
Symbols of the 'Depth' of Psyche and Cosmos in Eric Voegelin

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"Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History" (1971)¹ is one of Eric Voegelin's five most important stand-alone essays, along with "Immortality: Experience and Symbol" (1967), "The Gospel and Culture" (1971), "The Beginning and the Beyond: A Meditation on Truth" (written 1974-77), and "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation" (1983). It is a writing with relatively few textual references, consisting almost exclusively of a sustained exegesis of the nature and structure of human consciousness in history. Despite its being by far the briefest of these five essays, "Equivalences" addresses questions about so many issues central to philosophy—concerning experience, language and symbols, truth, reality, values, divine being, history, and the structure of consciousness and its historical development—that a proper exposition and "reader's guide" to the essay would have to extend to the length of a book, and not a short book at that.

My principal aim in what follows is to examine one element addressed in the course of the essay: the fact that what Voegelin calls "the depth of the cosmos," or the "underlying oneness

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¹ Eric Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," in *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 115-33.

of reality," requires, for each of us, adequate articulation and symbolization, if we are to orient ourselves successfully in existence. In order to pursue a proper study of this issue, I will need to consider both the overall character of Voegelin's essay, and some of the key concerns that initiate and propel it—concerns that coalesce in his analysis of the notion of a cosmic "depth." But my own theme will be, finally, how *symbols* of a cosmic depth may or may not be adequate to its reality; may be found wanting for various reasons; and what role they necessarily play both in our being confident that we can attain some understanding of what is constant about the human situation in the process of reality, and in our having faith that our own inevitably personal efforts to "exist in truth" are meaningful.

Voegelin's essay shows him to have had ideas or intellectual impulses that were not similarly stressed elsewhere in his work and that were not sufficiently explored by commentators. The following exegesis offers a partly new perspective on his thought.

I

I will begin with a few comments about the first word in the title of Voegelin's essay—about what the word "equivalences" means and implies.

To affirm that two or more words, symbols, experiences, or events are "equivalent" to each other is to say that they share an identity in meaning or function, derived from their relationship to an underlying "sameness" of meaning or truth which must be one and constant if the notion of "equivalence" is to be valid. Only the assumption of such an underlying "sameness," as Voegelin writes at the start of his essay, "justifies the language of 'equivalences' . . ."² For example, to say that the words *destruction* and *ruination* can function as equivalent terms means that they both may be understood to represent the same experience or idea which makes the two words effectively equal in meaning and import. For another example: to state that the purpose of *haruspication* is equivalent to the purpose of *scrying* is to affirm that there is a constancy and sameness of meaning defining the aim of each activity—which is

² Ibid., 115.

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the aim of foretelling what is yet to come, enabling prediction of future events. The notion of equivalent symbols, then, *depends upon* an underlying reality of a constant of meaning that validates recognizing them as equivalent expressions of it.

Now, Voegelin's principal aim in this essay is to determine the location, so to speak, of the unchanging constants of *truth* that would justify the assertion that differing, and historically differentiating, symbolizations of significant truths about existence, reality, history, society, the world, or divine being, are "equivalent," even if some articulations are superior to others in representing a more differentiated understanding of a particular truth. Voegelin's concern, as usual, is with the most important symbolizations of truth about what it means to be a human being, and about the nature and order of reality, that have emerged in the historical unfolding of the human search for knowledge. These most-important symbolizations of truth have all derived from human *seeking*; so, to describe his *own* search for an understanding of how human seeking has historically brought forth symbolizations of truth among which the philosopher can discern genuine equivalences of meaning, Voegelin refers to his investigation as a "search of the search"—that is, as an effort to grasp the nature of what is *constant* in both the human search for order and its more notable results; and, then, to explain as carefully as possible why we may *reasonably affirm* that there are differing, equivalent symbolizations of key truths concerning existence and reality because we can *reasonably affirm* that, underlying those symbolizations, there are indeed constants of meaning.

An accurate and nuanced understanding of Voegelin's investigation is not easy to achieve. In part this is because "Equivalences" is, like a number of Voegelin's late essays, a "meditation." That is: it is not a systematic analysis and presentation of the meaning of one or more texts or events in political or cultural affairs, nor is it about problems of logic or formal structures of rational analysis. Rather, it is a personal effort on the part of the philosopher to re-enact and reconstruct in his own consciousness certain experiences in which crucial philosophical symbols or articulations of truth emerged in the psyches of earlier thinkers, and at the same time to encounter and follow the lead of question after ques-

tion relevant to consciousness's understanding of itself and its participation in reality as these arise in the course of the re-enactive meditation. The purpose of such a meditation is thus both to arrive at a more discerning understanding of how certain key philosophical insights and articulations have come into historical being, and also to introduce *new insights and formulations* that carry the understanding of a complex of philosophical insights a stage further, as the philosopher's consciousness suffers clarification and differentiation, within itself, of the matters under investigation.

Because such a meditation uncovers new aspects of the subject under investigation, as it proceeds it alters the landscape of the problematic in such a way that fresh and original questions arise; that the journey of thought moves in unexpected directions due to new insights; that themes already touched on in the meditation must be revisited, as newly emergent insights retrospectively adjust their meanings and implications; and that a continual revising and refining of thoughts take place due to the meditation's advances in discovery and clarification. The written work resulting from such a meditation thus has the character of an adventure in self-illuminative thought, rather than the character of a philosophical essay that systematically explains the meaning and implications of a text or other "external" data. Voegelin calls this written work a "meditative exegesis," to distinguish it from anything like a "textual exegesis."³ And due to its character as a journey of thought that undergoes in its course recurrent adjustments of understanding, expression, and focus, the work should be approached as being written from what Bernard Lonergan calls "a moving viewpoint," in that some questions and assertions introduced earlier in the piece, because of later insights and viewpoints, require re-contextualization and re-formulation, sometimes with the later formulations contrasting with—or even seeming to contradict—earlier formulations.⁴

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³ For Voegelin's account of his analysis in this essay as a "meditative exegesis," see "Equivalences," 131.

⁴ "[A philosophical work] may be written from a moving viewpoint, and then it will contain, not a single set of coherent statements, but a sequence of related sets of coherent statements. . . . It cannot begin by presupposing that a reader can assimilate at a stroke what can be attained only at the term of a prolonged and arduous effort. On the contrary, it must begin from a minimal

The reader of such a work, then, must be willing to do her best to follow the philosopher's meditation, re-enacting in her own consciousness the questions, insights, and discoveries that make up the meditation, and moving along with—and not becoming unnerved or confused by—the moving viewpoint of the meditation as it proceeds on its journey.

