

12-1-2013

Ironic American Exceptionalism and the Myth of the Open Self

Myron Moses Jackson

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, mjackson@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/dissertations>

Recommended Citation

Jackson, Myron Moses, "Ironic American Exceptionalism and the Myth of the Open Self" (2013). *Dissertations*. Paper 778.

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

IRONIC AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE MYTH OF THE OPEN SELF

by

Myron Moses Jackson

B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2004

M.A., Southern Illinois University, 2010

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Philosophy in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
December 2013

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

IRONIC AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE MYTH OF THE OPEN SELF

By

Myron Moses Jackson

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of Philosophy

Approved by:

Dr. Randall E. Auxier, Chair

Dr. Douglas Anderson

Dr. Kenneth Stickers

Dr. Roudy Hildreth

Dr. Joseph Brown

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
November 4, 2013

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

MYRON MOSES JACKSON, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in PHILOSOPHY, presented on November 4, 2013, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: IRONIC AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE MYTH OF THE OPEN SELF

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Randall E. Auxier

This work rethinks current interpretations of American exceptionalism, emphasizing dynamic relations, especially those we could call “ironic.” I am reading Reinhold Niebuhr’s *The Irony of American History* alongside Eric Voegelin’s and Woodrow Wilson’s philosophical and political treatment of freedom, expressed through the ideal of American personhood. American entertainment continues to spread globally, and the spreading creates a wider nexus of efficacious relations, allowing for the interplay of hidden relations and symbolic complexes. “Ironic American exceptionalism,” as I call it, highlights the positive aspects, usually overlooked, provided by “virtual integration” and the spawning of novel cultural hybrids. By “virtual integration,” I mean to include the forms of entertainment that Americans export to the world, including sports, movies, music, etc. I will try to show that popular culture, specifically “entertainment,” in a certain sense of the word, serves to facilitate a mythic consciousness of open selfhood to the world. It is also my contention that open selves are not scientific, religious, political, economic, or otherwise, at least in any limiting sense. When freedom is concentrated under any of these movements or cultural interests solely, then the openness and inclusiveness associated with being “American” (in the sense I will explain) is jeopardized. I want to suggest that popular theories of exceptionalism, those revolving around these limited interests, misconstrue what “Americans,” as exemplary open selves, aspire to be. Assembling symbolic icons, images, and artifacts, consumed widely, generates the pluralization associated with American identity and liberty. The spreading and exporting of these complexes produces novel

hybrids between elitist and low cultural trends, bringing them together in subtle ways. Inquiring into exceptionalism through a philosophy of culture shows that American open selfhood is not peculiarly democratic, Christian, or capitalist. By resisting exemplarist or expansionist exceptionalisms, the “American” service to humanity is exceptional without serving some higher moral cause or false sense of superiority.

DEDICATION

To Jenny, Patty, John, Katie, and Ella

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT	i
DEDICATION	iii
CHAPTERS	
CHAPTER 1 – Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER 2 – Niebuhrian Irony and History	71
CHAPTER 3 – Voegelin’s Appropriation of Schelling	105
CHAPTER 4 – Coming to America: Myth, Symbol, and the Open Self	147
CHAPTER 5 – Wilsonian Paradoxes and the Chosen People	169
BIBLIOGRAPHY	216
VITA	229

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Section 1: Thesis of Argument—Ironic Relations as Central to Value of Open Selves

Enjoying near rock-star status, President Barack Obama was asked by a reporter in Strasbourg, France, if he believed in American Exceptionalism, as was customary of US Presidents. He responded with, “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.”¹ Now, exceptionalism does traditionally imply national superiority or self-congratulations in being the wisest, strongest, richest, or whatever superlative you may choose. But what I seek to convey is an interpretation of American exceptionalism that is “ironic” or open to the hidden and unconscious relations that emerge from the love of freedom and liberty. Identifying a person as “American” should be seen symbolically, in my view, to include anyone who embodies and conveys what Eric Voegelin called the myth of the “open self,” taking the love of freedom as fundamental. This dissertation will attempt to articulate an “ironic American exceptionalism” predicated on the mythic consciousness of open selfhood in this broader sense of “being American.” On my account, “being American” has nothing to do with the nation, constitution, government, or territory but, concurring with Woodrow Wilson’s notion, “Americans,” whether they reside within the borders of the United States, share the same values and rituals, rallying around similar hopes and fears across divergent worlds. “Americans,” in this broader sense, can be recognized as open selves, but open selves need not be American or modern. They have a transhistorical pattern of existence, according to Voegelin, that does not presuppose a certain

¹ Michael D. Shear, “Obama Used Speech to Address America’s Greatness—and His Critics,” *The Caucus—The Politics and Government Blog of the New York Times*, January 27, 2011, http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/27/obama-used-speech-to-address-americas-greatness-and-his-critics/?_r=0 (accessed June 4, 2012).

cultural environment, let alone a particular technocratic culture. We are not in a post-traditional world, but that fact does not minimize the friction that has emerged between Western interpretations and different, non-American and global aspects of modernity. The plentitude of ways of life Americans seek to protect has the power to evoke the principles which we aspire to, in the sense Kant used the term: starting places for thinking. These American principles do not embrace the necessity of an “us vs. them” consciousness as a prerequisite for securing our freedom. In a turn of ironic events, our supposed “social prophets” fail us today while the “people” are crying out for social justice and equality. The situation warrants analysis.

A sincere love of freedom, i.e., the new “America,” should not be in the business of spreading or defending any form of naked capitalism or mere democracy. Contrary to the ideological narratives that feed the various interests of the parties expounding them, I want to tell a story without any overarching agenda, without triumphal metanarratives (or “epic” in Reinhold Niebuhr’s sense of the word). Anyone who claims to have any such story would most likely have only a tale of resistance to hubris or to the vain-glory of any powerful nation or people. American history is unique given that the ideological struggles that engulfed Europe were never adopted wholesale and a widespread cultivation of original communal practices was possible within the sphere of American influence.

The recent reflections of Margaret and William E. Hrezo, writing on the “Myth of America” through an analysis of the “cinema of King Vidor and Robert Altman,” spoke of the paradoxes or “contradictions” that people around the world have attributed to Americans: “Americans may appear to be both idealistic and materialistic, in search of freedom and in search of an escape from freedom, individualistic and conformist, supporters and opponents of

individual civil rights, and equally committed to equality and to status.”² Given these perplexing circumstances, the complexity of American identity and symbolism can be appreciated. This work is an attempt at rethinking current interpretations of American exceptionalism. I emphasize the cultural aspects under the central efficacy of ironic relations. I will read Niebuhr’s *The Irony of American History* alongside Voegelin’s and Woodrow Wilson’s philosophical and political treatment of freedom as expressed through American personhood. I will try to show that popular culture and entertainment serve to facilitate a “mythic consciousness of open selfhood” in “Americans” (in a special and surprising sense of the word) to the world. The contemporary assemblage of symbolic icons, images, and artifacts, as they are consumed widely throughout the contemporary world, generates the pluralization associated with American identity and liberty, and does so far beyond the geographic territory of the United States.

“Ironic American exceptionalism,” as I call it, generates mixtures of low and high cultural forms, or what I call “cultural hybrids,” which transform the historical ways of thinking about self and world that existing images and artifacts have supported. Americans have a knack for bringing everything, from warfare to space exploration, to operating a pawn shop, to appraising antiques, to pathological lifestyles (such as hoarding) into the realm of “entertainment,” broadly construed. The “tropes of entertainment,” we might say, are expanding our structures of expectation, leading to broader complexes of energy and activity. The spreading and exporting of these complexes produces further novel hybrids that exist in the space between elitist and low cultural trends, bringing them together in subtle ways. In short, as the world becomes increasingly American, it also breaks down the barriers between high and low culture. I want to suggest that the previously popular theories of exceptionalism, those revolving around

² Margaret Hrezo and William E. Hrezo, “The Politics of the ‘Open’ Self: America in the Cinema of King Vidor and Robert Altman,” *Studies in Popular Culture*, 32:2 (2010), 68.

military, political, our purely economic versions of exceptionalism, misconstrue what “Americans,” (in a sense to be explained) *as* open selves, aspire to be. Those who favor such accounts of exceptionalism also downplay (or are ignorant regarding) how entertainment is increasingly mediating American cultural rituals, especially as this affects our values and purposes. American entertainment continues to spread, and the spreading creates a wider nexus that allows (or even brings about) the interplay of hidden relations, stirring up analogous symbolic complexes elsewhere in the world. The world comes to be “like America,” whether or not it consciously aims to do so.

Ironical American exceptionalism, such as I will defend, highlights the positive aspects of exceptionalism, which are usually overlooked and which spawn these novel cultural hybrids. An example of such positive aspects I call “virtual integration.” By virtual “integration” I mean to include the forms of entertainment that Americans export throughout the world, such as the sports, movies, music, etc., that depict a world that is far more racially integrated and accepting of difference than we find in the actual United States. People elsewhere in the world do not know that the integration and acceptance of difference depicted in our entertainment media is exaggerated. Such people expect an America that exists mainly in their highly mediated experience, and they imitate it, as they understand it (not as it really is). But more importantly, it is my contention that “entertainment complexes” (this is my terms for these transformative exports) promote the symbolizing of “Americans-as-freedom-loving” to the world. From an inside-out perspective, however, ideology, racism, and segregation continue to be widespread in US neighborhoods, schools, prisons, and so on. The irony of how American citizens actually live, domestically, and its very different portrayal through virtual integration in entertainment media has spawned a worldwide mythic consciousness of open selfhood. In paradoxical ways,

“Americans” (in the special sense) have come to identify more with how they *aspire* to live, through their possibilities, rather than identifying with the ways in which they are being determined by what is actually transpiring.

Freedom, as fundamental to “the American way,” demands that one remain *open* to the possibilities which can shape our personal, social, and cosmological worlds. To all these worlds “Americans” symbolize open selfhood by aspiring to the love of freedom –valuing the intensity of ironic relations (if not the relations themselves)—in which identities, purposes, and objects are held as discernible without being completely discerned. It is a sort of existential optimism. Being an open self-entails taking in the actual world as circumscribed only by possibility, seeing things as in-the-making or open-ended. This is the kind of thinking that sees the prospect for, say, a TV show in the operating of a pawnshop or in the appraisal of an antique. America revels in being the premiere symbol of global democracy and identifies itself as a “cultural melting pot” capable of integrating various customs, ethnicities, social and moral backgrounds into a peaceful cohesion. These more recent sentiments, the sort we hold proudly in America, are extensions of older myths stemming at least partly from Puritanism and the Protestant work ethic.

Elites and non-elites alike have singled out America as a strong and powerful force. But it would be wrong to dismiss the fact that the same can be said of many countries and people; more and more there is nothing unique about America, domestically, in this regard. American open selves do not serve a higher cause than everybody else, but as Wilson wrote, we are in the service of the highest cause we know, i.e., humanity.³

³ Woodrow Wilson, “America Was Born to Serve Mankind,” *The Politics of Woodrow Wilson—Selections from his Speeches and Writings*, ed. August Heckscher, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1970), 279-82.

Power lies not in controlling others or achieving a higher moral standard, but in the world's willingness to empathize with what *it* believes Americans believe, that is, the supposed ability to put themselves in our place, and in our sense of time, and vice versa. These open selves residing within the borders of the USA *see* that the world believes they are better than they are, and in wanting that expectation to be true, they strive after its actuality. America is the place of *non-privilege*: "Men have turned their eyes towards America in order that they might release themselves from the very kind of privilege which we have permitted in some places to grow"⁴ The effects of the hybrids between low and high culture I mentioned above, which ironic American exceptionalism has spawned, need to be analyzed. Unlike the traditional ways of the Old World, American social junkets and status have become far more dynamic today. Or, in the case of indigenous ways of life, we acknowledge our ancestors' culpability in threatening the personal dignity of native peoples. Americans demonstrate such culpability in the ways they understand best: they make movies, write songs, or coach teams. They may write novels and plays, but why settle for a stilted novel when a screenplay would be better? The social tension that develops from the spreading of American low and high culture derives from the emphasis placed on freedom as a major engine of social capital.⁵

Americans, as open selves, promote a culture which values entertainment over all else. This habit of valuation accounts for a significant portion of the critically reflective freedom conveyed in the mentality of "the American way." We can become rich and famous just as fast

⁴ Wilson, *Speeches and Writings*, 181.

⁵ I emphasize conflict to the full extent of broad cultural relations and, therefore, my analysis has parallels of emphasis with Pierre Bourdieu and Peter Sloterdijk. See, Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241-258; and Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital: Towards a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*, trans. Wieland Hoban, (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013).

as we can become bankrupt and forgotten. New social forces have been unleashed and have been re-enforced through new forms of interaction. These new forces generate fresh possibilities for our identities, values, and purposes. It is simply not accidental that Facebook, for example, was invented by an American college student. The expectation, that where a possible connection can become a virtual connection and a virtual connection can become an actual connection, is the epitome of what is meant by the phrase “the American way.” Open selves are neither socially estranged nor perpetually in crisis, as are the alternative forms of selfhood in common modern forms of criticism today. It is not that the open self is uncritical; it is rather that it expects critical reflection to be a constructive and inevitable part of its own self-creative process. This view may appear naïve to cynical or Old World selves, but the effect of American open selfhood upon the world, even the Old World, is undeniable. Enhanced engagement through phenomena such as “virtual integration” makes possible a diminishing reliance on traditional categories. Such an engagement determines in advance how we must identify ourselves. No basic social blueprint or ideology can provide a prefabricated vision of what an open self is or should become. Who is Cher or Madonna or Michael Jackson or Tim Tebow apart from who they can make themselves be in the eyes of others? It is an art of understanding something about how others already see you, as a self, in light of who you *could be*, are *expected to be*, or better yet, are *not* expected to be. Accepting the reality of ironic relations as the basis of American open selfhood is a form of resistance against the idols of prevalent worldviews –the soldier, the economist, the diplomat, the CEO, the politician. Americans want to see Bill Clinton wail on the saxophone, and *then* they may listen to his ideas, if he’s pretty good. Reagan’s chief failing was *not* his economic theories, it was being a below average actor. These competing selves, vying for the ownership of American exceptionalism, have limited or impoverished accounts of freedom.

Because I assume the love of freedom to be fundamental to American open selves, people who insist upon these narrower alternatives (soldiers, politicians, etc.) are having crippling effects on our interpretations of these dynamic cultural relations. Academicians who attempt to “theorize America” using these tropes are missing the center of the phenomenon. The open self of ironic American exceptionalism has to be seen in distinction from “rationalized” selves, those theorizers of America, and I would include the standard self-types listed above under the heading of rationalized selves. Both William James and Voegelin warned against this sort of rationalizing; they deal in types of closed or lost selves. Lost selves subscribe to dogmatic exceptionalisms, with the extremist impulses that underlie a closed mythic consciousness. Through their skeptical or dogmatic attitudes such theorists produce antagonistic relations with others and damage their own ethical fiber. In admitting the exceptionalism of “being American,” there is a resistance against such self-triumphalism and national aggrandizement, which has wrongly been taken for American self-doubt. After all, the theorizers trade upon the hermeneutics of suspicion. They are hardly patriotic.⁶

The truth is that Americans are not remarkable at enacting the traditional essentialist roles of soldier, politician, economist, etc. They rise above mediocrity only in insisting that the traditional roles could be, and indeed *should* be, held up to the standard of excellent cultural enactment. Whether Alan Greenspan is a good economist is secondary to whether he is an interesting person –a man with a car collection better than Jay Leno’s, or a hobby of designing model trains raised to a ridiculous level of enthusiasm like Neil Young. The world could forgive the man for having bad theories, but not for failing to be interesting. In the long run, the fact that

⁶ Richard Rorty critiques what he deems to be the worthlessness of the academic left in *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1998), 27, 56-64, 128.

General David Petraeus “won the war in Iraq” and had a salacious affair with his biographer is better than just winning the war. The General is humanized and becomes a self for others rather than enacting an essence as a military leader.

We confront exceptionalism through a philosophy of culture, seeking to show that American open selfhood is not exclusively democratic, Christian, or capitalist. It is also my contention that open selves are not exclusively scientific, religious, political, economic, nor otherwise. When freedom is concentrated under any of these more limited movements, or to any set of cultural interests, solely, then the openness and inclusiveness associated with “being American” is jeopardized. Richness in the efficacy of images, icons, and cultural semiotics increasingly serves the cultural aims and interests behind ironic American exceptionalism. Irony, an appropriate interpretative trope for the open selfhood of America, respects the subtleties and nuances of dynamic relations. Living in a pluralistic, conflict-ridden world impresses on us the need not only to be familiar with conscious contingencies but enjoins us to recognize what is hidden from us, or unconscious, as well. That is why my interpretation is called Ironic American Exceptionalism, as predicated on the mythic consciousness of open selves. Cultural maintenance and engagement need to be in sync or at least conducive to the complex of aims and processes of the individual symbolic forms or interests. The autonomy of economics, science, art, religion, and so on, concern agencies and objects that cannot come at the cost of cultural considerations in this broad sense. “The consideration of cultural objects and agency, though important, will be subordinated to the analysis of the cultural aims which define a civilized society and the cultural interests which implement those aims.”⁷ The organic relatedness of the broader aims and the satisfactions of culture comes through the

⁷ David L. Hall, *The Civilization of Experience—A Whiteheadian Theory of Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1973), 79.

enfranchisement of cultural interests, without a necessary order of relevance or importance. So American exceptionalism has facets which are political or economic, but it is first and foremost cultural. Also, with the belief in certain symbolic forms of culture as the key to our freedom, we are left with the potential for destroying culture more than creating it. For a world that puts so much emphasis on socio-economic conditions as the key indicator for gauging the quality of one's life, for example, there is the drawback that we live, on that basis, in too small a world.

Introduction Section 2: Unrest over the Future of American Exceptionalism

There is a narrow understanding of the factors that influence American exceptionalism. The issues are presumed to be only political, economic, religious, and/or historical. Yet, there is a broad sphere of social activity which has moved from the traditional notion of "leisure" to the more contemporary category of entertainment. The change may be related to the globalization of electronically transmitted mass culture. People are increasingly engaging the world through the means of virtual, technological exchange, and increasingly these media have interceded in "politics" and "history" and "economics," as traditionally understood. Nowadays "history" is the History Channel and Wikipedia, while "politics" ranges from CSPAN to the endless sparring between Rupert Murdoch's companies and CBS, Inc., but these intervening media are driven by the idea of entertainment first and are only secondarily concerned with norms that might be associated with "good economics" or "good history," and so forth. That is why exceptionalism must now be understood in the sense of popular culture.

If we define it in the broad sense, as Alfred North Whitehead does (according to Susanne Langer at least), then entertainment is "what one does with one's freedom."⁸ Freedom in the

⁸ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 405.

widest sense captures the entanglement of issues *as they are experienced* in a pluralistic and conflict-ridden world. Cultural forms, such as politics, history, economics, science, and the like, can be treated singularly so long as this limited applicability is specified. No single cultural interest is reducible to culture itself, despite the fact that each cultural interest can be viewed individually as comprising determinate wholes, the “horizon of science,” or of history, and so on. The approach to culture by way of entertainment is conducive to a non-reductionist valuation of our cultural aims and interests. Rorty uses the notion of exceptionalism in attacking the tendency of the American “left” to turn all issues into political and economic problems. While Rorty is correct in identifying these short-comings as continuing to motivate intellectual elites, he does not address the pertinent *philosophical* issues. Where are we to go from here regarding American exceptionalism? Are we to settle where Rorty’s critique leaves us?

I contend that these are not the only alternatives. I will provide a sketch of an American exceptionalism that is motivated by ironic relations, through cultural exchange in a global context. Issues among diverse power structures are emerging as more interrelated in the present global context, which generates a surprising mutual influence amongst the weakest and most powerful nations. The impact of globalization on small or undeveloped nations, for instance, is further evidence of this mutual influence. One can, after all, watch the World Wrestling Federation in Micronesia. All nations, rich and poor, are more interdependent than ever. Despite being seen as spoiled and affluent, through globalization, American prerogatives have also become tied to the struggles of the oppressed and disinherited. The levels of political, commercial, and economic integration are unprecedented at the dawn of the twenty-first century and these prerogatives have been amplified through the development and spread of information technologies.

What I suggest about American exceptionalism is that its symbolic complexes have long been a part of American identity and experiential consciousness. These symbols are adaptable to our new situation in the present in ways that are uniquely relevant to the aspirations of “Americans” all over the world. Being American, in this day, is not predicated on viewing the love of liberty or freedom as a type of “global initiative.” The quasi-imperialist urges of the creators of Disneyworld are not integral to the functional sense of “America” or what makes it exceptional, in my view.

As a “superpower for freedom,” the cause of “America,” in the broadest sense is to be in the service of mankind, as Wilson suggests. The exceptionalism of America lies not in its moral or economic leadership but, ironically, in being a servant to the meek of the earth. President Wilson articulated this interpretation of America politically, which I now adopt *culturally* for the purposes of this study. The emphasis on culture recognizes the prevalence of cultural *rituals* through the dominant modes of entertainment within American social interactions, insofar as these agents and agencies are understood as open selves. Such cultural rituals (including those associated with sports, music, and film) should be kept in mind by those who, in the future, want to sustain both our social enjoyment and our energy.

Thus, an explicit norm, that I endorse for this analysis, is that social enjoyment and energy are to be preferred over cultural rituals that close off our prospects of such enjoyment. This assertion is unapologetically normative. Further, these pluralistic practices are not only sustained in progressive social situations, but also are open to subsequent interpretations under varied valuations and experiences. Value can be spawned through the assimilation of *any* cultural image or artifact, provided that the assimilation is open, in the relevant sense. Hence Naziism is closed while the democratic republic is likely to be open.

Such is the character of a cultural freedom that is not abstract and which does not use abstractions to justify its explanations. The ontologies come from the *enacted* cultural freedom (such as we would normally call “entertainment”), but such sources could just as easily be interpreted the other way around. Some would see the enactments as driving the ontology, but I will characterize the ontology as deriving from these cultural enactments. It is not the cultural ontology that makes us free but how we *actually* choose to live and integrate in our worlds that create the conditions for any abstract analysis of culture. Such a perspective adds to the “plurality of middles” or stories of endearment. We ought to take these interpretations at their cash-value, without simply glossing over and categorizing them for reductionist purposes; this is the task at hand because cultural objects and agents are disclosed in these interpretative experiences. Open selfhood is not derivative of or wedded to some totalized vision of social and personal values. Rather, open selves move within the possibilities offered by various worldviews without adopting just one. Interests, values, identities, and purposes should be culturally pluralized to avoid the inertia that limits either traditionalist or modernist preferences. One’s preferred values should be seen dynamically, as non-fixed and fallible, in the mode of being-in-the-making rather than *already made*. Resisting this crystallization of one’s center of values, an open self seeks to recommit his or her attitudes in ways conducive to the possibility of reflective experience, not that reflection is required.

As a philosophical interpretation of American exceptionalism from broad cultural and historical views, this dissertation seeks to examine the symbolic features of culture that are governed by the dynamics of what I call “ironic relations,” a term I understand in a sense indebted to F. W. J. Schelling and Reinhold Niebuhr. Given the scope of the topic, a single methodology will not serve; hence, my several methods –cultural history, dialectical criticism,

operational and functional (i.e., non-essentialist) analysis, and others—are pertinent to the topic. It is not a stretch to say that this inquiry can, and often has, taken up an unusual grouping of topics, including topics many philosophers consider unimportant. But as I will try to stress, many “fringe” phenomena have been ignored or downplayed by those interested in issues related to US exceptionalism. These merely popular phenomena, such as Hollywood movies, massive sporting spectacles, and the enthusiastic revelry of the modern pop music concert, are usually subsumed under a larger category by most philosophers, whether it is economic, political, technological, or other category of mass culture. But there have been major shifts occurring throughout the landscape that cannot be adequately explained using such generic conventions. Much of the America symbolic and ritualistic texture has not been taken seriously, mainly due to the limited biases of these traditional categorizations. Amplifying the ways in which the tropes of mass entertainment, along with their vast networking, serves to spread the mythic consciousness of what it is like to “be American.” This amplification will go a long way toward critiquing the standard interpretations of American exceptionalism. I will expose these interpretations for their shortcomings.

“Crystallization” is the technique of the ideologue or dogmatist who adopts views with absolute certainty.⁹ Those who associate the freedom of open selfhood exclusively with capitalism, democracy, or any ideology parasitic upon them, tend to produce “lost selves” who find their loyalties in blind creeds. Lost selves attach themselves to creeds and causes blindly, falsely believing that some predetermined end will guarantee their freedom. In truth, the pluralizing of ends is the best security an ironic self can hope to have. So by arguing for the

⁹ For analysis of Jacques Ellul’s notion of “psychological crystallization,” see, *Propaganda—The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 162-168.

pluralization of ends and interests of culture, I aim not only to respect the autonomy of others but also to resist the disinclination of lost selves toward others' identities and the stories they have to offer. Pluralization of the relevant sort is not simply an attempt to be tolerant, or *not intolerant*, but rather an effort to be actively inclusive and open in practice. At a theoretical level, we can get overly focused convictions that, in their effects, diminish the possibilities for living our lives we would be prone to accept. No necessary, theoretical framework or approach can account for the features and conditions that are compatible with open selfhood, as understood through my concept of ironic American exceptionalism. I have chosen the name for this mass phenomenon, but hundreds of millions, perhaps billions of people think this way.

To associate this ironic American exceptionalism with a global communalism is as damaging as it is popular today, among the theorists of politics and social life. The aim here is not to say "We Are the World, We Are the Children . . ." My contention is that many have confused open selfhood with a cultural indifference of a sort that results from a disengaged consciousness. If you have to be a celebrity to say "We are the world," then you aren't the world. The move to open selfhood is not the unreserved praise of the cult of celebrity. On the other hand, the condemnation of American entertainment as "shallow" misses much of what open selfhood can teach. Despite the widespread appeal of a love of freedom there remains a loud chorus who deny it should be called "American." The problem with this loyalty to "world-consciousness," as Schelling and Whitehead call it, is that it treats otherness unfavorably: "individuals are indifferent because [they are] unknown."¹⁰ An undifferentiated mass self is no genuine self at all. One way we can account for this breadth of variation among the theorists of

¹⁰ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 41.

cultural globalization is through their shared love of freedom spread through the symbolic energy and cultural ironies of “Americans” on every shore.

Thus, we cannot mistake a non-dogmatic exceptionalism and eschatological openness for “global governance” or some other abstraction so typical in the literature. I argue from my interpretation of the empirical evidence rather than trying a priori to convince anyone that this is the best alternative available.

Americans lead the world in promoting culturally generated images and artifacts, and I also take entertainment to be the primary export of the US. But more importantly, entertainment rituals, such as are disseminated through American popular culture, have the tendency to expose more people to adversarial or foreign images and symbolisms. There is an invasive (and, to many, disturbing) character in American popular culture, but it is also infectious and difficult to stop. Cultural conditions and factors, promoted through American entertainment complexes, leave none ignorant or uninformed about competing values or their limitations. “Americans,” as I use the term in the broad sense, cultivate social parameters conducive to freedom and inclusiveness, which is the hallmark of open selves.

The dominant narratives of Western power blocs, in contrast to those of the open selves, have championed freedom in static fashion. The dynamic notion of freedom, on the other hand, is not exclusively a European or even Western kind of exceptionalism. The dynamic notion of freedom is not “Americanism” in the sense Martin Heidegger uses the term, nor “is [it] something European, stemming from European metaphysics.”¹¹ Nor is the conception of freedom “global” in the generic sense of a faceless diversity conducive to political correctness. Contrary to the ideological narratives that feed the various interests of the political parties that

¹¹ Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 158.

expound such faceless diversity, Niebuhr is an example of those who seek to tell a story of history without any overarching agenda. Where Heidegger has an epic of the West and its decline, Niebuhr has the drama of the self and its dialogical relations with others, God, and self. The latter is conducive to freedom as open selves understand it. If we can claim that he, along with such thinkers as Schelling and Voegelin, has an agenda, then it would most likely lie in resistance to the hubris or the vain-glory to which any powerful nation or people is susceptible. American history is unique given that the ideological struggles that engulfed Europe were never widespread in the US, and there was less disruption of communal practices.

James Madison, for instance, offers a theoretical justification commensurate with the diverse social forms which have largely shaped American identity and legacy. But he is unfortunately not consistently read as a *pluralist*. Taken out of their context, arguments from *Federalist* ten, forty-four, or fifty-one, for example, can be read merely as a structural design for the constitutional framework.¹² Or the *Federalist* can be read, superficially, as representing a sociological account of the importance of American diversity today. Instead of readings such as these, and along with Niebuhr, I want to suggest that the *implications* of Madison's arguments are more aligned with American symbolic and experiential formation. "Americans" who live in constructive dialogical relations with themselves, with others, and with the divine, have energies, values, and resources at their disposal to resolve issues that arise from their own divided loyalties. That is the meaning of the "plural sovereignty" Madison defended as a safeguard against extremism and forms of closedness. This political philosophy is also advocated by Niebuhr and it is a key aspect of ironic American exceptionalism. The recognition of the

¹² Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, in *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 43, ed. Mortimer J. Adler (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

significance of the individual as the basis of power over forms of government or social classes lies at the heart of Madison's appeals to liberty. Traditional political philosophy has systematized and appropriated power under these formalizing structures, but without accounting for the individual's freedom, in the sense that these new "Americans" appropriate it. Open selves need not study American history or political philosophy to grasp the formation underway in the American experience. Niebuhr argues for the superiority of the American experience as a "triumph over [the] dogma," of the sort that characterizes both classical political philosophy and modern European democracies.

Following the logic of Madison's notion of plural sovereignty, Niebuhr details the ironic structure underlying the American balance of power. He states, "[...] the political philosophy which underlies our Constitution is characterized by a shrewd awareness of the potential conflicts of power and passion in every community. It knows nothing of a simple harmony in society, analogous to the alleged reciprocity of the free market."¹³ The factors that create a stable development of civilization (represented through "America") cannot be explained by nor reduced to economic, political, or military accounts. Sincere lovers of freedom should not be in the business of spreading or defending any form of naked capitalism or mere democracy. Unfortunately, the agenda of globalization has marketed itself in just this form and appears to be "open" to traditionally Western values, but it is not open to much else. Establishing the "union of America" is not only a novelty in political history but it is a system designed not to constrain future generations; rather, it calls forth their ability to self-govern. The "union of American" is a fallibilistic and non-superstitious approach to legitimate authority, and it proceeds without being

¹³ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 98.

oriented toward any dogma. Such a union embodies a faith in the dignity of persons under providence.

Economic concerns dominate the agendas of lawmakers and leaders in US politics. The likely impact on future economic prospects appears largely negative. With the national deficit growing, not to mention the risks of not meeting US debt and pledge obligations, it appears that the US is taking on such a heavy financial burden that there are no remedies in sight. One would think that “Americans” are sunk by these bleak conditions and prospects. Is the dominance of economics, as a symbolic form, contributing to this crippling effect? Have we not made ourselves slaves to a world where everything is turned into a commodity? Open selves recognize that anything can be made into a commodity, but that does not mean everything is wholly commodifiable. Theories of American exceptionalism generally account for the luxury and power that accompanies the vast lands, resources, and subsequent privilege that the concept of “Americans” symbolizes to the world. These conditions we associate with the “American” have been historically compatible with capitalistic principles and practices. People exaggerate their own contributions to accounting for the privilege of what make Americans “Americans.” There is the myth of the worker, or the farmer, or the investor, or the entrepreneur, or the captains of industry, or the pioneer, or the cowboy, or the inventor, on whose back America was built. All of them supposedly “built this country.” It is more fantasy than reality.

Niebuhr’s views on irony are a testament against the vanity associated with “rugged individualism.” The “blessings bestowed on America” are not simply the result of a collective effort and/or personal sacrifices or acts of heroism. Every “people” has its stars and villains and they are held up as prototypes that express certain sentiments and lasting legacies. For every Billy the Kid there is a Robin Hood or a Ned Kelly, and the same is true with any other

archetypal role a people needs to fill with a legend of its own. But what “Americans” in the new sense acknowledge is that they are blessed in unprecedented ways. An American, in the old sense of the word, wastes more resources in a day than most of the people in history have been able to enjoy. That image of unimaginable resources has been the initial source of attraction for many in the world. It is historically undeniable that the exploitation of those resources made possible the “American myth” that grew in minds of so many potential “Americans,” some of whom, like Voegelin, were so deeply moved that they left their ancestral homes to become Americans in the geographical sense of the word. But many more remained where they were and dreamed. Those dreams came to fruition in the assurances of Wilson that “Americans” are everywhere.

Many of our world’s advantages and blessings remain largely unknown to us, including the reasons why some commodities sell and others fail. As Niebuhr rightly contends (regarding American prosperity), “[w]e never dreamed that we would have as much political power as we possess today; nor for that matter did we anticipate that the most powerful nation on earth would suffer such an ironic refutation of its dreams of mastering history.”¹⁴ But the refutation applies to the political, economic, and military forms of the American dream. While old style Americans dreamed of the old type of empire, the (new) “Americans” were creating a culture they believed was a by-product of their political way of life. But it was that culture, itself, that Americans were contributing to the “drama of history,” in Niebuhr’s sense. Even the founding political documents and the framers of the republic have become cultural icons, more akin to celebrities than to world historical individuals.

¹⁴ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 69.

The Americans themselves, in the geographical sense, still treat their framers as the subjects of gossip and tabloid exposé.¹⁵ They see no irony in this, but the wider world of “Americans” knows that George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are first and foremost superstars. They also happened to be political leaders. If the world disliked George W. Bush but loves Barack Obama, could the difference be which of the two gleams with star quality? It would be unwise to dismiss these characteristics in assessing the two leaders.

Moving from the political to the economic domain, it is naïve to claim that success comes from one’s superior talents or a magic formula. When confronted with the probabilistic models popular in the stock market today, the claim to success looks like gambling. Ironical American exceptionalism contends that to “be American” is to acknowledge a kind of privilege which cannot be fully accounted for or self-justified. We might call this phenomenon the “Bush complex,” or any other name that would characterize those who seek to overcome their own privilege. The wealth and security enjoyed by me and you can just as easily be the blessing and curse of somebody else. Being American today, in the geographic sense, comes with accepting that much of our success lands in our laps and is not something fully within our command. Advocates of the capitalist-democratic self often flirt with dogmatic prejudice by putting their values and role-models on a false pedestal, overlooking the incomprehensible patterns of history, according to Niebuhr. Niebuhr cautions:

The impulse to falsify the facts in order to bring them into a comprehensible pattern assails the scientists who try to manage detailed facts and small patterns. Another analogous temptation assails the philosophers and ontologists who try to make sense out of the larger patterns of history and to comprehend the whole drama of history as meaningful. Naturally the mind is baffled by the seeming confusion of the historical

¹⁵ The extensive literature on Thomas Jefferson’s affair with Sally Hemmings is only one example of what I mean here. Perhaps he was gay instead –as has been alleged in still more recent literature.

drama, devoid of the next endings, whether tragic or happy, which art gives to the various dramas of history in order to endow them with comprehensible conclusions.¹⁶

There is a dark underside to many of the global initiatives of American exceptionalism. They are the actions of a hegemonic superpower. Policies associated with both economic and national security strategies seem to drive the agendas of those who see “being American” only in this light. Power structures like the government, or corporate entities and transnational organizations, are esteemed as the carriers of the core beliefs and values of “America” as a hegemonic superpower. In my view, American power does not lie in being the moral conscience or the leader of the free world, or in being the leaders of globalized commercialization. Still there is an exceptionalism that thrives in American identity and its symbolizations. This vitality is not simply political, moral, or economic, as maintained by the advocates of a widespread fundamentalist and anti-American propaganda.

