

THE CONFESSION OF VOEGELIN

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Allow me to summarize what I take to be the gist of Professor Darby's argument. The modern world is in crisis, of which the use and abuse of technology is one pervasive sign. This crisis follows, in whole or in part, from modern secularizing thought, which culminates in the philosophy of Hegel. In Hegel's philosophy the modern attempt to conquer nature is radicalized and revealed for what it is — a misguided effort to abolish the difference between man and God.

In considering Hegel, Darby is guided by Nietzsche and Heidegger, who recognized and struggled with the problem posed by what Hegel called the death of God, and by Alexandre Kojève, who accepts the death of God with apparent equanimity. According to Kojève, who Darby takes as *the* modern spokesman for Hegel, modern life represents — in principle or in fact — the end of history and the circular culmination of human striving. Still, modern life for Kojève is not without its difficulties and absurdities. For the end of history is, paradoxically, the end of humanity, whose essence lies in striving and negativity. The universal satisfaction made possible by the homogeneous modern state and by modern technology eliminates the creative or dialectical tension on which human freedom depends. If man is a radically historical being, if he makes and remakes himself and his world in order to attain satisfaction, then in attaining satisfaction he completes himself, and, paradoxically, ceases to be.

The result, for Kojève, of the completed cycle of history is, as Darby notes, either the reanimalization of man (something like Nietzsche's last man, who says he is happy and blinks), or a culture of gratuitous "snobbism," a formal and so to speak meaningless assertion of difference, not as part of the process of history and the quest for satisfaction, but for its own sake.

Professor Darby accepts Kojève's description of our world as accurate, without accepting all the claims Kojève makes on behalf of that description. Instead, Darby treats Kojève's claim that Hegel's science is true, that we are satisfied, and that history is in all important respects over, as itself a symptom of the modern sickness, and indeed a symptom that points beyond itself to a possible cure or at least a more adequate image of health. Thus, in discussing Kojève's curious notion of snobbism, Darby departs from the letter and spirit of Kojève by associating snobbism with the Greek *aidos* or shame, and thus with religious reverence and piety. The culture of absurdity, of the gratuitous gesture, to which much of modern society seems reduced, appears for Professor Darby to hide in its folds traces of the mythic awe that held together

SUSAN SHELL

pre-philosophic cultures like that of Homer. Kojève, the insistent atheist, proves unconsciously at least to be something of a pagan believer.

The theme of religion manqué is an important one for Darby, witnessed, for example, by his discussion of Hegel's attempted supersession of Christ. Hegel must resort to "magic", and one not of the whitest sort, according to Darby, conducted in a realm of pure ether, following a descent into hell, undertaken to overcome the dismemberment of the human spirit. Darby does not so much aim at refuting Hegel as at showing that Hegel's innermost principles are a reversal and perversion of Christianity and a so to speak satanic denial of the transcendent.

Along these lines, Darby suggests that: 1) the alleged worldly syntheses, by the Hegelian system, of action and thought, time and eternity, Napoleon and Hegel, remain unachieved and unachievable; and 2) that the level at which these syntheses are spuriously achieved — the ether that is the realm of Hegel's science — betokens the depersonalized, cyberneticized world system in which we find ourselves increasingly enthralled.

To these criticisms several responses might be made. Beginning with the second, more practical charge, it is striking how closely Darby's accusation of depersonalization and even sorcery in Hegel resembles Marx and Engel's charge in the *Communist Manifesto* that capitalism threatens to turn men into the tools and slaves of their own products. At any rate, it may be useful to remember the fear of man's enslavement to the system he has created is not a new one and that Hegel himself takes it into account. Professor Darby cites a rather menacing phrase from the *Phenomenology*, to the effect that science requires individual self-consciousness to rise, and thus implicitly that it is science and not individuals that truly possesses self-consciousness. But this phrase is taken somewhat out of context and is for Hegel only a partial account of the truth. If science requires individual self-consciousness to rise, so, Hegel goes on to say, the individual "has the right to demand that science . . . show him that he has in himself the ground to stand on." This right, says Hegel, "rests on the individual's absolute independence . . . for in every phase of knowledge, whether science recognizes it or not, his right as an individual is the absolute and final form . . .".¹

Hegel's system, then, aims not at depersonalization but at a synthesis of science and person that for the first time gives the individual his due and fully satisfies his rights. The individual's assertion of his rights is, as Hegel puts it elsewhere, the central pivot of history.² To state matters another way, Darby does not seem to take adequately into account the benefits by way of individual satisfaction which accrue from the modern conquest of nature, benefits without which the power and attraction of the modern project seems inexplicable. The modern effort to "better man's estate," in Bacon's phrase, stems not only from demonic hubris but also, arguably, from charity.³ To

VOEGELIN

renounce the modern project too immoderately and unqualifiedly is in our time not without political risk.

It is clear, however that in Professor Darby's eyes the Hegelian synthesis and the satisfaction it claims to install are spurious; and this leads us back to Darby's first, more theoretical criticism of Hegel's secularizing project.

Darby accepts Hegel's or Kojève's claim that man exists in a state of tension, but he rejects their claim that this tension is merely human. For Darby, as for Eric Voegelin, the tension that defines humanity is a tension toward the "divine ground." For Darby, God is dead, not, as for Kojève, because we recognize God as a human artifact and projection, but because we have lost sight of God. According to Darby, following Voegelin, the fundamental human experience is that of the difference between world, man and God, an experience Voegelin calls *metaxy* or in-betweeness. Hegel's attempt to eliminate the tension between man and God abolishes man, not (it is charged) by completing and satisfying him, but by obliterating his access to transcendence.

What might Kojève say in response? According to Kojève all theological discourse, all human reference to God, is ultimately self-contradictory; for it claims access to that which is by definition inaccessible. Voegelin seems to grant as much when he admits in *Anamnesis* that taken literally, the concept of temporal man experiencing eternal being is "unintelligible." And yet, Voegelin goes on to say, neither the temporal being of man nor his experience of divine being can be doubted.⁴ But why can't it be doubted? One wonders whether Voegelin's *metaxy*, which he describes as a loving and hopeful urge toward the divine and as a call and an irruption of grace, does not in the last analysis depend on a religious and even a specifically Christian faith.

Returning from this excursus into the Voegelinean legacy, one is compelled to question whether the best responses to the modern predicament are, as Professor Darby suggests, a Nietzschean assertion of will or a leap of faith.

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Notes

1. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, Baillie trans., p. 87.
2. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, Knox trans., p. 84.
3. On the relation between the modern technological imperative and Christian charity see for example George Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*, Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969, pp. 17-36.
4. Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978, pp. 125-6.