For example, in the second paragraph of his essay, Voegelin explains that if “symbolizations” of experiences may be truly said to be “equivalent,” the theoretical implication is that there are “constants of engendering experience” underlying such symbolizations, and that these constants must be the “true subject matter of our studies.”⁵ But later, on the basis of meditative developments, he concludes that it is a theoretical “fallacy” to consider any “engendering experiences” to be themselves “constants,” and that it is philosophically necessary to “speak of the equivalence not only of symbols, but of experiences as well.”⁶ Again, early in the essay, Voegelin asserts that what “is constant in the history of mankind . . . is the structure of existence itself”—that is, the structure of each person as a seeker of truths about existence and reality.⁷ But later, toward the end of the essay, Voegelin states firmly that “[t]here is *no constant to be found in history*, because the historical field of equivalents is not *given* as a collective of phenomena which could be submitted to the procedures of abstraction and generalization.”⁸ That is, no one can validly claim to possess the truth of a constant regarding “the structure of existence” on the basis of having had *empirical experiences* of the consciousnesses of all persons in history. Thus, it can seem to the reader who is not following the essay precisely *as* a meditation, and consequently not attempting to re-enact in her own consciousness the philosopher's meditative journey,

viewpoint and a minimal context; it will exploit that minimum to raise a further question that enlarges the viewpoint and the context; it will proceed from the enlarged viewpoint and context only as long as is necessary to raise still deeper issues that again transform the basis and the terms of reference of the inquiry . . .” Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, vol. 3 of *The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 18; see 18-20.

⁵ Voegelin, “Equivalences,” 115.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 131 (emphasis added).

that Voegelin corrects himself along the way to the point of self-contradiction, and that the essay as a whole may finally be a muddle. After all, either there are “constants of engendering experience” or there are not; and either there is a “constant in the history of mankind” or there is not.

And yet, to the attentive and careful reader, Voegelin’s assertions, as the meditation proceeds, each make sense in their context; this moving context constitutes the genuine adventure of the essay; and Voegelin’s conclusion to his inquiry into the constants that *must* exist if the language of equivalent symbolizations in history is to be justified may be summarized as follows: It is indeed the case that there are no constants or absolute truths in history that can be *empirically*, or *experientially*, verified; but, nevertheless, we are justified in affirming the truth, and the equivalence, of important philosophical symbols and propositions concerning existence and reality, because we can be confident that they are indeed founded upon constant or absolute truths *that lie beyond our empirical experience*. The meditative exegesis is finally concerned, then, with the precise nature and character of this reasonable confidence—this “trust” or “faith,” as Voegelin calls it—that we may have in a constancy of truth beyond experience itself.

Seemingly contradictory assertions each make sense in their context.

II

This much established, a few more comments about the essay as a whole should be made before following the path of those elements in Voegelin’s meditation that lead to the theme of “symbols of the depth” which is our principal concern.

Hans-Georg Gadamer has emphasized that, in interpreting an important text, the reader must try to understand as far as possible the author’s *horizon of questions and concerns* that motivated the writing of the text. It will be useful to identify two of the principal concerns that drive Voegelin’s meditative journey in “Equivalences.” Both of these derive from his being a philosopher living and writing in the middle of the twentieth century, and both of them are mentioned in the text—but not mentioned in such a way that their overriding importance for Voegelin’s engagement in this particular meditation is highlighted.

The first concern pertains to the rise of historical conscious-

ness in modern centuries—the increasing cultural and intellectual focus on human *historicity*, or historical situatedness, and a consequent deepening preoccupation with all of the implications of historicity for properly understanding the nature of language, social institutions, cultural insights and artifacts, self-interpretations, and truth-claims—especially truth-claims pertaining to moral, legal, and religious matters. One consequence of this focus and preoccupation has been particularly problematic. During the nineteenth century and after, the growing emphasis on *historicity* has led, in some intellectual, academic, and cultural circles, to its apotheosizing in doctrines of *historicism*—that is, doctrines claiming that a human being is only and completely a historical or history-bound creature, with no element or dimension of a person’s being or consciousness transcending the material and temporal conditions of existence. In Voegelin’s language, in the view of such historicist doctrines, a person is a purely “world-immanent” being.⁹ A purely world-immanent being could have no access to any truth that transcends the physical, biological, biographical, cultural, and linguistic circumstances and conditioning factors of her existence, and in such a case all understanding of truth could only be historically relative. From the historicist perspective, no one could validly argue that any recognition of a genuine good or value, or any insight into how life should properly be lived, or any articulations or symbolizations concerning the order of reality or existence, is a truth that holds constant across the boundaries of cultures, languages, and epochs. Needless to say, this view of human existence is, for Voegelin, misleading and dangerous.¹⁰ And “Equivalences” is,

⁹ See, for example, Eric Voegelin, “The Drama of Humanity,” in *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1939-1985*, ed. William Petropoulos and Gilbert Weiss, vol. 33 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 174-75.

¹⁰ It should be noted that the form of “historicism” with which Voegelin takes sharp issue is different from the recent “value-centered historicism” of Claes G. Ryn, which draws selectively upon, supplements, and reconstitutes some of the “historicist” thinking that Voegelin rejected. Unlike the historicism which denies that historically situated human beings can have any access to trans-historical meaning, Ryn holds, to the contrary, that the transcendent, inexhaustible values of goodness, truth, and beauty become present to human beings in or, as he says, *through* concrete, particular instantiations. As human beings resist their lower inclinations and let their actions be guided by

in fact, his most sustained meditation on historicity, as well as his most deeply-elucidated rebuttal of historicism's claim that we cannot know trans-historical truths. Or, to put it another way, it is Voegelin's most sustained philosophical defense—in response to the challenge of historicism—of the view that the human search for enduring truths about existence and reality is not, and has never been, an unfounded and vain enterprise. Voegelin himself describes this elemental purpose of “Equivalences” in a somewhat casual sentence, whose importance the reader could easily overlook, at the end of the essay's brief introduction, where he writes: “The following reflections intend to clarify, as far as that is possible within the limits of a paper, the principal problems of the new historical consciousness.”¹¹

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A second concern that propels Voegelin's meditation is one familiar to his regular readers: the delusion and harm caused, over the known centuries of history, by the confidence on the part of a leader and his followers, a thinker and his acolytes, or a powerful group or institution and its members or believers, that they alone possess the *absolute and final truth* about the meaning of human existence, the nature and order of reality, the factors determining the worth of individuals and the ultimate outcome of individual destinies, the purpose and goal of history, the right order of political life, the manner in which people should live, and which specific set of values and traditions should be revered by all people of all times as humankind's highest moral and cultural achievement. The conviction that *final knowledge of ultimate truths* has been attained and is possessed by the privileged, Voegelin argues, leads their presumed possessors into deluded viewpoints and degraded existential postures, which undermine the ability to make headway in the unending struggle against existence in untruth, and tends also toward the promotion, more or less active, of social and political disorder. In its most destructive manifestation, it is a delusion that leads to the use of force to punish or even

the opposite inspiration, the transcendent acquires immanent form, becomes incarnated in history, however haltingly and incompletely. See, in particular, Claes G. Ryn, *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003) and *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality*, 2nd, expanded ed. (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1997).