The French, for example, may hate the American government, but they line up around the block to see Stephen Spielberg’s latest movie or to buy “le Big Mac.” The statistical indicators that support such views supply anti-American detractors with stories of what America, or any other nation or state “is,” including what they have the potential to become. But how can anyone with common sense claim (during these trying times) that America has its military, economic, or even social “house” in order? Obviously these statistical stories are not the source of America’s influence on the world. At most, they are a measurement *of* that influence. Traditional categories within these statistical methods are showing a declining and bleak forecast of America’s ability to lead in these vital areas of international relations.

We have recently entered dire economic times, mirroring the devastation that most people compare with the Great Depression. European instability caused much panic in 2012 as

¹⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), 49.

countries like Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, and especially Greece spawned unparalleled financial collapses. On average, a Greek citizen owed in debt \$39,384, while an Italian was burdened with \$41,645.¹⁷ As US leaders warned that we were on the brink of repeating these problems domestically, who could overlook the fact that average Americans owed \$53,378.00 per person in debt? Even with the use of bailout packages, or raising the debt ceiling, economic hardships have almost been assured for future generations who will incur these costs. The future prospects of the nation state of America look catastrophic. We find no shortage of politicians attempting to exploit the fact.

Yet, are all benefiting from the “fringe” of culture exhibited in the prevalent entertaining rituals. Some may dismiss these rituals out of hand as a coping mechanism. Also, to ignore the “fringe” factors of culture overlooks many phenomena and experiences of the world. In an effort to be more empirical, I suggest that it is too often the case that these categories are used as poor substitutes for what Voegelin alludes to as the “plurality of middles”—stories already going on that we offer the world as accretions of value. These are stories that symbolize, in various and ironic ways, our identities, purposes, and attitudes that are proffered through the leading entertainment rituals that characterize the cultural complexes that Americans spread and enjoy. Given this tendency to focus on “the numbers,” many have precluded important data from qualitative assessments about American exceptionalism. Instead, they focus on *only* traditional economic, political, or demographic categories.

Is relying on the same predictable indicators telling us anything new about our world? This regrettable habit has resulted in leadership which looks marginalized or at least out of touch

¹⁷ Daniel Halper, ‘U.S. Per Person Debt Now 35 Percent Higher than that of Greece,’ *The Weekly Standard* (blog), November 5, 2012 (4:27 p.m.), http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/us-person-debt-now-35-percent-higher-greece_660409.html.

with the prevalent cultural practices. As Andrew Bacevich shows, if our leaders were to mention Hollywood or academic institutions becoming centers of “edutainment”—essentially highlighting the importance of popular culture—it would be to rail against or criticize it. If these aspects of culture are to be emphasized *at all* it is too often in the form of the accusation of moral wrong-doing. The value of entertainment gets downplayed since it is seen as contributing to an immoral and wasteful culture.

Several dismal factors are increasing the burden being felt economically and elsewhere as contributors to our negative attitudes. An unfortunate amount of cultural pessimism continues to distort the anticipations of the future for American exceptionalism. Yet with these pessimistic attitudes come an awareness of and a gratitude toward the freedom Americans take as fundamental. Even a cynical or socially apathetic people largely recognize that they live in one of the freest and most developed times in human history. American liberty is a leading symbol of this unprecedented privilege. In times when the Western world, especially the US, looks weak and declining, the pulse of freedom still beats loudly through virtualized entertainment. Not only are these domains of social interaction growing in importance, but they also reveal how the creation of culture can happen at very basic levels. While many have focused on the destructive aspects of entertainment culture, I aim to highlight what is positive and constructive in its contribution to sustaining culture, especially open selfhood and the love of freedom. Anxiety about the future prospects of American exceptionalism is overburdened due to the neglect of pertinent cultural phenomena. Movies, video games, sports, and music have allowed many to turn away from the political and social criticism. In spite of appearances, that turn may be a positive indicator of a better future.

Introduction Section 3: Cultural Hermeneutics of Present Culture Interpreting Past Culture to Future Culture

For the purposes of this dissertation, I will employ David L. Hall's notion of "cultural agency [which] may be construed both in terms of the processes of active centers of decision and in terms of the aims providing the criteria in accordance with which the decisions are made."¹⁸ This is called "civilizational ethics." The cultural aims pursued and prized by a persons are expressed most vividly by analyzing and interpreting their prevailing attitudes and sentiments with regard to the criteria presented above. The questions and problems of eschatology, historiography, and cultural hermeneutics are as pressing as ever and it is with attention to these themes that I put forth my claims. It is not that the issues considered by other scholars are not important or rewarding. On the contrary, we need those studies and arguments for their alternative perspectives. But much difficulty ensues. Is the integrity of such views questionable? Is it artificial?.

The use of irony in philosophy has served both heuristic and revelatory ends. Richard Rorty advances a portrait of "the ironist" whose openness toward contingent, unforeseen relations is insured by his commitment to eschew any finality of vocabulary.¹⁹ In his view, the "dangers of metaphysics" can be avoided by not committing oneself to the totalizing language which metaphysics presupposes. Irony, in this account, is an important interpretative lens capable of alerting us to the limits of those elusive factors that unconsciously affect our valuation and appropriation of completed relations. Denying full or total consciousness to the actors who are the centers of meaning within the show is the over-riding purpose of ironic prose. We

¹⁸ David L. Hall, *The Civilization of Experience—A Whiteheadian Theory of Culture*, 79.

¹⁹ See, Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

recognize limitation in knowing as a condition of being open to possibility in concrete existence. This does not mean that American exceptionalism needs to fall into a self-caricature, which either ignores or takes for granted the nuances irony has to offer. Against a view like Rorty's, Niebuhr seeks to evaluate moral right and wrong-doing in social, economic, or political behavior on individual and institutional levels. As Randall Auxier notes in his analysis of Josiah Royce, comparing Niebuhr's philosophy with Royce's, "Niebuhr famously observed that we tolerate behavior from groups, notably institutions such as nations and churches, behavior of a sort we would never condone from human individuals. He [Niebuhr] believed that nothing could be done about this –groups are incorrigible, and individuals, through the prophetic stance, would always need to set themselves against the immoral behavior of groups."²⁰

Interpreting events and people in history with regard to their contribution and meaning, such that it emphasizes an inside-out perspective drives Niebuhr's analysis. In order to capture our own attention, we tell ourselves or identify with certain stories that can have bearing on how we perceive others as these others view our experiences. Organic narratives serve as the model by which we collect and convey the believed relevant details and information. For advocates as well as opponents of American exceptionalism, there is much at stake in being able to possess or manipulate the accepted story of America. The dangerous or short-sighted popular accounts of American exceptionalism suffer from utopianisms variously distorted by either championing America as superior through exemplarism or being driven to aggressive responses given the uncertainties of the globe by advocating expansionism.

Open selves will negotiate, synchronize, and challenge these cultural presuppositions in their bid for freedom. One who recognizes the limitations of one's own traditions is aspiring

²⁰ Randall E. Auxier, *Time, Will, and Purpose* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 2013), 201.

toward open selfhood. Expanding the cultural matrices of engagement, *through others*, is what Americans are called to do. This does not mean acting simply for some political, economic, and technological gain. Such action should not be for the sake of national expediency or self-interest, open to immigrants or outsiders. Spreading democracy and capitalism around comes at the cost of giving the appearance of hypocritical self-righteousness. Human rights support and protections must be aimed at the benefit of those who are persecuted and not used as a front to promote stronger economic benefits and ties. Unfortunately, much of what the World Bank or International Monetary Fund (IMF), as Western international organizations represent, has been tainted by the suspicion of hidden motives. Looking at potential Americans (as social capital or as hostile to one's domestic livelihood) trades in or eclipses cultural freedom in exchange for cheap political, economic, and geo-strategic values. Open selves adopt mutual engagement, interacting with foreigners because it is not simply a one-way street, like many who are saturated in Western ideals usually believe.

A host of problematic positions is offered for interpreting American exceptionalism today. There is self-centeredness, self-appointed glory, and a host of other narcissisms. This habitual ethos of self-aggrandizement has become a mainstay of current nationalistic tendencies. Such people argue either for American exemplarism or expansionism, and they emphasize economic and technological supremacy. On the contrary, I argue that to be an American exceptionalist is to strive for freedom, teleologically, according to the critical method where *possibility* circumscribes actuality. Our "American" love of liberty serves as a symbol for social inclusion and tolerance, not only for building a larger, stronger community but one which comes to be manifest from a plurality of forms and values. The powers of memory, imagination, and interpretation extend through the investigation of vast fields of cultural practices and symbols.

As the richness and intensity of various cultures are accepted on its own merits we also strive toward a threshold of tolerance and respect, symbolic of how Americans expect to be treated.

In mirroring the vigorousness of life, philosophy endures as a creative enterprise. This awakening of the philosophical sensibility puts us in the place of an uninformed questioner, without the pretensions of certainty. To accept this role for philosophy as a cultural symbolic form, is part and parcel of the myth of the open self. The lover of wisdom moves congenially yet seamlessly through the terrain of culture. With an authentic questioning comes the openness to indefinite revision. This commitment is a commitment to the pragmatic method. Besides, philosophical inquiry is situated in its own historical problematic, regardless of its desire to be otherwise. Schelling confirmed this radical pluralism when he accepted the idea that all philosophical systems are true insofar as they are incomplete. “This is not just a matter of philosophical method. Philosophical speculation has no finality, because the world within which (as well as about which) the philosopher speculates has no finality.”²¹

Any event can be experienced in an indefinite number of ways; life and death, symbolized by the mortality of man and the everlastingness of the divine, are two sides of the same reality. Schelling’s philosophy of freedom hinges on that “conspiracy of life” which reaches beyond and within life and death, where paradox is the genetic basis of all existence. When it comes to philosophical inquiries analogical and indexical meanings should drive the parameters of the analysis. “Such an operationalist approach to culture emphasizes function over

²¹ Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 145-47. Shaviro notes about the openness of philosophy, “This is why it is so crucial that, in the course of systematizing and generalizing, we must incorporate antagonistic perspectives without explaining any of them away, and also without reconciling them in a spurious sublation or higher unity.”

status, an emphasis which has been vigorously criticized by many theorists of culture because of its failure to allow to philosophy, or to any cultural enterprise, a normative function.”²²

This study presents an ontology of culture and philosophy of history capable of accounting for the dynamic and robust factors American exceptionalism. As a hypothetical hermeneutics of culture, it is offered for the sake of challenging existing approaches as overly narrow and ideologically motivated. If I highlight the significance of entertainment (through popular culture), I can call attention to the healthier aspects of an American exceptionalism. Such an approach is not only ironic, but predicated on the (constructive) myth of open selfhood. Those who subscribe to dogmatic versions of American exceptionalism argue for a renewal of culture rooted in a distant past or dreamy future. The feeling of being threatened by current trends of popular culture, i.e., the precariousness of the blurry lines between high and low culture, may lead to an anxiety about whether “our” greatness has been either lost or still needs to be gained. I will argue for the value and benefits of ironic American exceptionalism, rooted in open selfhood, yet during a time when ridicule and pessimism outweigh any hope for its success. Being an American exceptionalist, on this view, means that one is loyal to the love of freedom over any other considerations. Freedom is hard and uncertain; while many will make a mockery of it by substituting some criterion as its guarantee or basis, this position misconstrues what it means to be free existentially. Rather than being just external or outside-in, the freedom “Americans” symbolize to themselves, and to the world, and the freedom they value, comes from the inside-out. Therefore, it is just as likely as not that whatever one deems to be a prerequisite to freedom can enslave us as well as liberate us.

Freedom may be meaningfully applied to the human person considered as permanent through time in three senses—two weak, one strong. In the strong sense, the human self

²² David L. Hall, *The Civilization of Experience*, 18.

is free insofar as its presiding occasion is able to produce and integrate novel data, deciding among a variety of possible alternatives. In the weak senses there is freedom insofar as the self is disposed to act by virtue of free decisions of the past occasions in the temporal sequence of which it is a part and insofar as it is *predisposed* to act for the same reason. These two latter senses of freedom provide the foundation in Whiteheadian metaphysics for the approval of certain forms of routine, habit, discipline, custom, moral codes, introjected values, etc.²³

Such an account is a metaphysical description of what I aim to describe in more concrete terms in the subsequent sections of this dissertation.

Introduction Section 4: Philosophy of Culture from a Voegelinian Perspective

The final project of Voegelin's thirty-four volume *Collected Works* series was completed in 2009 with the publication of his *Selected Correspondence, 1924-1949*. In his introduction, editor Jürgen Gebhardt writes, "The American experience taught him that the Atlantic was a border between two prevalent mental forms: He distinguished the American notion of the 'open self' from the European 'closed self.' The American principle of mental 'openness' that embraces the whole of reality became the leitmotif of his philosophizing. . . . This self-reflective open-mindedness accounted for Voegelin's rigorously maintained intellectual independence and his resistance to certain ideological temptations that he would encounter in later years."²⁴

Voegelin's notion of the open self should be distinguished from the "open society" found in the philosophies of Karl Popper and Henri Bergson. Although Voegelin sympathizes with Bergson's philosophical orientation much more than Popper's, his articulation of open selfhood can be read as a critique of the versions found in Bergson and Popper. With the *Open Society and Its Enemies*, we find what Voegelin labels "dilettantish ideological rubbish" as an interpretation of Plato's political philosophy; it is more consistent with propaganda. Voegelin is

²³ David L. Hall, *The Civilization of Experience*, 66-7.

²⁴ Jürgen Gebhardt, introduction to *Selected Correspondence, 1924-1949*, vol. 29, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* [hereinafter *CW* followed by volume number], ed. Jürgen Gebhardt (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 9.

very harsh in his assessment and equates reading this book with wasting precious time. Popper argues that Plato's *Republic* is totalitarian and appeals today only to those with anti-democratic prerogatives. The construction of Plato's second city or "city in speech" is the social blueprint that Popper associates with the legacy of Platonic philosophy. Not being concerned with the genuine intentions of Plato, Popper considers only contemporary appraisals relevant to his critique. At best this is a distortion of Plato's views. Popper offers a literal, communistic reading about the sharing of property, familial relations, and other forms of social regulation. Instead of respecting the dialectical structures at the heart of the dialogue, he gives an impoverished and watered-down propagandist reading.

Unable to interpret Plato with a reflective distance, Popper takes the *Republic* to be advancing *mythoi* of ideas (forms) similar to the scientism and *mythoi* of reason at the heart of his own political philosophy. As Robert Cummings Neville writes, this view misses the richness and subtleties because, "Plato was an incorrigible pluralist in his view of the world, the first major Western thinker to believe that a 'thing' is actually a 'society' or a 'social ordering' of component things."²⁵ Popper's account is a simplification insofar as it relies on anti-humanist, overly epistemological reasoning. Reading Plato through his own lenses, Popper stresses the importance of "trial and error" or falsificationism as the mechanism by which the state governs. Scientific methodology, using experimental evidence in the framing of principles, is the basis of Popperian epistemology. It appears that Popper is quite optimistic about the prospects for scientists to become the leaders of society and therefore the experts the government should listen to. And in this sense, Popper is friendly to the totalitarians ways that Plato would see as a betrayal of the most genuine of philosophical efforts. As Neville explains:

²⁵ Robert Cummings Neville, *Reconstruction of Thinking*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 54.

Would [Plato's] conception of the relation of reason to life and society lead to a totalitarian polity with philosophers in charge? No, it would not. *Philosophers could be totalitarian only if their process of rational goal-setting were discontinuous with the process of governing.* Just as Platonic reason rules the spirit and appetites by persuasion, *so it must rule the state by persuasion or be false to itself.* Plato devoutly wished that philosophy be persuasive enough to be politically effective, but he was highly pessimistic about the possibility. Surely society would not stand for a philosopher at the helm! The reason for this seeming impossibility, one that so depressed Plato, is that society as he knew it simply could not be persuaded by reason; it prefers the flattery of tyrants.²⁶

Thus, we see that Popper's notion of the "open society" is really a closed *mythos* of modern reason, with all of its technical and technological baggage.

Voegelin gives much praise to Bergson for his account of the "open society" in *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*.²⁷ Bergson's radical empiricism is a contemporary exposition of open selfhood, or "spiritual realism," as Voegelin called it, in what are known as his middle years. For Voegelin, Bergson's category of the "open society" is an analogue to the open soul or self, but in Bergson's book, only the *religious* and *moral* aspects are stressed. Bergson's cultural orientations are conducive to the creation of open selves, for Voegelin. It is another perspective that deals with the dynamics of open selfhood. In the same way Americans symbolize an *inclusive* or open-ended eschatology in which anyone can be included in the "chosen people." Bergson draws a crucial distinction between the closed and open societies with the latter symbolizing the inclusiveness of all humanity. He states "the closed society is that whose members hold together, caring nothing for the rest of humanity, on the alert for attack or defense, bound, in a fact [of dogmatic exceptionalism], for a perpetual readiness for battle. Such is human society fresh from the hands of nature [...]. The open society is the society which is deemed in principle to embrace all humanity."²⁸ Unlike Bergson, I interpret the symbol of the open self not

²⁶ Robert Cummings Neville, *Reconstruction of Thinking*, 55, emphasis added.

²⁷ Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1965).

²⁸ Henri Bergson, *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, 266-7.

as strictly as a prerequisite for moral life, but rather as a cultural one. “Within this context, it [the moral prerequisite] acts as a bulwark against the corruption of a society that is still closed in its particularisms.”²⁹ When we buy into closed notions of culture, either overly traditionalist or modernist, we are not being radical enough in our ideas about freedom. Voegelin reads Bergson as not only calling us to absorb alien artifacts and images, but also to create cultural resources open to the respect and dignity of all peoples and interests.

This emphasis on openness is a keystone of Voegelin’s philosophy and a bridge by which he is led to radical empiricism. The logic derived from the “closedness” of rationalistic systems can be applied to the analysis of parochial cultures; such analysis does not automatically include, as Bergson contends, all primitive or non-modern societies. Voegelin does not buy this sweeping assertion and critiques Bergson for claiming that he simply meant to distinguish between “compact” and differentiated” symbolic expression. “The closed society cannot therefore be identified with primitive societies and their methods of mythical symbolization; on the contrary, for Voegelin, it never represents, as it does in Bergson, a form of regression towards the archaic—it is rather, a fruit of modernity.”³⁰ Transcendent and immanent experiences stem from the human orientation on the world in the mode of being either closed or open. Ironie American exceptionalism sides with Voegelin (against Bergson); we need not adopt a modern triumphalism that views all ancient myths as extremist or authoritarian. This accommodation of the mythic

²⁹ Thierry Gontier, “The Open Society, from Bergson to Voegelin,” presented at annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 9, 2012, Washington, D.C., 17-8.

³⁰ Thierry Gontier, “The Open Society, from Bergson to Voegelin,” 7, See also on p.10 where Gontier stressed: “What Bergson describes as a ‘progress,’ corresponds to what Voegelin prefers to call ‘differentiation,’ that is to say a difference in degree and not in essence, a more ‘advanced’ level of understanding. This is why, whereas Bergson dismisses mythology, Voegelin takes it into account: the cosmological societies are no less ‘rational’ as the more differentiated ones, only [rather] their symbols have become ‘opaque’ to us, and we must therefore restore their ‘luminosity’ by getting back to the root experiences behind the symbols.”

may seem comforting in the face of modern alienation and estrangement, but any sense of superiority we derive from this accommodation can have a damaging effect. We must not be too easily consoled by our sense of progress.

Thus similar to Popper, “Bergsonian historical philosophy thus remains in thrall to the progressive principles inherited from the Enlightenment—a fact that is made clear by the extremely positive vision of modernity and its secular values that Bergson has.”³¹ Bergson hypostatizes a necessary order between modern and ancient societies, where all ancient societies are static, culminating in forms of closedness. Ancient societies do not have the content or context to warrant the *need* for openness in the sense of cultural engagement and interaction. Given the vitalism that grounds Bergson’s traces of “natural religion” upon the function of “myth-making” and “intelligence” (as analogous with instinctual drives), Voegelin opposes the hyper-immanence that informs Bergson’s analysis.

While human existence is historically finite, Voegelin also interprets cultural forms as the symbolizations and expressions of our human responses to the divine or transcendental ground. This authentic level of openness to the divine helps orient and inform the practices and rituals of openness and freedom socially, culturally, biologically, and even personally. As Gontier notes, “What matters instead is that mankind maintains itself in a position of openness towards God; in other words, in a state of striving towards the transcendental foundation—without, however, ceasing to assume the finite condition of mankind. The finiteness of the world and the divine transcendence are two opposing poles of a tension, and not terms that may be hypostatized.”³² Bergson’s notion of the open society has no philosophy of the ‘tensional in-between’ or *metaxy*. Voegelin’s and Schelling’s philosophies account for this tensional nature of human existence in

³¹ Thierry Gontier, “The Open Society, from Bergson to Voegelin,” 11.

³² Gontier, “The Open Society, from Bergson to Voegelin,” 14.

culture, which is reduced in Bergson's philosophy to a biological-evolutionary account. Instead, Voegelin focuses on the progression related to our accounts of cultural worth, in what he calls the "plurality of middles."

The plurality of middles, engendering a plurality of true stories, has been observed as a phenomenon as far back as our written records go, to the third millennium B.C. And as far back as the observation itself, there reaches the manifold of variegated responses to it—ranging in conventional patterns from tolerance to intolerance, from questioning doubt to dull indifference, from imperial claims for this story as the one and only truth to diplomatic acceptance of coexistence among a plurality of verities, from pragmatic skepticism that will conform to the dominant truth because peaceful order is preferable to the violent disruption of society by fanatical truth-fighters, through historical relativisms that consider the ever-increasing plurality of middles as conclusive proof that the quest for truth is vain, to the extremes of radical nihilism. These conventional responses [of formative open or deformative lost selves], however, though confirming by their millennial recurrence the truth of the observation, contribute little to the analytical understanding of the plurality of middles as a structure in reality.³³

Echoing the sentiments of Schelling's emphasis on paradox, Voegelin articulates a respect for pluralism as the basis for freedom and resistance against dogmatic exceptionalisms. Like Schelling, he argued that the philosopher's nature. i.e., asking questions, is a cultural representative of openness. As Voegelin writes, "in the pursuit of our questioning, thus, we encounter a plurality of middles, validating a plurality of quests, telling a plurality of stories, all having valid beginnings."³⁴ The immense richness and emotional appeal with which Americans share experiences of their quests, as expressions of freedom, is a prevalent mark of open selves. To be American, in Voegelin's sense, implies overcoming parochial forces of low or high culture and traditionalist or modernist prejudice. It is assumed that you will just "tell your story"; that is all. We talk about the good and the bad times without having any hidden agenda. So called "foreigners," (a category ironic American exceptionalists use sparingly) do not have to give up

³³ Eric Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, vol. 5, *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 43-44.

³⁴ Eric Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 43.

their identities and values to become Americans. Now, appropriating American culture, its sports, movies, and music, along with an ironic (unconscious) interpretation of American exceptionalism, provides a more optimistic outlook on our world.

The various tropes of this culture serve as the basis of a mythic consciousness which has emerged globally as the “American way,” with the openness for the love of freedom. Voegelin, like countless others, was shocked by the pluralism and openness of America. It shattered his provincialism. He credits his intellectual development to the experience of cultural intensity of openness in America and to his reading of thinkers like Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce, Alfred North Whitehead, John R. Commons, and John Dewey. Voegelin’s American visit had a “devastating effect” on his provincialism as a central European. Voegelin advances a radically empirical philosophy that attempts to discard the historical baggage of dogma and doctrinalism. He got back to a predogmatic reality of knowledge. This radicalization was the primary objective for political philosophy, according to Voegelin. Western civilization, to have any hope of sustaining the sources of order, apart from a search for transcendental and immanent or theophanic consciousness, must remain open to revising its self-interpretation. Learning to be attuned to the historical epoch is not the only basis for Voegelin’s quest. There is also the imaginative drive to arouse metaxic freedom in the search for order; this is a rejection of all political programs or ideological movements. Since he did not simply engage in collecting theories or ideas, there is in Voegelin’s philosophy also an emphasis on the creative task of unraveling the philosophical language with experience as its guide:

By tracing reason to its experiential origins, Voegelin made clear the *empirical* nature of his work. Voegelin would claim that his notion of reason was neither a theory nor an idea; it was a symbolic expression of well-attested experiences in the history of humanity. He was quite conscious of empirically grounding his philosophical language. This is why throughout his work we find him returning again and again to the data: symbols, myths, religious and literary texts, works of art, and any other expressions of the human spirit.

His was a *radical empiricism that went beyond the symbols and texts to recapture the experiences underlying these expressions.*³⁵

The traces of radical empiricism continue to crop up throughout Voegelin's widely varying interests, guiding the independent inquiries of his long career. In advocating an ethics and politics committed to the development of individual spiritual personality, Voegelin remains open to a humanistic philosophy of culture as an antidote to contemporary alternatives. Given the harsh tone Voegelin adopts regarding the prospects of the current socio-economic environment, many read him as a conservative realist, similar to such "talking heads" as Rush Limbaugh or worse yet, the neo-conservative followers of Leo Strauss.³⁶ Everything in the world appears to be going to hell in a hand-basket, in such a view, and Voegelin can be heralded as serving a prophetic role in sounding the great warning, so the sound-bite goes. On this reading, Voegelin is merely a reactionary against his age. He was much more than that.

Such a view hijacks Voegelin's ideas, polarizing popular sentiment and political theory; it leaves one with a merely bankrupt account of his philosophy. Such a reading of Voegelin is mistaken. We are obsessed these days with classifying or labeling everything and thereby sanctioning this or that sound-bite as immediately familiar; but that is impossible with a thinker of Voegelin's subtlety. Voegelin was exposed to philosophical temperaments manifest through the anthropological underpinnings of the *myth of the open self*. In juxtaposition to the continental tradition of Western philosophy, an exposition is advanced which is not ideologically or dogmatically constructed but respects the freedom of individuals to creatively identify themselves. The justification for Voegelin's claims offers a critique of prevailing mythic

³⁵ John J. Ranieri, "Grounding Public Discourse: Voegelin's Contribution," in *The Politics of the Soul: Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience*, ed. Glen Hughes (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 38.

³⁶ Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964*, eds. Peter C. Emberley and Barry Cooper (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993).

consciousness, associated with contemporary discourse on the symbolization of American Exceptionalism. Voegelin experienced what millions find compelling about the identity of America, albeit in high intellectual fashion. This type of Tocquevillian experience Voegelin underwent is unique as a pragmatic response to neo-Kantianism and the orientations of continental philosophy.

Introduction Section 5: Review of Literature

Much has been said and written on the history or prospects of American exceptionalism, including its political, economic, and military implications. Very little has been offered by way of philosophical analysis and interpretation regarding the fruits of culture. It is not only warranted but it is well within the purview of speculative philosophy to describe a cultural ontology that highlights the ethical, religious, and aesthetic concerns of Americans. The scope of historical meaning is a source of contention amongst many authorities. It is my intention to address the issues of exceptionalism and eschatology in developing the principles for a contemporary philosophy of history.

The current literature on American exceptionalism (and all its cultural dynamics) is vast and still rapidly developing. Three main strands of research make up the different complexes of this hotly-debated topic. First, there are the political, economic, and military interpretations of American identity and interests and they appear to represent the dominant orientation in the scholarship today. The capitalistic and democratic justifications of American power rely heavily upon these common stratifications of culture. Next are the sociological approaches to the issues of American exceptionalism (mainly religious and historical), regarding the aspects that drive the typical analyses of the mainstream interpreters. Neither the former nor latter approach is wrong or misguided in itself; they just tend to emphasize competing elements that involve many

complex elements and interests. A third and more nuanced method of inquiry (so I claim) is what I term the philosophical or hermeneutical treatment of American exceptionalism, that deals with the cultural apparatus of our identities, values, and purposes. It is my estimation, upon a responsible review of the literature, that these features, which belong to the philosophical method (as distinct from historical, economic, or other more specialized inquiries), have gone largely unnoticed or have been under-appreciated by most intellectuals and leaders. The downplayed features of American exceptionalism are precisely those which I would like to emphasize and bring to the fore in the analysis I present. I will give central efficacy to “ironic relations” in concordance with the terms presented by Niebuhr.

As Patrick J. Deneen, in an excellent recent article, “Cities of Man on a Hill,” keenly noted: “While *lacking a fully articulated explication of the nature of that ‘exceptionalism,’* its proponents generally extol the idea of American uniqueness, casting their enthusiasm for the idea that America is in some way a blessed and even providential nation, one charged with a distinctive role in advancing the cause of liberty, equality, democracy, and prosperity in the modern world. As such, America is seen to have a ‘mission,’ a distinctive and definitive objective advanced by an actor on the historical stage.”³⁷ Is America a social melting pot, where there is an array of religious, political, and economic interests competing in the same forums? America is identified with these dynamic aspects of diversity and cultural exchange. Several tropes of American history deal with the complexities of these clashing conditions because the devastating effects bigotry, racism, sexism, etc., have produced also aspired to incorporate communities that were tolerant of pluralistic cohesion. (What is meant by “pluralistic cohesion” will be worked out later.) For better or worse, Americans have to live with the premonition that

³⁷ Patrick J. Deneen, “Cities of Man on a Hill,” *American Political Thought* (2012) 1, 1, 29, emphasis added.

we seek to be “different,” or that we have such a mixture of everything that we are perpetually confused. This unprecedented diversity of American cultural life has been articulated in a number of ways, especially focusing on the historical, political, economic, and religious aspects.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I will categorize these various approaches to American exceptionalism along three axes. First, there are the political, military, and economic perspectives which present the statistical and projected analysis of American dominance and leadership in these areas. The tendency with self-aggrandizing religious, military, economic, or political hegemony is too irresponsible from the standpoint of open selves in ironic American exceptionalism. When these ideological sentiments arise one should be ready to resist the ways in which these values contribute to the democratic, capitalist, or Christian selves, insofar as they have to be the sole prototypes of being American.

Seymour M. Lipset argues for the mutual advocacy between liberals and conservatives in Americanism, which he lumps together with other dogmatic examples of “isms.” He traces the great economic waves in American industry and speaks on how the “developed world” views Americans as experiencing what has been identified as an “economic miracle.” From the famous Manifest Destiny and the discovery of immense natural resources, along with the profusion of information technologies and the production of digital gadgets have been identified with much of American power. I will emphasize in this work how one’s standard of living may be a sufficient condition of one’s freedom, but not a necessary or inevitable one. Several versions rooted in the egoism of a nation-state have dictated either Eurocentric or Anglophonic dogmatic forms of exceptionalism. For those conceiving of America as a nation-state simply fail to appreciate the amplified capacity Americans serve as a symbolic harbinger of freedom. In his popular book, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*, Godfrey Hodgson attacks the problem from an

institutional government standpoint.³⁸ He addresses the issues of slavery, female equality, and environmental protection, in comparison with other democratic nations, globally. Attacking the role of global leadership on gay rights, economic equality, and criminal justice procedures, Hodgson assesses the past half-century as one of “American decline” compared with the domestic reforms by the European Union. Hodgson also stresses the traditions of European values and political philosophy, insofar as they are influential on America’s belief in exceptionalism. New factors have emerged that change the global dynamics beyond those of the post-Cold War. In looking at the results of math and science scores for US junior high and high school students, Americans continue to lag behind the younger people from Japan, China, India, Brazil, and so on. These types of geo-political-economic indicators have led to pessimistic prospects for the future of American power. It is not surprising to see how critical he is to a “complacent nationalism” that exaggerates the opinions Americans have of themselves in relation to the global community. The issues of free trade, diplomacy, and national security get the top priority in understanding American interests or how domestic policy-making should aim at the alleviation of these concerns. Lobbyist agencies and influential individuals seek to have discretion over these sectors while down-playing or ignoring the importance of other key *cultural* features about Americans.

The second category is what I call the sociological and historical arguments, either in favor or against American exceptionalism. Relying on historical grand narratives, or the interpersonal stories of various groups, whether viewed as mainstream or outcast, is the common motive behind these inquiries. Believing in the “destiny of America” to lead the rest of the world to liberty and democracy has been one main line of defending American exceptionalism. In his

³⁸ Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

latest book, *A Nation Like No Other*, Newt Gingrich contends that this form of exceptionalism is “built on the unique belief that our rights do not come from the government, from God, giving honor and responsibility to the individual—not the state.”³⁹ With the enhanced awareness of America as the place of “second chances,” through the gauntlet of popular culture sensationalism, many (including Gingrich) have misconstrued this as nationalistic privilege. My argument advances the claim that the acknowledgment of such “second chances” involves the influence of ironic relations as the inherited features governing social interaction and processes. It is not just that you can have what you want and it’s yours; rather to be American means that “it” can be *theirs too*. Following Niebuhr’s appropriation of irony, unconscious or hidden relations are revelatory of cultural dynamics and integrative of unforeseen contingencies that are nevertheless foreseeable. Intensified contrasts characterize the interchange of images and values. Any relational ontology of the community is constituted by signs and symbols involving “semiotic selves” where analogical, iconic, and indexical meanings drive encounters between groups and cultures.

Historically, those who emphasize America’s social heritage have always been tempted to construct some grand narrative of a particular nation as the “global melting pot.” Nothing could be further from my intentions in this work. The structure and connections of ironic relations are not just a mixing mechanism whereby we all tolerate each other, and in the words of Rodney King “just get along.” In a November 2011 article in *Foreign Policy Magazine*, Stephen M. Walt details the various interpretations of American exceptionalism commonly upheld today, especially those that involve conflicting interests. Let me take these ideas one by one. The first notion relates to American virtue and the religious overtones associated with the destiny of the

³⁹ Newt Gingrich, *A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2011), bookjacket.

American nation within human history. This approach presumes that America's very existence and actions are good or exceptional in the sense of superior. Walt complains, and I concur, "Americans take too much credit for global progress and accept too little blame for areas where U.S. policy has in fact been counterproductive. Americans are blind to weak spots, and in ways that have real-world consequences."⁴⁰ Arguments confident of American greatness tend either to be naïve or misrepresentations that favor inflated American self-triumphalism..

On the contrary, the efficacy and development of American open selfhood is transformative, rooted in a consciousness that claims no superiority. Out of the differing terrains of high and low culture emerges a compromise of values and interpretations. These compromises are negotiated through a competitive exchange of cultural capital. The richness of cultural complexes can be fruitfully gained only through the creation of these transformative energies by treating them as stabilizing rituals of interaction. In terms of world history and cultural relations, there is today an unprecedented mixture of identities, values, and stories. This acceleration has occurred through vast global networks. These aspects of mutual exchange are enhanced through the development of novel interpretations made available as the tools for critiquing various aspects of one's own culture. In short, cultural conditions are changing so fast that people are obliged to interpret their own cultures anew, to deal with novelty at a rate that exposes the biases and shortcomings, as well as the strengths and promise, of our own culture; it is difficult to remain either innocent or ignorant.

In this context, ironic relations have special efficacy, given the double-edged roles I have just described, i.e., the strengths and weaknesses of our own cultures. American justifications and claims of supremacy need to embrace the importance of self-criticism through fallibilistic

⁴⁰ Stephen M. Walt, "The Myth of American Exceptionalism," *Foreign Policy Magazine* (2011) 189.

and pragmatic methods, to take critical awareness and direct it intelligently. Not only do we confront “the other” from the comfort of our own skin but we encounter the strangeness of the becoming the other (or the possibility of having a kinship with the other), as providing the basis for the reflective distance that enables us to look into ourselves. Doing so, we discover not just the inadequacies of our cultural adaptation to the rate of change, but also the constructive possibilities that are latent in the situation. The experience of the dynamics of self-other relations enables us to construct our freedom; and the more the possibility of estrangement between selves and others is dissolved, the more reflective we become. Once consciousness is differentiated into the levels of the self and other, overlapping, where each one has the potential to be either, then cultural relations are not only viewed contingently, but also, unconscious forces become difficult to ignore.

