

HESIOD AND HISTORIOGENESIS: ERIC VOEGELIN'S DISCOVERY OF A MILLENNIAL CONSTANT

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In the pioneering researches of the crypto-semiotician Eric Voegelin into the history of human symbols of order and disorder, I believe we have an unsurpassed account of the “purely objective reality” of societies in their historical anthroposemiosis *practice* that makes a perfect complement to the *theoretical* insights into the being of sign-relations (which were achieved by Thomas Aquinas and John Poinot and rediscovered by Peirce and postmodernity).¹ This is because I discern a consonance between Voegelin’s implicit approach and the explicit developments articulated in Danesi and Sebeok’s modeling systems theory (MST) (Danesi and Seebok 2000). Sebeok’s success with biosemiotics has now vindicated the implicit method of Voegelin’s researches into humanity.² Voegelin’s sensitivity to the field of semiosis in human history may thereby open up new horizons for a truly philosophical historical science.

This sensitivity eventually bore fruit with Voegelin’s discovery of “historiogenesis”, an unexpectedly ubiquitous mode of the construction of a *Lebenswelt* by anthroposemiosis, which occurs, for example, in imperial narratives,³ in which there is “a unilinear and progressive construction of history where material is rearranged to allow only one line of meaning to emerge” (Trepanier 2008). This discovery was part of a larger crypto-semiotic discovery, about which Voegelin wrote to his

¹ Cf. Deely 2004. The “purely objective reality” that Deely describes as “*non ens*” in Deely 2009 (using the phrase of Thomas Aquinas) is the same mode of reality described by Voegelin as “the field of non-existence”: e.g., in Voegelin 1974: 67–75; cf. Voegelin 1968: 87–105.

² This, at least, is what comes to my mind as I muse on the contributions to Copley, Deely, Kull, and Petrilli eds. (2011) by Ivan Mladenov (281–292) and W. C. Watt (365–370). Cf. the review by Pelkey 2012.

³ For an accessible presentation of Voegelin’s account of the historical symbolizations of the various types of empire, see Heyking 2009. On “historiogenesis”, see Voegelin 1966: 101–139, Voegelin 1968: 52–110, and Voegelin 1974: 108–166, esp. 110–111. See also Voegelin 1961, 1963, and 1969.

publisher in 1960, describing it as “an incredible stroke of luck: I have hit on something like a theory of relativity for the field of symbolic forms, and the discovery of the theoretical formula that will cover all forms to whatever civilization they belong...” (Voegelin 1960: xiii; cf. Purcell 2012: 215).

In light of Sebeok’s appropriation of Peirce for his “modeling systems theory”,⁴ it can now be appreciated what Voegelin accomplished when he first formulated his outline of how historiogenesis fits within the evolution of symbolization over the entire history of humanity, because Voegelin used a schematic visual outline for his presentation that was analogous to a mathematical equation (Voegelin 1974: 110-111). The occasion for this schematic formulation was Voegelin’s treatment of “mytho-speculative” thought, like that of Hesiod (Voegelin 1974: 155–156),⁵ whose poetry exemplifies many interesting features that form a bridge between myth (e.g., Homer) and philosophy (e.g., Plato).⁶ Thanks to his crypto-semiotic discovery, Voegelin’s treatment of “mytho-speculation” is able to follow the same pattern of organization as that of Danesi and Sebeok’s three modeling systems (Voegelin 1974: 109–113, and Danesi and Sebeok 2000: 9-10).

Voegelin’s treatment of “mytho-speculative thinking” (Voegelin 1974: 109-113) follows the same pattern of organization as that of Danesi and Sebeok’s treatment of “connective modeling”, the modeling activity that they note is species-specific to humans (Danesi and Sebeok 2000: 39-43). Mytho-speculative thought involves speculation that deploys concrete experiential inputs in representations involving four fundamental fields of abstract concepts: viz., gods, humans, world, and society (Voegelin 1974: 109-110). For example, a *lightning strike* may be a concrete metaform (rooted in a sensory experience) for representing divine justice, e.g., *the justice of Zeus*, an abstract concept pertaining to how the gods behave unexpectedly and seemingly capriciously but perhaps also according to an inexorable and inscrutable logic. Metaforms are thus “assemblages intended to deliver the meaning of abstract concepts on the basis of concrete source domains” (Danesi and Sebeok 2000: 40).

Voegelin notes, “The speculative forms corresponding to the sectors [of the most abstract and comprehensive fields of speculation] are called theogony, anthropogony, cosmogony, and historiogenesis. We

⁴ Cf. Danesi and Sebeok 2000. As tribute, Danesi offers an admirably concise assessment of Sebeok’s legacy at Copley, Deely, Kull, and Petrilli, eds. 2011: 115–122.