¹¹ Voegelin, “Equivalences,” 116.

Self-proclaimed possessors of ultimate and final truth destructive on unprecedented scale.

kill those whose lives and convictions clash with the dictates or precepts derived from the “ultimate knowledge” of its presumptive possessors.

In modern centuries, the impact of doctrines and zealous activities on the part of self-proclaimed possessors of ultimate and final truth have become existentially and physically destructive on a scale much larger than earlier in history. This is due partly to technological advances (in communications, transportation, weaponry, etc.), and partly to the emergence of ideologies built on world-immanent interpretations of existence and history that view the necessary goal of historical process as both (1) known absolutely, and (2) dependent for its realization upon the concerted activities of the “possessors of ultimate truth” to force non-believers either to conform to the doctrine’s vision or be put out of the way. Voegelin, who narrowly escaped Nazi arrest and almost certain internment, spent much of his energies as a political philosopher (and philosopher of history) analyzing the origins, character, and meaning of modern secular political ideologies and regimes founded on the presumed possession of ultimate truths and values, and of modern theoretical and philosophical systems, such as those of Hegel and Marx, that claimed also to have attained a “final” and “absolute” knowledge of ultimate truths and values. There is no doubt that a key passion guiding the meditation of “Equivalences” is Voegelin’s abhorrence and rejection of all human claims to possess knowledge of ultimate truths about the final whys and wherefores of existence, about the final purpose and goal of history, and about what reality as a whole finally is. It is an abhorrence that finds articulation a few times in the essay, beginning in section I, which diagnoses the specific “deformation” of human thought and existence involved when persons believe that *ultimate truth* can be summarized and possessed in a fixed doctrine composed of true propositions. But it is most clearly and forcefully stated in a sentence near the start of section II, where Voegelin flatly states: “Ultimate doctrines, systems, and values are phantasmata engendered by deformed existence.”¹²

Now, Voegelin’s acceptance of the “new historical consciousness,” with its emphasis on the historical situatedness

¹² Ibid., 120.

of human experiences and utterances, on the one hand, and his rejection of the idea that human beings can possess ultimate truths about such matters as the purpose of existence and history's outcome, on the other hand, are fully compatible philosophically—and compatible with the view of any historicist, as well, who would instantly agree with Voegelin both that all human experiences and formulated understandings are historically situated and that ultimate doctrines, systems, and values are “phantasmata.” But then Voegelin would also argue that these positions may and must be embraced without succumbing to the outlook of *historicism*. In other words, Voegelin accepts human historicity while rejecting historicism's argument that we cannot claim knowledge of *any* trans-historical truths. Voegelin argues that, in fact, we *can* be confident in our knowledge of many fundamental, permanent truths about human nature, about the right order of existence, and about the structure of reality, even while we must acknowledge that these do not constitute a possession of final or ultimate answers regarding the meaning of human existence, the purpose and goal of history, or why there is a reality at all.

As already mentioned, the path of Voegelin's meditative journey leads to the reasons *why* a philosopher may confidently claim to have knowledge of certain “constants” concerning existence and reality, as well as why *the precise nature of our relationship with these constants* leaves us, as humans, still and forever engaged in the ongoing search for a deepening understanding of how to order our individual and social lives; of history's structure and direction; and of the order of reality as a whole. So let us now move through the stages of Voegelin's meditation and examine the *basis* of these conclusions of Voegelin—an examination that will entail addressing the human need for “symbols of the depth” of reality for our proper philosophical and existential orientation.

III

Voegelin begins his essay by explaining that the search for constants of truth about human order in society and history will not be found at the level of symbols, that is, in spoken or written words or other expressions of meaning. The historical process of the human search for order throws up suc-

cessive symbolizations of truth; symbolizations emerge that are superior in their complexity and differentiation to earlier symbolizations; but at the level of expression or formulation or proposition, truth is multiform, adaptational, shifting, unstable. There is no one absolute symbolization of any important truth, only “equivalent” symbolizations of significant truths. Thus, the person who wants possession of a constant truth about human order will not find it in any particular set of propositions, or a written catalogue of permanent values, or in any doctrine, religious or secular, concerning the meaning of existence or history.

We are tempted to look, then, to the experiences that have “engendered” the varying and equivalent symbolizations for what is “constant” in the human discoveries about truths concerning existence and reality: we may hope, that is, to find *experiential constants* of truth. For example, the Chinese symbol of the *Tao* and the Upanishadic symbol of *Brahman* may well be understood as equivalent symbolizations of a truth that, “beyond” the world intrinsically conditioned by space and time, there is a transcendent and ultimate reality, unconditioned by space and time, which is more real and more enduring than worldly reality. One may be ready to affirm that, not the symbols, obviously, but the *experiences* that gave rise to them are the same—are a constant—to be found wherever and whenever a person undergoes the experience producing the insight expressed in the affirmation of such a transcendent reality.

But this, Voegelin explains, would be a theoretical error, for two reasons. First, human experiences, like human symbolizations, are part of a reality that is continually in process, continually in movement, so that no experience holds a position of fixity beyond the flux of becoming. All experiences, being involved in the historical flux, are *distinct and differing involvements* in the existential movement of consciousness participating in the process of reality, and thus cannot be accorded the status of sameness or constancy. Another way to say this is that every experience is that of a distinct person, of reality becoming luminous for its reality and truth at the emergent site of that particular person, and each such emergence has a unique position in the movement of the historical process. Thus, there is no constancy or “sameness” at the level of

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experiences, since each experience is historically conditioned, individual, and distinct from any other experience.