The impact of this fluidity among various cultural features in a pluralistic world, and their enhanced efficacy in our lives, has a frightful yet seductive appeal. A more interrelated world impinges on the norms humans have always adopted and then alters them in ways that leave culture non-static and capable of being created or destroyed. Traditions and customs are continually threatened by modernist trends and hence cannot sit idly under these circumstances. They will be thrust into the fray of cultural mutual relevance, willy nilly. The social relatedness and the fabric of the world is growing such that its subtleties are as puzzling as they are informative. Intermixing races or national customs is a delicate matter which continues to haunt us as one among the real considerations that are shaped by contemporary diversity and pluralism. A common concern regarding American exceptionalism is that we would all be better off taking the high-road around nationalism and self-aggrandizement. We accomplish such an end by

recognizing the reality of privileged selves, while calling our American exceptionalism an international or global exceptionalism.

The post-Cold War trend of identifying peace and democracy as actual global achievements sounds good, but it is not conducive to the concrete facts and struggles of history. In offering a hermeneutics of ironic American exceptionalism, I am resisting the temptation to advance a philosophy of history that gives a false superiority to Western values. Along political lines, there are advocates of American exceptionalism who promote either a liberal progressivism or the traditions of conservatism. No candidate from either party could run successfully for U.S. President without pandering to many misguided sentiments about American superiority. There is a perverse nationalism which feeds into the symbols and consciousness of the power of the US as a nation-state, insofar as it represents the new Covenant with God. People believe that this anointed status sanctions our moral leadership and responsibility to the world. The pride of the American Revolution and the success of republican constitutionalism have given an immense political legacy for the rule of legitimate authority as a model for other societies. Needless to say, on the domestic political scene today, there is little shortage of self-inflated views about American power, such as those espoused by Newt Gingrich. One will find either a positive or negative picture of the future prospects of American exceptionalism, depending on the willingness of the interpreters to reduce the phenomena to segment and fragments of culture. This reduction proceeds without considering the efficacy of ironic relations in a robust cultural pluralism. Ironic American exceptionalism is not rooted in the nation's character or destiny.

These habitual (reductionist) approaches judge America's prospects to be threatened or problematic in the midst of the present unstable environment. But the current fluctuations in

culture, make the environment merely a necessary condition for determining our freedom. The caricature of American exceptionalism makes this farce seem sufficient, but it is not a complete picture. The problem with these claimants to open selfhood is that they make this categorical mistake: necessity is not sufficiency.

Just because they deem certain variables essential, does not evade that dangerous tendency to view the popular elements of entertainment, crucial to my analysis, negligible or merely formal elements of “counterculture.” A host of phenomena is continuously overlooked or downplayed by those bent on the military, financial, or commercial status of these elements, and their interests, simply. Needless to say, there are blind spots in the leading interpretations that gain the attention of leaders and intellectuals alike. In seeking to highlight the prevalent cultural rituals of entertainment and virtual integration, this study seeks to make good on these deficiencies. Ironically, in the factors historically taken for granted and usually deemed as unimportant, I find the cultural fusion that Americans symbolize in their visceral rituals (their sports, Hollywood movies, and popular music) are often made into caricatures as the basis for this philosophical theory of American exceptionalism. Geo-political strategies that bear on America’s future, insofar as they secure the material interests that rely on this self-caricature, have seized much of the attention and dialogue surrounding American exceptionalism, which I seek here to challenge.

Finally, the category which has received the least attention, and that will be the key to my analysis, involves a philosophical interpretation of exceptionalism as it relates to the American case. My aim in this dissertation is to advance a philosophical explanation of exceptionalism as it relates specifically to the American context. American exceptionalism in this special sense is ironic, dominated by paradoxical relations between traditional and modern forces that are

integrated through the vastness of their own historical inertia. Through an ontology of culture, the scope of my argument will develop accordingly as a philosophy of history that draws heavily on Voegelin, Schelling, and Niebuhr. To my knowledge there has not been, to date, an analysis of American exceptionalism—indeed, a really potent topic currently—oriented toward questioning the ontology and mode of cultural appropriation that underlies the various claims that seek to give the definitive philosophical account. This theory of ironic American exceptionalism presupposes a cultural ontology which describes freedom as the determination of flexible and open categories that are contingent rather than necessary aspects of strict identity. American-led symbolic complexes have generated fluid and explosive interchanges between the forces of high and low culture. Such interchange creates novel hybrids of value and diversity. American pop-culture leads the world in the production of movies, music, and sports, all of which specialize in image-generation. It is high time that people, especially our intellectual and political leaders, recognize that entertainment is our principle export and our highest-demand commodity. There is good reason why most theorists have down-played this prominent aspect of American exceptionalism; after all, who wants to be associated with the decadent ways of Hollywood? But there are more pressing concerns about the effects of low-culture that need to be analyzed.

Unlike the traditional ways of the “old world,” the habitual social junkets and status-seeking have become far more precarious today. One can become rich and popular just as fast as one can turn bankrupt and be forgotten. New social forces have reinforced new forms of interaction, that generate fresh possibilities for personal and social identities, values, and purposes. Thus, with the spread of these new paths for American-style freedom, the contingencies increase; it is easier to succeed, but success is fleeting. The generation of

meaningful social connection becomes, if anything, a greater challenge. But the open self can meet these challenges.

Open selves stand in contradistinction to the alternatives prevalent, as live-options, in the twenty-first century. To predicate American exceptionalism on the Christian self, just as the democratic, communistic, fascistic, or capitalist self, short-changes a quest for liberty for some preordained, predestined grand narratives that are incompatible with ironic relations and symbolic freedom. Grand narratives that are wedded to the notion that American exceptionalism represents the triumph of good over evil, but they are very dangerous and they overlook our own potential culpability and ironic entanglement whenever we act out our (self-perceived) “sound moral judgments.” One can be Christian, capitalist, or the like, so long as one respects the openness to adversarial values which admit of irony. One must allow unconscious within their conscious horizons. This study suggests that we betray our most vital legacy and resources when we interpret these prototypes of freedom under these alternative selves. To be American does not mean that one is a capitalist, Christian, or a strong advocate of democracy.

To associate only these identities, values, and attitudes with these prototypes limits the very possibilities so many feel and interpret as the symbolic expression of “the American way.” The scope and intensity with which others symbolically represent the richness of American transformative experiences are severely undermined by such condescending cultural prototypes. To see only one’s own values as the hallmark of freedom is the effect of an ingrained parochialism coupled with an ideological frenzy and short-sightedness. Open selfhood is misunderstood from this perspective because it does not call for some preconceived criteria, such that being American really boils down to being with the right prototype on such a view. It has become popular amongst commentators and politicians to commercialize or prepackage the

openness of Americans so as to represent their personal interests. This happens from all ideological spectrums. But this view overlooks the fact that one does not have to live in or even like America in the formal or historical senses in order to be “American.” On this ironic view, there are those, domestically, who misidentify Americans with criteria other than a love of freedom, while the world is full of possible Americans as open selves.

This cultural interpretation provides an irreducible scale and basis for American exceptionalism, in all of its complexities and paradoxes. With this orientation I hope to avoid the arbitrary trends of scholars who claim exceptions from the confines of their narrow, mainstream interests or disciplines. The philosophy of culture seeks to embrace much more a holistic approach, guided by a pragmatic hermeneutics. A philosophical interpretation of American exceptionalism, such as the one presented here, seeks to understand the potential dangers and pitfalls of dogmatic symbolisms and exceptionalisms. As Hall says: “An idealist reduction similar to Platonic philosophy (but by no means identical in form or implication) is perpetuated by Hegel and, once more, the unity of all forms of knowledge is affirmed at the cost of the autonomy of the various cultural forms.”⁴¹ Political, military, economic, religious, sociological, or even historical interpretations do not forcefully capture the nuances involved in a phenomenology of culture, such as I aim to offer.

A typical focus of American exceptionalist heritage lies in its roots as a Puritan myth, formulated by John Winthrop as a symbolism for the idea of a “City upon a Hill.” To use the historical example of the nation of Israel, America is viewed as an extension of the Hebrew covenant, with the continental United States being deemed the “Promise Land.” This common form of advocating American hegemony comes off as another brand of pandering to the people.

⁴¹ David L. Hall, *The Civilization of Experience*, 115.

Such a position is partial to the triumphal ways of America, which leaves us with presumptuous attitudes of presumptuous blindness. The Puritan story of American salvation is *ironically* an inflated opinion of one's own people, which coincides with leading interpretations that emphasize the historical destiny of America either as the defender of freedom and democracy or as the Christian nation of the New Covenant.

For almost a decade now, America has faced trying times which have forced many to question where the nation should go from here. We are squandering vital resources, fighting two wars we cannot afford, while already greatly in debt both domestically and internationally, with no end in sight on our continued downward spiral. No shortage of negative bickering exists currently over the issue of what the future of American exceptionalism entails, which deflates our hope. To make matters worse, it is not even believed by many that we merit the advanced prosperity we enjoy. The sacrifices have been made by the courageous of the mainstream as well as the impoverished and oppressed. None can claim exclusively the glory or victory of history without ignoring or dismissing the contributions achieved by their adversaries. No sense of entitlement can be justified based on the illusory belief that a single individual's interests or people have a more meaningful stake in the outcome of the circumstances than some other people.

Statistically, the US fares grimly when it comes to providing safe and reliable social services and public programs. Ironically, we rely on such programs more than we may be willing to admit. Families that are well off, they are likely to look for what is available through grants-in-aid before paying expenses out of pocket. Many have emphasized these self-interested factors as evidence of America's declining global hegemony. With an inability to sustain growth and

development domestically, there comes a time when we question whether our view can realistically remain the focus of American international relations.

As Michel Ingnaetieff argued in the book *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, such that there is a double standard traced through a “complex and ambivalent pattern” between American and international values. Ignatieff writes “Since 1945 America has displayed exceptional leadership in promoting international human rights. At the same time, however, it has also resisted complying with human rights standards at home or aligning its foreign policy with these standards abroad. Under some administrations, it has promoted human rights as if they were synonymous with American values, while under others, it has emphasized the superiority of American values over international standards.”⁴² In the traditional sense of sovereignty, the basic tenets of human rights and American values are not synonymous. Especially is this the case in not allowing multinational institutions such as the United Nations or the International Criminal Court (ICC) to have jurisdiction over the the United States. The notion of traditional sovereignty depends on an aggressive nationalism, which thinks of power as a product of the nation-state.

Another possible philosophical inspiration comes from the work of Peter Sloterdijk, television analyst and German cultural critic and philosopher, who articulates cultural relations as an ontology of “spaces of coexistence.” At this level, common technological exchanges are generating hybrid realities, according to Sloterdijk. Blending in the various interests of all the facets of contemporary culture, Sloterdijk engages a more dynamic approach that can be related to the question of entertainment. His central focus is not exhausted by economic, military, political, or even sociological and religious interests as the basis for the desire of freedom. Even emphasizing ecological aspects as crucial to maintenance of healthy and stable cultures,

⁴² Michael Ignatieff, *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3.

Sloterdijk has much to say on the pluralistic intricacies of Western culture. But he has tended to overstress the genetic and biological prospects for what he calls “breeding” and “selection,” at the forefront of *bio-cultural* engineering. His argument that human civilizations are “anthropogenic hothouses” stirred much controversy and animosity given the impression that it calls for a eugenics program. Intellectuals throughout Germany, such as Jürgen Habermas, publically criticized his ideas as fascistic. This backlash was somewhat exaggerated, but the overall accusation was well-warranted, I believe. Sloterdijk’s philosophy tends to overemphasize the role of “rage” as a dominant stimulant for the Western individual in contemporary politics. From this single emotion, Sloterdijk is able to construct what he calls a “metanarrative” as the ringing explanation for different ages and epochs, as these are measured by Continental philosophers. Despite his significant differences from Heidegger, they share this disposition of epic philosophizing. Sloterdijk reinterprets Heidegger’s being-in-the-world with an analogous ontological category he calls ‘sphereology.’ He too writes of cultural hybrids, but not in the sense I am referring to that involves the negotiation between adherents of low and high cultures. As distinct from my theory of cultural hybrids, he speaks of materialistic and philosophical processes that combine into a “global sphere”; what he calls “terrestrial globalization.” We are in the middle state of a three-tier metanarrative which commences with the Greek philosophical concept of the globe.

There is no doubt that Sloterdijk wants to speak about the experiences of creating new spaces, insofar as they transform those spaces currently inhabited by global citizens. Finding ways to overcome the traditional and burdensome values of humanism that cripple the post-second world war generation, is the goal Sloterdijk sets for his philosophy. His expressed sentiments appear to be consistent with Heidegger’s anti-humanistic social and political

philosophy. Yet, unlike Heidegger and most apologists of postmodernism, this demise of humanism does not represent a new form of post-subjective metaphysics. Philosophical advancements from modern Enlightenment rationalism and subjectivity should be undermined, even though we acknowledge the technological capacity with which we have been equipped.

The possibilities latent in technology are positive as well as negative, so it makes no sense to stress only the latter concerns. A profound transition is occurring in human-understanding. I take Sloterdijk to be finding therapeutic means to cope with the post-war condition of humanism. It is a way of dealing with the increasing suspicions that surround the alienation of high technologies. A point of agreement between ironic American exceptionalism and Sloterdijk's philosophy involves a positive attitude about today's technological apparatus, which are the "capital" of the world.. There are adversions and inhibitions that are generated through the production and consumption of the technologies , and this occurs without the need to subscribe to an apocalyptic crisis (as is the case in Heidegger's philosophy). The condition of "astrayness" or what Heidegger calls the homelessness (*Unheimlichkeit*) of Dasein is an epochal development extending from European metaphysics and technology. "In the face of that fact, the suspicion is unavoidable that this [position] could be due to an optical illusion—a suspicion that becomes all the more plausible when one considers that after his failed effort with the 'national revolution' to take a turn into the own and the authentic, Heidegger makes no more suggestions about how a return from the astrayness could be conceived philosophically—his resort to the poetics of being is, even from a sympathetic point of view, an interim solution at best."⁴³ In interpreting his philosophical stance juxtaposed Heidegger's, Sloterdijk demystifies the infiltration of gadgetry infiltration that is so much a part of contemporary life. "Therefore

⁴³ Peter Sloterdijk, "The Operable Man: On the Ethical State of Gene Technology," 2000, 3.

humans encounter nothing strange when they expose themselves to further creation and manipulation, and they do nothing perverse, when they change themselves autotechnologically, given that such interventions and assistance happen on such a high level of insight into the biological and social nature of man, that they become effective as authentic, intelligent and successful co-productions with evolutionary potential.”⁴⁴ Sloterdijk makes a solid point about the dangers of interpreting culture through certain reductionist forms, such as nation-state, sovereignty or economics:

At present, the main danger to the future of the system involves the growing indebtedness of states intoxicated by Keynesianism. Discretely and ineluctably, we are heading toward a situation in which debtors will once again dispossess their creditors—as has so often happened in the history of taxation, from the era of the pharaohs to the monetary reforms of the twentieth century. What is new is the gargantuan scale of public debt. Mortgaging, insolvency, monetary reform, or inflation—no matter, the next great expropriations are underway. Today, the state’s grasping hand even reaches into the pockets of generations unborn. We have already written the title of the next chapter of our history: “The pillage of the future by the present.”⁴⁵

So when we are told by leaders like President George W. Bush that joining an international accord like the Kyoto Treaty would damage the US economy or the ICC would threaten US power, the more basic question should be asked are these treaties healthy for our culture and future of the world. What if the US or global economy is already on life-support as Sloterdijk’s claim suggests? American identity and culture surpass the narrow obstacles of nationalistic interests and are more compatible with a personalist, pluralistic sovereignty. Pluralistic sovereignty holds that *individuals* are the locus of power, and personal relations of responsibility are the basis for freedom. American values can be interpreted as consistent with the principles of human rights in the global sense, and open selves take such values to be complementary. Ironic American exceptionalism invests in a symbolic freedom beyond statecraft and military, political,

⁴⁴ Sloterdijk, “The Operable Man,” 3.

⁴⁵ Peter Sloterdijk, “The Grasping Hand,” *City Journal*, Vol. 20 (1), 2010,

or socio-economic strategy. Such a view makes it unproblematic that the US should be party to such globalized arrangements.

Self-triumphant Americanization, as it is understood by dogmatic American exceptionalists, is not threatened by the cultural rituals of “America” and their spread. Centers of government and power are intermixed in *hybrid* fashion, having more in common across these cultural lines than actual differences and this is significant for future stability. Our politicians, nuclear scientists, and business specialists cannot successfully connect with those peoples (such as North Korea). But American culture has succeeded where all other initiatives have failed. Hollywood movies and NBA basketball seem to have made the political and economic differences irrelevant.

In looking at the example of the Kyoto Treaty on climate change and the protocols for emission regulation, which the US signed but did not ratify, we find many of our leaders holding double-standards inconsistent with their rhetoric and mission. If we advocating the more encompassing human rights initiatives that are regulated by international bodies, these should not be a threat to American sovereignty, but rather, it should be seen as a fuller commitment to and deeper articulation of American values. A tolerable, open exceptoinalism should be congruent with international standards. “Sovereignty is not an abstract principle; it is the concrete sphere of action of the individual or of the leadership group.”⁴⁶

From the general pattern, it can be argued that we have produced a fear-mongering society because we lead the world in having the most prisoners per capital, outspending the world in military and national security. These economic realities have been the cause of great

⁴⁶ Eric Voegelin, *On the Form of the American Mind*, vol. 1, trans. Ruth Hein, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Jürgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995). 209.

concern, engendering a gloomy pessimism about America's future role in the world. Given this bleak picture, elites in Washington, along with many American leaders and intellectuals, are pronouncing a proper burial of American Exceptionalism. In his popular book *The Limits of Power—The End of American Exceptionalism*, Andrew Bacevich presents the prevailing attitude that the present economic, political and military crisis runs deep, along with a perverted culture

centered on consumption and individual autonomy, the exercise of freedom is contributing to the gradual erosion of our national power. At precisely the moment when the ability to wield power—especially military power—has become the *sine qua non* for preserving American freedom, our reserves of power are being depleted.⁴⁷

American exceptionalism has *wrongly* been identified with a consumer-dominated culture obsessed with “wanting more” for the sake of self-gratification, in the form of a vulgar capitalism. A certain shallowness characterizes such mediocre endeavors as watching sports incessantly or gossiping and being distracted by the lives of major sports and pop stars. Capitalism along with liberal democracy has bred the sentiments of a perverted individualism and an ill-informed, socially apathetic attitude toward civic mindedness. All this is true and has been the typical complaint of conservatives and liberals, strict religious moralists and altruistic humanitarians alike. Pessimistic attitudes dominate the general assessment of even those who directly benefiting from the pop-culture, on the level of deep guilt. And if I were to critique modern-mass society and the pitfalls associated with American pop-culture right now, it would be preaching to a great choir. My aim today, instead, is to make a case for the contrary account—the one in which American exceptionalism has a promising future.

It is with the fruits of our vast diversity that we serve humanity through a cultural nexus of mediums in the forms of movies, music, and sports. Scholars have seriously overlooked and downplayed this pivotal aspect of American identity. Anyone who examines American

⁴⁷ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of American Power—The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York, Metropolitan Books, 2008), 9.

exceptionalism seems to assume that the main questions are traditionally political, or economic, or historical. Also, we seem to be cynical toward (and only vaguely aware of) the hidden fruits of this highly-criticized culture, which is ironic considering how much we are immersed in and reliant upon it. The various tropes of this culture serve as the basis of a mythic consciousness which has emerged globally as the “American way,” which takes as fundamental an openness for the love of freedom. And when this is identified as a significant part of American exceptionalism, we have cause for hope –not just rhetorical hope but a deeper kind of hope. Hence, American exceptionalism has been misunderstood both through the failure to appreciate the powerful role culture plays in it and in wrongly being identified with the democratic, progressivist, and Christian myths. How can Bacevich and others overlook this function of culture and its underlying myth as a critical aspect of American Exceptionalism?

Perhaps the earliest secular version of American exceptionalism comes from Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in *Letters from an American Farmer*. Compared with traditional Europe, Crèvecoeur finds America is a “great asylum” inspiring a “promiscuous breed” of people. “The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labor, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence.—This is an American.”⁴⁸ The limitation of his analysis, which is justifiable given the historical setting, lies in identifying Americans through the abundance of soil and territorial resources. Certainly these categories stem from the hangover of European heritage. “They are a mixture of English,

⁴⁸ Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), 44-5.

Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, that race, now called Americans, have arisen.”⁴⁹

Crèvecoeur values the freedom embodied by Americans so much so that he is highly critical of the ill-treatment of slaves and other emigrants. In reading several of his passages such as the one below, one can gather that he is addressing the prevalence of ironic relations as central to the American struggle. While showering praise on the American experience as liberation from the past of European bondage, he recounts the horror of encountering dehumanizing practices. He gives a telling description of this new found “promise land”:

It is a strange heterogeneous assemblage of vices and virtues, and of a variety of other principles, for ever at war, for ever jarring, for ever producing some dangerous, some distressing, extreme.⁵⁰

Crèvecoeur then goes into detail about an existential crisis he suffered one day while walking around Nantucket and finding a helpless slave whose eyes were gouged out and several birds feasting on his flesh. The chilling account is as follows:

I perceived a negro, suspended in the cage, and left there to expire! I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already picked out his eyes; his cheek bones were bare; his arms had been attacked in several places, and his body seemed covered with a multitude of wounds. From the edges of the hollow sockets, and from the lacerations with which he was disfigured, the blood slowly dropped, and tinged the ground beneath. No sooner were the birds flown, than swarms of insects covered the whole body of this unfortunate wretch, eager to feed on his mangled flesh and to drink his blood. I found myself suddenly arrested by the power of affright and terror; my nerves were convulsed; I trembled, I stood motionless, involuntarily contemplating the fate of this negro in all its dismal latitude. The living spectre, though deprived of his eyes, could still distinctly hear, and, in his uncouth dialect, begged me to give him some water to allay his thirst. Humanity herself would have recoiled back with horror; she would have balanced whether to lessen such reliefless distress, or mercifully with one blow to end this dreadful scene of agonizing torture. Had I had a ball in my gun, I certainly should have dispatched him; but, finding myself unable to perform so kind an office, I thought, though trembling, to relieve him as well as I could. A shell ready fixed to a pole, which had been used by some negroes, presented itself to me; I filled it with water, and with trembling hands I guided it to the quivering lips of wretched sufferer. Urged by the irresistible power of

⁴⁹ Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 42.

⁵⁰ Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 162-63.

thirst, he endeavoured to meet it, as he instinctively guessed its approach by the noise it made in passing through the bars of the cage. “Tanke you, white man, tanke you, pute some poison and give me.” How long have you been hanging there? I asked him. “Two days, and me no die; the birds, the birds, aaah me!” Oppressed with the reflections which this shocking spectacle afforded me, I mustered strength enough to walk away, and soon reached the house at which I intended to dine. There I heard that the reason for this slave’s being thus punished was on account of his having killed the overseer of the plantation. They told me that the laws of self-preservation rendered such executions necessary; and supported the doctrine of slavery with the arguments generally made use of to justify the practice; with the repetition of which I shall not trouble you at present.⁵¹

What Crèvecoeur experienced is the flat irony related to American symbolic value of equality; he was able to see the two faces of American exceptionalism. He never denied the exceptional character of the American nation while simultaneously narrating this awful scene. Liberty in the middle of the degrading institution of slavery and the mistreatment of Native Americans, was still a possibility. This hypocrisy helps us to recognize that all cultures struggle to live up to the values to which they aspire. We should always be mindful of this weakness of the human soul, especially when we never hear of it in the speeches of global leaders. A certain pride and dignity must be afforded to all people despite their ethnicities, religious practices, or social values. Despite being appalled by the oppression of slavery and its dehumanizing effects, Crèvecoeur believes in the American potential to challenge such barbaric practices. The enslaved and oppressed have recourse to the symbolization that enlivens the ethos of this “new world” and the hope for an uprooted people of the sort that suffers the extreme costs of such an exceptionalism..

In the experiential consciousness of Alexis de Tocqueville, as articulated in his two volumes, *Democracy in America*, he makes the claim that America is superior in land, resources, manners, customs, and institutional, democratic procedures.⁵² Tocqueville, admits the exceptionalism Americans have to offer the world, but given his proclivities as a French

⁵¹ Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 164-65.

⁵² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler, vol. 44, (Chicago, Encyclopedia Britannica, 2005).

aristocrat, this admonition is given with one eye open. The story Tocqueville offers represents the trend in the history of exceptionalism which highlights the democratic and constitutional features of US government and civil society. Aside from these overarching themes, there is something remarkable about the American experience that Tocqueville enumerated, but there are many also potential dangers that he highlights. Also, there is a sense in Tocqueville's praise of Americans that we are not aware fully of the privilege we enjoy—he was able to detect that much of this exceptionalism remains unconscious or hidden to us. Like Voegelin and others, Tocqueville recounted the pragmatic ways of the Americans, which gives the impression, at times, of being anti-intellectual. As Voegelin remarked about the status of philosophy in America compared with Europe, it was almost a “civic duty” to remain “philosophically illiterate,” in the former.

Everybody wants to be a part of the chosen people in some fashion, to feel a sense of belonging and to hope for good “eschatological” standing. This hope is largely the eschatological result of the modern condition of alienation and fragmentation, according to Voegelin.. Hence, some form of exceptionalism has to be granted for two reasons. First, international politics, as steadily haunted by the derailment into anarchy, depends on establishment of anchoring center(s) of power sources of stability and leadership, especially in regulating the balance of power amongst states.

The other need for some type of exceptionalism stems from the longing to be counted within God's elect, to be consoled and comforted with the assurance that as “providence provides,” it is on your side. The Hebrews of the Old Testament have been recognized as the chosen people of God's covenant and this was later incorporated into Christianity. Under the Puritan symbols, as already discussed, America gets interpreted as the “people of the new

covenant.” As that shining city or light on the hill, which John Winthrop popularized and Lincoln repeated during the Civil War, America has always been represented as the new promised land—read as a continuation of the Biblical narrative. But Wilson, the stiff Calvinist, ironically articulated a *secularized* notion of American exceptionalism broad enough to plant the seeds for a mythic consciousness of the open self. Sadly, this amazing (but ultimately unconscious) achievement of Wilson has been undermined by the myth he abandoned—the Puritan philosophy of history, which holds “only if you are saved then you are exceptional.”

American exceptionalism has been driven largely by the religio-political myths of America’s greatness as exclusively Judaic-Christian, which actually has more in common with the dogmatic twentieth-century myths than it has with Judeo-Christian history. Not only does the myth of the open self represent an elasticity of self in the presence of ritual, but it demonstrates a love of freedom in the Wilsonian sense; yet is also a stronger myth than the Puritan alternative. With its closed eschatology and authoritarian demeanor, the Puritan myth suffers from the same limitations that are inherent in the myth of the worker, the people, and the state.⁵³ And like those myths, if this is what American exceptionalism entails, then it is dying or dead and that would be a good thing. Fortunately, American exceptionalism involves an ironic or *unconscious* right-doing, through movies, sports, and music, which has helped generate a stronger myth of the open self.

If we look at the current strain on US-French relations following their disagreement over the Iraq war, there was the famous cultural war that erupted. Passionate Americans bent on nationalistic pride started calling McDonald’s French Fries, “Freedom Fries” as a way of countering this important ally’s opposition. Disagreement amongst the governments, however,

⁵³ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 39-40.

did not impede Parisians from taking in American B movies or selling-out the concerts of many rock stars. In fact, a strong case could be made that the connections through cinema and various arts have become a source of essential relations amongst the people; much like the theater did historically. The politics—pardon me, *politricks*—will continue where many feel that they are at the mercy of those anointed leaders who emulate the players that move pieces on a game board. But the breadth and depth of the cultural rituals have the intensity needed to sustain lasting relationships. That is why I agree with Theodore Adorno's philosophical focus on mass entertainment's important role in culture. But I am not primarily concerned with critiquing its moral wrong-doings as an "industry" bent on profit through commercial enterprise or psychological manipulation. Among the leading rituals, entertainment in particular has captured our imaginations and formed our mythic consciousness, insofar as these are symbolic of American openness to dynamic interpretations of freedom, identity, and values. When entertainment is viewed ironically, the unconscious and hidden relations demonstrate "right-doing," which was traditionally handled either politically, economically, or militarily. It is plausible that partaking in these cultural rituals perpetuates a kind of democratic propaganda, but those same components of pluralistic sovereignty are given over to individuals to propagandize themselves.⁵⁴ This is the case for the Americans and the French alike.

Many have heard the criticism that Americans are a bunch of slouches, feeding on a culture of entertainment without contributing anything significant to the world. As Tocqueville warns in his *Democracy in America*, "If men ever came to be content with physical things only, it seems likely that they would gradually lose the art of producing them and would end up by enjoying

⁵⁴ Ellul argues that democracies propagandize themselves, see, *Propaganda*, 235-242.

them without discernment and without improvement, like animals.”⁵⁵ I grant that there is a superficial and mediocre side to American popular culture. With the unhealthy promotion of narcissism, laziness, and unprecedented levels of waste, there is certainly a case to be made for the moral wrong-doing, or even moral non-doing of, by, and for Americans. My goal, however, is to analyze the *positive* aspects of American entertainment as a cultural power and to show how its development and exportation facilitate a cultural perception of freedom which is crucial to human growth and moral progress, but neglected by the dominant political philosophies. Entertainment is a popular form of contemporary culture conveyed through the rituals of sports, movies, music, video games, blogs, and so on. Entertainment as a popular cultural trope has not only generated the complex unities of high and low culture, but in the past half century there is also the emergence of the “artist” in the sense defined by Andy Warhol.⁵⁶ By emphasizing the unconscious relations that sustain these mediums and rituals, along with their cultural reference to our particular values and purposes, I think that pluralistic entertainment cultivates an aesthetic intensity capable of advancing healthy steps in cultural progress. American entertainment continues to spread, and its spreading creates a wider nexus, that also creates an efficacy of analogous symbolic complexes in the various mediums (sports, movies, music, etc.). The result is a virtual onslaught of American ideals.

⁵⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, ch. 16, 294.

⁵⁶ Arthur Danto, *Andy Warhol (Icons of America)*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). “The new, post-modern art form was to achieve fame *as an artist*, and so painters needed to be acting and actors should be writing musical scores and composers should take up architecture, while the architects are writing novels, and so on. The all encompassing category of “the artist” as a type of celebrated performer was being popularized. This is, in a sense, the very extreme of the idea of genius [...] It’s the apotheosis of celebrity as justified by the idea of genius.” Randall E. Auxier, “The Glimmer Twins,” in *The Rolling Stones and Philosophy: It’s Just a Thought Away*, ed. Luke Dick and George A. Reisch, (Chicago: Open Court Press, 2011), 17.

Yet, Americans themselves live in a transitory world, fully in dialogue with many visions of the past and future in unprecedented ways. There is no reason to think of this “onslaught” as intentional or conscious. This is not cultural imperialism. The American historical terrain is steeper, in this sense. It entails a plurality of values and perspectives that allow far stronger and weaker, but nevertheless offers more intense experiences along aesthetic, moral, religious and other lines of cultural activity. Racial consciousness, for example, remains socially relevant today, but in a more subtle fashion than before. Either a person sees the perils of racism as alive and well or views it as outdated and unnecessary. Ironic or hidden, unseen, yet discoverable relations, offer a more accurate account of the contingencies at play in our racial problems, and other such issues, than the accounts found in social criticism. From the domestic perspective, Americans are less diverse and integrated than one would be led to believe by the global image. For example, the US the most people incarcerated per capita than any other country, including high rates of disproportionate poverty among minorities. Other social indicators suggest groups such as Blacks and Hispanics lag behind Whites and Asians in educational and healthcare opportunities, for example. Pessimistic outlooks dominate the current ethos regarding American power and status globally. This is in contrast with the attitudes and symbolism of freedom and opportunity Americans secure and enjoy.

The processes, agencies, and aims of culture have the potential for both traditional and progressive orientations. But what makes ironic exceptionalism of America interesting is the way that what we customarily call low and high culture are integrated in our entertainment rituals. Relations previously seen as mutually exclusive are intensified when they are experienced and expressed aesthetically; these are qualities which inhere “in their shared character as modes of

achieving depth of experience.”⁵⁷ To understand open selfhood calls for an expansive treatment of cultural values and interests and an account of the ways of cultivating such intensified qualities. “Cultural interests are those areas of funded experience which evoke a continuing interest in the criticism and revision of concepts based upon novel experiences and more subtle rationalizations.”⁵⁸ Entertainment fulfills this function because, as Susanne Langer writes, “we give ourselves up to their contemplation spontaneously, eagerly, without any other intent than to bear and see and be enthralled.”⁵⁹ The hybrid character of these values can reveal the paradoxical senses of “being American” and more.

If the history of politics and human affairs can teach us anything it is this: we cannot escape the need to have an exceptional nation or people. Yet, if the twentieth-century of totalitarianism and genocide is any indication, then we would have to see that the safest way for an exceptionalism to persist is when *everyone* can belong to the chosen people. The irony of American exceptionalism lies in an unconscious right-doing by a culture capable of projecting the image of the open self as its very myth. It is also ironic that in having to struggle to identify who constitutes “our” people and leaders, we propagandize ourselves first and foremost; we do not so much try to convince the world of our exceptional standing as ourselves, and in convincing ourselves, we invite others to believe with us if they care to. And they *do*. Our American like-mindedness in seeing ourselves as freedom-loving shows no signs of fatigue even with other ideologies and darker myths still lurking. The exceptional thing about American exceptionalism is that it seeks no exception through the myth of the open self.

Introduction Section 6: Preview of the Remaining Chapters

⁵⁷ David L. Hall, *Civilization of Experience*, 122.

⁵⁸ David L. Hall, *Civilization of Experience*, 127.

⁵⁹ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 405.

Chapter one presents Niebuhr's philosophy of history and his notion of irony as tools for interpreting the cultural aspects of American exceptionalism. Niebuhr calls our attention to the force of unconscious or hidden factors in our moral, religious, political, historical acts and judgments. We should be mindful of or *open* to what is unknown, yet foreseeable in the future. I will explain what Niebuhr means by the "ironic" in accordance with a "dramatic" interpretation of American history, such as he also favors. Niebuhr opposes dramatic history to the "epic" historiographies filled with what I would call closed selves, dominated by fate more than destiny; these remain popular in the twenty-first century. Niebuhr argues that we must respect the elusive contingencies that affect how we view our identities and purposes as Americans. The "wise" will know that they cannot presume to define their "people" in advance. The wise are aware that the "people," however defined, do not necessarily represent the triumph of good over evil when pursuing their national prerogatives. Niebuhr argues that irony can help us recognize our responsibility and can prevent unconscious moral wrong-doing by showing us the total consciousness of "compelled choice," which is the basis of a tragic interpretation.

Upon highlighting the main themes of Niebuhr's analysis, I will argue that ironic relations abound in American culture and find their expression in paradoxical ways through the mythic consciousness and rituals of "open selfhood." This word of all work is the idea and ideal I seek to define in this dissertation. The Niebuhrian paradoxes show up most notably in American entertainment and popular culture, which has been widely condemned as mediocre. But I contend that popular culture has contributed much through an unconscious moral right-doing, spreading a love of freedom in ways that no political, military, or economic pressure could accomplish.

The emphasis on freedom, as fundamental to open selves, and this theory of ironic American exceptionalism gets its inspiration from the philosophy of Schelling, as conveyed through Voegelin's analysis of him (which is the focus of chapter two). Voegelin's reading amplifies Schelling's resistance to ideological movements and dogmatic exceptionalisms. In contrast to Heidegger's confrontation with Schelling's thought, Voegelin held Schelling's philosophy in high esteem, interpreting Schelling as an "open self" —this is Voegelin's term—as a "spiritual realist" who emphasized the value of persons in the universe. Interestingly, both Heidegger and Voegelin turned to Schelling's philosophy for consolation and for wisdom and guidance during the tumultuous time leading up to and including the Second World War. Schelling's philosophy of freedom and his metaphysics of evil become the focal points of some of Heidegger's pre-war lectures, while Voegelin discusses his cultural philosophy of history, myth, anthropology, and politics at the same time.