⁵ On Hesiod’s “five ages”, cf. Voegelin 1957: 144–154 and Hesiod c. 700 B.C.: 70–75 (*Works and Days*, lines 109-201).

⁶ Cf. Voegelin 1957: 126–164, also in Morrissey 2012: 119-125.

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shall use the initials of these four nouns for designating the four sectors of reality as **t**, **a**, **c**, and **h**" (Voegelin 1974: 110–111). Voegelin therefore designates the varieties of speculation (S_t , S_a , S_c , S_h) using these letters as subscripts. Thus, while the concrete metaform of *the lightning of Zeus* is designated by **t** (for "theogony"), since it concerns the gods, its use in mytho-speculative thinking on *the justice of Zeus* is designated by S_t since it constitutes abstract speculation about the gods.

The three main types of connective models are: *metaforms* (produced by the primary modeling system, e.g., the use of the concrete image of lightning in abstract speculation on divine justice); *meta-metaforms* (produced by the secondary modeling system); and *meta-symbols* (produced by the tertiary modeling system) (Danesi and Sebeok 2000: 39).

Meta-metaforms create a more abstract level of linkages among metaforms due to what Danesi and Sebeok call the "layering principle", namely, the fact that connective linkages build up in layers of abstract connections (2000: 40). As Voegelin observed, the speculative fields of theogony, anthropogony, cosmogony, and historiogenesis "do not confine themselves to their respective sectors of reality but absorb into their symbolism materials from the other sectors, divesting them in the process of their autonomous meaning and sometimes transforming them thoroughly. Hence, we must distinguish between primary and secondary materials organized by the several symbolisms" (Voegelin 1974: 111). Thus, while (S_t) *the justice of Zeus* can be contemplated using the mytho-speculative symbolization of (**t**) *the lightning of Zeus*, in addition, i.e., through the layering of connections, this abstract speculation can be connected to establish linkages with speculation in other realms: e.g., (**t**) *the lightning of Zeus* can be linked, in a speculation on anthropogony, to (**a**) *the fire needed for human survival*;⁷ (**t**) *the lightning of Zeus* can be linked, in a speculation on cosmogony, to (**c**) *thunder and lightning as monstrous natural offspring caused by the cosmic union between Earth and Sky*;⁸ and (**t**) *the lightning of Zeus* can be linked, in a speculation on historiogenesis, to (**h**) *the sudden liberation of the oppressed* which results from the sort of political deal-making that Zeus specializes in, to

⁷ "[Zeus] would not grant the power of ever-dancing fire to strike, in lightning, the ash trees. That would benefit humans, the ones who die, who dwell on the ground" (*Theogony*, lines 563-564, in Hesiod c. 700 B.C.: 38).

⁸ "Earth lay with Sky. She gave birth to ... the Cyclopes, lawless at heart. *Brontes* and *Steropes* and *Arges* were mightily competitive in spirit. It was they who later gave thunder to Zeus. The thunderbolt was originally theirs. They resembled the gods in most respects. But they had only one eye. It lay in the middle of their foreheads" (*Theogony*, lines 133-145, in Hesiod c. 700 B.C.: 11).

empower the disenfranchised and make them his allies.⁹

Voegelin therefore proposes to represent this sort of elaborate secondary, extensional modeling with the sign: " $S_t(t-a,c,h)$ ". What is truly remarkable is that Voegelin's insight thereby mirrors that of Danesi and Sebeok, because while each thinker recognizes the layering of "assemblages forged among already-existing metaforms" (i.e., what Danesi and Sebeok call "meta-metaforms") (2000: 40), Voegelin recognizes the key semiotic point that this sort of secondary modeling is an outgrowth of primary modeling.¹⁰

Thanks to the tertiary modeling system, "symbolic forms that result from specific types of linkages associated with particular metaforms" (Danesi and Sebeok 2000: 40-41) can establish particular metaforms as elevated *meta-symbols*, which is what the lightning of Zeus comes to represent by the way it is selectively highlighted in Hesiod's poetry (cf. Hesiod, *Theogony*, 674-719, 820-868). The lightning is primarily a metaform for divine justice, but it also suggests, through its secondary linkages to the speculations of anthropogony (concerning humanity's need for fire), cosmogony (concerning causation within nature), and historiogenesis (concerning the cultural wisdom about political deal-making), that as wielded by the hands of Zeus this lightning also stands (in a meta-symbolic way) for the brilliant uniqueness of *Greek culture* and for that culture's many innovations within history.¹¹