Second—and unlike the former point, this is a point Voegelin emphasizes—it is theoretically untenable to separate an *experience of truth* from the *symbolization of the truth* of that experience. This is because there is no human experience of “truth” without both *an act of understanding that grasps the meaning* of that experience and *some inward or outwardly expressed formulation of that meaning* in some type of symbolization. Therefore an “experience of truth” is always an experience-understanding-and-symbolization of truth. Experience-understanding-symbolization—the hyphenated complex is my own linguistic formula, not Voegelin’s, but it clarifies his point—is an inseparable unit *insofar as any discovery or emergence of truth* is concerned, such that to separate out “experience” from that complex is a misleading hypostatization.¹³ If we were to assert that some type of *experience* that has engendered important symbols of truth is itself a constant, then we will have fallen into the trap of ignoring the indivisible unity of the complex experience-understanding-symbolization with respect to human discoveries of truth. As Voegelin explains: “[The supposedly] constant experience, in order to be *identified*, would have to become *articulate*, and once it has been articulated the result would be a *symbolism* claiming to be exempt from the fate of being one more historically equivalent truth.”¹⁴

An “*experience of truth*” is always an *experience-understanding-and-symbolization of truth*.

Voegelin sums up the preceding points by saying that what “we call *experiences*, as well as the *symbols* engendered by them, are part of reality *in process*,” and in consequence he concludes that “we must *extend the differences* of the symbols [concerning important truths] *into the engendering experiences* and, consequently, speak of the *equivalence not only of symbols, but of experiences as well*.”¹⁵ Bernard Lonergan has put this point, which essentially concerns the historicity of human truth, in a striking

¹³ Such an error is analogous to thinking of “transcendence” as a reality that is apprehended in some way other than in its interpenetration or fusion with immanent reality in conscious existence in the *metaxy*, the in-between of immanence and transcendence that is the ontological condition and ambience of *all* human consciousness and experience—a mode of thinking that unwarrantedly hypostatizes “transcendence.”

¹⁴ Voegelin, “Equivalences,” 123 (emphasis added).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 121, 123 (emphasis added).

way by curtly stating: “concepts have dates.” That is, every human act of insight, and every idea resulting from it, and every articulation of that idea, occurs at some moment in the historical process; and it is both false and futile to claim that any insight, concept, or doctrine has entered consciousness from beyond the historically-embedded activities of human consciousness. The person who claims to possess knowledge of a truth that has not been uncovered through historically situated human experience, language, and interpretation is simply ignoring human historicity, i.e., the temporally-conditioned and situation-specific character of human existence with respect to any experience, discovery, and articulation of truth.

Where does this leave us, then, in the search for constants of human order in society and history, in the light of whose truth we attempt to orient our lives in confidence that we are moving in the direction of living more well-ordered and less deformed existences? It leaves us looking for some *level of reality* that is more enduring and profound than the historically conditioned variables of experiences and symbolizations. And any claim that humans can attain *any* knowledge of genuinely enduring truths about existence and reality depends on our discovering such a level of reality; for, as we recall, the language of “equivalent truths,” whether applied to symbolizations or to experiences, requires for its validity an *underlying sameness or constancy of truth* with respect to which the experiences and symbols may be understood to be related *as* equivalents. As Voegelin writes at this point in his meditation: “The constant that will justify the language of equivalent experiences and symbols must be sought on a level *deeper* than the level of equivalent experiences which engender equivalent symbols.”¹⁶

We are searching, then, for a reality that in some sense can be understood to “underlie” all human experiences of what Voegelin calls “the primordial field of reality [consisting of the community of] God and man, world and society”; all experiences of existential tension; and all experiences of participation.¹⁷ And indeed, Voegelin writes, such a reality has long been philosophically identified: it is the “depth” from which

We are seeking some level of reality more enduring and profound than historically varied experiences and symbolizations.

¹⁶ Ibid., 123-24 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Ibid., 126.

consciousness experiences itself as emerging into illuminated, self-aware questioning and understanding. It is that dimension of the human psyche, Voegelin explains, that lies “below” conscious experience and from which, through inward exploration and meditation, “new truth[s] of reality can be hauled up to conscious experience,” but which *in itself*, as the “depth” of the soul or psyche, always remains “beyond articulate experience.”¹⁸ This “depth of the soul,” which has been symbolized since the time of the Hellenic philosophers as a *boundless extension of the psyche into the depth of reality*, is understood to have ontological continuity with consciousness—to be reality of the “same nature as the reality of consciousness”—but to which one cannot validly attribute any “substantive content,” since any psychic depth that has come to light in conscious experience as images, insights, or symbols, no longer belongs to the psyche’s “depth” but to consciousness.¹⁹ As Voegelin explains:

We experience psyche as consciousness that can descend into the depth of its own reality, and the depth of the psyche as reality that can rise to consciousness, but we do not experience a content of the depth other than the content that has entered consciousness.²⁰

The content of the “depth” that *remains* below consciousness remains unfathomable, because it is by definition not experienced. Therefore, we cannot validly attribute to a person’s *experience* of the depth of the psyche any truth-content that would constitute a permanent or constant truth of meaning that underlies the historical field of experiences and symbolizations. Every *experience* of the depth of the psyche, of the boundary-area where depth and consciousness meet as self-exploration succeeds in bringing new images, insights, or symbols into the light of conscious experience, is personal, and governed by historical conditions; in other words, there is no such thing, Voegelin writes, as an “autonomous depth” *experienced*, but “only a [specific] consciousness in continuity with

The content of the “depth” that remains below consciousness remains unfathomable because not experienced.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 124, 126.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 126. It should be noted that such a “depth” of psyche or consciousness (or “self”) has also been symbolized in Eastern thought since the time of early Buddhist and Upanishadic writings.

its own depth.”²¹ Therefore the search for a constant of truth that would justify the language of “equivalent symbolizations of the truth” must be extended even beyond *experiences* of the depth. The search for a constant *in the history of experiences and symbolizations* has ended in failure: “There is no constant to be found in history . . . ,” Voegelin concludes.²²

(It might be observed that in making that last assertion Voegelin seems to be contradicting his own denial of constancy.)

The depth underlying consciousness is the one depth of “substance” underlying all experienceable realities.

But Voegelin’s meditative search for constants of absolute truth has not, in fact, reached a dead-end. For while the search has found no constant *in history*, it has disclosed a depth of reality below consciousness and history, a depth that is not merely an “individual” depth, restricted as a localized continuation of this or that specific consciousness, but rather to be identified also as *the one depth underlying all reality experienced in the primordial field of God and man, world and society*. For when a person asks, what kind of reality “is touched when man descends into the depth of his psyche,” Voegelin writes, he will recognize that, since truths brought up from its depth affect his understanding of the field of partners as a whole, this depth cannot be identified with any one of these partners in the community of experienced being including himself, “man,” but only with “the underlying reality that *makes them* partners in a common order, *i.e.*, with the substance of the Cosmos.”²³ That is: the depth underlying consciousness is the one depth of “substance” underlying *all* experienceable realities. To grasp why this must be so, it is crucial to remember that every human consciousness is ontologically *a mode of participation in the process of reality as a whole*—a “site” in the process of reality where it becomes consciously luminous; thus, the depth from which the consciousness of one partner emerges (a “man”) can *only* be the depth of reality as a whole. And because it is contrary to reason to imagine there being a “depth below depth in infinite regress,” this depth must be understood as the “underlying oneness of reality” that gives reality *as humanly experienced* its coherence, order, and intelli-

²¹ Ibid., 129.