Although Voegelin and Heidegger differ in orientation, they have a common focus on either attempting to do away with or amend humanistic principles, given the aftermath of the Holocaust. A large portion of the chapter will be devoted to Voegelin's study entitled "Last Orientations," where Schelling is praised for his commitment to the love of freedom and truth. In spending over two years diligently studying the works of Schelling, Voegelin came to see Schelling as an example of that kind of thinker (like Vico) who resisted the ideological temperament of his age. Completing several historical studies on peripheral thinkers like Schelling, Voegelin respected figures of openness in much the same way he responded positively to his own cultural experiences in America. For Voegelin, Schelling represented a climactic German philosopher, embracing open selfhood with his own signature—representing a "watershed of order" in the midst of repeated European turmoil.

I will also show how, unsurprisingly, Heidegger analyzes the shortcomings of Schelling's efforts to grapple with the question of Being, reading him against the backdrop of Heidegger's grand narrative of Western philosophy. This programmatic appropriation of Schelling's legacy in Voegelin's view, is consistent with Heidegger's gnostic speculation, which is characteristic of his style of philosophizing which Voegelin criticizes as embracing the "immanence of the eschaton." It is essentially the same problem Niebuhr named "epic history." The conclusion of the chapter will be devoted to Voegelin's critique of Heidegger. I argue that Schelling's "philosophy of hauntedness" (as I call it) is the basis of Voegelin's meditation on pluralistic American experiential consciousness. Voegelin is able to glean the importance of Schelling's later (posthumously published) philosophy and its attention to paradoxical relations, relations that are vital to the love of freedom he holds so dear.

The story behind Voegelin's personal and cultural transformation, and his encounter with James' radical empiricism and Peirce's pragmatism, while he was studying in America, will be detailed in chapter three. I will rely on Ernst Cassirer, Jacques Ellul, along with Voegelin himself, to discuss the dynamics of mythic consciousness and its role in shaping cultural identity, practices, and norms. The importance of symbolic meaning and rituals will be noted as the conscious-unconscious interplay that contributes to the beliefs and attitudes that belong to an ironic American exceptionalism. Second, I will use Voegelin's journey to the philosophy of open selfhood and his writing of *On the Form of the American Mind*, as an example of "becoming American" under this hermeneutic of exceptionalism.⁶⁰ Voegelin's philosophical response to this traumatic, eye-opening experience, I contend, conveys the orientation one needs to cultivate

⁶⁰ Eric Voegelin, *On the Form of the American Mind*, vol. 1, trans. Ruth Hein, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Jürgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).

in the mutual engagement of open selves. Finally, the chapter will end by discussing Voegelin's shattering of the parochialism that characterized the mentality and lifestyles of central Europe at that time. The cultural pluralism that defines American symbolism became the basis of Voegelin's philosophical and historical projects, and he found it conducive for resisting the extremist, darker myths of various dogmatic exceptionalisms (such as the master race theories). In coming to America, Voegelin was able to articulate the conditions of an inclusive eschatology, rather than an immanent one, through the philosophical underpinnings of the open self.

In the fourth and final chapter, I will show the importance of entertainment as the primary export and prevalent cultural rituals that Americans consume and produce. The idea of partaking in the movies, music, sports, or networking of entertainment as the American "service to humanity" connects with Woodrow Wilson's idealistic personalism as the basis of American values and its ideal of freedom that the world admires and wants for itself. My argument is that Wilson identifies a new concept of the "American people" which does not presuppose residence in a given the place or allegiance to its particular government. This new idea follows the proper sense of open selfhood. While it was born within the political domain, working out US foreign policy, Wilson's ideal of "being American" is analogous with the complexes now expressed through our "cultural hybrids," such as are generated in entertainment. These cultural hybrids sustain paradoxical relations which can transform both traditional and modern categories, bringing them together in ironic and subtle ways.

This concluding chapter connects the efficacy of ironic relations as woven into the freedom-loving myth of open selfhood, as explained in the previous chapters, with the new American exceptionalism articulated primarily by Niebuhr, Voegelin, and Wilson. I will argue that the cultural dynamics of American freedom presents a new type of exceptionalism, a new

sense of the chosen people in history. The pluralization of having the exceptional people come from any race or ethnicity, that potentially anyone can become American (without needing to move there), shows new possibilities for human value under “divine providence” (since the idea of an “elect” cannot be divorced from the idea of a providential order). Not just one people or nation is seen as the anchor, but culture itself serves as the catalyst of providence. This idea of election and providence conveys the foundation of an ironic American exceptionalism, in the eschatological sense and the cultural sense, which leaves us with a sense of promise and hope for the future.

CHAPTER TWO

NIEBUHRIAN IRONY AND HISTORY

Section 1: The Drama of History and Interpretative Tropes

Reinhold Niebuhr's employment and interpretation of irony is telling and, I believe, philosophically robust. He reads American history ironically through the lens of dramatic tragedy. Writing at the outset of the Cold War, his thought seeks to bring out and then minimize the pretensions of Western liberalism and Communism. As Niebuhr notes in 1952, regarding the metanarratives driving the Cold War conflict:

Perhaps the real difficulty in both the communist and the liberal dreams of a "rationally ordered" historical process is that the modern man lacks the humility to accept the fact that the whole drama of history is enacted in a frame of meaning too large for human comprehension or management. It is a drama in which fragmentary meanings can be discerned within a penumbra of mystery; and in which specific duties and responsibilities can be undertaken within a vast web of relations which are beyond our powers.⁶¹

Mindful of the limitations in human power, Niebuhr holds as central to any historical inquiry the *unconscious* or elusive forces at play—what evades the purview of human perspective and foresight. The story of history cannot be (re)told without remembering "unforeseen contingency." A call to humility is evoked for the visionaries. The historian has the responsibility of holding in check the strong temptation to push the "order of the beyond" into the order of history. We must even be suspicious of recognizing overarching patterns, where history gets used and abused in Nietzsche's sense, as a means for legitimizing the interpretation which elevates one's superiority over the rest. An exaggerated notion of cultural, national, or ethnic self-importance thwarts the complex interwoven human drama. None can claim eschatological certainty or enjoy a privileged position off the stage, knowing in advance how the story will end. Whenever a supposedly "neutral" perspective or metanarrative is offered the history of truth gets

⁶¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 88.

sacked for the less modest account of the truth of history. Therefore, in agreement with Schelling and Voegelin, Niebuhr rejects the presumption of “total consciousness” which rashly privileges the efficacy of presence over absence, or proffering over hiddenness. The contingencies that affect the actors and the embodied relations they inhabit and have novel responses towards drives Niebuhr’s historiography. Instead, human history can be read as a process of syntheses of various dialogues containing, unlike an epic, no overarching grand narrative.

In a pure drama, narratives can only take place within the dialogues that occur between the “actors.” For Niebuhr, the dialogues take place on three levels: an inner-dialogue with oneself, dialogue with others, and a dialogue with God. In preserving openness to the divine, Niebuhr upholds a *providential* view of history, but as I will show, it strives for the same level of humility that he calls upon statesmen to recognize in their affairs. This humility requires the prudence and temperance of sober statesmen who are capable of recognizing the dramas and dialogues of history in which they are intricately bound. I think Niebuhr provides the theme for such humility and introspection that is needed by our leaders.

In *The Irony of American History*, Niebuhr lays out the ontological categories that will guide his philosophy of history, while *The Self and the Dramas of History* attempts an application. A providential view of history is possible only for God and is unattainable for man, even when we uncover more and more about the past. We could never be neutral observers, given the intensity of the entangled web and nexus of historical forces that drive us, some of which we also command. None of us is allowed to step off the stage as historical-actors, or to step out beyond it—to borrow the phrase of Voegelin, we all play vital parts in the “drama of humanity.”

Niebuhr employs the literary tropes of the pathetic, comic, tragic and ironic as ontological categories for evaluating the moral and aesthetic dimensions of human acts within the drama of history. The pathetic, comic, tragic and ironic types are usually used as tools of literary interpretation, but that is *not* Niebuhr's intention. He seeks to develop a philosophy of history capable of discerning (within the drama) the moral fiber of societies and peoples according to their congruity with the moral arc of the universe.

Tragedy is usually the lens through which people evaluate their responsibility for any act that was judged to be a "compelled choice." But Niebuhr shows that this habit of evaluation only recognizes the *conscious* elements without taking into account unconscious circumstances. When these elements are considered, we see that sometimes the choices made were not necessary or compelled. The ironic relations are those unconscious elements that could have been known to the actor but went undetected and made a supposedly tragic choice ironic. Therefore, of all the interpretations, the ironic can be the most revealing, because it uncovers a "hidden relation" in what initially appeared as an incongruity. Niebuhr marks out the integrity of irony as a telling category:

If virtue becomes vice through some hidden defect in the virtue; if strength becomes weakness because of the vanity to which strength may prompt the mighty man or nation; if security is transmuted into insecurity because too much reliance is placed upon it; if wisdom becomes folly because it does not know its own limits—in all such cases the situation is ironic. The ironic situation is distinguished from a pathetic one by the fact that the person involved in it bears some responsibility for it. It is differentiated from tragedy by the fact that the responsibility is related to an unconscious weakness rather than to a conscious resolution.⁶²

As participant in the historical landscape, the individual does not enjoy, as Voegelin mentions, the vantage of "...a self-contained spectator. He is an actor playing the part in the drama of being

⁶² Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, xxiv.

and, through the brute fact of his existence, committed to play it without knowing what it is.”⁶³ We are not to imagine ourselves as masters of America’s historical destiny. When he discusses messianic dreams and illusions, Niebuhr notes that “the American dream is not particularly unique. Almost every nation has had a version of it. But the American experience represents a particularly unique and ironic refutation of the illusion in all such dreams.”⁶⁴ Holding in tension those factors and values consistent with a dramatic reading of history and the efficacy of contingencies, is what distinguishes American exceptionalism as ironic from the various dogmatic derailments which “all forget that, though man has a limited freedom over the historical process, he remains immersed in it.”⁶⁵ Niebuhr builds his philosophy of history on his ironic Christian interpretation of man as both creature and creator, or selves as products of natural processes and persons expressive of unique freedom.

“Fate” and “destiny” are usually employed interchangeably, but not by Niebuhr. Destiny has to do with interpreting the history from any standpoint or position within it. It involves only one’s perspective on the whole. Fate has a much sharper designation because it pertains to an inescapable state of history in its totality; a God-like, outside-in knowledge of the world. Whereas fate is overshadowed by the forces and presumptions of consciousness, fortune seeks to highlight the unconscious efficacious features in the story. When applied to the typical genres of the arts, “Tragedy is the image of Fate, as comedy is of Fortune”⁶⁶ Dramatic history comes from

⁶³ Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, Vol. I, *Order and History*, (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1956), 1.

⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 72.

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 82.

⁶⁶ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 333-34. Langer continues: “Their basic structures are different; comedy is essentially contingent, episodic, and ethnic; it expresses the continuous balance of sheer vitality that belongs to society and is exemplified briefly in each individual; tragedy is a fulfillment, and its form therefore is closed, final and passionate.”

the inside-out, experiencing narrative through dialogue and temporal relations. Epic, by contrast, aims to express the story in terms of necessary relations that rely on the presentation of a synchronic virtual space. When applying this difference we can say that, structurally, drama is algebraic whereas epic is geometrical in the weaving together of relations in narrative. Those committed to epic “project a history in retrospect, whereas drama is history coming. Even as performed arts, narration and dramatization are distinct.”⁶⁷ The basis of epic lies in the emphasis on fate exemplified in the structure of grand narratives. Historical interpretations bent on judging America according to prefabricated fate or fulfilling some destiny within the *ultimate* meaning of the world are not consistent, therefore, with the orientation of ironic American exceptionalism. The richness of American experience and symbolism lies in ironic relations, in my view, which includes openness and the aptitude for the spawning of novel cultural hybrids. An epic style of philosophizing neglects or downplays the importance of these hidden relations, along with what Voegelin calls the “plurality of middles” which is a tensional participation between various discourses and groups in the historical process (I will discuss this in greater detail in a later chapter.). The destiny of the “beginning and beyond” remains vague and mysterious for our purposes, and the stories of Americans cannot be foretold or completed in any overarching sense. The same events or scenarios will be reinterpreted in positive or negative ways without being bound to a necessary reading based on inertial historical validity. By interpreting history as a *drama* and emphasizing its *ironic* elements, the fruits of Niebuhr’s and Voegelin’s philosophies can be brought to bear on my central questions.

These dynamics have been noticed by other important philosophers, and it will be valuable here to flesh out Niebuhr’s distinction between epic and drama by showing how this structure is

⁶⁷ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 321.

handled by philosophers who write on aesthetics (which Niebuhr does not do). For example, the same ranking of movements, epic and dramatic, within lyrical poetry can be found in Schelling's aesthetics, but arising in this case from the tension between freedom and necessity. Epic depicts an "objective identity" between these antithetical forms, while drama relays their "subjective non-identity" through various "harmonies" or "dissonances."⁶⁸ Dramatic history emphasizes the qualitative value and alternating pulsations of harmonies and disharmonies, which can be interpreted aesthetically, morally, religiously, scientifically, and so on.

Also the kind of virtual "illusion" described in Susanne Langer's aesthetics can be depicted in germane and novel ways that we find affirmed in various aspects of the symbolic forms of culture. There is a significant difference between the aesthetic philosophy of Schelling and Langer, of course. The latter's philosophy of art is not burdened by over-systemization and idealized categories that dictate the empirical conditions and values. Schelling's treatment of art (1802-3), similar to Hegel's, is heavily intellectualized and consistent with a static transcendental idealism which arguably limits its applicability. Ideas become imagistic virtualizations in Langer, having the advantage of treating art organically and under the auspices of transitory processes. Influenced by Whitehead's and Cassirer's emphasis on symbolic reference and cultural mediation, she also makes an important distinction between "presentational" and "discursive" symbols as a guide for interpretive structures. Yet, we see in both Langer and Schelling the general outline of the distinction between epic and dramatic ways of understanding the proper interpretation on human time (e.g., history as a kind of story).

Applying this distinction, then, to Langer's broader views, we find that unlike epic and tragedy, which moves toward a necessity on the question of the fate of past actualities (which

⁶⁸ Friedrich Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, trans. and ed. David Simpson, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 250.

makes the present seem inevitable), drama is oriented toward a virtual future as presentational. Dominated by a description (phenomenology) and valuation (ethics) through the act, the dramatic form produces a “semblance” of history according to Langer. Patterns of “felt life” are posited through elements weaved together in a “rhythmic single structure.”⁶⁹ One does not just give a straightforward narrative in drama, therefore, but focuses on one’s commitments and consequences in their actions as *forming* the narrative. The organic structure of the narrative emerges out of the dialogues within the story.

In episodic fashion, then, the interpretation I am arguing for is, in the main, consistent with Schelling’s, Voegelin’s, and Niebuhr’s notion of drama—reading history as in-the-making rather than already made (predestined). As Langer rightly notes, to appropriate history under grand narrative (epic) is to “project a history in retrospect, whereas drama is history coming.”⁷⁰ Organic narratives, serve as the *dramatic* model by which we convey the relevant details and information. Interpretations are given fuller weight, structured according to the synoptic unity of the cultural complex. As Langer argues, drama involves a presentation of latent form or form in suspense. “Drama is more variable, more tolerant of choices made by performing artists, than any other art and mode. For this reason, the ‘commanding form,’ which is established by the playwright, must be clear and powerful.”⁷¹ Drama should be read as telling the story from the inside out and not the outside in. Similarly, the mythic consciousness of open selfhood does not ritualize fate or fortune as the basis of some “impersonal subjectivity.” Rather the narratives of

⁶⁹ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 326.

⁷⁰ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 321.

⁷¹ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 314.

open selves are algebraic, rooted in a purposive self-development which is organic. In a very important sense, history should be viewed as “poetry in the mode of action.”⁷²

With these provisions many will assume a cynical or pessimistic outlook on the possibilities for performing good deeds in the world. But Niebuhr wisely suggests that

The recognition of historical limits must not, however, lead to a betrayal of cherished values and historical attainments. Historical pragmatism exists on the edge of opportunism, but cannot afford to fall into the abyss. The difficulty of sustaining the values of a free world must not prompt us, for instance, to come to terms with tyranny. Nor must the perplexities confronting the task of achieving global community betray us into a complacent acceptance of national loyalty as the final moral possibility of history.⁷³

Niebuhr’s crucial distinction between “drama” and “epic” specifically shows how they both appropriate the ontological tropes for assessing the deeds and moral responsibilities of historical actors. His agenda (if we can say he had one) lies in the resistance toward dogmatists or ideologues who try to confiscate the infinitely complex meanings of history and employ them for their own twisted purposes. As Richard Crouter says, “For Niebuhr, history’s drama unfolds freely as a series of infinitely complex acts. That is true of the present, but also of the past and the future. Because of history’s contingent nature, it is indecipherable and unpredictable.”⁷⁴

Drama holds as a cathartic combination, a play of unconscious and conscious motives where no one understands the situation any better than the actors themselves. In the etymological Latin and Greek senses, drama signifies simply doing or “to perform.”

History done from this “inside-out” perspective can truly appreciate the role of the prophet or prophetic voice in articulating meanings from the perspective of providence. I read Niebuhr’s historiography as consistent with Voegelin’s notion of the plurality of middles where

⁷² Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 320.

⁷³ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 143-44.

⁷⁴ Richard Crouter, *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics, Religion, and Christian Faith*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 33.

both argue that the “beginning and beyond” of history must remain a mystery. Relations we can take to be fundamental or essential to our place and story in history are recognized by Niebuhr as subtle and possibly uncanny (though not necessarily). Whatever knowledge we believe we possess regarding these ultimate values and purposes needs to be held as fallible, being indefinitely revisable, according to the pragmatic method. Niebuhr is not talking about faith in the traditional religious sense because that is presumed to be unknowable, but about those ironic factors that are foreseeably revealed in some undefined future.

The destiny of humanity is not exhausted by the framework of world-immanent causes and effects. This is another way of expressing the need for some idea of providence. In acknowledging their mutual relevance, open selves seek to emphasize the internal and other contributory relations within cultural frameworks, which can stimulate both cooperation and conflict. Interpreting events and people in history with regard to their contribution and meaning, emphasizing an inside-out perspective, drives Niebuhr’s and Voegelin’s analysis. Open selves are not just products of history they are makers of history. In order to give a convincing account of ourselves, we identify with certain stories that can have bearing on how others view our experience. To give the political account of American exceptionalism, whether pro or con, is to play the “politico.” To give the military or economic account implies something analogous. These are epic or linear postures one might adopt relative to our central question.

For advocates and opponents of American exceptionalism, there is much at stake in being able to possess or to manipulate the definitive account—the “accepted story” of America. The dangerous, short-sighted, popular accounts of American exceptionalism suffer from utopianisms, variously distorted by either championing America as superior through “exemplarism” or being driven to aggressive responses (given the uncertainties of the globe) by advocating

expansionism. The relations among American economic, military, and political interests, affect American popular culture but do not wholly determine it. It is not as if American corporate or national interests can land on any shore where Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson have not already formed the public mind regarding what “an American” is: i.e., culture precedes and reinforces these other narratives.

In emphasizing drama over epic in historiography (and similar to Voegelin), Niebuhr recommends that we respect the integrity of persons by acknowledging the “plurality of middles” (as our earlier quotation explains) as the basis for historical narrative.

Section 2: Competing Selves of the Twenty-first Century

An intriguing form of exceptionalism exists in the mode of an anti-American global communalism, a multinationalism that leaves the world bereft of *any* chosen people. What is rarely understood is that from the time of Abraham’s initial covenant with his God, the world has grown increasingly dependent on exceptionalism, to the degree that in the 20th century the American version of exceptionalism became the principal alternative to fascism and communism. Arguing for the spread of globalization through democratic capitalism these “global Westerners” claim exceptionalism beyond the nation-state, referring to the end of history or the withering away of the state. For these interpreters America cannot be disassociated from the list of state culprits responsible for war, exploitation of vulnerable nations, or working in the special interests of transnational corporations. Certainly the last dozen years of conflict stemming from the War on Terror has increased these sentiments against US power, especially in relation to EU politics. It is difficult to see through the military, political, and economic fog and onto a cultural ground that continues to support America’s international efforts.

Who are “the Americans”? Speculation persists regarding the articulation of selfhood and identity of Americans and how this should be interpreted domestically and internationally. The

hangover from the Cold War still remains, along with the triumph and propaganda of capitalism that dominates much of contemporary US rhetoric. Strong elements of US leadership praise the fruits of the capitalistic system and they emphasize the importance of economic independence through prosperity. American exceptionalism gets attributed to the superiority of liberal and individualistic practices because of our commitment to capitalism, in the genuine sense. Hence the “capitalist self,” as I will call it, is viewed by many as largely responsible for American freedom. Similar sentiments are shared by proponents of democracy who emphasize the importance of constitutional frameworks, such as civil guarantees of liberty. One emphasizes the economic form while the other focuses on the importance of the political. Both the democratic and capitalist selves are closely aligned in promoting progressivism through free market enterprise. Spreading the purposes and ideals of democracy and capitalism has been suggested as the key to sustaining American hegemony in a globalized world. Claims are made that these endeavors will ensure the success and prosperity for less developed regions, such as Africa, Central and South America, and/or Southeast Asia. The recent uprisings in the Middle East and Muslim world (that go under the name of “Arab spring”) are further evidence that decrepit, authoritarian modes of governing may be shattering before our very eyes. The issues associated with the rights and dignity of persons are as pressing as ever in a conflict-ridden, pluralistic world. Desire for freedom is catching fire despite the fact that these societies do not exemplify the typical indicators most associated with the Western values of secularism, democracy, capitalism, and so on. What if these societies strive for freedom without having the experience or the faith in these Western identities and values? Could it be the case that one of the major tasks confronting our prospects for stabilizing a peaceful future lies in solidifying political liberties through non-democratic, capitalist forms of culture?

Ironie American exceptionalism seeks to embrace and promote a wide-range of cultures, including those perceived as threatening or foreign, through the open self. It is not the case that freedom is secured through certain proclivities a culture possesses, simply; but, rather, one makes culture as a symbol of human freedom and happiness. Misinterpreting these transitional events can have devastating political consequences; but a greater difficulty lies in having a mistaken understanding of ourselves and of what American symbolism represents. Adopting a hermeneutics of American exceptionalism based on capitalism or democracy runs the risk of appropriating a narrowly ideological version that sabotages our most valuable resources. The love of freedom, so central to ironic American exceptionalism, is not to be predicated on democratic and capitalistic principles, simply. It may be “American” to be a proponent of capitalism or democracy but one need not subscribe to these ideals in order to be considered American. I am arguing for an openness which takes the love of freedom as fundamental such that a non-reductionist account is needed to articulate the immensity of the American symbolic texture. There are many people and groups who identify themselves as Americans through open selfhood without claiming to be democratic or capitalist.

By claiming progress or prosperity to be fundamental to the achievement of freedom, utopian orientations have influenced much of this political and economic discourse. The possibilities for generalized freedom in the world are undermined by the delusional ideologues who deem the “new Americans” to be “free” while many in the world are not. Making certain social conditions absolute prerequisites for happiness and personal liberty falls for a false sense of superiority. The “new Americans” aren’t superior. They are ironists of a sort. There are no guarantees of a safe and authentic existence. One could hold that an adequate standard of living, or the requirement of specific government institutions, might be necessary but this is not

sufficient for freedom. As Woodrow Wilson said in an address before the Southern Commercial Congress, “I would rather belong to a poor nation that was free than to a rich nation that had ceased to be in love with liberty.”⁷⁵

For the many who argue American exceptionalism is at an end or deserves a proper burial we have to consider what *mythoi* they are relying on. What do they take to be fundamental in the pride one has in identifying oneself as an American? The Democratic and Republican temperaments are awash in cynical, pessimistic forecasts, which pervade the general attitudes of the public. We no longer look to our leaders as sources of hope—which may be we elect movie stars and sports heroes to public office. If there is an equality that we all share, it lies in the dismissal of optimism in our own ability to respond to the current crisis facing the political and economic scene. These pessimistic assessments appear to be largely driven by the religio-political myths of the American cultural mainstream and the power perceived as exclusively Christian, capitalist, or democratic, which devolve into dogmatic interpretations and willful stupidity. But such measures fail to recognize the richness of what it means to see America *as* exceptional. In believing that the open self is political, economic, or even religious one misses the ways in which these values are exchanged as aspects of culture.

While the military interpretation of exceptionalism points to a kind of hero, the economic interpretation points to a venture capitalist, and the political interpretation looks for a new lawgiver (some even imagined Obama in such a role), but in truth the American exceptionalist anticipates a cultural icon—someone who fulfills economic, political, and military ends through a *cultural* status. The cultural elements in such a narrative are about something broader and more

⁷⁵ Woodrow Wilson, “Address on Latin American policy to the Fifth Annual Convention of the Southern Commercial Congress,” *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 451.

concrete than these political, military, and economic aspects. Aspects of military or political strategy are treated as secondary, or as subsets of culture, in an account such as is offered here.

As we address the state of American exceptionalism and debate its various expressions of selfhood, it is beneficial to see the limitations of the capitalist, democratic, Christian, or socialistic selves as viable options globally. They share in common a mythic consciousness wedded to an “us vs. them” mentality, including the initiatives they commercialize. Instead of respecting personal centers of action, where one can posit his or her own values, however unpopular, they propose prefabricated values and purposes, and these are to be simply accepted or rejected wholesale. One of the biggest obstacles that prevents these selves from symbolizing openness lies in an unhealthy commitment to a system or program that cripples any ability to challenge conventional wisdom. By believing unquestioningly in capitalism or democracy, for instance, our leaders not only become narrowly ideological, but they also fail to be critical of their own assumptions or principles. It may be that identifying success or global stability with Western values exacerbates the problem. Such worldviews come off as exploitative because of the way they are believed by those leaders. Becoming aware of these inadequacies in dealing with the expanding nature of global social differences is one way to avoid such short-sightedness.

The popular movements associated with these various American “selves” represent an identity dependent on what Heidegger called the “crowd” or the “they-self” (*das Man*). Liberty, whether political or economic, becomes cheap and inauthentic once it is naively believed that one has the only blueprint to its realization. Thus, despite the competing nature of these selves, they share several features in common. Their emergence and success in the decades after the Second World War depends on pre-scripted identities or epic grand narratives. To pretend these

traditional Western ways –politics, economic dominance, militarism-- solely or collectively, hold the only key to personal and communal success would undermine the richness and fruits of ironic American exceptionalism, which is the kind of exceptionalism that has genuinely spread to the world. Of the competing selves seeking their validation in being the hallmark of US hegemony, none is as incomplete and inclusive of the efficacy of ironic relations as the open self. “Being American” means accepting the love of liberty as essential, such that one cannot designate in advance who one’s leaders or people are, or what values are important to them.

The transformative power does not lie in political, religious, economic, or military solutions, but rather in the cultural hybrids conveyed through entertainment rituals. Open selves embrace diverse forms and interpretations of the same cultures without feeling compelled to affirm any. There is a genuine acceptance of free expression in ironic American exceptionalism, not mere narcissism. The widest category of the open self is cultural and this accounts for a deeper range of sentiments and purposes. It can include certain political, economic, and religious expressions. Current views associating American exceptionalism with capitalism, US hegemony, or democracy remain impoverished accounts, in my view.

Some elites and intellectuals have wrongly understood America’s essential exceptionalist myth to be Christian—the New Covenant or Promised Land, the fortunate who are a part of God’s elect. This narrative has led to disastrous results for our self-understanding, generated from an irresponsible interpretation of history. We would be better served in recognizing the dark features entailed by such a conception of American exceptionalism: an exaggerated identity of who we are as a people; a false sense of superiority and security; and a perverted eschatological vision which is exclusivist and gnostic. The danger of such presumptions frightened Voegelin: “[b]y transforming pragmatic history into apocalyptic drama, the

imaginator transforms himself from an ordinary man in open existence, from the ‘link in the chain,’ into the intellectual guide of mankind on its way to metastatic liberation.”⁷⁶ Alarming, this American Christian myth of exceptionalism conveys a pathological consciousness similar to the dogmatic myths employed within the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century: the myth of the worker through communism, myth of the *Völk* or people of National Socialism, myth of the state, and the myth of progress as the pathos of liberal democratic capitalism.⁷⁷

American Exceptionalism should be viewed simply as a love for freedom and the openness toward all people to have the opportunity of possibilities. As Woodrow Wilson suggested, under this simpler notion of American Exceptionalism, one does not have to live in or even *like* America to be considered an American. Yet, many have seen the America vision symbolized by ideas like “the promised land,” or “the shining light on the hill,” or the nation of the New Jerusalem with the true Covenant. During the American Civil War, Lincoln used the rhetoric of America as a Christian nation and this is a recurring theme in the politics of our own times, especially amongst the “religious right.” It is advantageous politically to promote American exceptionalism as an extension of the Biblical tradition, viewing ourselves as the appointed vicars of God.

Presidents Reagan, Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama, along with many of our leaders and pundits, believe stubbornly that America serves the cause of good over evil. Andrew Bacevich may be wrong in his pessimistic assessment of American exceptionalism, but he has reminded us of the wise warnings of Reinhold Niebuhr at the right time. Niebuhr prophetically

⁷⁶ Eric Voegelin makes this claim in “On Hegel,” *Published Essays, 1966-1985, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, CW12*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 239.

⁷⁷ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda—The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 39-40.

refuted this inflated opinion of America in saying, “No simple victory of good over evil in history is possible.”⁷⁸ To think otherwise is pretentious and possibly delusional, according to Niebuhr. Despite being a Christian theologian, Niebuhr stayed consistent by refusing to accept the self-appointed elitism adopted by many Christians. Niebuhr says: “All men are naturally inclined to obscure the morally ambiguous element in their political cause by investing it with religious sanctity.” And regarding the US, “The tendency to equate our political with our Christian convictions causes politics to generate idolatry.”⁷⁹ The results of such a *Star Wars* narrative, where it is us, “the good ones,” versus “the evil doers,” are disastrous and not in the least exemplary of Christian humility.

American exceptionalism is not only then involved in an ironic right-doing that promotes the myth of the open self, but we become the key statesmen who make certain that its direction does not overlook the implications of the “hidden relations.” The democratic self is necessarily open, as least in principle if not always in practice; but the open self is not necessarily democratic. A major difficulty presented by democracy is the almost inherent tendency to conflate the *non*-democratic as being *anti*-democratic, but this is not accurate. Many people have exemplified the attitudes and sentiments of open selfhood while not believing institutional democracy to be a *real* historical possibility. They were non-democratic yet open. Likewise we see a figure like the late Pope John Paul II, representing the Catholic Church, which stands as one of the most hierarchical and authoritarian institutions still around. But who would deny that

⁷⁸ Quoted from Niebuhr’s *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History*, (New York: Scribner Book Company, 1979), 145-46 in Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of American Power—The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York, Metropolitan Books, 2008), 81.

⁷⁹ Bacevich, “Introduction” to *Irony of American History*, xii. Quoted from D. B. Robertson, ed. *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1967), 59.

Pope John Paul II was an open self, taking the freedom and dignity of persons as fundamental to culture, while resisting the urge to exalt one's own traditions? His way of life exemplified a deep commitment for tolerance and respect for persons.

When Niebuhr presented his “ironic” interpretation of American history, he planted the seeds planted for what I am now calling an ironic American exceptionalism. I have only named a phenomenon that is already widespread. In constantly hearing the phrase, “only in America” by movie stars, professional athletes, and even presidents, we are forced to wonder what leads us (or anyone) to hold America in such high esteem? Upon closer examination, employing the ontological categories of Niebuhr’s philosophy of history, I want to suggest that America is held to be exceptional in a pluralized world, *viewed ironically*. America, whether it is admitted or not, has historically been associated with a level of tolerance that always threatens to dissolve relations between persons or groups that have been based on dialectical antagonisms. Given this association, many are quick to point out American hypocrisy wherever some group or individual is treated unfairly, or when we are not living up to our own lofty goals. This association, then, is the *essence* of our heritage, even when we do not fulfill it—a constant refusal to give up our resistance of those who, in thought or deed, fight against that love of liberty. So there is a dominance of utopian thinking about “America,” both positive and negative, which pervades much of the public consciousness in conjunction with our open selfhood.

Fundamentalism, by contrast, operates as a kind of rationalism which is a uniquely modern phenomenon. It is the essence of the closed self. Fundamentalism and other forms of extremism, relevant to American exceptionalism are united in their belief that our love of liberty should be replaced with some other value: the modern protocol and rationalism of the evangelical Christian; the democratic ideologue; the capitalist; or the ideological socialistic kind

of self. Modern man, Niebuhr says, “hovers ambivalently between subjection to the ‘reason’ which he can find in nature and the ‘reason’ which he can impose upon nature. But neither form of reason is adequate for the comprehension of the illogical and contradictory patterns of the historic drama, and for anticipating the emergence of unpredictable virtues and vices.”⁸⁰ A naïve progressivism sets much of the agenda for social leaders in the US, whether Democrat or Republican, that tomorrow or our future must be better than today. This type of linear outlook shapes many of the expectation structures of the masses, who get pandered to with the empty promises of politicians. An Enlightenment temper of consumerism and rationalism is thought to be sufficient for the conditions of securing freedom and equality for all. By selling and exporting liberty through the commodification of practically everything, the impression has been widespread that wealth and privilege represent the heart of Western values. But as Niebuhr notes, these marks of social status are not fulfilling, given the paradoxical nature of the human self:

The self is so great and so small that its greatness can not be contained in its smallness. It can only realize itself by endlessly being drawn out of itself into larger ends. The community may provisionally be that larger end. But it can not be so ultimately. For the community is, though broader than the individual, also much closer to the necessities of nature than it. The individual must have a higher end than the community.⁸¹

Those who see American exceptionalism as consumerist will think these sentiments are distorted. What comprises much of our wealth and progress is waste and exploitation. One cannot deny the legitimacy of the critique of capitalism in its more moderate form, of course. The entanglement between democracy and capitalism has served to conduct this cynical worldview throughout the basic ideological circuit of Western liberalism. Open selves are free to acknowledge the ironic factors which follow from these arguments—surely one can be liberated even in poverty or be a slave while lavishing in prosperity. Freedom does not necessarily follow

⁸⁰ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 88.

⁸¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1955), 220.

from certain socio-economic equality or any superficial standards of success. Technological and information advancements have contributed to these attitudes, setting the agenda of globalization, which has been conflated with the protection of American interests. The unfortunate results have been narrowing the breadth and importance of culture down to certain tropes, such as, economics, science, or art, as fundamental for sustaining growth. This conflation often conceals the deeper situation, which is not nearly so rationalized, controlled, or clear.

In my view, seeking to cultivate freedom should be in our overall interests and not simply collapsed into some notion of spreading democracy or capitalism as a national initiative. It is necessary to admit that the level of engagement between hostile nations has been modified through democratic and capitalist features, especially due to the increase in our global interdependence. While much of the rhetoric points to capitalist principles, such as commodification, most of our Western practices have become increasingly socialistic as they shape domestic policies. Ironically, the US leads most of the world in its offering of and dependence on social programs per capita, while refusing to ditch the mentality and norms of rugged individualism so steeped in capitalism. Any analysis of these facts must take into account the reality of the debt levels that not only involve individual consumers, but governments in general. How can America, with its debt and dependence, continue to represent the ideals of free trade and pretend to be a leading moral authority among other nations given the paradoxical difficulties of military, economic, or political woes? In exaggerating the connection of democracy and capitalism as cornerstones of American freedom, there lies the danger of subverting one's real cultural virtues into vices. It is not our military strength, political know-how, or economic wizardry that make America the beacon of liberty.