Voegelin himself recognizes this tertiary level of connective modeling when his formula (intended to summarize his "theory of relativity" of symbolic forms) groups what he identifies as the four most fundamental forms of secondary modeling—namely, $S_t(t-a,c,h)$, $S_a(a-t,c,h)$, $S_c(c-t,a,h)$, and $S_h(h-t,a,c)$ —within an aggregate held together by vertical lines (Voegelin 1974: 111). The composite force of this tertiary level is what establishes culture as "a connective macrocode" (Danesi and Sebeok 2000: 42-43). Voegelin notes that its semiotic sophistication is "equivalent" to what philosophy itself can attain with explicitly "noetic" specu-

⁹ "Next, Zeus freed his father's brothers, the Cyclopes, from their deadly chains. They too were unwanted sons of Sky. But how thoughtlessly did father Sky bind them! Returning the kindnesses of Zeus, they showed gratitude. The Cyclopes gave Zeus the thunder, the smoldering bolt, the lightning. Previously, these weapons had been locked away in the vast Earth, inside Tartarus. Now, thanks to these trusty weapons, Zeus is Lord, over mortals and immortals alike" (*Theogony*, lines 501-506, in Hesiod c. 700 B.C.: 33-34).

¹⁰ Cf. Danesi and Sebeok 2000: 42, 48, 83-85, 174-175, on the SIH ("Sense-Inference Hypothesis").

¹¹ Hence the symbol of lightning is highlighted in the cover image for Morrissey 2012, which depicts Zeus's battle with Typhoeus. Cf. Hesiod c. 700 B.C.: 54-57 (*Theogony*, lines 820-880).

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lations, because mytho-speculative thought can comprehensively embrace and symbolize all four of the fundamental sectors of reality. The sophistication of mytho-speculative culture's elaborate (threefold) semiotic layering is what makes it "equivalent" to philosophy's more conscious ambitions to understand reality. Yet Voegelin is also careful to point out that while such achievements are "equivalent" they are not the same, because mytho-speculation is still subordinate "to the myth of the cosmos" (Voegelin 1974: 111). "The aggregate, though equivalent to a philosophy of being, is not by itself a philosophical symbolism but remains a speculation within the sphere of the cosmological myth" (Voegelin 1974: 111).

By this, I believe Voegelin means that cultural thought has a tendency to fall back to moving exclusively within compact *intramundane* symbolism ("the myth of the cosmos") and to forget the hard-won spiritual and philosophical insights into the *transcendent* (i.e., the achievements of "pneumatic and noetic differentiation" with regard to theoretical speculation about gods, humans, the world, and society). After all, it is on this point that Voegelin is most famous; i.e., for his articulation of the thesis that modern thought, in its tendency to fall back from humanity's hard-won spiritual and philosophical achievements, is a variation on ancient Gnosticism (cf. Franz 2005: 28–47, esp. 42–43). If we avoid a "monolithic and monochromatic use of the term" (McKnight 2005: 25), and regard "Gnosticism" as an analogical term that is valid insofar as it stimulates further inquiry, and not use it univocally as a species (or even a genus) (Roszbach 2005: 86), then we would stay true to Voegelin's cautionary use of the term.¹² A semiotic analysis of the experiential equivalences between ancient and modern "Gnosticisms" would be one way of studying the deformative visions of "purely objective reality" that have impacted history by means of their gross ideological dogmatisms (cf. Voegelin 1970). Such an analysis would demonstrate how a philosophy of history could give semio-ethics a proper orientation.¹³

The constancy of this lapsarian phenomenon in history—i.e., the deformative, "Gnostic" ideological tendency to fall back to moving exclusively within compact *intramundane* symbolism (the world of the *cosmos*) and to forget the hard-won spiritual and philosophical insights into the *transcendent*—is suggested by Voegelin's use of the letter **C** prefixed to the tertiary aggregate, a letter which echoes the famous con-

¹² Cf. McKnight: "His experience with trends in scholarship warned him that the attention being focused on Gnosticism in the '70s would cause more confusion than clarity when the term was applied to modern forms of disorder" (2005: 122–142, esp. 141).

¹³ Cf. Deely 2003, 2004a, 2005, 2008, and 2008a.

stant for the speed of light in Einstein's theory of relativity. Voegelin is thereby suggesting that if cultural symbolic representations (achieved by primary, secondary, and tertiary modeling) do not continually return to be nourished organically by the roots of experience, they can ossify into dogmatic deformations. Mytho-speculative thought can deform into mere myth (in the pejorative sense) when it loses sight of the authentic live-giving and life-sustaining power that was tapped into by its speculative origins. Hence the need for every human to experientially re-appropriate the real meaning of what is signified by the tertiary meta-symbols preserved in a culture's wisdom. In other words, Voegelin in his own crypto-semiotic way is thus affirming what Danesi and Sebeok (2000) call "the Sense-Inference Hypothesis".

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