²² Ibid., 131.

²³ Ibid., 126 (emphasis added).

gibility, and also such constancies of structure as are repeatedly and universally experienced in the historical field—constancies such as the unvarying fourfold of partners in the primordial community of being, and the human universality of the search for meaning and order.²⁴

But Voegelin does not claim that we have *experiential access* to this “substance” as a oneness that underlies all reality experienced. In clarifying this point, Voegelin takes care to explain both the genesis of symbols that express this “underlying oneness” and the status of all such symbols.

The genesis of such symbols Voegelin describes as follows. First, there is the experience by consciousness of “touching” and “descending into” its own depth, which we understand can only be, also, the depth of reality as a whole. Second, symbols emerge or are chosen to signify the underlying oneness of reality through bringing together insights *from two separate types of experience*, of which the former is one. These two types of experience are (1) the individual experience of the depth of the psyche, already mentioned, and (2) experiences of the entirety of the primordial field of God and man, world and society. Once *both* types of experience have been undergone and understood, the consequence is that through an act of “imaginative fusion” symbols will be created that *unite the experience of depth with the experience of reality as a whole*. Humans confidently generate such symbols to represent an underlying oneness of reality through *trusting* that all the discrete intelligibilities in the cosmos we experience and understand are grounded in a oneness, a oneness that ensures, through the metaphysical logic of the very notion of a cosmic “oneness,” that reality as a whole is *ultimately and completely* intelligible—absent which all human experience of cosmic order would be grossly deluding, and the *human search for order*, which is existentially predicated on the assumption that reality is in the end *fully* intelligible, would be unfounded and finally meaningless.²⁵ As to the status of imaginative symbols of this underlying oneness or “depth,” Voegelin is clear on the point that they have the status of “myth”—that

Through an act of “imaginative fusion” symbols are created that unite the experience of depth with the experience of reality as a whole.

²⁴ Ibid., 127, 129.

²⁵ Voegelin makes clear that, in Hellenic thought, the emergence of the symbol of a “psyche” that has “depth” runs parallel to the emergence of the symbol “cosmos” as a symbol of the underlying oneness of reality. See “Equivalences,” 127-28.

they are the creative product of mythopoetic imagination. As we shall see, symbols of the depth are a type of mythic symbol that differentiated consciousness cannot do without; and the most important of them all, Voegelin points out, is the symbol *Cosmos* itself, through which was first expressed, by Hellenic thinkers, reality's ultimate oneness, intelligibility, coherence, lastingness, and constancy of structure.

So here we find, at last, the source of justification for the affirmation of equivalences of symbolized truth: the constancy of truth that cannot be found in the history of experience may be assumed, in trust and faith, to be "located" in the "depth of the cosmos," in the underlying oneness whose ultimate coherence, intelligibility, and constancy of structure are the guarantee for the truth of the equivalent experiences and symbolizations that appear, and differentiate, in the process of historical experience. Therefore the human search for truth—for significant and enduring truths about society and history, about existence and world, about consciousness and God—*does* make sense; and we *can* be confident that such important truths as we arrive at, verified by their recurrent discovery through the millennia of history, are not transient ephemera without trans-historical significance, as a radical historicist would argue. Voegelin's conclusion, at the end of his meditation, is that the "search for truth makes sense *only under the assumption* that the truth brought up from the depth of his psyche by man, though it is not the *ultimate* truth of reality [which, as historically conditioned, it could never be], is *representative* of the truth in the divine depth of the Cosmos." In other words, the truth of different but equivalent symbols that are discovered, across cultures and in the historical course of differentiation, to consistently illuminate existence and reality, may rightly be trusted, Voegelin says, to be "representative of a truth that is more than equivalent."²⁶

It is significant, and worthy of our close attention, that Voegelin in the last paragraph of his meditation (quoted above) suddenly refers to the underlying oneness of reality as the "*divine* depth of the Cosmos." For what occurred historically when the experience of psychic depth was united with

²⁶ Voegelin, "Equivalences," 133 (emphasis added).

experiences of the primordial field to create, through imaginative fusion, symbols articulating an underlying oneness of reality—an historical development of experience and symbolization that Voegelin has re-enacted in his meditation—was that the *traditional mythological account* of the divine within cosmic reality, represented by a plurality of gods and goddesses, nature-divinities, and multivarious minor deities and numinous presences, was replaced by a *philosophical mythological account* of the divine within cosmic reality as the “underlying oneness” of the cosmos. In Voegelin’s rather compact words: “The depth of the psyche is . . . the quite authentic understanding of divinity present in the order of the cosmos peculiar to the philosophy on the depth emerging from myth.”²⁷ This means that the origin and guarantee of an ultimate order, intelligibility, coherence, and constancy of structure in experienced reality has historically shifted, in this development, from “the gods” as portrayed by traditional myth to the “underlying oneness” of reality as mystically apprehended in experiences of the depth of the psyche and articulated by the philosophically mythic symbol of *Cosmos*.²⁸

Through imaginative fusion, the experience of psychic depth was united with symbols of the primordial field to create symbols articulating an underlying oneness.

This raises some very important questions. If the “depth of the cosmos” is a symbol of divine reality, occasioned by philosophical insights into the order of reality, that replaces—for differentiated understanding—traditional myths about the gods, then what is the relationship of that insight and development to the philosophical discovery, in the same Hellenic milieu, of the *transcendent* nature of divine reality—e.g., the

²⁷ Eric Voegelin, letter of July 30, 1969, to Stephen J. Tonsor; published in Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984*, trans. Sandy Adler, Thomas A. Hollweck, and William Petropulos; ed. Thomas A. Hollweck, vol. 30 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, MO: University Of Missouri Press, 2007), 619. In June 1969 Voegelin finished revising the text of “Equivalences” (originally a paper given in Rome in October 1968) for publication, and sent copies to a number of people, including his former assistant and colleague Professor Manfred Henningsen, at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, and Professor Stephen J. Tonsor at the University of Michigan. In his replies to their written responses to the text, specifically in four letters to Henningsen and one to Tonsor, Voegelin expanded on the meaning of the symbol of the “depth” in a manner that is especially illuminating. See *Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984*, letters 314, 317, 318, 319, and 321 (604-606, 611-616, 618-19).