It is ironic that the typical military, political, economic, or historical strengths are becoming the weaknesses of American leadership in symbolically serving the world. Open selves, by contrast, convey the intensity of images and artifacts as the fabric of American cultural architecture; but they are resisted by the dogmatic interpretations which claim Americans should take as fundamental simply prosperity or progress—in a word, simply more. Obstacles to the acknowledgement of the constructive mythic consciousness of the open self are generated by those who dedicate themselves to the cause of some *prerequisite* they claim as essential to freedom. They falsely claim what may only be *necessary* to one's freedom is fully sufficient. Open selfhood reveals that extremism in any loyalty or cause has the potential to enslave or have crippling effects on those with even the best intentions. One should adopt views and commit oneself to them with a sense of fallibility. An ironic American exceptionalism promotes cultural interpretations, practices, and rituals as fallibilistic and subject to indefinite revision.

One might well expect that, confronted by this fact [these aims of culture], cultural expressions would increasingly evidence a search for new guidelines, channels through which to experience anew the Eros which promises some fundamental harmony of Reality and Appearance. This in part explains the highly tentative and transitory character of so much of the aesthetic expressions of contemporary culture.⁸²

There is a normative claim being made, then, about the open self: Americans ought to recognize not only what they are but who they can be through a mythic consciousness. It is better to be an open self than to embrace versions of lost selves.

Section 3: Unconscious Moral Right-doing

Given the immense complexity of history, discovering any meaningful patterns is provisional and hypothetical at best. On one side of history we have the drama itself, ironic exceptionalism symbolizes the possibility of realizing one's unconscious opportunities; it is a

⁸² David L. Hall, *The Civilization of Experience—A Whiteheadian Theory of Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1973), 193.

path toward fulfilling these possibilities in new forms. On the other side of history we have the actors, open selves acknowledging the efficacy of evil as a possibility through the perverse use of freedom in positive actions. But this acknowledgement accompanies the view that the basis of one's freedom is his/her personhood; we are engaged *only* in dehumanizing ourselves in the presence of others when we co-operate with ideological interpretations of our selfhood—that we are soldiers only, or consumers only, or citizens only, and not more. Empires and imperial conquests have dominated world politics from time immemorial. Some nation takes the lead, so-to-speak, in being the founders of a civilization, reaping rewards that come with great sacrifices and risks. Others are dragged in and dragged along, or caught between. Thus the question we have to face even in our age of liberal democracy is whether or not the constellation of states and international institutions can exist securely without a neutral or exceptional overseer. Human history suggests there is always some hegemonic power that shapes and develops a vast cultural landscape, from Egyptians to Babylonians to Persians to Greeks and so on up through European colonialism. Each empire had some version of exceptionalism. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the symbolization of American exceptionalism pervades global mythic consciousness on a variety of levels. It does so largely through a democratic culture of movies, sports, and music that evokes feelings of empathy toward the possibilities of freedom expressed in the myth of the open self.

Perhaps one of the most effective, yet overlooked in this regard, aspects of American exceptionalism lies in the various myths associated with the mediums of popular culture. Images of sports superstars like Tiger Woods and Kobe Bryant, or music and movies, become the means of coping with our hopes and fears; these means ironically to engender attitudes of tolerance toward individual possibility and opportunity. Compared with the typical tools of political capital

through the deployment of hard and soft power in strategic relations, these modes of culture more strongly and believably convey the American temperament, and it is communicated in ways that accord with Wilson's broader articulation of American exceptionalism. Valuing the love of freedom, being committed to serving humanity, and like attitudes, help to maintain an open-ended notion of the chosen people. Everybody can be a part of this exceptionalism, indeed, as Wilson believed, the implications of this view are that the whole world, wherever freedom is loved and sacrifices are made for its sake, is American. Unlike the alternative darker myths which are closed and exclusive, being based on a self-imposed, privileged image of their people, the open self myth resists the pressure to identify exactly who are its people—potentially anybody.

It seems that everybody wants to be a part of the chosen people in some fashion, to feel a sense of belonging and to hope for good eschatological standing. This may be the pathological result of the modern condition of alienation and fragmentation. Modern exceptionalism cannot work in quite the same way that pre-modern forms worked. Yet, some form of exceptionalism has to be granted for two reasons. First, international politics is steadily haunted by the prospect of being derailed into anarchy; preventing that depends on establishing an anchoring center(s) of power as a source of stability and leadership, especially in regulating the balance of power amongst states. The other reason is that we still need some type of exceptionalism that stems from and satisfies the longing to be counted among God's elect, to be consoled and comforted with the assurance that, as providence provides, it is on "our side." The Hebrews of the Old Testament have been recognized as the chosen people of God's covenant and this claim was later incorporated into Christianity; indeed, the Hebrew form of this claim, involving the One God, has spread throughout the world, becoming the only operative sense of exceptionalism.

Relevant to the story of its becoming general is the way exceptionalism developed in America. Under the Puritan symbols, as I already discussed, America gets interpreted as the people of the new covenant. As that shining city or light on the hill, which John Winthrop popularized and Lincoln repeated during the Civil War, America came to be represented as the new promised land—read as a continuation of the Biblical narrative. But Wilson, the stiff Calvinist, ironically articulated a *secularized* notion of American Exceptionalism broad enough to plant the seeds for the mythic consciousness of the open self. Sadly, this amazing but ultimately unconscious, achievement of Wilson has been resisted by the same myth he abandoned—the Puritan philosophy of history, which holds that only if you are saved are you then exceptional. There is thus a closed and an open version of America's exceptional standing.

But what should not be overlooked are the strong influences of British imperialism and constitutionalism enjoyed as essential factors to the development and dominance America. The British and Americans are forever connected, and many of the connections remain unconscious, material for ironic history: English is the cultural vehicle for getting things done these days around the world, but it seems unlikely that the British visions of empire included Spike Lee movies and Bollywood.⁸³ Americans do not identify their exceptionalism with empire as do the British, for:

Americans could never have built the empire they now enjoy at the beneficent *noblesse oblige* of their British cousins (shame that the French got that phrase when the British own the virtue). Americans do not *want* to suffer for the sake of imparting higher culture

⁸³ Randall E. Auxier, "A Very Naughty Boy: Getting Right with Brian," in *Monty Python and Philosophy: nudge, nudge, think think!*, eds. Gary L. Hardcastle, George A. Reisch (Pera, IL, Open Course Press, 2006). In his humorous and insightful essay, Auxier states: "The true threat to empire is people who refuse to learn the *lingua franca* correctly....Right up to my own middle school years we were still learning, at the tip of a blade, to conjugate Latin. The language had been dead for five centuries. Now *that's* an impressive cultural imperialism. People will be learning the Queen's English everywhere for another two millennia, minimum. Some things come and go, some come and stay. Latin and English are of the latter sort."

to a barbaric world. They want to make money and B movies and live in Florida. Only their own comfort, security and wealth moves them in any serious way. Yes, yes, democracy, freedom, things of that nature, but it's not like we [Americans] will hop in our boats and go off to create it (not really).⁸⁴

If the history of politics and human affairs can teach us anything it is this: we cannot escape the need to have an exceptional nation or people, yet if the twentieth-century of totalitarianism and genocide is any indication, then we have to admit that the safest way for an exceptionalism to persist is when it is exceptional-less. The irony of American exceptionalism lies in an unconscious right-doing by a culture capable of projecting the image of the open self as its myth. Niebuhr illustrates this point in speaking out against our own moral self-interpretations, not letting them succumb to the hubris associated with being driven exclusively by one's own cause. Mentioning a stronger sense of justice he writes:

The inclination "to give each man his due" is indeed one of the ends of such a discipline. But a sense of humility which recognizes that nations are even more incapable than individuals of fully understanding the rights and claims of others may be an even more important element in such a discipline. *A too confident sense of justice always leads to injustice. In so far as men and nations are "judges in their own case" they are bound to betray the human weakness of having a livelier sense of their own interest than of the competing interest.* That is why "just" men and nations may easily become involved in ironic refutations of their moral pretensions.⁸⁵

Moral and political reflection of this kind seldom is taken for anything other than self-doubt or a sign of weakness. Open selves do not deny the limitations of finite perspectives and they acknowledge the importance of morale, but this acknowledgement is not a stoic cosmopolitanism. It can be healthy to be loyal to one's nation, but one must resist being so headstrong that it misdirects freedom into a vicious nationalism that is predicated on a false

⁸⁴ Auxier, "A Very Naughty Boy-Getting Right with Brian," 75-76. Auxier says at the end of the essay, as a kind of reminder to those present-day Puritans who are prone more to American (Christian) exclusivism: "If ever a bunch of undeserving people was touched by divine favor, it's the Americans—even luck seems eliminated as a competitor" (81). If some type of exceptionalism is unavoidable then ironically we might be better off having to accept a democratic culture, one being consumed and exported by a not so terribly exceptional people.

⁸⁵ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 138-39, emphasis added.

sense of superiority. An open self is not adamantly opposed to nationalism, generally, but resists those forms of nationalism that are a product of hatred and not about love for the dignity of persons. “Ironie refutations” help to simmer down our own presumptive calls to remedy injustices or to know in advance who is and is not a part of “one’s people.” For Niebuhr, what appears to be a trivial contingency can be reinterpreted according to new purposes through our discovering the efficaciousness of a hidden relation. It is also ironic that, in having to struggle to identify who constitutes our people and leaders; or whenever we propagandize ourselves, American like-mindedness regarding the issue of loving freedom shows no signs of fatigue, even with the ideologies and darker myths still lurking. Freedom stands as our purpose.

If America were not taken as a symbol of freedom, then why would the Israelis or Palestinians, or the Catholics and Protestants of Ireland lean on such a young nation to lead in the construction of their peace and reconciliation processes? They look to America as the leader in helping them overcome the extreme, darker mythic consciousness which harbors pathological fidelities, blind hatreds, and ideological creeds. Niebuhr says:

For nations have always been constitutionally self-righteous. But it will make a difference whether the culture in which the policies of nations are formed is only as deep and as high as the nation’s highest ideals; or whether there is a dimension in the culture from the standpoint of which the element of vanity in all human ambitions and achievements is discerned.⁸⁶

What we can take from Niebuhr, on the whole, is that the exceptional thing about American Exceptionalism is that it seeks no exception through the myth of the open self.

Section 4: Ironic Relations Abound

Ironic relations abound, not only in shaping our historical consciousness but also through

⁸⁶ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 149-50.

the values, identities, and the symbolization of “what it means to be an American.” With the end of the Iraqi war and the lessons to be learned from the conflicts in Afghanistan and the Middle East over the last decade, we may still turn to Niebuhr’s reminders to us about many of the difficulties facing a superpower under such conditions, as expressed in *The Irony of American History*. Through a pragmatic rather than utilitarian, deontological, or virtue ethics, Niebuhr warns against adopting moral and political initiatives which are not open to indefinite revision or not mindful of undiscovered options. This is a fallibilism and an epistemic humility before the drama of history, in Niebuhr’s terms. On this view of what identifies one as “American,” we are confronted with intriguing paradoxes. For instance, is it not ironic how African slaves can be imagined as more “American,” than their Anglo-european captors; at least when it comes to evoking attitudes of openness and freedom in a deeper sense, than their captors who sought to take away their liberty through bondage? Why, in the perception of the wider world, is a man of African descent in a better position to symbolize “the American” than is the man of privileged, European background? In this example, we find not just irony in the ordinary sense, but a hidden relation, a place where supposed past necessities are exposed as contingencies propped up by wrong-doing. In a word, this is “irony.”

The trouble with Rorty’s position is that its skepticism about final vocabularies inhibits moral judgment.⁸⁷ Against positions such as Rorty’s, Niebuhr seeks to evaluate moral right and wrong-doing in social, economic, or political behavior on individual and institutional levels. Compared with tragic and comic modes of interpreting, I concur with Niebuhr’s assessment that the ironic trope is more “revealing”—paradoxically—and informative, given its handling of details and its temporal extension. Rorty’s application of irony is inadequate, I think, given its

⁸⁷ See, Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

proximity to Heidegger's project, which has dominated most of the agenda of continental philosophy since 1927. In such a schema, the recognition of irony tends to undermine our confidence in moral knowledge. Instead, Niebuhr employs irony as an ontological category *insofar* as it is ethical, given what it can tell us about our moral motivations, actions, and interpretations. Irony is a trope whereby we can gauge and enhance our expectation structures for meeting the demands of an intermingled, pluralistic world. And alert us to the need to be open to many unforeseen relations and consequences that have an impact on the decisions we are making in the present.

In emphasizing Niebuhr's notion of irony, which offers an account of moral responsibility and unconscious wrong-doing, I seek to emphasize the role of unconscious moral *right*-doing in my subsequent discussion of the practices of entertainment rituals and the way it illustrates what I call "virtual integration." Reluctant and critical attitudes surround the media frenzy of scandals and social networking, with its innuendos and flame wars, and the like. Movie stars, artists, and athletes are overpaid and, we constantly hear, in the grand scheme of things, what they do is not very important. News stories and TV programs continue to blur reality and fiction with outlandish sensationalism, these skeptics point out. Too many, especially the young, can easily form an unhealthy obsession with a video game or with instant access to all types of filth on the internet. So the typical story goes. This kind of cynicism appears to be growing as we try to cope with an information-saturated, transitional, and diffuse world. It goes without saying that we are still in the beginning stages of a highly developed, fast-paced technological frenzy. To find positive aspects of American popular culture aesthetically, not to mention ethically, is difficult, for most of us. Often viewed with contempt, these rituals are seen more as perverted than productive. The conventional wisdom has usually deemed threatening the

onslaught of gadgets or data that expand the scope of our cultural matrices. But with the bad comes the good, and I want to argue for the positive enrichment of opportunities in this new and confusing terrain.

Attitudes and orientations toward racism, for example, have taken on those haunted aspects articulated in Voegelin's reading of Schelling's and Niebuhr's use of irony. Undoubtedly, progress has been made in attempting to atone for the national legacy of slavery and segregation against African Americans, Native Americans, and other groups. The election of the first black US president, Barack Obama, is not insignificant evidence of this kind of change. Another extreme has emerged by which it is naively argued the US has entered a "post-racial society." Sentiments expressed along these lines capture only the "outside-in" perspective, through which Americans continue to sell the world an image of virtual integration, through the spreading of entertainment rituals, icons, and artifacts. In this view, possibilities for cultural engagement arise from the intermingling and neutralizing forces that virtualizations of our worlds tend to reinforce. And the more communicative technologies infiltrate our experiential consciousness, the more the decrepit social conditions can be challenged, as our actual and possible relations become more intertwined. Such equalizing structures have the potential to alter these social conditions through cultural interchange. The norms of entertainment call for a mutual immanence of every culture within every other. The interests and aims of a given people are appropriated in episodic fashion, without any enforced commitment on behalf of those who enjoy them.

Entertainment corresponds well to our experience of the world in its transitory character, articulated most radically in process philosophy; one might say that in the experience of an entertaining durational epoch the many become one and are increased by one. A genuinely

entertaining durational epoch adds value and intensity to our collective experience. Even a bad show contributes something, but a good show achieves, apart from catharsis, a kind of elevation or betterment of the group. A. Bartlett Giamatti says, in speaking of baseball:

A “win” is the actual realization of what is centrally an imaginative surge [. . .] The spectator, seeing something he had only imagined, or, more astonishingly, had not yet or would never have imagined possible, because the precise random moments had never before come together in this form to challenge the players, is privy to the realized image and assents, is mastered, and in that instant bettered. “Winning” for player or spectator is not simply outscoring; it is a way of talking about betterment, about making oneself, one’s fellows, one’s city, one’s adherents, more noble because of a temporary engagement of a higher human plane.⁸⁸

A sense of fulfillment for the betterment of the group occurs through this “imaginative surge” and “temporary engagement.” There are both positive individual effects of such experiences, and various groups are also enfranchised from the sense of contributing to the total cultural worth. One’s own ethnic or national pride can be channeled in modified and healthier ways through popular cultural engagements. And in the case of minorities, such rituals give them a genuine claim of participating in their respective cultures.

“Catharsis,” in such cases, does not mean that we follow some type of fixed pattern. In achieving the catharsis we are able to bring out the hidden relations within the experienced durational epoch. We are able to make explicit what is implicit in the process, giving us a transformative claim. Despite being unknown there is the possibility that some outcome can be foreseen within the aesthetic satisfaction achieved, for the betterment of the enjoyer. Not just looking at the moral judgment used to interpret one’s actions, my analysis is concerned also with aesthetic contingencies in the mode of what I call *aesthetic* irony. The cathartic effects cannot be calculated nor are they necessary for the outcome of the process. Instead they can be hauntingly contingent, bordering on the strange or the bizarre. Rituals of entertainment also include both

⁸⁸ A. Bartlett Giamatti, *Take Time for Paradise—Americans and their Games*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011), 39.

contingent and necessary factors the felt expectations of engagement. When one attends a movie or a sporting game, there is a sense in which what is supposed to happen is generally known and largely predictable. The enthusiasm or excitement lies in what “might be,” or the mode of the possible prevalent in the partaking of the cultural activity. Entertainment provides a level of engagement that is relevant to the individual more so than for the benefit of the group.

Many areas of popular culture attest to the increasing sacrifices and successes of minorities as indispensable pioneers who further the causes of “America” (the ideal, not the place). Without the growing enthusiasm for musical and sports opportunities, for example, how would African Americans and other non-whites believe it really is possible to make something of themselves? These rituals bring pride to the disinherited, to people otherwise excluded from the privilege surrounding them. Since the traditional categories of aesthetics and culture have been thoroughly traversed, we should reconsider how our narratives get appropriated by those beyond the physical shores of the USA. The pluralism promoted and exported by American culture resists narrowly ideological views, even when concomitant practices are lagging behind in America proper. We cannot account for this love of freedom on the basis of social factors and demographics alone. Economically, politically, or even militarily, our global virtual exchanges may be hard to distinguish from our entertainments rituals. These traditional centers of power are subordinated, in the contemporary milieu, to the forms and structures of entertainment. The Latins watched American wage war in the Middle East as if it were a kind reality show or video game. The importance of this way of watching is often underestimated. There is a strong sense in which these areas of communication and technology interpenetrate each other and can generate adverse effects. Theoretically or scientifically, we should view these domains of social interaction *together*. There are good reasons to adopt this method but it is not exhaustive in accounting for

all of our social relations and social spaces, whether actual or possible. The social process of experiencing entertainment requires that we recognize the inherent limitations in our own views. Those who are entertained are engaged in a particular modality that may or may not lead to a conscious alteration of the viewpoints of those who consume it, but it alters the culture.

Empathy, or an ability to imagine taking the place of another, exhibits feelings which are moral as well as aesthetic beings for Niebuhr. Unlike the tragic-centered (as opposed to ironic) Biblical teachings, which interpret divine grace as meriting God's favor, Niebuhr employs an ironic reading, related mainly to gratitude and hope. He views divine grace through the lens of aesthetics, without overemphasizing ethical concerns. To enjoy the gifts of God is more than merely possessing pathos for others; it also involves sharing in the suffering of the disinherited. So one needs both empathy and pathos. More than patience, which is the enduring of pain, empathy is an aesthetic value, a positive contributor to character in the drama of history. Empathetic feelings inform the comportment of one's pain and suffering, funneling it into the experiential frame of another with various intensities. As distinct from tragedy, this view calls us to question the degree of freedom in our actions, because, under irony, one's "responsibility is not due to a conscious choice but to an unconscious weakness."⁸⁹ Where responsibility is borne, there we have irony. Ironic action may be unaware of its own meaning, but it could be aware, and if it were, the locus of responsibility would be very clear.

While pathos is an ontological category for the philosophy of history, it is not sufficient to condition the natural and moral order, Niebuhr contends. It is not just that we *feel* history and suffering, although we certainly do (and if we did not, there could be no history). Rather, we find that we not only feel but must *act* and *be felt*, by God, by others, by ourselves, in order to

⁸⁹ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, xxiv.

contribute to the drama of history. In light of this, we should strive to transfigure pathos into beauty, which is empathy. Where we find necessity in suffering, we have tragedy; while when we do not find necessity then we have nascent irony. We have the capacity to convince ourselves, in the throes of our pathos, that what is not necessary in our actions really cannot be otherwise, that it allows no alternatives. Thus, we suffer and make others suffer.

Unsurprisingly, suffering is a major accretion of value. It is in the deeper strata of our experiences that we feel compassion for ourselves and “it may be shot through with both tragedy and grace, through the nobility of victims of a common inhumanity in bearing each other’s sorrows.”⁹⁰ Niebuhr emphasizes that being as open to others as we are to ourselves is a mark of divine love and mercy. Humility is the trace of divine providence, and through irony we are not so much concerned with our actions as with what is forsaken or not chosen when we act.

We are blessed with “God’s grace” in enduring the losses or agony for the sake of comforting those in distress.⁹¹ This is theological language for an idea that need not be expressed in just this way. The point is that no *necessary* order follows from the experience of grace (history unfolding in providential ways) according to Niebuhr’s interpretation, and given the unrepeatable nature of aesthetic judgments. In short, the deliverances of popular culture are *genuine* deliverances, no more to be despised than any other manna. Read under the lens of irony there is today an avoidance of over-moralization, of seeing what is human and holy in the mundane and the ubiquitous, and playing down whatever is *sacred* in human suffering. Niebuhr is not primarily concerned with the worthiness or legitimacy of individual ethical acts, but he is concerned with whether or not one is renewed in the fellow-feeling of human aspiration. Under

⁹⁰ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 166.

⁹¹ For my purposes, it does not matter whether there is a God in some medieval sense, only whether selves remain open to whatever may be divine in the drama of history.

our political climate, which recognizes our common humanity and destiny, Niebuhr warns with a “touch of irony”:

The idea of a brotherly world community is certainly more legitimate as the goal of history than either of these conceptions of fulfillment through victory over a hated foe. *But it is certainly significant that two less attractive alternatives are more probable than this ideal.* The one is global destruction through atomic conflict. This alternative is not really as probable as those would persuade us who believe the dread possibility might scare the nascent world community into virtue, if not into existence. But it remains a possibility. The other alternative is a period of development in which destructive conflict will be avoided, but in which no neat world order will be achieved. This alternative is, of all possibilities, most probable. It would not change the international situation from the status of partial order and partial anarchy of the past centuries very radically. It would merely heighten the perils of anarchy and increase the potency of community. If we are patient enough we could cultivate the gradually growing organic factors of world community and perfect them at opportune moments by the constitutional contrivances which always express and perfect what the forces of life and togetherness have established.⁹²

Thus we see Niebuhr’s sense of the ironic in its own historical context. What it may mean for own context awaits further explication.

⁹² Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History*, 215-16, emphasis added.

CHAPTER THREE

VOEGELIN'S APPROPRIATION OF SCHELLING

Section 1: Post-humanism and the Crisis of Modernism

This chapter will sketch Voegelin's interpretation of Schelling's philosophy of history and culture by way of contrast with Heidegger's alternative appropriation. Articulating the notion of freedom central to ironic American Exceptionalism is the focus of these sections. By turning to thinkers like Giambattista Vico and Schelling as political philosophers, Voegelin compellingly argues for similar traces of open selfhood as those he had discovered in America, and that inquiry influenced his first book, *On the Form of the American Mind*. One of the primary functions of human freedom is to inquire into nature—to direct the will to meditation upon the whole of which it is a microcosm. Schelling referred to this meditation of the soul as an inner-dialogue with oneself—what he calls an *anamnetic* contemplation, as we will see in this chapter. It is a dialogue with oneself, meditating upon the inner workings of the will as it interacts with reciprocity. Similar to Niebuhr's three dialogues –with oneself, with others (Nature), and with God –Voegelin maintains we are all born into a “plurality of middles,” that is, meaningful stories already taking place within the historical drama as quests for the “Beyond” of our “Beginnings” and “Ends.”⁹³ Voegelin's “plurality of middles” accounts for the human search and questioning of “the mystery of a reality that is experienced as a meaningful epiphany of structures, the meaning of the whole however not being a given as its Beginning and End are unknown.”⁹⁴

This is Voegelin's crucial antidote to the modern tendency to express the estrangement and alienation of the individual in relation to the community and the world. But I contend, along

⁹³ Eric Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, vol. 5, *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 29-31.

⁹⁴ Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 82.

with Voegelin, that there is no isolated village of the self. Most of the ways in which we live as moderns is impersonal and institutional designs of further fragmentation and balkanization. To be modern is to be always thrust back on to the individual. With this condition arises an intense anxiety of the kind that leads either to reactions of overconfidence or of insecurity. When diagnosing the ever-prevalent ideological sentiments of pop-culture science, religion, and political discourse, Voegelin argues that the lack of creative imagination is the main symptom of the crisis of modernity: “There is nothing dreamlike about these facts: science, technology, industry, and the memories of the struggle are the solid ground on which the ideologue can take his stand.”⁹⁵ Because the human condition is to live within the *metaxy* or the tensional-in-between of intentionality (time) and luminosity (eternity), paradox grounds our quests for finding any ultimate meaning of reality. This needed temperament Voegelin finds in Schelling’s later philosophy as a constant orientation throughout, and it is given its fullest articulation in the *Freedom Essay* of 1809. This chapter will explore this relationship between Voegelin and Schelling, including how they share an affinity for pluralism, personalism, and the mystical openness symbolic of American purposes, all of which are conducive to this theory of ironic American exceptionalism.

Voegelin’s interpretation stands in stark contrast to Heidegger’s reading. Heidegger lectured on Schelling in 1936, 1941, and 1943 before turning mostly to Nietzsche. During this time, Schelling stands as the apex of German Idealism which sees freedom enclosed in the subjectivity characteristic of modern “identity philosophies.” Heidegger assesses Schelling’s philosophical influence under the lens of the grand narrative Heidegger was pushing at the time

⁹⁵ Voegelin, “Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” in *Published Essays, 1966-1985, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, CW12*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990), *CW12*, 75.

regarding what I call “epic philosophizing” (following Niebuhr). In attempting to uncover the long history of the question of Being, Heidegger faults Schelling for ultimately “falling back into the rigidified tradition of Western metaphysics.”⁹⁶ Of course, Heidegger believed that Schelling had to “get stranded” in his quest to go beyond the history of Western metaphysics in his attempt to establish a post-idealist philosophy. Everyone since Heidegger is caught up in the frenzy over “the end of metaphysics.”

In contrast to Heidegger, Voegelin held that the greatness of Schelling’s thought lies in the unpublished late philosophy developed in the Berlin lectures. Voegelin’s interpretation is unique in that he does not employ the *Freedom Essay* of 1809 as the center of Schelling’s thought as is so typically done. The late lectures on the philosophy of mythology and on revelation give the strongest impression of how the contingency of hidden ironic relations comes to structure the experiences of personality through the interplay of powers developed and exchanged in what I call Schelling’s “philosophy of hauntedness.” According to Voegelin, it is this late period of Schelling’s philosophy that traces out the sentiments and orientations which anticipate many of the concerns in postmodern philosophy as well.

By the Second World War, Voegelin and Heidegger were looking to history for ways to account for and resist the catastrophic. Voegelin seeks historical examples of open selves while Heidegger is marking out the economy of Being according to the epochs of philosophy. This interpretation assumes that Voegelin and Heidegger were dealing with Schelling in the face of the Western calamity, where humanism is not even a live option. The juxtaposition of Heidegger and Voegelin can be made fruitful by reflecting upon the philosophical attitude they believe Schelling to be expressing. Both find an affinity in Schelling for going beyond concepts and

⁹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Schelling’s Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985), 161.

systems, to life-experience, where the *fact* of our freedom can be felt and asserted. As with every thinker Heidegger engages, one's philosophical contributions are subsumed into his own grand-narrative of Western metaphysics and philosophy. This is not to take away from the brilliant and creative discussion he always brought to the table, as if conversing contemporaneously, with the great books. Heidegger had a knack for creative etymology, describing the historicity of the question of Being and ontology's implications for all the regions of culture. Who can doubt the value of that?

Logical positivists from August Comte to Wittgenstein supposedly overcame the traditional problems of philosophy in the popular view, especially the traditional superstitions of metaphysics. A philosopher of Heidegger's rank was engaged in the same enterprise as the logical positivists, while also recognizing the "question of being" as philosophically fundamental. But Heidegger's philosophy is heavily polemical and gets bogged down in its very own fundamentalist stance, which, I argue, resonates with the same onto-theological ways of Western metaphysics that he criticizes. And this outcome can be viewed more clearly in his objections to secular humanism and to modern technological society. In such a view, dehumanization undermines the very core of our own personhood, which, contrary to Heidegger's view, is always wrapped up with the possibilities of others. All subjectivity has to remain open, at its core, to the other, because selfhood cannot just coalesce around itself.

Following the Second World War, humanism was no longer taken seriously—it was largely viewed as impotent in the face of radical evil and could be blamed for its lack of response to the catastrophic violations of human rights in the War. Heidegger penned the *Letter on Humanism*, which all but declared humanism dead and totally ineffective. Humanist appeals to "spiritual personality" or "redemptive measures" of the divine are held to be naïve and

unwarranted in the midst of such unbearable anguish. Humanism is no longer considered a live-option, and is now widely held to be merely reactionary against the ills of postmodernity. This is how the stage was set for Voegelin to come on to the American scene and write his version of how the Western political and social crisis ensued.

Much in the same way that Ernst Cassirer penned *The Myth of the State* as a response to the inquiries of his associates about the impact of the destructive downfall of Europe in the 1940's, Heidegger and Voegelin turned to Schelling's unique (yet neglected and undervalued) philosophical insights around the same period. Both admire Schelling for bringing German idealism to its culmination and for the development of a process philosophy, but they did so for different reasons. As we will see, however, Voegelin moves in an extraordinary direction by employing Schelling "as political philosopher," who articulates the mythic consciousness of open selfhood. "Schelling is not a political thinker."⁹⁷ This assessment by Jürgen Habermas echoes the current sentiment amongst philosophers who are concerned with the scholarship of Schelling. In never carrying out the design of a systematic program like Hegel's, it has been *rightly* claimed that Schelling does not have a "political philosophy," taken in the generic sense. But the question must be raised whether it is the essence of philosophy to be concerned with such communal blueprints. Voegelin argues, in resistance to the growing trend of his contemporaries, that Schelling resisted the temptation to engage in such ideological polemics. Rather than develop plans for the political *organization* of an "ideal" society, Schelling seeks to return to the speculative "idea" of political *existence* as the love of freedom, much in the same way that Wilson does, which will be shown in the fourth chapter. From this larger horizon of

⁹⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism: Schelling's Idea of a Contraction of God and Its Consequences for the Philosophy of History," trans. Nick Midgley and Judith Norman, in *The New Schelling*, ed. Norman and Welchman, (London: Continuum Press, 2004), 43.

existential meaning, Voegelin contends that Schelling has much to offer political philosophers of all stripes.

Voegelin's indebtedness to Schelling can be evidenced in several of his works. This chapter will highlight these points of influence, along with critiquing Heidegger's interpretation of Schelling as compared with Voegelin's emphasis on open selfhood. My purposes for appropriating Schelling are evident in Voegelin's and Heidegger's rehabilitation of the modern crisis.

Section 2: Voegelin and the Open Self—Radical Evil and Freedom

When Voegelin returned to Austria from his Rockefeller fellowship in America, he completed his first book, entitled *On the Form of the American Mind*. He argues for the fruits of American philosophical pluralism and personalism against its European counterparts. Given how radical it was for its time and the plethora of cultural pressures that Voegelin had to resist and overcome, the book stands as a remarkable feat. Through a crude philosophical antagonism, "Voegelin juxtaposes the modes of thought and motivating experiences operative in European (S.H. Hodgson, Franz Brentano, Husserl) and American (William James, Charles S. Peirce) philosophizing on time and existence."⁹⁸ It is my contention that much of Voegelin's focus throughout his spiritual and intellectual voyage consists in this division brought out during his studies in the US, symbolized as the open self, and distinct from the closed or what I call "lost self." Voegelin singled out what he took to be the completed form of Peirce's ideas: contingency has become *the irrational* in the pluralistic world; the tendency of continuity has been more

⁹⁸ Eric Voegelin, "Editor's Introduction," *On the Form of the American Mind*, vol. 1, trans. Ruth Hein, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Jürgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 9.

precisely specified; communication with God has evolved from a short remark into the center of a system; and the motive of intimacy has become explicit. The gospel of love and increased goodness and meaning is preserved in the hope that God or the gods can be the principle of the good and can assist us in overcoming evil. And all these themes together tend toward a philosophy of personality that is in contrast with the European (exemplified in the English) school, with its dialectic. If we conceive the European tradition, with its mania for conceptualizing the mystery of the person as “rational,” and as a doctrine of a closed self, the philosophy of Peirce’s and James’s type can be called the doctrine of the open self. Kenneth Keulman’s interpretation expresses Voegelin’s sentiments when he “suggests further that the pessimism apparent in Voegelin’s writings relating to intentionality in consciousness should be read as an open stance that looks beyond the construction of closed systems and disembodied propositions to a sensitive apprehension of the existential tensions and flux that condition life.”⁹⁹

For Voegelin, unlike Heidegger, Schelling’s rehabilitation of myth and revelation, through his positive or later philosophy, is coupled with the historical and cultural pluralistic openness which Voegelin identified.

The spiritual process in which the symbols of myth and dogma are created is recovered from the unconscious through *anamnesis* (recollection), and the symbols actually created in the course of human history are interpreted as meaningful phases of the theogonic process, manifesting itself in history on rising levels of spiritual consciousness. In this contemplative attitude the myth of the past need not be abandoned as the aberration of an undeveloped intellect but can be understood as a necessary step in the expression of spiritual reality. It can be superseded historically but not invalidated in its own place by subsequent fuller and more differentiated symbolic expressions.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Kenneth Keulman, *The Balance of Consciousness: Eric Voegelin’s Political Theory*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 165.

¹⁰⁰ Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, The New Order and Last Orientation*, vol. 7, *History of Political Ideas*, CW25, eds. Jürgen Gebhardt and Thomas A. Hollweck, intro. Jürgen Gebhardt, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 138.

Voegelin is primarily concerned with surveying historical “experience-symbol complexes,” or the development of unreflective cultural symbolic forms in the modes of language, art, myth, religion, science, to name only a few. Indeed, these instances of symbolization constitute a discernable “order and history” stirring the human need to seek meaning beyond external happenings and to consider the radicalness of reality. Voegelin stands as a prominent American philosopher whose contribution is recognized within contemporary historiography and political philosophy. The general narrative introducing Voegelin usually runs that he is a “Christian” or “classical conservative” thinker. But these are the kinds of labels Voegelin sought to reject. Instead, pluralism and personalism are central to his philosophy, the hallmarks of openness. Recognizing these features as Voegelin’s key contributions shows why his ideas still serve as a formative force in a multifarious and pluralistic world, such as ours. Voegelin cannot be aligned with any dogmatic exceptionalisms. The skeptical and dogmatic orientations in which our cultural mainstream continues to persist is something Voegelin resists. We should resist through a congenial cultural engagement, with a plurality of forms and experience-symbol complexes, imaginatively interpreted, through a critically reflective freedom, as forging the possibility of community. Voegelin acknowledged that the role of the philosopher consisted in resistance of untruth and the acceptance of a “restless questioning” in our openness to the transcendence of the divine ground.

