesis*, 197–98. In the works that follow *The Ecumenic Age*, the notion of "the balance of consciousness" is again made thematic in "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation" (1977). The treatment here, which introduces some refinements to the notion while linking it more immediately to Voegelin's account of the structure of consciousness, is an integral part of Voegelin's meditation on the topic. See Eric Voegelin, "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation," in *Published Essays, 1966–1985*, 326–28.

4. I have chosen to write of "imbalanced" rather than "unbalanced" consciousness for a number of reasons. First, I want to avoid the connotations popularly associated with the notion that someone's mind or consciousness is "unbalanced" in a psychological sense. Second, "imbalanced" more readily suggests degrees of "lack of balance," while "unbalanced" might suggest simply "not balanced." And third, there is the precedent of Voegelin's use of the term as both noun and adjective (for example: "the Gnostic imbalance of consciousness," *The Ecumenic Age*, 234; "imbalanced and distorted images of reality," "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme," 327).

5. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 1, *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 84.

6. *The Ecumenic Age*, 74.

7. Voegelin takes the term *metaxy* from Plato, who, he claims, used it (principally in *Symposium*) to designate the distinctive ontological realm of human consciousness, where the search for meaning, happiness, and divinity takes place. See "Reason: The Classic Experience," 279–82. For Voegelin's most concentrated description of human existence as having the structure of an "in-between" or *metaxy*, see "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," in *Published Essays, 1966–1985*, 119–20.

8. *Israel and Revelation*, 2.

9. *The Ecumenic Age*, 228.

10. On love as an element in the philosophical discovery of transcendence, see Eric Voegelin, "Science, Politics, and Gnosticism," trans. William J. Fitzpatrick, in Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1968), 18: "In the experiences of love for the world-transcendent origin of being, in *philia* toward the *sophon* (the wise), in *eros* toward the *agathon* (the good) and the *kalon* (the beautiful), man became philosopher. From these experiences arose the image of the order of being. At the opening of the soul . . . the order of being becomes visible even to its ground and origin in the beyond, in the Platonic *epekeina*, in which the soul participates as it suffers and achieves its opening." See also "Reason: The Classic Experience," 273–74.

11. "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," 122. Earlier

in the same essay (119) he refers to the triad as “virtues of openness toward the ground of being.”

12. Michael Franz in his study of Voegelin has also provided categories for mapping out types of imbalanced consciousness. He arranges them under four headings, with each of the two basic orientations, “eclipse of worldly reality” and “closure against transcendent experience,” divided into two chronological segments, the Christian epiphany constituting a dividing line. Eclipse of worldly reality is given the headings of “metastatic faith” (B.C.) and “parousiasm” (A.D.); closure against transcendent experience the headings of “promethean revolt” (B.C.) and “ideological consciousness” (A.D.). See Michael Franz, *Eric Voegelin and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt: The Roots of Modern Ideology* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 3–20. Franz describes his categories as merely “heuristic suggestions,” and reminds the reader that the “two characteristic patterns of ‘imbalanced’ consciousness—closure against transcendent experience and eclipse of worldly reality—are often observable in a single writer” (10). Franz’s work has been helpful in developing my own survey of imbalanced attitudes, though the results of our respective organizing efforts reflect somewhat different questions and criteria.

13. Eric Voegelin, “Anxiety and Reason,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 28, *What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 78.

14. As Voegelin puts the matter in *The Ecumenic Age* (324), “[T]he discovery of the [transcendent] ground does not condemn the field of existent things to irrelevance but, on the contrary, establishes it as the reality that derives the meaning of its existence from the ground; and inversely, the [search for ultimate reality], as it ascends over the hierarchy of being, leads toward the ground because the ground is the origin of the hierarchy.”

15. See especially the introduction (3–12) to “Science, Politics, and Gnosticism”; also *The Ecumenic Age*, 17–29.

16. “Such terms as *immanent* and *transcendent* . . . do not denote objects or their properties but are the language indices arising from the Metaxy in the event of its becoming luminous for the comprehensive reality, its structure and dynamics. The terms are exegetic, not descriptive. They indicate the movements of the soul when, in the Metaxy of consciousness, it explores the experience of divine reality and tries to find the language that will articulate its exegetic movements” (“The Beginning and the Beyond: A Meditation on Truth,” in *What Is History?*, 185).

17. The Vedantic attitude may be interestingly contrasted with the poem of the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides, as analyzed by Voegelin. The Parmenidean distinction between Truth (*aletheia*) and Delusion (*doxa*) recalls the *Brahman-maya* distinction, but according to Voegelin, Parmenides (as far as the text permits conjecture) shows less tendency toward misleading hypostatization of the two “realities” described in his poem. See Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 2, *The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 203–19.

18. *Israel and Revelation*, 452. On metastatic faith, see especially 447–58 and 481–91.

19. *Israel and Revelation*, 484. “The metastatic experience of Isaiah, which hitherto has been considered under the aspect of a sterile withdrawal from the realities of Israel’s order, will appear in a new light if it is considered as an experience of the gulf between true order and the order realized concretely by any society, even Israel. And Jeremiah’s experience of the tension between the two orders . . . is even articulate enough to make it certain that the prophet had at least a glimpse of the terrible truth: that the existence of a concrete society in a definite form will not resolve the problem of order in history . . .” (491).

20. *Israel and Revelation*, 481–82 n13, 484.

21. It may be said that the secular forms of metastatic faith that reject the given world in favor of an imagined perfected world have in fact not truly abandoned transcendence, but rather allowed imagination to confuse the perfections of transcendence, conceived specifically as the goal of historical transfiguration, with the conditions of immanence; they have, in Voegelin’s phrase, “immanentized the eschaton.” See Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 117–21.

22. “[W]hen the experience engendering the symbols ceases to be a presence located in the man who has it, the reality from which the symbols derive their meaning has disappeared. The symbols in the sense of a spoken or written word, it is true, are left as traces in the world of sense perception, but their meaning can be understood only if they evoke, and through evocation reconstitute, the engendering reality in the listener or reader” (“Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” in *Published Essays, 1966–1985*, 52–53). “[T]heory as an explication of certain experiences is intelligible only to those in whom the explication will stir up parallel experiences as the empirical basis for testing the truth of theory. Unless a theoretical exposition activates the corresponding experiences at least to a degree, it will create the impression of empty talk or will perhaps be rejected as an irrelevant expression of subjective opinions” (*The New Science of Politics*, 64–65).

23. “The Beginning and the Beyond,” 217.

24. Lines 975–76, quoted in *The World of the Polis*, 259–60. For Voegelin’s discussion of Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*, see *The World of the Polis*, 253–64. Karl Marx famously quoted the line, “In one word, I hate all the gods,” in the preface to his doctoral thesis, adopting Prometheus as a symbol of his own atheistic position. See Franz, *Eric Voegelin and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt*, 13–14.

25. *Israel and Revelation*, 465.

26. *The Ecumenic Age*, 228.