²⁸ Voegelin refers to the apprehension of the depth of the cosmos, through experiences of psychic depth, as a type of “mysticism” in a letter of July 10, 1969, to Manfred Henningsen; see *Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984*, 614.

“being beyond being” of Plato’s *Republic*—which “dissolves” the one cosmos into (1) world and (2) transcendent divinity? How can these two developments be brought into explanatory conjunction? Where, one might ask, is the divine: is it the “underlying oneness of reality” symbolized as cosmic depth, or is it transcendentally beyond the world? And how are the later Christian mystical differentiations and symbolizations of the *transcendent* God related to the “cosmological” apprehensions of a divine depth that, according to Voegelin, “has remained a constant in Western history from the *Timaeus* through Neoplatonism of Antiquity, and the Renaissance into the Neoplatonism of the German Pietists, Jakob Boehme, and Hegel”?²⁹

The core component in Voegelin’s response to these and related questions is that there always remains, for differentiated consciousness, two basic approaches to understanding our human relation to divine reality and two basic sets of symbolizations corresponding to these. First, there is the approach that he calls the “mysticism of the ‘height’” through which the *transcendent* being of the divine is apprehended—which provides, writes Voegelin, a “partial experience of God.” Second, there is “the mysticism of the soul of the ‘depth,’” in which one apprehends the divine as the “underlying oneness of reality,” which provides “another partial experience” of God.³⁰ These two distinct types of mystical approach to divine reality, Voegelin indicates, are compatible and complementary, and—more important from a philosopher’s point of view—both types of apprehension and symbolization of divine being “*must* be taken into account in any philosophy of the human condition that wants to be *complete*.”³¹

These comments will bring to mind, among Voegelin’s readers, the opening passage of his later meditation, “The Beginning and the Beyond: A Meditation on Truth,” which states: “Divine reality is being revealed to man in two fundamental modes of experience: in the experience of divine creativity in the cosmos;

²⁹ Voegelin, letter of July 30, 1969, to Stephen J. Tonsor, in *Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984*, 619.

³⁰ Voegelin, letter of July 10, 1969 to Manfred Henningsen, in *Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984*, 613-14.

³¹ Voegelin, letter of July 30, 1969, to Stephen J. Tonsor, in *Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984*, 619 (emphases added).

Two basic approaches to understanding human relation to divine reality are compatible and complementary.

and in the experience of divine ordering presence in the soul.”³² That the “divine ordering presence of the soul” is identified with the God of “the Beyond” (i.e., transcendence) and thus with the God of the “height” is clear. Just how the “divine creativity in the cosmos,” here identified by the symbol of “the Beginning,” is associated with the God of the “depth of the cosmos” is less obvious, and would perhaps require a separate paper to explore and explain. But three facts resulting from Voegelin’s philosophical reflections on the differentiated understanding of divine reality may be stated clearly. First, in a general philosophical account of how human beings approach and understand their relation to the divine, we must remember that divine reality is apprehended and symbolized in two different fundamental modes. Second, the “depth” of the cosmos is a *theological* symbol, originating in the search for and discovery of a *differentiated apprehension of divine reality* beyond the symbols of traditional myth, and thus *valid* symbols of the depth will always have a theological character.³³ Third, human beings require valid symbols of the depth if they are to succeed in existentially orienting themselves in relation to divine reality, as well as to the meaning of personal existence as a mode of participating in reality.

The “depth” of the cosmos is a theological symbol; valid symbols of the depth will always have a theological character.

The underlying oneness of reality can be, and has been, symbolized in many ways. In “Equivalences,” Voegelin discusses how Plato, in his *Timaeus*, introduced the mythic symbol of the *anima mundi* (world soul) to articulate his imagining of the divine depth, and comments that this symbol and its meaning-equivalents have had “a prodigious career” of employment by Western philosophers and mystics from the classical Neoplatonists down to such modern thinkers as Boehme, Schelling, and Hegel (and we should not forget Emerson).³⁴ But also in modernity we see the emergence of explicitly anti-theological immanentist and materialist worldviews that lead inevitably to the introduction of immanentist symbols for the

³² Eric Voegelin, “The Beginning and the Beyond: A Meditation on Truth,” in *What Is History? and Other Late Unpublished Writings*, ed. Thomas A. Holweck and Paul Caringella, vol. 28 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 173.

³³ Voegelin, letter of July 10, 1969, to Manfred Henningsen, in *Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984*, 614-15.

³⁴ Voegelin, “Equivalences,” 126-28; letter of July 30, 1969, to Stephen J. Tonsor, in *Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984*, 619.

Authentically
theological
symbols of
the depth
replaced by
de-divinized
“metaphors.”

underlying oneness of reality. Many Enlightenment and Romanticist writers, for example, embraced the symbol *Nature* as an appropriate symbol of the depth—a symbol in which (whatever the specific view of this or that thinker) the presence of the divine is not explicit, and one that was used by many anti-religious Enlightenment figures as a *replacement* for the conception of a divine foundation of reality. Schopenhauer’s *Will* and Nietzsche’s *Will to Power* likewise symbolize the depth in its oneness—and again, considering Schopenhauer’s understanding of *Will* as a blind unconscious striving and his ethics of pessimism, and Nietzsche’s explicit atheism, we find authentically theological symbols of the depth replaced by, as Voegelin calls them, mere de-divinized “metaphors.”³⁵

In the twentieth century, in light of the development of theoretical physics, many persons would be satisfied to symbolize the oneness underlying all reality by the term *Energy*. Here, too, we recognize the impact of the de-divinization and immanentization of reality; for the symbol *Energy*, as it is generally understood in modern culture, has no theological meaning or implications. In fact, for most people, if embraced or employed as a symbol of the depth, *Energy* functions simply as a more sophisticated and highly etherialized version of *Matter*—that symbol of the underlying oneness of reality so dear to materialists and immanentists of all persuasions.