In the bold 1809 *Freedom* essay, what I call Schelling’s “mature philosophy” argued in terms of “unity and conspiracy,” a *Konspiration*, as a description of the human life entwined with the divine. This is the basis of ironic relations, as I interpret Schelling’s philosophy as a whole. Employing the symbol’s contraction and expiration, in the form of expansion, freedom is the synthesizing of these forces in the manifestation of human powers. As Jason Wirth notes

regarding Schelling's explanation of freedom, this "conspiracy is a simultaneous expiration and inspiration, and each thing of nature is both inspired yet expiring [...] As the conspiracy of life, that is, the life beyond and within life and death."¹⁰¹ The juxtaposition of Heidegger and Voegelin can be brought to the surface by inquiring into the philosophical attitude they each interpret Schelling to be expressing. In his lecture courses however, Heidegger is overly focused on Schelling's "metaphysics of evil." Certainly the 1809 essay on human freedom is a philosophical and theological breakthrough for the intellectual and spiritual lineage of Western civilization. But Voegelin finds a continuation of those insights in Schelling's later works, which had such a major impact on Voegelin's thinking that it influenced a readjustment of his previous scholarly aim. Heidegger is only concerned with the 1809 essay and its implications for the rethinking of freedom, as a disclosure of the "nothing" or "not" within Being. It conveys for him the essential climax of the question of Being as it had failed to be grasped historically through the movements of onto-theology, which contributed to the forgetfulness of or "oblivion of Being."

As with every thinker Heidegger engages, their philosophical contributions are baptized in the holy water of his own grand-narrative of Western metaphysics and philosophy. In 1936 we find him at one of his darkest hours; continuing from the assault developed in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* a year earlier, he concentrates on Schelling's addition of evil to the notion of freedom. Heidegger's sadistic fascination with evil is evidence that he lacked the means of viably resisting the political dogmatism and totalitarianism of our day. The importance Heidegger gives to evil remains concealed within his presentation of Schelling's *Treatise*—an inability to confront evil as a crippling force of spirit or as a people, on its own terms, as it was

¹⁰¹ Jason Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life-- Meditations on Schelling and His Time*, (Albany, N.Y.: Suny Press, 2003), 2.

unfolding in the midst of Heidegger's own authentic historical situation. He overlooks Schelling's powerful insight, that the victims of history or crisis can become its predators just as easily as consciousness and unconsciousness interact in Schelling's philosophy.

This brings us to a note that must be made regarding Voegelin's brilliant lectures given at the University of Munich in the summer of 1964, *Hitler and the Germans*, when he occupied the Max Weber Chair of political science.¹⁰² In eleven lectures (the final two are incomplete due to inaudible recording), Voegelin sought to give a cultural and anthropological account of this global catastrophe. How could such a civilized people fall into such horror? Relying upon Plato's anthropological principle, he contends that pointing the finger at Hitler's existence was not enough; this was the result of a decadent culture: Voegelin returned to Germany to tell Germans about themselves.

The common thread that runs through the 2,600 pages of Voegelin's *History of Political Ideas*, and all his work, is the anthropological principle which Thomas Heilke, a well-known Voegelin scholar, labels as "Platonism." This is similar, at its core to *Hitler and the Germans*. It is the conviction that "the character and quality of a society depend on the character and quality—the souls—of its political, intellectual, and spiritual leaders."¹⁰³ Dealing with the "academic, ecclesiastical, and legal abyss" of German society, Voegelin confronts the nature of evil—a spiritual and intellectual rottenness.

He credits Schelling's analysis of radical evil as an authority to decrope the political conditions, in attempting to give a phenomenological account of Germany's demise. Unlike the final part of Heidegger's *Schelling Lectures*, "The Metaphysics of Evil," where he coolly and

¹⁰² *Hitler and the Germans*, eds. and trans. Detlev Clemons and Brendan Purcell, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

¹⁰³ Thomas Heilke, "From Christendom to Crisis," *The Journal of Religion* 81 (2001): 98-99.

calmly, in the safety of his abstract world, speaks of evil, Voegelin testifies to the despicable acts prefigured in the Nazi community's consciousness or myth.¹⁰⁴ In his *Philosophical Investigations* Schelling presents his view of radical evil. For the first time in the Western tradition of philosophical theology, he rightly holds that evil is not a lack or privation of good. He argues that it is "twisted good" or a positive force of a negative being like disease.¹⁰⁵ This sickening plague can become mobilized in a perfectly efficient society, through a defect in the character of its citizens. The community leaders have a "defect of spirit," a "spiritual arrogance" that *really* revolts "against the spirit, which gives rise to saying or doing things against the spirit."¹⁰⁶ Schelling is credited with the expression "pneumopathology" to designate spiritual disturbances of this kind.¹⁰⁷ Guiding Voegelin's political interests are the achievements of Schelling's thought in grasping the nature of man. The demonic spirit of evil is said to be the work of human freedom as the source of a creature seeking to make itself the center or ground of existence. Voegelin too recognizes the reality of evil within the divine ground of eternal freedom. He not only conceives of the "imaginative oblivion" but finds the imagination to be a "creatively formative force [which] is exposed to deformative perversion."¹⁰⁸ So we have to make the distinction between constructive or critically reflective and pathological "second realities," which are destructive and "pneumopathological."

¹⁰⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985), 104-161.

¹⁰⁵ Friedrich Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt, (New York, SUNY press, 2006), 34-35, 38, 66.

¹⁰⁶ Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 101.

¹⁰⁷ Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 101-102. In a footnote, the editors of the lectures mention how Voegelin stated in a letter to a colleague that he came across "the term during his intensive Schelling studies thirty years earlier and writes that he is now unable to locate the passage: "I refer to it only, because I do not want to be accused by some Schelling scholar of having pinched the term without acknowledging its authorship."" However, there is considerable doubt that Schelling ever used this term and it is more than likely Voegelin's own.

¹⁰⁸ Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 39.

Interpreters of Voegelin's thought stubbornly continue to assert that he implied we are to avoid all "second realities" as ideological derailments. But this view misses the nuanced richness in his philosophy and distorts its possibilities. It is disheartening to see many developing Voegelin's philosophy for a general audience so that it appears to be working against those qualities which they actually deem respectable. Upon further reconsideration it is difficult for them to deny that they have failed to emphasize Voegelin's favorable sentiments toward pluralism, open selfhood, and a personalism rooted in process philosophy. These are the hallmark traits that characterize Voegelin's life-long resistance toward "certain untruth" and dogmatic exceptionalisms, which have been scarcely acknowledged by so-called "Voegelinians." It is not a matter of *whether* we will falsify reality or our experiences of reality in our interpretations of it. The issue is whether and to what degree of intensity we *will* so falsify matters, and how will our range of values be created, transmitted, maintained, or undermined, over time. Voegelin's very own experiences in coming to America and in being exposed to a plurality of worlds reveal that he was more than familiar with having his world shattered or his "reality eclipsed." The irony or paradox Voegelin finds in Schelling's method lies in refusing an exclusive, essentialist hermeneutics while aiming to "resist untruth." One appreciates the open-ended cultural adventure that exposes us to our highest hopes and deepest fears about the historical drama that is shot through with freedom. Voegelin argues that Schelling is concerned with the *metanoia* or the transforming process of the person as an *open self*; such a process motivates an "inner return" to the self-stripped of its nationalist and historicist predilections or "grand fate." (See the previous chapter for a discussion of fate.)

Open selves do not exclude the possibility of participating in extremist myths and rituals, however. The attempt to resist forms of untruth, does not automatically avoid entanglement with

fundamentalism and the like. There are no guarantees to a secured freedom. Lost selves, on the other hand, trade in their freedom for a surge in meaning or worth, by means the self-elevation which motivates their claims to superiority or exceptionalism in the dogmatic. Thus, there is the self-aggrandizing exceptionalism of lost selves, and it cannot be positively compared with the freedom of the open self, even if an embedded judge cannot distinguish the two, in a given historical context. In presuming to know who are and are not “their people,” the hope for the salvation of the world is made exclusivist. Vico’s “conceit of scholars and nations” applies here and the negative energy generated by such exclusion can be a prime source for antagonistic grand narratives.

As I already discussed, grand narratives operate from a presumed total consciousness over history. This hubristic form of consciousness is presupposed when we presume to be able to include or eliminate who counts as chosen or elect in advance. But my version of ironic American exceptionalism denies this exclusivism and holds that any sense of certainty about our destiny is an illusion. An open self is not naïve on this point. It is emphatically unknowable and often destructive to presume one’s place in the world can be fated according to a historical necessity. Therefore, in holding ironic relations as central in this inquiry, Heidegger’s analysis of *das Man* or the they-self is used in a surprising way as the basis of humility. Although one must go through the ontic or mundane to achieve authenticity, one will never comfortably be disentangled from becoming a part of the crowd in the modern world. In short, being embedded in a popular culture is not the opposite of being authentic. Whereas Heidegger’s philosophy is extreme in advocating “anticipatory resoluteness” in the midst of *das Man*, Voegelin and Schelling deny this sort of demand as a false hope.

To be an American open self means, again, that one can *become* the other, and vice versa, without becoming inauthentic or estranged. Open selves are elastic, not dichotomous, and they do not subscribe to an “us vs. them” mentality. Heidegger understands that the road to freedom is painful. However, clinging to a German, American, or even Western onto-theological destiny will not save us. If open selves have destinies, they are grasped from within the drama of history.

For Schelling, Voegelin, and Niebuhr there is no way out of the drama; we should not “profane the mysteries” in exchange for a deterministic historiography. As a substitute for this surge in aggrandizing lost selves, such as one finds in the totalitarian or nationalistic regimes of the twentieth century, ironic American exceptionalism appeals *only* to the “surge of imagination,” enhanced through the cultural rituals of entertainment. The way to freedom lies in embracing the cultural adventure through the stimulation of our imaginative powers.

Entertainment rituals prevalent within many cultural complexes have the capacity to intensify our imaginative capacities for the better and for the worse. Similar to Schelling, Niebuhr, and Heidegger, Voegelin believes that humans experience this paradoxical structure in coping with a reality, which is uncanny or mysteriously haunting (*unheimlich*). Participating today in the “imaginative surge” (to use Giamatti’s phrase) of the movie or the competition of the game generates creative energies of such enormous cultural impact that even Voegelin would be amazed. We are potential makers and enjoyers of cultural forms and hybrids rather than agents of historical destiny. Such are open selves.

Section 3: Watershed of Order: Schelling the Spiritual Realist

In undertaking to write a political science textbook, upon arriving in the US in 1939, Voegelin agreed to produce a brief account on the history of Western political ideas. Within a couple of months the project swelled in size and Voegelin deemed it necessary to treat the topic

in three volumes, corresponding to the periods of ancient, medieval and modern. The last volume included a large section dedicated to Schelling's idea of existence, which purportedly "establishes a new level of consciousness [efficacy of ironic relations] in Western intellectual history in general and in the history of political thought in particular."¹⁰⁹ The editors at Macmillan Publishing cautioned, after the direction of the study appeared, against moving from one volume to three. On the one hand, they obviously were concerned with the expanded work which Voegelin wanted to incorporate in the analysis. That was not a part of their original agreement. The other issue was the selection of thinkers that Voegelin found important, who are not the usual suspects within the traditional canon of political theory. How can one justify large studies on Jean Bodin, Voltaire, or Schelling in dealing with *significant* or influential political thinkers? The publishers were skeptical and questioned the outlook of the research. Others, including Habermas, still find it difficult to justify a serious treatment of Schelling as being important for a history of political ideas. There is no question that Schelling's political philosophy exercised no influence in its own day –very little was published until long after Schelling's death. Most philosophers read Hegel and then Marx. But for Voegelin, Schelling works within a tradition that descends from Plato and was able to show how that tradition was being adapted to the questions of self-government that emerged in the nineteenth century. Without Schelling, we do not know how to connect our present ideas about self-government with the Ancient traditions. Who is correct, Voegelin or Habermas and the publishers? It is my contention that Voegelin's incorporation of Schelling's philosophy, in several works throughout his life, is a testament to Schelling's importance as a political thinker.

¹⁰⁹ Eric Voegelin, CW25, 236.

But in order to see if this idea is plausible, we first must mention the impact Schelling had on Voegelin's work. This eight-volume masterpiece, posthumously published as *History of Political Ideas*, is a work of magisterial proportions that Voegelin eventually abandoned due to a staggering theoretical deficiency.¹¹⁰ The *History* "crashed," according to Voegelin, for two reasons, with Schelling's *Philosophy of Mythology* cited as the source of the problem. First, the size of the work "exploded" because of Voegelin's increasing interests in ancient Near Eastern and Hebrew and Jewish sources which he strongly felt had not been taken seriously in the Western tradition of political theory. But the main reason for the crash given in the *Autobiographical Reflections* was that he came to believe, after reading Schelling's *Philosophy of Mythology*, that ideas only arise as symbols of "immediate experiences," so to have "a history of ideas was an ideological deformation of reality."¹¹¹ Voegelin said in the "Autobiographical Statement" that while studying Schelling's

philosophy of myth, I understood that ideas are nonsense: there are no ideas as such and there is no history of ideas; but there is a history of experiences which can express themselves in various forms, as myths of various types, as philosophical development, theological development, and so on... So I cashiered that history of ideas, which was practically finished in four or five volumes, and started reworking it from the standpoint of the problem of the experiences. That is how *Order and History* started.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ The story behind the development of the *History* is a complicated one mainly due to the actors involved and the different turns it took (1939-1951). Although he published certain sections of it separately, the entire work was published posthumously in *CW* 19-26, from 1997-99. For more information, please see Thomas A. Hollweck and Ellis Sandoz, "General Introduction to the Series," *Hellenism, Rome, and Early Christianity*, vol. 1, *History of Political Ideas*, *CW* 19 (1997), ed. and intro. Athanasios Moulakis.

¹¹¹ *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 63.

¹¹² "Autobiographical Statement at Age Eighty-two," in *The Beginning and the Beyond: Papers from the Gadamer and Voegelin Conferences*, ed. Fred Lawrence, (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 119. The problems and thinkers discussed in the eight volume *History* are amplified into Voegelin's five-volume magnum opus, *Order and History*. The final volume *In Search of Order* is incomplete since Voegelin was working on it up to the day of his death, January 19, 1985.

Since Schelling's later works have received so little attention, it is odd that one would find Voegelin being drawn in by them. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, it is an interesting issue to think the differences among the reactions to Schelling's late lectures between Voegelin and thinkers like Heidegger, Zizek, Habermas, and so on. Voegelin thought the *Philosophy of Mythology* and *Philosophy of Revelation* Berlin lectures were a monumental breakthrough in the history of Western philosophy and have hardly received the attention they deserve. They were the lectures no one wanted to hear once they commenced, as his audience shrank and became increasingly agitated by his views, and based on this aversion, they were deemed incomprehensible rather than studied. Why have so many thinkers waved off the final phase of Schelling's thought as "theosophy" or believed it to be a testament to his waning philosophical reputation? And how did Voegelin manage achieve such insight in to that text, a work which, according to Hans Urs von Balthasar, should be ignored because it "no longer exerts a living influence on contemporary history"? I contend, along with Jerry Day, that these works do have a "living influence" and allowed Voegelin to attain a "better understanding than most of the core of Schelling's philosophical anthropology [i.e., the *Freedom* essay]."¹¹³ Unfortunately, the existential and not the spiritual elements of Schelling's insights have been most appealing to interpreters, but Voegelin's analysis gives us a fresh and compelling perspective.

Before detailing Schelling's political themes, let me briefly state how a Voegelinian reading is unique. First, Voegelin focuses mainly on Schelling's later works, starting with the

¹¹³ Jerry Day, *Voegelin, Schelling, and the Philosophy of Historical Existence*, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 276. He continues: "Unlike Balthasar, Voegelin does maintain that Schelling's latest work continues to exert an influence on contemporary history, the 'undercurrent influence' of Schellingian realism he finds in Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, among others."

Stuttgart Lectures (1810), which have not been widely read amongst scholars. The seminars at Stuttgart are of particular importance in our case, given that they took place in the home of Friedrich Georgii, a government official for the Justice Department of Württemberg “and eventually president of the Supreme Court at Württemberg, most of the other ten listeners were members of the political establishment in the capital of Württemberg.”¹¹⁴ Schelling was not teaching his comrades to be anarchists, as Habermas contends, but teaching how man, with political existence, relates to the divine order which is manifest through the presentation of nature, the unfolding of history, and the symbolization of mythology—to remain *open*.

Another benefit of the Schelling-Voegelin connection involves the way the latter sees the former’s thought as situated within traditional political theory. Voegelin identifies Schelling’s open selfhood in the *History* with “spiritual realism.” He uses the term in the following way: “Since the time of Dante the spiritual realist has been faced with the problem that the surrounding political reality of the Western world no longer can adequately absorb the spirit into its public institutions”¹¹⁵ In finding the dissolution of public spirituality to be a deficient aspect of most modern political thought, Schelling is a rare watershed in which one who seeks a spiritual orientation can find solace. Schelling recognizes the intellectual decadence of his age and refuses to accept it. This refusal involves a special resistance to the surrounding disorder that made up the intellectual scene and continues to run amok today. Voegelin makes it plain “[...] that the authority of spirit does not disappear from the world if its institutionalization in a

¹¹⁴ See, Thomas Pfau, “A Note on the Text” (Stuttgart Seminars), in F. W. J. Schelling, *Idealism and the End Game of Theory*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 195.

¹¹⁵ *The Later Middle Ages, CW21, History of Political Ideas*, Vol. 3, ed. David Wilson, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 68.

historical society breaks down. The spirit bloweth where it listeth, and if it does not blow through the soul of men in community it may still blow through the soul in solitude.”¹¹⁶

Schelling was a figure who calls forth the spirit from its isolation. There is much to admire in this and Voegelin is adamant about his sympathies with Schelling’s example of enduring resistance to corruption and untruth. It is well known that Schelling was horrified by the level of partisanship and parochialism he witnessed during his lifetime from some of his closest associates, most notably Hegel. And as we will see shortly, he would have been dismayed by the doctrines of Marx as well, but not surprised.

“Human existence is political in the sense that man has ontologically his place in the historico-political process.”¹¹⁷ For Schelling, history is “theophany,” as Voegelin describes it, or the drama of divine revelation unfolding in history. Despite having a different story from the typical Christian account, Schelling develops his view of the state as a political unit based on a “reflection of sin and the fall of humanity.”¹¹⁸ Unity is the essential principle that drives all Schellingian philosophy of identity and Voegelin notes that the “idea of man” stems from our “eternal identity [and unity] in God.”¹¹⁹ But we have fallen from the center of the Godhead and no longer exist in an “actual” divine unity. The external and internal, or outer and inner worlds have separated within human existence. Here I depart from Voegelin and the common Schelling scholarship, which argues that Schelling’s philosophy is tragic and not ironic, in the sense explained by Niebuhr. “The substitute for, as well as the remnant of, the lost eternity is the state:

¹¹⁶ Eric Voegelin, *Revolution and the New Science*, vol. 6, *History of Political Ideas*, CW24, ed. and intro. Barry Cooper, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 177-78.

¹¹⁷ Voegelin, CW25, 223.

¹¹⁸ Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science*, (Columbia, M: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 405.

¹¹⁹ Voegelin, CW25, 219.

a unity of nature, a sort of second nature over the first.”¹²⁰ The state as a historical phenomenon is the actualization of an “intelligible constitution of being” that is beyond human manipulation and “is not an order created by man to be formed after a rational pattern ...”¹²¹

With this openness, “the search for an ideal state must be futile. The perfect state is not for this world, and any attempt to devise it can only end in apocalyptic fancies.”¹²² Therefore, unlike thinkers like Hegel, Kant, Marx and so on, Schelling does not theorize a historical schema of a constant political form into a perfect order. “Schelling is beyond Enlightenment insofar as man has become an unexhausted historical existence. For Hegel there is no perspective into a future; for Schelling the unconscious is pregnant with time that has not yet become past.”¹²³ Another way of saying this is that there is a hauntedness in the flux of time, or in what is lingering through unconsciousness. As a philosopher of freedom, Schelling enfranchises the transmission of relations, meaning there is no longer any *necessary* order, contra Hegel, amongst good and evil or life and death. They are co-equal, manifesting the eternal freedom of the “divine conspiracy” (a term coined by Jason Wirth which I will explain shortly). Insofar as we can describe necessary or essential conditions of our experience, they are to be treated empirically resulting from, according to Schelling, a “sublated contingency.”

In refusing to adopt the moral prejudices of Christian theology with fixed or hierarchical relations, Schelling asserts that the metaphysical ground of reality is groundless (*Abgrund*). In the *Freedom* essay, Schelling presents his impressive view of radical evil. He holds, rightly in

¹²⁰ *CW25*, 223. Voegelin quotes Schelling’s *Stuttgart Private Lectures*: the state is “a consequence of the curse that rests on mankind.” The “curse” we are left with is the service we owe to the state as a way of glimpsing the “intelligible order” of nature again which has been forgotten.

¹²¹ Voegelin, *CW25*, 223.

¹²² Voegelin, *CW25*, 224.

¹²³ Voegelin, *CW25*, 214.

my view, that evil is not a lack or privation of good. Rather it is “twisted good” or a positive force of a negative being like disease. And this sickening plague can become mobilized in a perfectly efficient society, through a defect in the quality of its citizen’s character. One can reflect a “defect of spirit,” a “spiritual arrogance” that really revolts “against the spirit, which gives rise to saying or doing things against the spirit.”¹²⁴ For Voegelin and Schelling, non-open forms of spiritualism are spiritual nonetheless. Schelling claimed boldly in the second draft of *Ages of the World*, regarding the nature of reality: “Without contradiction there would be no life, no movement, no progress; a deadly slumber of all forces. Only contradiction drives us—indeed, forces us—to action. Contradiction is in fact the venom of all life, and all vital motion is nothing but the attempt to overcome this poisoning.”¹²⁵ This contradiction is not merely a reflective difference, it is a difference that functions from the desire for the continuation of the will to strive for things—time is predicated on striving, which at this level can only be a striving for self *after* self. This is based on the nature of an urge for movement, an urge that postulates that *from* which I move *to* that which I move (a duality arises which is inevitable, the distinction between “source” and “destination”).

To posit something is also to engage in an act of negation. The paradox of consciousness illustrates what I call Schelling’s philosophy of hauntedness: that there *is* consciousness is granted, but in order for it to *be*, it must emerge from unconsciousness, which would not *be* unless there was consciousness. We can see lurking under the project Schelling’s move away from his early Fichtean influences into what characterizes his later works: the distinction between positive and negative philosophy—the latter tries to ascend towards God, while the

¹²⁴ Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 101.

¹²⁵ F.W.J. Schelling, *The Abyss of Freedom: Ages of the World*, trans. Judith Norman, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 124.

former waits on God's descent. Whereas negative philosophy, what we find in Hegel, deals only with abstractions, concepts, and essences, positive philosophy confronts the terseness of life in its grandeur and complexity. To those who charge that Schelling is at best engaging in a metaphysical trespassing or philosophical dilettantism, Jerry Day replies, "[E]verything does not hang together as smoothly and simply as one thinks, but rather in an emphatically wonderful, and if you like, inconsistent way"¹²⁶ Schelling "rather develops a theory of political existence that is inseparable from the general process of history, understood as the theogonic process in which God in the universe unfolds and returns to himself."¹²⁷ For all we know, our political existence registers through the "idea" (as opposed to the ideal, as associated with Hegel) corresponding to various external and internal institutional sources emerging in history.

The current external political institution is the profane "power-state." Voegelin uses "power-state" to designate Schelling's derogatory sense of the "state" in order to have a precision of terminology in the *Stuttgart Lectures*, which are concerned with the unity of a community of free individuals. Schelling holds this power-state to be merely a superficial response, because programs like Marx's or Hegel's will not touch the internal human condition; for they are only concerned with what the majority of humankind is obsessed with—material comfort, economic security—in short, the phenomenalization of life. Since it is through open selfhood that one is free, how can we express this in a secular community set on a neutral public spirituality? The spiritual substance of the community or a people is its strength, and Schelling, in Voegelin's summary, insists that "[w]hen the power of the state is deprived of its strength, a short dream of freedom will be followed by a despotic increase of state power, as the course of

¹²⁶ Jerry Day, *Voegelin, Schelling, and the Philosophy of Historical Existence*, 115.

¹²⁷ Voegelin, *CW*25, 226. Other conceptions of the political order which would conflict with Schelling's are the social contract theory or the Divine Right of Kings, for example.

the [French] Revolution has shown.”¹²⁸ Producing a unity of the self with its own public persona in the community is impossible in a power-state because it cannot provide an openness by which the internal and external in man are united. As Schelling stated in *The System of Philosophy in General*: “No such political life exists where public freedom is submerged in the slavery of private life.”¹²⁹ This bold assertion can be taken as a jab at notions of intersubjectivity or personal consciousness which pose as the only basis needed for the conveyance of human inner life in public institutions. Such a position has been defended in our time by Habermas. Here we must mention an important point concerning Habermas’s critique of Schelling’s political theory in comparison with Marx’s.

Habermas complains that Schelling fell into an obscure mythologizing in dealing with the corruption of the world, while Marx rightly turned to external, economic factors of production. Voegelin identified the error of Marx in relation to this problem and he suggests how Schelling would have handled it. For Schelling no single political unit or system, whether church or state, dominates all of history. No single governing authority or symbolic form is exhaustive of culture. The power-state is not the only “unifying” institution, but alongside it “we see the church, established on the basis of a divine revelation, as the attempt to produce an inner unity of the mind between men.”¹³⁰

Before dealing with this in more detail, let me explain the mistake Habermas fails to notice regarding Marx’s political teachings. Contrary to Marx, Schelling has a “critical realism,” according to Voegelin, that takes religious and other cultural experiences seriously. Again, Schelling conveys the tolerance and openness we would expect from a thinker whose philosophy

¹²⁸ Voegelin, *CW25*, 224.

¹²⁹ Voegelin, *CW25*, 225.

¹³⁰ Voegelin, *CW25*, 225.

emphasizes freedom. But Schelling was very critical of “the question whether a system of moral rules can be established independently of religious experience” and “criticizes the idea that God can be deduced as a necessary postulate of morality.”¹³¹

Clearly Schelling was able to identify what later led Marx to deem religion to be the “opium of the people.” But unlike Schelling, Marx “commits the gross blunder of mistaking a phenomenal misuse for the substance of faith.”¹³² Marx is unable and unwilling to cope with anything underlying the phenomenal and so he, like Habermas, is only able and willing to deal with the improvement of man’s material condition. They share with Heidegger and “post-modernism” the aversion to any language which is metaphysical. Voegelin contends that Schelling avoids the “eschatological indulgence” in which Marx engages by “indulging in a perspective of revolutionary action that is supposed to restore by changes in the phenomenal sphere of institutions a ‘goodness’ of man that only can grow through the *metanoia* of the person.”¹³³ The *metanoia* of persons involves a “return” of one’s freedom into an identity with inner necessity, which I will deal with momentarily. For now, we have to deal with Schelling’s idea of a community and how he views it in contradistinction to the later view of Marx.

In general, the state is founded on the idea of a community, which is a true bond of a people. Schelling’s notion of the community was heavily factored into some of Voegelin’s earlier works entitled, *Race and State* (1932) and *Political Religions* (1938). In challenging the

¹³¹ *CW25*, 238. Voegelin cites *The System of Philosophy in General*, and summarizes it thus: “In particular he [Schelling] reflects on the people ‘who have a habit of looking at everything from an economic point of view. God is for them a home medicine that everybody can use for himself in order to fortify his morality, which it costs much trouble to keep up. This idea is in no way better than the opinion held by high-placed persons and so-called statesmen that the belief in God is a good thing to restrain the people and to support a rotten and cracking machinery of government.’” These words can be mistaken for those of an anarchist, as Habermas does.

¹³² Voegelin, *CW25*, 238.

¹³³ *CW25*, 239. Voegelin then throws out: “The spiritual realist [open self] is not only the better philosopher, he is also the better empirical scientist.”

race theory advanced by the ideology of National Socialism, these books were banned and it is still a mystery today how Voegelin was able to find a willing publisher in Hitler's Germany. Employing "Schelling's doctrine of myth as the ground of being of all peoples or nations seems to us the first profound insight into the religious nature, in the broadest sense, of all community formation."¹³⁴ Drawing on the importance of the "inner" connections for the experiences and symbolizations of myth, Schelling argued that a nation cannot be made from the outside.

Voegelin puts the matter succinctly:

A people's or nation's ground of being and its unity is its myth. *Simply living together in an area does not unite individuals into a people; nor do they become a people by virtue of their shared pursuit of agriculture and trade or by a common legal order. What makes a people and sets it apart is "community of consciousness," "a common perspective," a shared "mythology."* A people or nation is not given its mythology in the course of its history; instead its mythology determines its history.¹³⁵

Habermas is therefore wrong when he contends that, for Marx, the community's "foundation then becomes economic, not mythological."¹³⁶ But Voegelin and Schelling hold that the nation does not make its myth; rather the myth makes the culture or people. Therefore, the mythic consciousness associated with the open self is American insofar as *anybody* can be called American. *That* is the myth. Any government or community that believes it can dispense with the "internal unity" that its people gain through myth and religion is destined for political tyranny.¹³⁷ Schelling admits that the church lost its purpose in attempting to "externalize" itself by letting the practices of the state or the world enter its domain. As Voegelin summarizes, "The

¹³⁴ Voegelin, *Race and State*, *CW2*, ed. Klaus Vondung, trans. Ruth Hein, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 150-51. Here the use of the word "determines" may strike us as contrary to Voegelin's emphasis on freedom, but I would point out that this is an early writing, undertaken in the atmosphere of heavy Germanic eschatology and apocalypticism.

¹³⁵ Voegelin, *CW2*, 149, emphasis added.

¹³⁶ Habermas, "Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism: Schelling's Idea of a Contraction of God and Its Consequences for the Philosophy of History," 81.

¹³⁷ Thus, I am not arguing that entertainment is a substitute for religion or for any other essential symbolic form of culture. I argue only that these are the prevalent cultural rituals of Americans, and hence are the primary conveyors of it myth.

church did not preserve its purity from the external; it indulged in advancement by external power [and tried to dominate liberal, progressive forms]. When it started to persecute the heretics, it had lost its true idea.”¹³⁸ Religion involves the inner life of human existence and is articulated in the *institution* of the church. And the church is very much a part of the public and private “organic unfolding” of any community, which represents a “tree of culture” where all the cultural symbolic forms are available for an open self. Voegelin emphasizes Schelling’s true idea of the church and the state, which is a “form of political existence in which the state is [merely] a vessel for the free, organic unfolding of art, science, and religion [and all other cultural interests].”¹³⁹

It is important to note that Schelling is no nationalist or ideologue, but is concerned with history and mankind in terms of civilizational experience. Following the principles of Platonic-Aristotelian political science, Schelling, in Voegelin’s summary, concludes that “[m]en differ from each other. Not the whole possibility of mankind is fulfilled in any human being, only mankind as a whole realizes this possibility through the manifold differentiated realizations in all men.”¹⁴⁰ Therefore, “[h]istory cannot be planned, and Schelling does not indulge in the futility of details.”¹⁴¹ The fundamental political problem for Schelling is “[n]ot the internal organization of the state, but the relation of the differentiated, secularized, political unit to the spiritual substance (to the idea, in Schelling’s terminology)[...]”¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Voegelin, *CW25*, 225.

¹³⁹ *CW25*, 226. Voegelin cites *The System of Philosophy in General*: “The church is not outside such a state, it is inside. The church can be ‘outside’ only in a state of merely profane purpose and institutions, but such a state is no longer a state.”

¹⁴⁰ Voegelin, *CW25*, 223.

¹⁴¹ Voegelin, *CW25*, 233.

¹⁴² Voegelin, *CW25*, 227. Voegelin continues: “In this relation are rooted the problems of stability and instability, political rise and decay, change and evolution, revolution and crisis. If the secularized state is not placed in the context of the spiritual history of the modern world, the

The construction of blueprints for an ideal state is considered by Schelling a futile endeavor because such constructions—“and particularly the forms of government constructed in science since Kant”—deal only with the profane power-state. On this level ideality cannot be found. This impossibility of constructing an ideal does not mean, however, that the philosopher of politics is a relativist to whom one form of government is as good or as bad as another, since he has no standard of value by which to measure them. *On the contrary, only if the search for ideal states is abandoned does a realistic interpretation of political existence become possible, because now the interpretation can be oriented not toward the ideal, but toward the idea of the state.* The construction of an ideal is a subjective adventure that destroys the structure of reality, while the ontological assumption of an idea in existence submits to reality and enables the philosopher to understand politics as an existential component in the life of a historical community.¹⁴³

Politics is intimately personal and it is the condition of the synthesis of the existential and spiritual orientations of Schelling’s philosophy of culture. Human beings are immersed in a historico-politico process which flows with the spirit of nature. Voegelin says that man, according to Schelling, is not born with “a *tabula rasa* but finds himself existing historically in a realm of knowledge that is coextensive (in mythology, revelation, rational, philosophical speculation, and empirical historical sciences including those of nature) with the universe itself to its origins.”¹⁴⁴ These forms of experience represent for Voegelin the experiential ground of transcendence in accord with immanence. Voegelin argues the human condition is to live within the *metaxy* or the tensional-in-between of intentionality (time) and luminosity (eternity), and this paradox grounds our quests for finding any ultimate meaning of reality. Therefore, we have to be open and oriented by both time and eternity.

The basis of experiencing the unconscious in the soul of man involves recollecting (*anamnesis*) the course of events in history. We are always dependent upon this “remembering” because of our ontological constitution. Schelling grants that we recognize our experience of

political phenomena of an age of crisis must remain utterly incomprehensible, and their discussion must be reduced either to a dreary description of external events or to ravings about the bad people who do not like good, liberal, enlightened democracy.”

¹⁴³ Voegelin, *CW25*, 226, emphasis added.

¹⁴⁴ Voegelin, *CW25*, 211.

reality by a “reflective distance” (Voegelin’s term)—a thinking always trailing being. Against the rational, propositional, subject-predicate logical dogma models of Descartes, Hegel, and other subsequent thinkers, Voegelin approves of this theory of historical consciousness rooted in mediation. We have a “distance” regarding our political and historical existence as well. Like Plato and Augustine, Schelling is harkening back to an old idea: that the glory of the golden age is in the past and so one can find reconciliation only within his/her own life and character. Thus one cannot successfully reestablish a Christian civilization nor indulge in revolutionary activity, because these assume only effecting change at the “phenomenal” level of institutions. Rather, the fabric of the community depends upon the disposition of its inhabitants, where human goodness “can grow [only] through the *metanoia* of the person.”¹⁴⁵ The kind of sanctification to which Schelling is referring is a very deep and personal “return” or remembering (*anamnesis*) through an inner-dialogue. Voegelin calls this the “anamnetic dialogue” and stresses its intimacy as an independent activity:

This return is, furthermore, everyone’s most personal affair. The sanctification of the individual life has nothing to do directly with the salvation of mankind; the destiny of man is not absorbed in the destiny of mankind. Every man has to try for himself to represent the highest.¹⁴⁶

In developing his insights on the unconscious, Schelling reaches “a new level of consciousness,” which Voegelin greatly admires. Of particular interest is Schelling’s description of “orgiastic existence” in the dialectical modes of contraction and expansion, presented in *The Ages of the World*.¹⁴⁷ He cites Schelling’s account of the emergence of existence out of the dark

¹⁴⁵ Voegelin, *CW25*, 239.

¹⁴⁶ Voegelin, *CW25*, 220.

¹⁴⁷ There are three versions of this work, remaining unpublished and incomplete at Schelling’s death. The first version remains untranslated. Habermas worked from this version. The second draft can be found in *The Abyss of Freedom: Ages of the World*, trans. Judith Norman, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) with a good foreword by Slavoj Žižek. The third

or past night of unconsciousness, summarizing thus: “All conscious creation presupposes an unconscious and is only an unfolding, an explication of the latter.” Experiences of this dimension of existence can be felt in the human psyche itself by what Voegelin labels “dynamic tones” or *protodialectic experiences*. Ironical relations develop through the orgiastic intermixing of these forces, as Voegelin labels them, going beyond dialectical structures.

These forces are “still in a state of flux and vagueness before its solidification into language symbols, together with the dynamic ‘tones’ of the soul that accompany the emerging, such as, anxiety, contraction, urge, pressure, striving, hesitation, unrest, disquietude, release, etc.”¹⁴⁸ From this standpoint, Voegelin argues that Schelling develops a philosophical anthropology that synchronizes the movements of the universe and nature in God, with the soul of man. “Anthropology is now systematically made the key to speculation, nothing must enter into the content of speculation that cannot be found in human nature, in its depths as well as in its heights, in the limitation of its existence as well as in its openness to transcendent reality.”¹⁴⁹ Voegelin cannot praise Schelling’s breakthrough in the area of unconsciousness enough. He states boldly that “the philosophy of the unconscious is the historical answer to the search for access to the substance of nature.”¹⁵⁰ Since the human is a microcosm of the divine it is through

is published as *The Ages of the World*, trans. Jason Wirth, (New York: SUNY press, 2000). For his analysis Voegelin is relying upon the second draft.

¹⁴⁸ Voegelin, *CW25*, 214.

¹⁴⁹ *CW25*, 210. Voegelin quotes Schelling’s second draft of the *Die Weltalter* in the *Werke*, I. 8:207: “There is a light in the darkness. According to the old and almost outworn saying, man is the world on a small scale. Thus the processes of human life from the utmost depth to the highest consummation must be in accordance with the processes of universal life. It is certain: anybody could write the history of his own life from the ground, would at the same time have concentrated the history of the universe in a brief synopsis.”

¹⁵⁰ Voegelin, *CW25*, 240. Schelling’s doctrine of the potencies, presented differently in the various versions of *Ages of the World*, cannot be taken up on this occasion, but Voegelin has extensive praise for the achievement. He calls this Schelling’s process theology (*Potenzenlehre*) and boldly claims it is “perhaps the profoundest piece of philosophical thought ever

the phenomenology of the Godhead (the theory of potencies) that one can come to an account for human life and experience. For all things are in God and, as noted earlier, all things human are divine as Hippocrates taught, and everything divine is human.¹⁵¹ The only difference between God and man is the latter's dependency on God, and the fact that there is always the primordial unconscious ground underneath us, rendering human existence limited. Voegelin says:

Man is not an absolute existence but has his being as part of the whole system of the universe. His nature, his unconscious, is not posited by himself as his ground of being, as the divine nature, the first potency, is posited in God, but he finds himself with it, as something under him on which he is dependent.¹⁵²

Rather than as a representation of the Idea, Schelling stresses being as primordial will, which is a "sluggish, blind activity." Voegelin focuses on the frustration this sluggishness causes, "insofar as the nature under him can never be completely spiritualized."¹⁵³ This limit attaches to all finite existence, according to Schelling, a sorrowful sense that he captures in the *Freedom* essay, shortly after losing Caroline:

elaborated..." (208). There is a higher and lower cast of powers in God pertaining to the identity of necessity and freedom in the divine nature. Unlike traditional theological conceptions of God which operate through the "logics of perfection," next to His eternal being (*actus purus*) is an eternal becoming, where God becomes fully Himself. At first, God does not have an opinion of anything, which Habermas refers to as "divine egoism," but God arises from this slumber and creates an alter ego, or a true "Other" by which He can reveal himself to himself. The first movement is designated by A=B, where the forces of "contraction" and "expansion" produce a rotary motion that continually repeats forever. Contraction is the inhalation of powers that express the ego and gravity, whereas expansion deals with the exhalation of love and light into creation. The basis of all existence is groundless ground of contraction and expansion in a primal will of being as yearning (A¹). But in this vagueness and flux there is no articulation, only pure drive. The forces begin to solidify themselves and take on actual of existence into Nature (A²). All of consciousness runs through nature, as system is the arrangement of being in the Godhead that is shot through with freedom. Nature develops on a scale that eventually reaches the point of indifference or freedom in man (A³). Nature too is free and conscious, but the basic life of an organism is on a lower scale of man's selfhood, referred to as "slumbering selves." In this account of the divine nature, God's transcendence and immanence are synthesized into a true relation with the world and creatures, while He is above the struggle of the potencies (A⁰).

¹⁵¹ See Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 138.

¹⁵² Voegelin, *CW25*, 217.

¹⁵³ Voegelin, *CW25*, 220.

[A]nd even if in God this condition is at least relatively independent, still there is in God himself a source of sadness though it never rises to actuality but is overcome in eternal joy. Hence the veil of melancholy that is spread over all nature, the deep, indestructible melancholy of all life.¹⁵⁴

Mankind's history cannot be categorized under any prevalent political unit, but is a manifestation of our struggling attempts to get a grip on our falling away from the center of the Godhead. The state is one phenomenon amongst many in the unfolding of the theogonic process, and it is rooted in the eternal order and therefore, necessary. One is always living in relation to God as the absolute, by which "nature" or the "ground" inheres as the "basis" for the jointure of Being. A unity of absolute identity or the "point of indifference" is reserved for God, the absolute alone. In drawing the distinction between the "idea" and "ideal," Schelling promotes the "double-life" as the basis of all human character. The use of freedom in accordance with one's inner-necessity is the critical issue, involving every level of existence, especially the political. From the divine unity springs the powers that vital to our willing either good or evil, according to our drawing on light or dark sources in the formation of selfhood.

Like most contemporary commentators on Schelling's work, Habermas wrongly holds that there are serious shifts in Schelling's views, making three or five periods (or stages). He does not see the continuity in the problems Schelling confronts while taking the issues up afresh with every inquiry. Voegelin not only recognizes these constant threads but finds this versatility admirable in the works of Schelling. As is the case with Schelling's philosophical "system," insofar as it differ from other modern systems, in its emphasis on freedom, his political views boldly diverge from the customary treatments, especially since Kant. In an age of ideological

¹⁵⁴ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006), 62-3. Regarding existence, Schelling shows that because of his dependency on God, "[m]an never gains control over the condition, although in evil he strives to do so: it is only lent to him, and is independent from him; hence, his personality and selfhood can never rise to full actuality [*zum Aktus*]" (62).

frenzy and of the demise of political philosophy, according to Voegelin, Schelling offers one of the “last orientations” in confronting the nature of man, along broad ontological and political dimensions.

Schelling’s greatness as a thinker can be measured according to the balance of elements and experiences he synthesizes, which would later explode into the confusion and disassociation that characterizes our age. Voegelin concludes that “he did not anticipate the disassociation, and still less did he cause it: a great thinker is the seismograph of a civilizational earthquake, not its cause—and a German thinker ought to be a particularly sensitive seismograph because in his compound of experiences is missing the stabilizing experience of an old, firmly institutionalized political society, as for instance the English.”¹⁵⁵ An attempt to make valid arguments that could be taken seriously in the face of increasing partiality (or the scandal of unreason as reason) becomes meaningless in an intellectual environment now taken over by “philosophical dilettantes.” Despite the rising interest in Schellingean studies, many have overlooked the political and ethical dimensions of Schelling’s thought which are so wonderfully disclosed in Voegelin’s extensive chapter in the *Last Orientation*. Part of the reason for the neglect stems from the lack of attention paid to Schelling’s later works, which he gave as several series of lectures at the University of Berlin entitled, *Philosophy of Mythology* and *Philosophy of*

¹⁵⁵ *CW*25, 241. Schelling is compared by Voegelin, as he continues, with the greatness of Plato, Augustine, or Aquinas in that he marks the end of an age. Voegelin mentions “the signature of the crisis” following Schelling’s death, which involves a “violent disassociation of the elements that are held together by the strength of his soul, and as a result we see the *disjecta membra* of his experiences scattered through the following generations: the experiences of the will and the nirvana in Schopenhauer; the craving for the inner return in Kierkegaard; the psychology of the unconscious in Freud; the experiences of Dionysus and of immanent grace in Nietzsche; the social critique of the age and the longing for the Third Realm in the mass movements of Communism and National Socialism; the ominous orgiastic experiences with their anxiety in Nietzsche, in Freud, and in the orgasms of destruction and self-destruction of the General Wars.”

Revelation. Using these texts along with the Private Stugarrrt Lectures and the *Ages of the World* drafts, Voegelin reveals what is crucial to Schelling's political speculations.

Schelling does not have an ethics *per se*, since he rebukes the supposed developments achieved in the morality of Enlightenment, where God's imperatives become little more than a medicine cabinet. Hence, many have claimed that he has no political philosophy either. But both human enterprises of ethics and politics involve the play of freedom on the most exalted level. How could Schelling then, as a major philosopher of freedom, ignore or never contribute anything to political philosophy? Admitting it is tough work, Voegelin still believes reading Schelling is a worthwhile endeavor if one has the intellectual stamina or is not a dogmatist. Without acquainting themselves with the political connections of Schelling's thought, which Voegelin has unearthed, scholars have hastily jumped on the bandwagon of conventional wisdom concerning Schelling's silence after the *Freedom*, his feud and indebtedness to Hegel, his viability as a political thinker, etc. The commonly accepted opinions today about thinkers and schools have much historical baggage and will leave one muddleheaded, if one relies upon the common labels.

I leave it to others to psychoanalyze the complex relationship between Schelling and Hegel. Schelling has what I call a philosophy of hauntedness, which is neither ideological nor utopian. The structures of unconscious experience bear all those relations characterized by absence, which thereby include the subset of exclusions in the interactions that involve different beings. The power of the unconscious has been recognized, and yet it is difficult to pinpoint its exact source or function. This is yet another case of finding a great thinker who has something more to offer than popular perception holds, but only if one is willing honestly to take up a relationship with them again.

Section 4: Gnostic Speculation and the Philosophy of Hauntedness

The power of Schelling's philosophical insights develop through many decisive stages, but especially those that involve the existence and efficacy of absence. "Nothing" does not stand for emptiness or some vacuous abstraction, but symbolizes the power of nullity itself. There are several instances throughout Schelling's works that deal with the subtle ways of negation, exclusion, or the presence of absence. It has been overlooked for too long that Schelling employed the revealing/concealing structure, albeit within the traditional language of presence/absence in articulating hypothetical, ontological knowledge. Presence and absence are equi-primordial modalities mingled within the facticity of the universe. With the inclination to inquire into the uncanniness of Being's abode, Schelling initiated a unique path in philosophical speculation. Unlike Heidegger, however, Schelling does not claim to be engaged in a "new beginning" or reformation of the Western philosophical tradition (condemned by Heidegger as onto-theo-logy). According to Schelling every being and proposition *expresses* a new beginning and end constitutive of what he calls in his later Berlin lectures, "the exuberance of Being."

Jason Wirth's excellent study of Schelling, entitled, *The Conspiracy of Life: Meditations on Schelling and His Time*, gets at the core of what I call Schelling's philosophy of hauntedness. The hauntedness of existence unfolds through a conspiracy of life in the drama of history. He focuses on the "conspiracy of life" that is, the life beyond *and* within life and death. Wirth's book places the conspiracy between the simultaneity of expiration and inspiration, and such is his main thesis. I concur wholeheartedly with Wirth's conviction that "Heidegger's assessment of the anxious Schelling" is out of place and an exaggeration. As Wirth rightly states, "Schelling was not an anxious thinker driven finally to totalize the Whole. Schelling traced the conspiracy

of life as it unfolded, continuously revealing new dimensions, new openings, and new beginnings.”¹⁵⁶ Creation accounts, from both the Greek and Christian histories, stand in need of revision according to Schelling’s account because *both* fail to take seriously “negated being.” The Greek and Christian traditions misconstrue creation *ex nihilo* or the notion of *me on* (non-being); Schelling contends, rather, that beings do not emerge from nothingness but from a “dark precursor” as “being in and before itself.” The everlasting movements of beings stem for Schelling from the eternal rotation of “contraction” and “expansion.” Rotation is a result of relations that cannot *not* be upon the congealing of what-is. The rotary forces of the Godhead are eternal and seen as the “absolute,” but only as an “absolute indetermination.”

This is simply another way of stating the *Abgrund* principle, that God as Absolute is the groundless ground. There is a dimension of meaning, or a range of meanings, which has a surplus or extravagance of being, where there is always the unsayable at the heart of these layers of meaning. Words and concepts, therefore, work to conceal rather than reveal the domain of meaning conveyed on the surface through language. So the non-thought of thinking has to think the non-thoughtful, what Schelling called “the pre-thinkable,” or that which speaks through the silence of its absence. It took a lifetime of both intense thought and silence for Schelling to reach this point in his speculations, taking center stage in his 1840’s Berlin lectures that articulated a “positive philosophy.” For Schelling, we might say, in Whiteheadian terminology, that eternity is the range of possibilities capable of ingression through a field of forces—a type of matrix or eternal womb. Time is the ripping or tearing open of holes within the seamless of eternity, out of an original infinite beginningless and endless fabric of existing. These forces boil down to the divine necessity, which is not God’s *actual* being but constitutes the divine desire to be.

¹⁵⁶ Jason Wirth, *Conspiracy of Life*, 237.

Life develops and ends with the suspension of an entitie's presence and this "indivisible remainder" serves as the support haunting the economy of beings. It is "the incomprehensible ground of reality," called the *Ungrund* or groundless ground. The ultimate categories of interest are life and death represented analogously through the present and past, respectively. Wirth captures the sense in which the dead are a symbol of the "underground" for Schelling of "presence as gone":

The dead *live* as the intrusion of the past that Schelling once addressed as "*O Vergangenheit, du Abgrund der Gedanken!* O the Past, you abyss of thoughts!" The past here forms the groundless ground of the present. It is the abyssal ground of nature's self-presencing [...]. What most fundamentally—albeit abysmally—lives is always already dead and gone and thereby antinomically at the heart of present life. If death is the heart of life as the abyssal ground of nature, that is, as the abyss of the past, then death is more alive than discretely living things and hence death looms before the creaturely as the spirit of the past, which will in the future eternally return as the future-past, as the past that will always come again within every presence.¹⁵⁷

In the *Freedom* essay, Schelling concludes by noting the "veil of melancholy" draped over nature and the paradox this generates—"this is the mourning which clings to all finite life."¹⁵⁸

This view leads to what many have referred to as the tragic element in Schelling's philosophy. If I were pressed to critique Wirth's Schelling presentation, I would call attention to the common assumption that tragedy is the adequate interpretative lens of life's meaning. Following Niebuhr and Voegelin, it is more fruitful to read Schelling through an ironic account. The dynamic fluidity emphasized in the relations of conspiracy may be more transparent through the acute trope of irony. Wirth notes in several places how Schelling was an organic thinker, stressing movement and circulation in opposition to mechanical natural philosophies.¹⁵⁹ Potencies or cosmic forces are *freely* engaged in a "ceaseless striving" predicated on the nature of ἐρὸς (*eros*). The difficulty with a tragic reading is that it presupposes a total consciousness or denial of the

¹⁵⁷ Wirth, *Conspiracy of Life*, 196-97.

¹⁵⁸ F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, 63.

¹⁵⁹ Wirth, *Conspiracy of Life*, 95.

efficacy of unconscious or hidden relations. This view overlooks or denies that ironic relations lie at the heart and shape the very fabric of universe. As Whitehead says:

Consciousness presupposes experience, and not experience consciousness [. . .]. Thus an actual entity may, or may not, be conscious of some part of its experience.¹⁶⁰

There is an ironic connection between one's joy and sorrow or mourning based on the former's proximity to the Good, while the latter is concerned with its absence. Nature itself evolves out of the "whirlpool" of expansive and contractive forces, which forms the circle of simultaneous conditioning characteristic of freedom. This account is consistent with what Schelling says in the lectures on the *Philosophy of Art*, where reality "in its finitude simulates the infinite." Thus, the views summarized in this chapter do not derive exclusively from a few works. The same views pervade all of Schelling work.

At the remarkable age of twenty, Schelling articulated a speculative physics centering on the ataxia of energies while seeking to avoid the Manichean trap. Schelling claims that God's highest principle is "in-difference" or rest against any mutual opposition; this is a way of avoiding Manicheism. Scholars wrongly associate the will that wills such rest with "the pure I of divinity" or the will that wills nothing. Rather, the ontological modalities of being and what-is are inseparable forces of the "ground" in the divine essence. Being is what-is not, which is characterized by negativity or resistance. Schelling recognizes people are more prone to be accepting of "what-is, since it is communicative and freely gives of itself; but they frankly cannot comprehend what denies and negates itself—even if it is just as essential and is encountered everywhere in many forms."¹⁶¹ Again, this is not pure nothingness in the sense of creation *ex nihilo* or "the robbery of all essence"—Schelling is not working with a neutered brand

¹⁶⁰ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality, Corrected Edition*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1979 [1929]), 53.

¹⁶¹ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 140.

of nothingness. Rather, what-is-not and what-is are not mutually exclusive essences but are two aspects of the same essence.

What makes something not be is also that by which it is. “For it is not due to a lack of light and essence that it is not, but rather as a dynamic hiding-away, an active striving backward into the depths, into concealment, and therefore as an active force that likewise *is*—and hence is comprehensible.”¹⁶² Being or what-is-not is taken then as the eternal No or the primal womb of darkness out of which all life is delivered or revealed. This is the unconsciously impelling will that seeks only eternity without knowledge of it; it is the omnipotent will that is “out of itself and from itself.”¹⁶³ And this “eternal will alone provides the initial point that starts up the great process of the whole.”¹⁶⁴ “For this is the very will that wills eternity—that wills that the will that wills nothing [or God] become active and perceptible to itself as *such*.”¹⁶⁵ But as empty either in or outside itself “for it does not recognize eternity,” this will hungers or yearns for eternally what-is. “Thus, nothing is left but for the will to posit essence or affirmation absolutely outside of itself through an unconditioned and totally generative force.”¹⁶⁶

The contractive will (B) in Schelling’s doctrine of the potencies is what makes either progress or regress, in any sense, possible. That which negates revelation is to be made the basis of revelation as such. Negation is that first step involving transition from nothing into something. All movement is predicated on negation and the universe can be said to constitute the negative drives of the potencies. The origin of all being, in the manner Schelling describes it, is called the “divine madness,” where no ultimate logos can be given on why God created the world.

¹⁶² Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 143.

¹⁶³ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 137.

¹⁶⁴ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 138.

¹⁶⁵ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 138.

¹⁶⁶ Schelling, *Ages of the World*, 139.

Schelling's philosophy embraces these conspiratorial relations as essential and as manifesting the interrelatedness of reality. On the other side of the "conspiracy of life," we can say that "the venom of life" is the paradoxes revealed in the riddle of our present circumstances, the relevant features of which lurk subtly beyond the reach of inquiry, but which give the thick present some of its form and contribute to what is problematic in any situation. Not every relevant relation yields itself to inquiry. Our contemporary social identities, purposes, and values entail the tension between the forces of traditional life and modernism.

We can often find solace in our own cultural rituals or customs, but only in the midst of being uprooted and alienated by technological and bureaucratic powers. In a very real sense, there is (at least in the present) no open self except in contrast to the they-self. All are called, but not all are chosen, in the sense of the chosen people here advocated because they do not choose themselves. The exceptional people are not universal from the standpoint of the historical present. The current condition is one in which the self is locked in the tension between tradition and modernization, or conservative and progressive ways of life. Both can overreach their claims and reduce persons to mere selves.

For example, indigenous identities, interests, and aims stand out as either inhibitive or liberating forces against the modernist values for the development of humanity. From the categories of race or ethnicity, to various rites, rituals, and practices of religion or ethics, one has to decide how to interpret the various cultural complexes within his or her own domains. We have to decide upon the entry of these values into our lives and how they get appropriated. The Schellingian account of freedom gets to the core of what is mythic in the open self, that dimension of selfhood that contributes something paradoxical to the constitution of its thick present without being wholly discoverable through inquiry, but which haunts the self-knowledge

gained by open selves. Open selves cannot say exhaustively why they choose the courses of actions they choose, but are ready to offer dramatic narratives of how they have discovered important things they never suspected and never sought along the courses they have taken and which they are currently pursuing.

This point brings us to the controversies surrounding Voegelin's long use of *Gnosticism* as a symbol of modern spiritual, intellectual, or political estrangement. I am not concerned with how or why Voegelin employs the term throughout his vast corpus. Rather, I seek to give my own interpretation of the term's generic meaning within any systematic orientation of Voegelinian political philosophy. And what "gnostic" means in this study has to do with exclusivist or dogmatic eschatologies, which falsely convey their status in knowledge, identity, or history as unequal in privilege or importance to other cultures. Voegelin's and Heidegger's interpretation of Schelling diverges at crucial junctures, representing their conflicting philosophical orientations. In the case of Voegelin, Schelling serves as a formative historical source of order through a promotion for freedom –freedom that respects human personality. Heidegger observes that the career of German idealism from Fichte through Hegel and Schelling was a great event of Western philosophy. In particular, Schelling's *Freedom* essay is not only the apex but also the climax of this remarkable German tradition. Such pre-fabricated or pseudo-treatments of important thinkers, through loose labels and biases, can be transformed into the ideals that we then serve and advocate in unhealthy or dishonest ways. Honest intentions are often recognized amongst the twisted aims and interests of the many misreadings, despite their being morally reprehensible.

Heidegger came to be one of the key representatives of dogmatic exceptionalism, according to Voegelin. The gnostic speculation and sentiments can be felt in several of Heidegger's works, but Voegelin chooses to focus on the *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935).

Heidegger's speculation occupies a significant place in the history of Western gnosticism. The construct of the closed process of being; the shutting off of immanent from the world-transcendent being; the refusal to acknowledge the experiences of *philia*, *eros*, *pistis* (faith) and *elpis* (hope)—which were described and named by the Hellenic philosophers—as the ontic events wherein the soul participates in transcendent being and allows itself to be ordered by it; the refusal, thus, to acknowledge them as the events in which philosophy, especially Platonic philosophy, has its origin; and finally, the refusal to permit the very idea of a construct of a closed process of being to be called into question in the light of these events—all of this was, in varying degrees of clarity, doubtless to be found in the speculative gnostics of the nineteenth century. But Heidegger has reduced this complex to its essential structure and purged it of period-bound visions of the future. Gone are the ludicrous images of positivist, socialist, and super-man. In their place Heidegger puts being itself, emptied of all content, to whose approaching power we must submit.¹⁶⁷

For Voegelin, like Niebuhr, reliance on a dramatic historiography is one mode of protection against insulating the self in the way Heidegger does when he emphasizes the primordial structure of *Dasein* as the exemplar of lived temporality being-in-the-world through the moodedness of *Angst*. This sort of view is the prototype of the alienated modern condition that Voegelin, like Schelling before him, sought to resist.

In speaking of the “gift” of death one presumes that authentic freedom can only be manifest through *Dasein*'s being irreplaceable. But this is the very mistake of modernity and illustrative of the dead-end that the post-humanist West encounters, which will be fully addressed in the next chapter. Taking the modern alienation to be so fundamental forces one either to expire for the sake of the Other, or to believe that one's autonomy can come only through sacrificing the “They” or “Crowd.” But such a tragic, mutual exchange of annihilation is necessary only so long as one presumes static or *determinant* categories of identities and

¹⁶⁷ Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2004), 35-6.

relations. In the midst of being lost and removed to a “one,” Heidegger’s philosophy not only alienates the self, but immerses it in a kind of gnostic dread. The whole task of life is consumed in some quest to compensate for finitude and ward off despair. I interpret this depressing view, through Voegelin’s critique, to be a traditional, static means of maintaining an individuality that undermines, for example, pluralistic sovereignty. As Voegelin states toward the end of *On the Form of the American Mind*, the real basis of freedom lies in individual sovereignty where “the myth of the nation and the state is exposed, [and] the democratic ideology is shown to be foreign to reality, and its place is taken by an interpretation of history achieved by determining individual responsibility and conduct.”¹⁶⁸ *Dasein* is no citizen.

¹⁶⁸ Voegelin, *CW1*, 210.

CHAPTER FOUR

COMING TO AMERICA: MYTH, SYMBOL, AND THE OPEN SELF

Section 1: Mythic Consciousness and Symbolic Ritual (Cassirer, Ellul, Voegelin)

This chapter will explain how Voegelin's visiting fellowship to America brought with it not only new contacts and experiences, but also a new world that was much less parochial than the environment from which he came. Following the theme from last chapter, Voegelin's personal transformation led him to the philosophy of politics and culture. In Schelling (among others) he found a philosophy of open selfhood. Schelling's resistance to ideology is primarily marked by his willingness to absorb conflicting symbolisms into a *post*-dialectical, dramatic historiography. While studying in America, Voegelin underwent an intellectual and spiritual breakdown and then wrote:

[I]n brief, here was a world in which this other world that I had grown up in was intellectually, morally, and spiritually irrelevant. That there should be such a plurality of worlds had a devastating effect on me. The experience broke for good, at least I hope it did, my provincialism of a Central European or generally European kind without letting me fall into an American provincialism. I gained an understanding through these years of the plurality of human possibilities realized in various civilizations, as an immediate experience, an *expérience vécue*, which hitherto had been accessible to me only through the comparative study of civilizations, as I found them in Max Weber, in Spengler, and later in Toynbee. The immediate effect was that upon my return to Europe certain phenomena which were of the greatest importance in the intellectual and ideological context of Central Europe, as for instance the work of Heidegger, whose famous *Sein und Zeit* I read in 1928, no longer had any effect on me. It just ran off, because I had been immunized against this whole context of philosophizing through my time in America and especially in Wisconsin. The priorities and relations of importance between various theories had been fundamentally changed, and as far as I can see for the better.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ See Voegelin, "The American Experience," *Modern Age: A Quarterly Review*, 26:3-4, Summer-Fall 1982, 332-333. During a major conference at the University of Toronto with Hans Gadamer in 1978, Voegelin received a loud roar of laughter after having stated that he eventually had to emigrate to America in 1938 "because my previous experiences in America had made me unfit for existence in central Europe." He said this after formally apologizing to Professor Gadamer because he respects him but "this is why I could not follow Heidegger."

In reading the works of Peirce and James, for instance, Voegelin came to appreciate the critique of “closed intellectual systems,” including the “pure legal theory” of his famous teacher, Hans Kelsen. Upon being exposed to different temperaments and philosophical engagements, Voegelin uncovered the cultural underpinnings of the myth of the open self, without emphasizing the cultural aspects of entertainment (that are so much a part of this study). In juxtaposition to the continental tradition of Western philosophy, an exposition is advanced which is not ideologically or dogmatically constructed but which respects the freedom not to posit dialectical or anthropological necessities.

As we saw in the last chapter, this freedom-loving philosophical orientation is what attracted Voegelin to intense study of Schelling’s philosophy. This chapter will explore the justification for Voegelin’s claim while also offering a critique of prevailing mythic consciousness, associated with the democratic, capitalist, nationalist, or Puritan-Christian symbols of American exceptionalism, as laid out in the introduction. There is also the popular form of global communalism that dissociates itself from any ethnic, sectarian, or nationalistic interests, and which views American symbolism as international.

Mythic consciousness pertains to what a person or group takes as fundamental, as it relates to one’s highest hopes and deepest fears. Myths rely on symbolic rituals, which are repeatable acts that circumscribe our worlds, largely shaping our identities, purposes, and intentions. As repeatable acts myths symbolically offer us orientations on the world and on experience, manifesting interpretative tropes and other structural forms of thinking. This point is crucial to the version of ironic American exceptionalism presented here, so it is necessary that I elaborate further. Many who are dominated by the scientific cultural form extend the sphere of rationality in destructive ways, naively believing they can go beyond myth. On this view, myths

are taken as simply authoritarian stories, as fables or falsehoods which need to be discarded. But myth need not be a prison that is incapable of embodying a malleable pathos. Voegelin's philosophy of myth differs from Ernst Cassirer's based on the assumption that, for Voegelin, myth has the *possibility* of playing a positive and effective role in articulating transcendent meaning within various cultures. According to Voegelin, myth has the advantage of preserving ultimate meanings as mysterious because myth does not claim to be definite. At best, myth is a *likely* story about the knowledge we have of reality, but it does not pretend to stand above the limitations of human perspective(s).

Myths are an essential aspect of human consciousness, not as fables or falsehoods we superstitiously adopt, but based on what *we take to be fundamental*. Myths can be subscribed to in totalitarian fashion and sometimes are, while they need not be. According to Cassirer their functionality is vast and involves the "objectification of man's social experience [...]"¹⁷⁰ Earlier Cassirer said:

The subjects of mythic and the ritualistic acts are of an infinite variety; they are incalculable and unfathomable. But the motives of mythical thought and mythical imagination are in a sense always the same. In all human activities, and in all forms of human culture, we find a 'unity in the manifold.' Art gives us a unity of intuition; science gives us a unity of thought; religion and myth give us a unity of feeling. Art opens to us the universe of 'living forms'; science shows us a universe of laws and principles; religion and myth begin with the awareness of the universality and fundamental identity of life. . . . Myth does not arise solely from intellectual processes, it sprouts forth from deep human emotions. Yet on the other hand all those theories that exclusively stress the emotional element fail to see an essential point. Myth cannot be described as a bare emotion because it is the *expression* of emotion. The expression of a feeling itself—it is emotion turned into an image.¹⁷¹

Cassirer's notion of myth takes it as active; it is a process of diffusing internal fear on an instinctual level, but also he acknowledges myth just as much to be a product of conscious work.

¹⁷⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 47.

¹⁷¹ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 37, 43.

“Myth is filled with the most violent emotions and the most frightful visions. But in myth man begins to learn a new and strange art: the art of expressing, and that means of organizing, his most deeply rooted instincts, his hopes and fears.”¹⁷² Unlike ideology, myth has a richer history and deeper existential impact on human consciousness.

There are three ways in which myth and ideology can be distinguished according to Jacques Ellul. First, ideology is passive and can be advocated without much effort, but myth emerges with anxious energy. “The myth does not leave man passive; it drives him to action.”¹⁷³ Next, myth is not just wedded to ideas as beliefs but it engages multi-level dimensions of human experience. Ellul concludes that “myth is more intellectually diffuse; it is part emotionalism, part affective response, part a sacred feeling, and more important.” Therefore myth also differs from ideology in that the former is “imbedded much more deeply to the soul, sinks its roots farther down, is more permanent, and provides man with a fundamental image of his condition and the world at large.”¹⁷⁴

It is difficult to deny the power of myth as witnessed in the ideological struggles of the last century. In communism, for example, the proletariat are the chosen people, over the bourgeoisie, through the myth of the worker; in National Socialism the fascistic pursuit of the destiny of *Volk* lives through the myth of the nation or the myth of the hero tied in with a notion of the master-race, blood, language, or soil; and the myth of prosperity dominates a liberal progressivism that baselessly holds to a consumer-materialism, where the chosen people are those who die with the most toys.

¹⁷² Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 47-8.

¹⁷³ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda—The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 116.

¹⁷⁴ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 116.

Combined with Cassirer's insights, these characteristics show what constitutes mythic consciousness. But Ellul and Cassirer can be criticized for not taking seriously enough the possibility of myth acting as a positive, liberating force that leaves open the valuing of freedom. Myth need not be a prison. As an essential formative element of the social order, mythic consciousness cannot be dispensed with, but that does not relegate it necessarily to being a product of authoritarian, primitive impulses. In accepting the meaning of history as unknowable and open-ended, the myth tells a story that provides context within which our experiences become meaningful. In his critical review of Cassirer's *Myth of the State*, Voegelin criticizes the "myth of reason" at work in Cassirer's conception of Western progress and political, social stability. The notion that reason has overcome myth and must be continually on guard against myth as a primitive orientation toward the world is not only misguided, but is pathological itself.

Hence, from my point of view, and from Voegelin's, both Cassirer and Ellul fail to distinguish myth from dogmatic exceptionalisms. It is like modern scientists who fail to separate myth and superstition.¹⁷⁵ This is why Ellul did not see the importance of the role of media, especially TV, internet, etc., as an effective stimulus to culture; he, along with others whose intellectual consciousness was formed before the days of television were likely to say that these media lack force beyond mere propaganda, which, in Adorno's sense are called the "industry of culture."

¹⁷⁵ Ellul writes, "TV, for example, creates feelings of friendship, a new intimacy, and thus fully satisfies those needs [of mythic consciousness]." But then concludes, "They [these new, artificial needs] become more demanding and imperative for the individual than his own private needs and lead him to sacrifice his private satisfactions. In politics as in economics, the development of artificial needs progressively eliminates personal needs and inclinations." Ellul sees how mass media can hollow out the individual, but fails to appreciate how they can fulfill still deeper needs, such as the yearning for a freedom of the sort Schelling describes. See, *Propaganda*, 175, 177-78.

Section 2: Coming to America: Radical Empiricism and the Philosophy of the Open Self

In being exposed to the tenor of American pragmatism and radical empiricism through the thought of Peirce, James, Dewey, Whitehead, and John R. Commons, Voegelin's philosophical orientations were altered for the better. Radical empiricism had the advantage over European philosophies in refusing to posit arbitrarily dialectical or necessary structures for interpreting experience. One cannot overlook this influence, especially the Jamesian concept of open selfhood, as central to Voegelin's overarching philosophical aims, running consistently throughout his career. "Voegelin adopted a radically empiricist attention to the experience itself, prior to any assumptions about whether there is an actually existing entity that might be assumed to be the 'subject' of the experience, or even an actually existing world of entities that that subject might both exist in and take items of as its objects."¹⁷⁶ I take Voegelin's interpretation of radical empiricism to be overly intellectual or noetic, while James, Bergson, and Whitehead do not have this tendency. This noetic emphasis unfortunately distorts, through over-emphasis, the importance of consciousness or reason as a dominant ingredient of human experience. I agree with Whitehead when he argued in *Process and Reality* that the method of radical empiricism is distinct from other philosophies in that "consciousness, thought, sense-perception" as "components are unessential elements in experience, either physical or mental."¹⁷⁷ The efficacy of ironic relations entails that we should not privilege the cognitive as a dominating ingredient of experience, which Voegelin tends to do. Despite this serious critique which can be leveled at his

¹⁷⁶ Eugene Webb, "Eric Voegelin's Faith (or Atheism?)," 46. Webb mentions in an endnote: "Voegelin sometimes referred to himself as a 'radical empiricist,' alluding to the famous essay of William James."

¹⁷⁷ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality, Corrected Edition*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York, Free Press, 1979 [1929]), 36.

flavor of radical empiricism, there is no reason to deny that Voegelin did attempt to subscribe to that orientation in philosophy.

I argue Voegelin's radical empiricism is formed on two fronts for the purposes of this dissertation. One is the conventional reading of Peirce and James he picked up from Dewey and Whitehead. In reading alongside and attending the lectures of these towering figures, Voegelin's understanding and appreciation of American philosophy grew and widened. Paul Kuntz finds in his extensive study of Voegelin's notion of order that he became a process philosopher after attending Whitehead's lectures published as *Science and Modern World* (1925).

The other connection lies in Voegelin's later affinity for the philosophical and cultural persuasion of Bergson's *Two Sources*. Resisting epic, grand narrative and the "certain untruth" of ideology Voegelin finds resonance with thinkers who are guided by experience more than anything else, and these radical empiricists fit the bill. But as scholars familiar with Voegelin's work will contend, he seems at times not to have moved fully in the direction of radical empiricism. Nevertheless, he always remains committed to the empirical. Like all the other thinkers mentioned, he exemplifies his *own* version of radical empiricism, with an emphasis as a political philosopher. According to John J. Ranieri, Voegelin's "was a radical empiricism that went beyond the symbols and texts to recapture the experiences underlying these expressions. The more data he could amass from the study of comparative religion, archaeology, anthropology, ancient civilizations, and elsewhere, the more empirically verified would be his interpretations of the originating experiences."¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ John J. Ranieri, "Grounding Public Discourse: Voegelin's Contribution," in *The Politics of the Soul: Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience*, ed. Glen Hughes (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 38.