A brief consideration of the symbol *Matter* in its function as one of the most popular modern symbols of the depth of the cosmos will help to explain why the immanentist doctrines and ideologies of modernity—metaphysical, political, cultural, and existential—are both disorienting and dangerous. First: because almost all usages of *Matter* as a symbol of the depth are not only *non*-theological but *anti*-theological, a person’s casual or passionate embrace of it as such a symbol obstructs the ability to imaginatively experience his or her own psyche as emergent from, and constantly grounded in, divine being. It establishes a blind spot precisely at the center of self-understanding where one seeks to discern the deepest core of one’s human identity. Thus it is one of those pervasive and powerful modern symbols that “eclipses the reality of man’s existence

³⁵ Voegelin, letter of July 10, 1969, to Manfred Henningsen, in *Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984*, 614.

in the Metaxy” of which Voegelin writes so powerfully at the end of his Introduction to *The Ecumenic Age*, part of the “great obstacle” of accumulated symbols preventing our return to the experiential insights that would reveal to us our true human situation as participants in a divinely ordered reality.³⁶ Second: we must remember that an adequate symbol of the depth is a *myth*—and what the soul seeks and needs is a “likely myth,” in the phrase that Plato uses in the *Timaeus* to describe his symbol of the *anima mundi*. In “Equivalences,” Voegelin explains exactly what makes a mythic symbol or story “likely”: the “degree of *likeness* will depend on the amount of disparate experiences it has achieved to unify persuasively in its imagery.”³⁷ Considering this criterion, *Matter* is a profoundly “unlikely” symbol for signifying the underlying oneness of reality, since its imagery leaves inexplicable, ignored, or fragmentarily disassociated some of the most important types of experience available to conscious existence, for instance, experiences of loving encounter with the boundless spiritual presences of other persons (Buber’s I-Thou encounters), and the many varieties of the experience of transcendence that existence in the *metaxy* provides.

Immanentist doctrines and ideologies both disorienting and dangerous.

To embrace the symbol *Matter*, or any of its meaning-equivalents, as representing the cosmic depth thus has genuinely harmful existential consequences. For symbols of the depth, however consciously or tacitly they function for us, are symbols through which we interpret the essential being of the cosmos and by which we orient our lives. They shape our appreciation of what consciousness is and might grow toward; the imaginative trajectory of our existential hopes and yearnings; our sense of what the human search for meaning is ultimately for; and our assumptions or beliefs concerning why human beings—and the cosmos itself—have come into being.

³⁶ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume IV: The Ecumenic Age*, ed. Michael Franz, vol. 17 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 107.

³⁷ Voegelin, “Equivalences,” 128 (emphasis added). Just prior to this statement, Voegelin discusses the fact that Plato in *Timaeus* “wavers” in his description of the type of truth expressed in the symbol of the *anima mundi*, calling it both an *eikos mythos* (likely myth) and an *alethinous logos* (true story). The key fact, for Voegelin, is that Plato “was sure that the symbolism had not been engendered through articulation of an *experience*” but was consciously a “philosopher’s myth” (127; emphasis added).

Indeed, the symbolization of the depth provides a person with the most basic understanding of his or her identity, since it imaginatively represents the depth from which every human consciousness has emerged—"the depth by which experience lives."³⁸

Voegelin does not in "Equivalences" directly address the problem of misleading and dangerous symbols of the depth. But it is a problem whose solution he alludes to when he describes how, in the development of a life (or a culture), the images or stories that have previously been felt to successfully symbolize the depth *lose their persuasiveness*, and need to be replaced through discovering a more adequate symbolization, a more "likely" myth. In this development, Voegelin writes, "the truth of the depth has drained from the symbols by which [a person] orients his life," and a return to an explorative concern with the depth of the psyche, together with renewed reflection on experiences of the primordial community of being, will *normatively* bring forth a new "imaginative fusion" in the form of a mythic symbolization of the depth that will again—in its being more profoundly or differentiatedly "true"—be existentially persuasive and reassuring.³⁹

The person who undergoes such a transition, or transformation, will be someone who has not abandoned the existential search for truth and right order—someone who heeds the fact that existence is "participation in a movement with a direction to be found or missed," and understands the degree to which the struggle for existence in truth depends on finding convincing and inspiring symbolizations of the underlying oneness of reality.⁴⁰ It will be a person who recognizes that his or her role in the drama of humanity is part of a more comprehensive "play"—the play or drama of the cosmos itself as it unfolds through the eons. And above all, a person who cares passionately about orienting herself through symbols of the depth that are persuasively adequate will be someone who consistently remembers that she is a luminously conscious participant in a cosmic drama whose ultimate "plot" or pur-

The struggle for existence in truth depends on finding convincing and inspiring symbolizations of the underlying oneness of reality.

³⁸ Voegelin, "Equivalences," 129.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴⁰ Eric Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," in *Published Essays, 1966-1985*, 176.

pose can only be apprehended through mythic elaboration, an elaboration based on extrapolating some design of its mystery from the fullest possible range of available experiences of the primordial field, of existential tension, of experiences of psychic depth, and of known historical developments. Voegelin summarizes all this by stating that the person whose outlook is informed by such insights and who *does* find trustworthy mythic elaborations for guidance—his example is Plato—will recognize that “the most intimate truth of reality, the truth about the meaning of the cosmic play in which man must act his role with his life as the stake, is a mythopoetic play linking the psyche of man in trust with the depth of the Cosmos.”⁴¹ The symbol of the depth that is embraced by a person undeluded by immanentism, and attuned to the fact that cosmic reality is a divinely ordered “play,” is of such existential importance because *it must be linked to*, and radiate a meaning in harmony with, a more comprehensive “likely story” that mythically expresses why there might *be* such a cosmic “play” at all, and what it might ultimately be about.

I would like to suggest that there is one most important condition for recognizing and embracing a proper and salutary “mythopoetic play” that links or unites our understanding of our personal struggle for existence in truth with our mythic apprehension of both the cosmic depth and the process of reality as a whole. That condition is a loving openness toward reality in all its dimensions. Such loving openness allows us to acknowledge, and investigate the history of insights into, all four partners in the primordial field, God and man, world and society; it allows us to commit ourselves to the meaningfulness of our own personal search for truth and order; and in conformity with that commitment, it leads us to have faith in an underlying oneness of reality that ensures the coherence and full intelligibility of the cosmos, as well as in the divine constancy in the depth that justifies claiming that equivalent symbols of truth found in history are representative of a truth that is more than equivalent. Finally, it enables us to love the fact that we *belong* to the cosmos as luminous modes of participation in its process, and to recognize that all human beings deserve our respect and love as also belonging, in their onto-

Loving openness toward reality in all its dimensions allows us to acknowledge all four partners in the primordial field, God and man, world and society.

⁴¹ Voegelin, “Equivalences,” 128.

logical constitution, to the one cosmos in the same manner as ourselves. Without a loving openness to reality in its fullness, one might be led to ignore some part of the primordial field (such as God); or to become alienated from the human search for order and conclude that it is meaningless; or to refuse to accept the reasonableness of affirming an underlying oneness of reality, since such a oneness cannot be empirically experienced, and thus to view phenomena and persons as essentially fragmented, essentially heterogeneous, incoherent, and historically disconnected. Without it, in other words, one might become a radical historicist, an immanentist, a moral relativist, a cynical ironist, a xenophobic nationalist, a nihilist, or one of the more shoddy and shallow types of philosophical or literary postmodernist.

If, however, one were—through sufficient loving openness—to discover this to be the most important condition for orienting oneself aright in relation to existence and reality, one might be tempted to identify this dynamic core of one’s search for truth (that is, love) with “the process in the depth”⁴² that underlies our personal experience of the process of reality in the mode of presence, and proceed to mythically symbolize the depth of the cosmos as *Love*. This is a symbol that would unify a vast range of disparate experiences in its imagery, and is properly theological in linking the cosmos to its divinely transcendent ground differentiatedly understood and symbolized as the God who is Love (1 John 4:16-21). It is a symbol that would mythopoetically interpret the “cosmic play,” to which we link our own psyches in trust, as a universal movement of love that is self-illuminative in humans and is heading, historically, toward its ever-more illumined fulfillment. In light of such a mythopoesis, one would be drawn to identify the factors that most *impede* the movement and actualization of love as evil, fear, and sin, and to conclude that faith in the ultimate coherence and intelligibility of the cosmos must also entail faith in a divinely redemptive power in the cosmic process that would ensure Love’s illuminative fulfillment. With such thoughts in mind, one might scan the cultural scene for a mythopoetic play of the cosmos, arising from reality’s

⁴² Ibid., 130.

luminous emergence as self-presence in history, in which all of these factors are “imaginatively fused.” And that could provide a “likely story” of the cosmic play whose meanings and images one could rely on for guiding one’s struggle for existence in truth.

IV

The general truth to be drawn from Voegelin’s meditative conclusions in “Equivalences” pertinent to my own foregoing reflections on love is that—living in the epoch after the philosophical differentiation of the four partners of the primordial field, including the transcendent God—mythopoetic symbolizations of the “depth by which experience lives” and of the “meaning of the cosmic play in which man must act his role with his life as the stake” are necessary to help guide us if we are genuinely committed both to the struggle to make sense of our lives and to the struggle against existence in untruth.⁴³ Two further general truths may be drawn from his conclusions as well, both of which pertain to the two concerns identified earlier in this paper as dominating Voegelin’s meditation: the challenge of historicity to our search for, and our claims to know of, “constants” pertaining to human nature and human existence; and the delusory supposition that humans can arrive at *possession of ultimate truths and systems of explanations* about existence, history, and reality.

First, because the human search for order and truth—and thus personal existence—is itself meaningful only if there is a “constancy of structure, order, and intelligibility” in the depth of the cosmos, a constancy of truth it is reasonable to have faith in, we may reasonably extend that faith into a confidence that truths about the structure of human nature and existence discovered and symbolized, with increasing differentiation, over the known historical millennia may be granted the status of constants.⁴⁴ For instance, to use Voegelin’s example from the end of his meditation, it is a constant, of which we can be sure, that “all men by nature desire to know,” as Aristotle put it. Why? Not because we have empirically experienced the interiority of the consciousnesses of all persons, but rather because

⁴³ Ibid., 128, 129.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 127.

(1) the empirical evidence of this structural element of human nature—the human search for meaning—is consistent through all known history, *and* (2) our faith in the constancy and lastingness of structure in the depth of the cosmos allows us to accept that this historically situated and equivalently symbolized truth—“*the desire to know is constant in human nature*”—is truly representative of a truth that is more than situatedly conditional and more than equivalent.⁴⁵ The same argument holds for a number of truths about the structure of human existence, as Voegelin indicates in a series of propositions near the start of section II of his essay—for example: “Man participates in the process of reality”; “Man is conscious of reality as a process . . . and of his consciousness as a mode of participation in its process”; “While consciously participating, man is able to engender symbols which express his experience of reality”⁴⁶ We may affirm with confidence that these, too, are constant truths of human nature. All of these constants may be understood to be implicit in the assertion at the end of Voegelin’s meditation when he states that his search into the history of the search for order has revealed, above all, *the constancy of the process of reality “in the mode of presence.”* That is: the “search of the search” has revealed the constancy of the luminous search for and symbolization of truth—the constancy of human nature itself—which has left behind it the “trail of equivalent symbols in time and space” that collectively constitute what may be called “history.”⁴⁷

Second, a distinction must be drawn between discoverable truths that are constants pertaining to the human search for meaning, the structure of human participation in reality, the features of existential tension, the primordial field of historical experience, and basic criteria distinguishing between existence in truth and existence in untruth, on the one hand, and on the other hand, truths concerning—for example—the final meaning and goal of history; the ultimate outcome of

⁴⁵ If there were to emerge, in being, a creature in whom the process of reality came to luminous self-awareness in the mode of presence and *was not characterized by a desire to know at the core of its consciousness*, then that creature would not be human; it would be another kind of being; but I would hazard to say that such a creature is rationally unimaginable.

⁴⁶ Voegelin, “Equivalences,” 120.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 132-33.

individual moral and spiritual striving; why reality exists (and has the structure it has); or why human existence exists (and has the structure it has). In these latter cases, no answers in the forms of philosophical truths or propositions are possible; they remain mysteries. Thus, a temperate and mystery-respecting philosophy of consciousness such as Voegelin's may accurately be said to include many *true statements and propositions*. Two philosophical essays on the structure of consciousness replete with such propositions are "Equivalences" itself and "What Is Political Reality?" in *Anamnesis*.⁴⁸ But the only valid means of articulating suppositions about *ultimacies of meaning*—concerning, for example, why there is a cosmos at all, and why human beings have emerged within it, or what the purpose and goal of human history are—is mythopoetic elaboration, that is, the presenting of a "likely story" whose persuasiveness and helpfulness will be based precisely on how well it harmonizes with what we know about the primordial field of experienced reality, and on how successfully it protects insights into what it means to live a well-ordered existence in attunement with what history has revealed of "the divine drama of truth becoming luminous."⁴⁹

The only valid means of articulating suppositions about ultimacies of meaning is mythopoetic elaboration.

⁴⁸ See Eric Voegelin, "What Is Political Reality?" in *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, trans. M. J. Hayak based upon the abbreviated version originally translated by Gerhart Neimeyer, ed. David Walsh, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 341-412.

⁴⁹ Voegelin, "Equivalences," 133.