Voegelin advances a radically empirical philosophy that attempts to discard the dogma and doctrinalism of historical baggage, and to get back to, instead, a pre-dogmatic kind of knowledge. One of the unfortunate hallmarks of modern philosophy is the inability to account for the integrity of experience. This is the current task and primary objective for political philosophy according to Voegelin's understanding. For Western civilization to have any hope of sustaining sources of order, apart from a search for transcendental and immanent consciousness, we must remain open to experience in its transcendental and immanent modes and the human search for the meaning of both.

As highlighted in the last chapter, when Voegelin returned to Germany to give the "Hitler and the Germans" lectures of 1964, he attacked the leading clichés of the German courts, universities, churches, and intellectual elites as unempirical. The first of these was known as the "unmastered past." Voegelin found this social temperament appalling and did not see this as a major transformation away from the horrors and "collective guilt" of the Holocaust and Nazi period. Voegelin rejects not only the notion that one should or even *could* master the past, but also the linear notion of time presupposed in the notion of the "present here." Voegelin gives an application of radical empiricism by stating: "if there is somehow the feeling that there is still something to master in the past, then we are coming to what I have continually pointed toward in all these examples, that we live in an unmastered *present*."¹⁷⁹

Ideological and dogmatic distortions prevent us from distinguishing an empirical present from a "false image" or "second reality" of one. According to Jeremy Fackenthal, "When Voegelin writes that 'what is past, is past,' he does not mean that the past is dead, put behind us never to rear its head again. Rather, he points out that focusing on the past fails to address the problems of

¹⁷⁹ Eric Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, eds. and trans. Detlev Clemons and Brendan Purcell, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999). 71.

the present. And in the present, the problems of the past are already finding ways to reemerge.”¹⁸⁰ Open selfhood embraces our experience of the present “clearing out all the ideological junk in order to make the *conditio humana* visible once again.”¹⁸¹

There is only the “unmastered present,” and Voegelin finds this to be a radically empirical interpretation. But unlike the notion of the present within a linear conception of history, which Voegelin refers to as an ideological derailment, the present becomes intelligible only by presupposing a whole to which it belongs, what Voegelin calls “the presence under God.”¹⁸² Against the scientific or “spatialized time” notion of the present, as immovable points on a continuum, Voegelin argues for a present of all living humanity. We must not rely on hackneyed language to grasp the active presence of the past. Voegelin attacks the use of clichés in general as superficial labels which tell us very little about what a person really believes. The fact that such labels are widespread in our contemporary jargon is a testament to the shallowness which pervades much of our political discourse. Most people who use clichés do so sincerely, but the baggage of the labels makes constructive communication difficult if not impossible.

Taking a brief look at a classical, polarizing social issue like abortion rights will illustrate the frustration associated with this point. One is either labeled “pro-choice” or “pro-life” as the respective stances, and there appear to be no *pluralistic* solutions. If one were to apply these typical stereotypes without asking whether someone will claim to be “anti-choice” or “anti-life,” then one has failed adequately to scrutinize the labels. Labels such as these act as poor substitutes for other’s genuine attitudes and they allow ideologues to assume they are justified in their gross accusations. Under these conditions, no real dialogue ensues and groups are left

¹⁸⁰ Jeremy D. Fackenthal, “The Problem of Coming to Terms with the Past: A Post-Holocaust Theology of Remembrance,” (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2012), 53.

¹⁸¹ Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 69-70.

¹⁸² Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, 71.

talking to themselves about the righteousness of their causes, to protect life or freedom. Hence, no real debate has occurred between the competing factions on several heated social issues such as abortion.

Instead of maintaining openness toward the “other,” the norm has become to demonize one’s opponents in the midst of one’s own appeals to be heard. Under these conditions, Voegelin would contend that this defect remains a conversation with oneself, but in a perverted way. It is not Schelling’s “inner return,” or the trademark of the open society, as in Bergson, or Niebuhr’s dialogue with self, but a pathological closing off as the dominant mode of engagement. What comes upon the self in this common context is the delusion of openness through politically correct notions like (mere) tolerance.

The traces of radical empiricism continue to crop up throughout Voegelin’s widely varying interests, guiding many of the inquiries of his long career. In advocating an ethics and politics committed to the development of individual, spiritual personality, Voegelin remains open to a humanistic philosophy of culture, even broader than Schelling’s, as an antidote to the contemporary alternatives of lost selves. Voegelin’s encounter with the American philosophical tradition of pragmatism profoundly structured the way he viewed and sought to resolve social problems. Gregory Farr has observed that the “clear shifts of Voegelin’s philosophical interests and attitudes as were occasioned by his experiences in America, provid[e] the transitional material necessary to move toward a detailed account of Voegelin’s first monograph and later philosophical works.”¹⁸³ Although those not familiar with Voegelin’s writings may assume they have a religious character simply, it should be noted that he is pluralistic in his sentiments, which is consistent with a pragmatic vision. Voegelin notes that the “exclusion of relations of

¹⁸³ Gregory Farr, “Eric Voegelin’s Theory of Intentionality *In* Consciousness and its Pragmatic Influences,” (PhD diss. prospectus, Boston University, 2005), 8-9.

experience in earlier forms of empiricism resulted in rationalist attempts to supplement the world image and its lack of connections with a realm of a priori categories and transcendental experience; *radical empiricism renders these artificial superstructures unnecessary*.¹⁸⁴ The consciousness of human personality as a “teleological harmony” pertains to the higher phases of experience, “but not simply as a middle term in a steady movement toward a *predetermined end*. Rather, the person is structured in a developmental teleology: the present moment does not foresee everything that the future holds.”¹⁸⁵ The personality of the self is a “general idea” which “cannot be grasped in a brief act of understanding but must be lived through over time.”¹⁸⁶ In articulating the central themes of Peirce, Voegelin notes that it is in

William James’s philosophy—that a new experience, essentially different from the European tradition of skepticism, displaces the accent of thinking in such a way that the dialectic is strongly affected and perhaps disappears altogether. The absence of the connections between the problems of continuity and the stream of the self on the one hand and the gospel of brotherly love on the other indicates that the philosophy of the self does not carry the same all-absorbing meaning that it has in English though.¹⁸⁷

Pluralism is an engagement with the world that, according to Voegelin, “achieves the highest degree of intimacy.”¹⁸⁸ Alien forces and persons do not need to be held as foreign in the mundane sense.

The American experience makes it possible that *your* world can be re-circumscribed through encounters or *potential* occasions which harbor hidden or ironic relations forcing us to reevaluate our own views and values. To the extent one engages in reflecting on his or her own loyalties and social forms of association, there is a recognized continuity of the self as a series of

¹⁸⁴ Voegelin, *On the Form of the American Mind*, vol. 1, trans. Ruth Hein, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Jürgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 56-7, 62, emphasis added. “The philosophy of radical empiricism frankly abandons the attempt to structure a rational image of the world.”

¹⁸⁵ Voegelin, *CW1*, 46, emphasis added.

¹⁸⁶ Voegelin, *CW1*, 46.

¹⁸⁷ Voegelin, *CW1*, 51.

¹⁸⁸ Voegelin, *CW1*, 60.

deeds for which one is responsible but no longer possesses. These deeds are no longer under the individual's discretion but belong to the community and will be interpreted according to the various regions of available discourse. The temporal thickness of the person develops out of the inclusion of the social stability and continuities. The ultimate expression of a pluralistic intimacy with the community, or with universe and nature, is found for Voegelin in Peirce's agapism, an evolutionary love in anticipation of brotherly love. Individuals are not viewed in the desolation and solitude which Voegelin finds to be the general European response to the modern conditions of estrangement and de-divinization (as exemplified in Heidegger's philosophy).

The symbolic meaning of the opening of the soul (whatever it is) is attached to an orientation of the self-relating to others and the world, in ways that very similar to Schelling's call for the "inner return"—contracting oneself as an opening of the self. Voegelin provides another example of employing an ontology that recognizes internal relatedness predicated on the ironic. Much later in his career, Voegelin was asked "in your present thinking, do you still make use of the category of the opening of the soul [self]?" He responded emphatically "Oh yes. Only not exactly in the meaning that is sometimes attached to the term. As a symbol, it is very good, in opposition to the process of closing off existence. So it is the open soul, or the opening of the soul, that is opposite to the possibility of closing your soul into the state of alienation. And I use it today to describe the situation of contacting oneself. To contact oneself is to reopen."¹⁸⁹ Even in 1973, Voegelin held fast to the notion of the open self which he encountered in 1920s America, ripping through the parochialism widespread in Europe. There is considerable evidence that it remained a continuous symbolic source of inspiration for Voegelin's political science and philosophy.

¹⁸⁹ Eric Voegelin, "Philosophies of History: An Interview with Eric Voegelin," interview by Peter Cangelosi and John William Corrington, *New Orleans Review*, no. 2, 1973, 5.

Voegelin also strongly concurs with James' notion that "relations" are just as important an aspect of human experience as are "things." It is this emphasis on relationships which serves as the main focal point of cosmic, social, and personal analysis, if we are to connect Voegelin with a philosophy of culture, as I seek to do. It is this orientation on experience that influence the types of radical empirical philosophers with whom Voegelin had an affinity.

Employing a methodological personalism, Voegelin identifies every political philosophy as expressing the innermost sentiments and cultural interpretations of the thinker espousing those views. The *History of Political Ideas* holds spiritual personality as one of its central threads, and Voegelin argues it is the highest value known in the universe. A thinker's ideas are said to develop not only out of an assemblage of cultural complexes but within an interpretative scheme and imaginative capacity. As Voegelin wrote in the last volume of *Order and History*, "Every thinker who is engaged in the quest for truth resists a received symbolism he considers insufficient to express truly the reality of his responsive experience. In order to aim at a truer truth he has to out-imagine the symbols hitherto imagined; and in the assertion of his imaginative power he can forget that he is out-imagining symbols of truth, but not the process of reality in which he moves as a partner."¹⁹⁰ Philosophical inquiry is situated in its own historical problematic, regardless of its desire to be otherwise. Our own condition is marked by the ideological wasteland which lies in the wake of the "modern crisis" we are constantly warned about. Voegelin argues that the quality of life is reflective of one's philosophy and there is no real way to separate the philosopher from the thought. Voegelin complains about the lack of attention paid to Bergson's breakthrough in this regard over, for example, Karl Popper's ideas of the open society.

¹⁹⁰ Eric Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, vol. 5, *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 39.

In the same year when he was asked about the openness of the self, Voegelin denounced the “philosophical illiteracy” which has “progressed so far that the experiential core of the philosophizing has disappeared below the horizon, and is not even recognized as such when it appears in philosophers like Bergson.”¹⁹¹ Complaining about the state of philosophy in his own day, Voegelin sought to use the method of radical empiricism to resist untruth, or to adopt “uncertain truths” consistent with pragmatic approaches. Much of the problem in the history of Western philosophy, according to Voegelin’s assessment, stems from hubristic claims to “certain untruth.”

Section 3: The Derailment of Parochialism and Cultural Plurality

Voegelin, following Schelling, sought, in resisting untruth, “not to destroy with polemic, but to unleash and heal sclerotic stoppages. This emancipatory task is the eternal dialogue with freedom and its self-multiplication into an infinity of new beginnings and endings.”¹⁹² Voegelin was working intensely on Schelling’s political philosophy through a study of his philosophy of culture during the final two years of the Second World War. This was a volatile time in Voegelin’s life and it served as a transformative experience, leading to his focus on the modern crisis as a source of orientation for his studies. As we have already argued, Schelling plays a leading role in Voegelin’s eight-volume, posthumously published *History of Political Ideas* who, as a “spiritual realist,” or open self, evoked the conditions helpful in the resistance of extremisms, in the midst of rising mass movements and totalitarian regimes. Voegelin projected that “the spiritualist is faced implacably by the united nations of liberal progressives, Fascists,

¹⁹¹ Eric Voegelin makes this claim in “On Hegel,” *Published Essays, 1966-1985, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, CW12*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 260.

¹⁹² Wirth, *The Conspiracy of Life*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003), 18.

Communists, and National Socialists.”¹⁹³ We are not referring merely to a conglomeration of individuals as manifest through a multiplicity, but to a plurality wherein a unity in contrast is shared through a high-level of values. Such is “modernity” where the only unforgivable sin is to be “unmodern.” Voegelin believed not only in the transcendence of the divine ground but also in the constructive possibilities that lie within the human, creative, imaginative powers, which are just as prone to foster derailment as order.

A narrative of Western political philosophy is advanced by Voegelin in the *History* that the term “spiritual realism” represents a resistance to disintegration and hence closedness and the lost self:

Schelling draws into the orbit of his interpretation a vast historical material, including Pagan myth, Oriental symbolisms, and the Catholic and Protestant Churches; and the further enlargement of this orbit, particularly through the inclusion of primitive symbolisms and of Oriental civilizations, is the principal problem for a philosophical history of the spirit after Schelling.¹⁹⁴

Those who seek to resist untruth, as does Schelling, still absorb symbols and rituals. By committing to the plurality of symbolisms without dogmatically subscribing to them, Schelling articulates, according to Voegelin, the orientations of an open self. The inclusion of the vast historical materials Schelling employs in his later lectures on mythology and revelation did not simply force Voegelin’s eight-volume *History* to “crash,” as he famously stated; rather Voegelin was willing to abandon the work while he did not abandon the live option of open selfhood.

At a time when the world was very uncertain and in turmoil, Voegelin encountered the integrity of persons and the love of freedom as fundamental while studying in the US, and it had a profound, and lasting impact on the orientation of his philosophy. Ellis Sandoz, the only natural

¹⁹³ Voegelin, *Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man*, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 26, *History of Political Ideas*, Vol. VIII, ed. David Walsh, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 138.

¹⁹⁴ Voegelin, *CW26*, 139.

born American to write a dissertation under Voegelin, observed: “His insistence on the multifaceted intimacy of men’s normal sympathetic relationship to the universe led Voegelin in 1928 to coin the term *open self*, to symbolize the person who flees from the isolation and loneliness of his merely private existence as an atomized individual to embrace the mysterious togetherness of reality disclosed in pure existence.”¹⁹⁵ The Tocquevillian-like experiences Voegelin internalized in America allowed him to identify a cultural fabric with the existence of open selves throughout history. The cultural pluralism of America confirmed what he already believed possible on various individual levels, but not a reality that European parochialism and provincialism could so easily cultivate. He embraced what was largely foreign to him. He then anticipated ways and articulated how he had already become, or was potentially becoming the “other,” which is a leading principle of open selfhood.

Embracing a cultural pluralism entails that we adopt a fallibilistic disposition with respect to our own interests, similar to what Voegelin himself actually did. If one is not a fallibilist, one will be searching for the One True Way for everybody and that search is for *closure*—it cannot be pluralistic. Openness to the complexity, the many variables associated with American experience, adds to our cultural semiotics while it avoids a moral-crusade to convert people to a new viewpoint. Instead, we should promote attempts to stay mindful of those elusive, ironic relations which gain a wider impact under social conditions *as* they grow more diverse. Open selves acknowledge that the quest for *salvation* is “our ownmost possibility,” a position not held lightly, and one contrary to Heidegger’s ideas about death and finitude. Even those who have competing religious interests can agree on the inspiring notion that “providence provides” and

¹⁹⁵ Ellis Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 175.

that history can be seen as a drama of the achievements and catastrophes of theophanic or divine-human encounters.

My interpretation of ironic American exceptionalism is far from being secular or merely world-immanent. We are moved by the *possibility* of transcendence as an existential drive within our actions and motives. The open self recognizes this emotional appeal. Similar to Niebuhr's advocacy of a dialogue with God or the divine, religious rituals may either positively or negatively affect our lives. They may open or close us. We cannot deny the functional impact of experiential religious consciousness, appropriated through various traditions and interpretative horizons. Religion is not the culprit of humanity's contemporary crisis, brought on by seeking closure, any more than science or metaphysics are. The modern problem with religion lies in adopting an extremism which stems from or leads to the fundamentalist myth in the maintenance of essentially closed cultural objects and data.

Ironic relations should strongly influence American mindfulness, especially regarding our religious heritage. Without appealing to the imperialist grand narrative that views America as breaking out from the religious persecutions of seventeenth century Europe, instead we may adopt a dramatic account that sympathizes even with the godless. Open selves embody the possibility of *becoming* the other; for them, divine grace is witnessed in empathy. If your neighbor is an atheist and you are a theist, then imagining yourself as an atheist is the free act; if you are oppressed, then imagining the desperation of the oppressor and the fears that lead to his/her act is the approach of an open self. This view justifies why the non-religious can be tolerated and atheism is a viable response to the doctrines of organized religion. Resistance is rather directed at the anti-religious, who fail to see that there are fertile seeds in religious experience and who seek to challenge it *as a possibility for others*. Such opponents of religion

will not rest until religion is no longer possible for others. This is the action of fettered, closed selves. I believe that American exceptionalism protects the freedoms of religious followers and atheists alike, but refuses to promote the elimination of religious expression either way.

Only where it implies robbing others of their say, especially on matters involving eschatology, do open selves vehemently oppose either inaction or active censorship. Being anti-religious, or being unwilling to allow people a stake in orienting themselves toward theological interests, is a personal hindrance and destructive of liberty. Religion as a cultural form is to be valued for its own sake, but that does not justify holding any other form as reducible to a single narrowest function. The fruits of culture are well kept by cultivating as many meanings and stories as there are interests in the commitment to freedom, expressed in Voegelin's plurality of middles.

An unsurprising result of the sort of conflict I discussed above is that the estrangement of religious symbolization within modern social and political life is pervasive. The West has succumbed to the strife and division that distinguishes constitutional government from church authority. The secular mind-frame pervades the public consciousness along with an anxiety associated with continued alienation from real spiritual and mystical experience. These tensions emerge as apocalyptic fantasies and conspiracy theories regarding the end of the world, from both the hyper-religious and the hyper-secular factions. As Voegelin and others have argued, to fulfill the intellectual and spiritual needs of mankind, modernity's secular temperament shares in serving the processes of re-divinization. This is the response to the divine ground. We have seen the assimilation of religious traditions, with social networks and the many channels of entertainment. From Joyce Meyers and Billy Graham or Pat Robertson, to Islamic groups like al Qaeda and Hamas, there has been no shortage of using communicative technologies. The

increased sensitivity to the idea of religious conspiracies is evidence of our understanding that the spiritual is real and will find expression one way or another. Hence we find popular novels and movies about secret societies of present day Illuminati. Spirit goes underground in a secular world.

Religious practices in general are adapting to the requirements of the entertainment culture and its mediums of dissemination. In addition, the demands of cultural pluralism that actually converge into the networks of entertainment as a mutual reference are brought into play by the virtual planes and centers of action capable of generating analogous feltness and experience. Sports spectacles or movies not only provide transformative emotional experiences but they also bring us to action on a common plane. The prominent former NFL quarterback, Tim Tebow, provides a fair example. Within a short time, his “touchdown prayer” was alternately condemned and emulated in every conceivable medium, from talk radio and the internet, to *Saturday Night Live*. His movements became a cult phenomenon as everyone who supported Tebow would offer versions of his iconic pose in praying. This is a common feature found in the mediums of entertainment. The opportunity for openness in this context facilitates achieving a wider nexus of involvement with many pertinent modalities of social inclusion and exclusion. There is no question that our complexities lead to wider opportunities. Through entertainment, these stubborn differences are diminished and threats are removed. In recognizing the possibilities of harmonies between traditionally hostile tropes, such as religion and economics, open selves seek to call attention to the richness of culture. If synoptic prerogatives are offered to open selves, these selves can act creatively within the tensions. Appreciating the relative independence of the several tropes leads open selves to abandon the attempt to devise a grand narrative that posits a necessary order amongst them.

Taking religion as an example, what if someone approached *everything* in this vein? What are we to make of one who boils everything down to religion (or politics, or economics)? Such people will eventually realize, we hope, that they have made themselves slaves to this narrowly constructed world, a stance that potentially destroys culture as a whole, along with the individuality of those who take that stance. If some of the forms were developed at the cost of others, this exclusion would not only abandon a sincere love of liberty but also impoverish the autonomy and value of other cultural forms. I would also contend that this eventually leads to devaluing human individuals. Our orientation upon the cultural forms must be open-ended as suggested in the fluidity of entertainment mediums and practices.

With the radical pluralization of exceptionalism, the availability of the status of “chosen,” based upon ideals rather than national or natural criteria, as conveyed to the world by the symbolic meaning of America, there is some hope that religious differences, for instance, can be minimized or confronted non-violently. America is not to be viewed as a shining “city on a hill,” to use the famous Puritan characterization, divinizing the US as the chosen people. Admittedly, these roots of the Puritan narrative of exceptionalism serve interests that are not open to the inclusiveness which is so much a part of American history and its cultural complexes. Many of our finest leaders have been devout Christians, and even Woodrow Wilson (who does not adopt the Christian self as definitive of American freedom) was a faithful Calvinist involved in defending our “privileged destiny.” It is not antireligious or even anti-Christian to suggest that being American is not determined by any particular religious affiliations.

American exceptionalism has many connections with Christianity, shaping its history, but this new situation is not much different for most of the nation-states of the Western world. To contend with a Christian grand narrative of America as representing God’s will in the world,

with superior morals, politics, and so on, requires some subtlety, perhaps even some sleight-of-hand. Far from sustaining Christianity, the older dogmatic versions of exceptionalism (economic, political, military) work to solidify secular interpretations of exceptionalism; the older exceptionalisms create a media frenzy which leaves many feeling allergic to religion, economics, etc. In a healthy, *ironic* exceptionalism, the aims of religion are developed and promoted along with the other overarching cultural symbolic tropes like science, art, or economics, for example. When religion becomes such a reductive and imperious ideology, it is succumbing to social manipulation. Ironic American exceptionalism accepts the need for the autonomy of all the symbolic forms of culture to be respected. It does not posit any necessary order amongst symbolic forms regarding their relevance or cultural importance.

Extremist factions with varying cultural interests seek to dominate the other forms by reducing all issues to their own. Here, for example, we may find political or economic or cultural imperialism condemned as a religious issue, the Godless West against the God-fearing near east, for example. Or we might find others who interpret American exceptionalism as a political excuse for what is really an economic motive –to extract natural resources from the nations that ought rightfully to control those resources. There are many other examples, but all come to the same thing: one symbolic form of culture reduces all of the others to its own terms. It makes itself exceptional and presumes to dictate meanings to all the other symbolic forms. Ironic American exceptionalism treats all of the symbolic cultural forms as having equal power, such that no one of them is reducible to any of the others. They are not compelled to compete against each other. The economic interpretation of American actions has a validity that does not depend upon the religious lives of the people involved, and the same may be said for the political, legal,

or scientific interpretation of the actions of a given people. Neither can we assert that any of these domains is necessarily exclusive in relation to the others.

The traditional interpretations often fail to recognize the richness of what it means to see America as exceptional. America's genuine and ironic exceptionalism destroys our expected worlds through its power to exposure us to a plurality of worlds and cultures. Just as Voegelin experienced in 1928, we continue to have our parochialisms shattered, or at least questioned in many ways, for instance, at the movie theatre or the ballpark. Our narrower views about democracy and about dealing *openly* with non-democratic cultures and values threaten to veer off into another provincialism, one closed off to possibilities available by means of other symbolic forms. This narrowness cannot be tolerated. The competing myths have to be evaluated and critiqued on their own grounds, according to the criteria of whom they view as the exceptional or chosen people, including who gets identified as "the leaders" and "the people," and by what means they propagandize themselves.

CHAPTER FIVE

WILSONIAN PARADOXES AND THE CHOSEN PEOPLE

Section 1: Woodrow Wilson's Universalist Idealistic Personalism

Before I move to a thorough discussion of Wilson's contribution to American exceptionalism, a bit of background on his situation and ideas is needed. As stated earlier, America is the place of *non*-privilege where "Men have turned their eyes towards America in order that they might release themselves from the very kind of privilege which we have permitted in some places to grow...."¹⁹⁶ Wilson envisions an American exceptionalism where everyone can be included within the chosen people. He tears through both the myth of the nation as a democratic institution, and then settles on all-inclusive, all-embracing open-ended eschatology, which unintentionally captures a secular American exceptionalism. The politics of World War I give the context within which Wilson was framing this ideal, so the ideal is connected with his calls for US neutrality –to avoid entering the war the first three years. Ironically, Wilson uses the same arguments about the love of freedom and openness in supporting our entry the conflict in 1917 that used to support neutrality. So this is not so much a strategic maneuvering by a shrewd politician as a consistent conception of American values that are not really narrowly American at all. America is "a Nation that neither sits in judgment upon others nor is disturbed in her own counsels and which keeps herself fit and free to do what is honest and disinterested and truly serviceable for the peace of the world."¹⁹⁷ There is no doubt that America is the "special example" of a nation because it "must have this consciousness, that on all sides it touches elbows and touches hearts with all the nations of mankind."¹⁹⁸ Wilson ties

¹⁹⁶ Woodrow Wilson, *The Politics of Woodrow Wilson—Selections from his Speeches and Writings*, ed. August Heckscher, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1970), 181.

¹⁹⁷ Wilson, *Speeches and Writings*, 249.

¹⁹⁸ Wilson, *Speeches and Writings*, 253.

the idea of American exceptionalism with the ability freely to pursue opportunities for oneself according to one's own images. As he put it in a 1915 Philadelphia address, to a group of citizens being naturalized:

If I have in any degree forgotten what America was intended for, I will thank God if you will remind me. I was born in America. You dreamed dreams of what America was to be, and I hope that you brought the dreams with you. No man that does not see visions will ever realize any high hope or undertake any high enterprise. Just because you brought dreams with you, America is more likely to realize dreams such as you brought. You are enriching us if you come expecting us to be better than we are...¹⁹⁹

Viewed as symbol for a place of destiny, America's myth is best represented as a land of outsiders—a nation forged out of and open to all peoples of the world. If Wilson were to arrive in America today he would probably be shocked at the level of cultural differentiation and mixing of the races that has taken place under the direction of his own sentiments. No wonder many have ignored at their own peril Wilson's articulation of American exceptionalism—he too was largely unaware of the implications of what he was advocating. It is an example of irony in Niebuhr's sense.

While Wilson worked with a strong, vibrant ideal of freedom and of world democracy, he struggled to maintain a consistent position regarding domestic civil rights relations. He was known as an outright racist, and reinforced the policies of segregation in his notoriously unequal treatment of immigrants and African Americans alike. This failing could be no more apparent than in his dealings with the placement of "colored people" in the army. Upon drafting thousands into the army, Wilson denied blacks the right of equal pay, and they were assigned to all-black units, while being kept out of combat. Regarding those who tried to challenge in federal courts these discriminatory moves he was quoted as saying, "segregation is not a humiliation but a

¹⁹⁹ Wilson, *Speeches and Writings*, 253.

benefit, and ought to be so regarded by you gentlemen.”²⁰⁰ Before entering public office in 1910, as the governor of New Jersey, Wilson was extremely critical of the very commitment to the love of freedom which would come to mold his presidency and legacy. One is astonished to learn of this dark background of Wilson’s beliefs and it is difficult to reconcile with the rhetoric of freedom in his political theory.

For Wilson, “society is not a crowd, but an organism; and, like every organism, it must grow as a whole or else be deformed.”²⁰¹ Unlike Heidegger, the focus of Wilson’s political philosophy is not set on fulfilling the metaphysical destiny of a nation or people but to establish legitimate political leadership. Wilson recognizes that “if practical political thought may not run in straight lines, but must twist and turn through all the sinuous paths of various circumstance, then compromise is the true gospel of politics.”²⁰² Compromise with others, especially foreign nations, enlists the need for honesty, openness (non-hateful attitudes), and progress. In Wilson’s notion of leadership, he warns “there is initiative here [in the leaders], but not novelty; there are old thoughts, but a progressive application of them....”²⁰³ Similar to the views of Voegelin and Niebuhr, is the desire in Wilson for freedom, and it demands a receptive and generous attitude of openness. Wilson characterizes this American orientation as one “not too credulous in hope, not too desperate in purpose; warm, but not hasty; ardent, and full of definite power, but not running about to be pleased and deceived by every new thing.”²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ James J. Cooke, *The All-Americans at War: The 82nd Division in the Great War, 1917-1918*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999), 13.

²⁰¹ Wilson, *Speeches and Writings*, 73.

²⁰² Wilson, *Speeches and Writings*, 78-79.

²⁰³ Wilson, *Speeches and Writings*, 74.

²⁰⁴ Wilson, *Speeches and Writings*, 57.

As Niebuhr warns, closing ourselves off, especially from others, along with the anxiety of distrust leads to a dangerous “aggressiveness.”²⁰⁵ The aggressiveness Niebuhr warns against is not only a result of the pressures to harden of the self, described by Schelling and Voegelin, but it also generates a temporal stagnation wherein one can become stuck in a kind of quasi-permanence of the present. This stagnation becomes uncompromising and detrimental to the value of one’s environment. Wilson asks, “Is not compromise the law of Society in all things? Do we not in all dealings adjust views, compound differences, placate antagonisms? Uncompromising thought is the luxury of the closeted recluse. Untrammelled reasoning is the indulgence of the philosopher, of the dreamer of sweet dreams.”²⁰⁶

The love of freedom symbolizes an openness, then, of mutual engagement with all cultures, what Wilson calls the “emancipation from narrowness.”²⁰⁷ No single nation or people can exhaustively claim the status of the chosen people or claim to be the anchor of divine providence. Rather, the richness of culture itself satisfies the movement of spirit and the divine in history. The providential view of history presupposes or reinforces the prophetic voice or viewpoint of prophetic self, recalling the ethic of Niebuhr. The greatest of truths almost always come in the form of paradox, in the most dynamic modes of disclosure and concealing. Within any experiential consciousness and account of revelation is found the reality of how the divine withdraws, for the presentation of a finite self, in its very own revealing and givenness to the hunger of the world.

After Wilson (if he is rightly understood), what we previously believed or assumed constituted “being an American” is no longer realistic or pertinent. The radical paradox of this

²⁰⁵ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 86.

²⁰⁶ Wilson, *Speeches and Writings*, 75.

²⁰⁷ Wilson, *Speeches and Writings*, 61-63.

conclusion is that being American is *not* “being an American,” because of this redefinition of identities, values, and purposes. Secondly, to be free is no longer a matter of political, religious, even economic freedoms because it is available to everyone everywhere. Such freedom has a cultural grounding running deeper as the potential embodiment of all special interests and disciplines. Being in the “service of humanity,” is the optimal cause served by a people who are neither superior nor exceptional in any overriding way other than having unique opportunities. Cultivating freedom through the maintenance and spreading of culture, in its high and low forms of entertainment, but most importantly in its hybrid forms, serves to sustain our higher purposes. But we seek to cultivate freedom not through some compulsory program or hard-line demand, but only through a respectful luring of interests and values according to individual discretion. Under ironic American exceptionalism there are no exclusive domains of culture that are closed off to the commonplace and incapable of being adapted to competing ways or rituals. It is the gift of this cultural complex of hybrids that the ritual does not carry with it a purely repetitive application, but can also be carried out in progressive and creative ways.

Likewise, to be chosen is not to be chosen by anyone else, but to choose for oneself, and for reasons one cannot wholly supply, except to offer the reasons as an actor on the stage of history. The new chosen people are chosen by what moves the inner dialogue, in the interior of the self. Wilson contends we should “school our hearts and tastes, broaden our natures, and know our fellow-men as comrades rather than as phenomena”; and through freedom this schooling will be a “truly humanizing way in which to take the air of the world. Man is much more than a ‘rational being,’ and *lives more by sympathies and impressions than by conclusions*. It darkens

his eyes and dries up the wells of his humanity to be forever in search of doctrine. We need wholesome, experiencing natures, I dare affirm, much more than we need sound reasoning.”²⁰⁸

Wilson’s articulation of freedom, predicated on the symbolism of ironic American exceptionalism, does not promote or justify any superior claim over other places or peoples as a result of history. This is Wilson’s notion of equality that he works out in dealing with the role of American leadership in international relations.

Those who have interpreted Wilson as a Calvinist, Hegelian idealist, or socialist democrat have missed this crucial point, that even Wilson himself may not have fully appreciated. Representing a major turning point in Western history we find in his views the transition in exceptionalism *without* any appeal to self-triumphalism. Such a view recognizes American exceptionalism as ironic, in that it merits no genuine exception in the traditional sense. Service to humanity, cultivating the dignity of persons by establishing an equal level of freedom for all, is the “cause” with which Wilson can best be associated. He recognizes “love of freedom” as the *single* criterion for being American and he denies that it is rooted in religious, scientific, economic, or even geographic solidarity. Known as a leading visionary for establishing the League of Nations, Wilson did not believe in a preventive war foreign policy, or that the advancement of democracy around the globe would lead to the end of all wars.

Despite the increase of constitutional government around the world, there is never a fail-safe guarantee against encroachments on civil and personal liberties. In fact, democratic institutions can become authoritarian through a massive conformism by a majority in the guise of something like “political correctness,” for example. Likewise, a territorial sovereign is not indispensable to one’s freedom, and hence, the demands placed on it may require that it infringe

²⁰⁸ Wilson, *Speeches and Writings*, 58, emphasis added.

on civil liberties. It is no doubt necessary to solidifying freedom so that we are not overwhelmed by the anxiety of placelessness. However, this transient security is not a sufficient condition for freedom and Wilson articulated this crucial point by boldly claiming that one did not have to live in or even to like America in order to be considered American.

This broader platform of freedom is what motivated the idealism of Wilson's political philosophy in ironic ways. Consciously, he lived according to principles that may seem contradictory to the broader platform, even though he sought to be mindful of his and other Americans' limitations in embracing open selfhood. He did, after all, encourage humility. Setting a nationalistic agenda or institutional framework for world government, in hopes of preventing aggression and war, he successfully defined the US role in the world since that time (for better and for worse). But it would be wrong for us to read this hindsight back into Wilson's intentions and what he envisioned in the claim, "America lives in the heart of every man everywhere who wishes to find a region where he will be free to work out his destiny as he chooses."²⁰⁹ He did not associate this wish with any national superiority or imperialist agenda to achieve the purpose to organize and establish a kind of Western peace for the world.

Section 2: Nexūs of Entertainment and Hybrids of Culture

The positive or negative, whichever way one interprets it, role played by popular culture in establishing social practices should not be underestimated. Political party conventions become entertainment spectacles, while high-profile court cases create sudden cultural icons like George Zimmerman and Casey Anthony, and the result is that many of our attitudes get shaped by the sensationalism of these "current events." It is even more entrenched today than ever before that in the public psyche (as Ellul noted in his work *Propaganda*), distinguishing propaganda from

²⁰⁹ Quoted in J. W. Schulte Nordholt, *Woodrow Wilson: A Life for World Peace*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 394.

the information news cycle is nearly impossible. This confusion of propaganda and information is one of the dangers facing democratic societies: the overload of data. The bombardment of symbols, images, and agendas adds both anxiety and social apathy to the already toxic mixture. These responses are generated under conditions in which individuals feel tiny, overwhelmed, and submerged in the effects of globalization.²¹⁰

Yet, there are cultural practices that counteract this feeling. The idea of open selfhood requires that these influential practices of entertainment and their efficacy be reckoned with—taken seriously as the prevalent cultural rituals engaged in by “Americans.” Although the practices of the open self can be transmitted by mass entertainment, I do not claim that there is no down side to this medium. On the other hand, no blanket moral condemnation can simply dismiss the relevance and significance of popular culture. The entangled nature of these technological forms of communication is at the forefront of maintaining our cultural rituals and it dictates much regarding our collective aims and interests.

It is not the particular embodiment or medium of the experience which is fundamental within this entertainment milieu—a poster can have a similar inspirational impact on a youngster as a new pair of Air Jordans. Rather, the transformative values stemming from culturally enhanced interaction with others is the focus. Open selves aspire to the experience of cultural fruits without taking on entire paradigms of meaning and limiting ideologies. They resist enclosing themselves in a world in which others cannot reach them. The “clichéd dichotomies,” to use Voegelin’s phrase, that dominate political rhetoric, and that polarize social issues within the mainstream, tend to exhibit the solitariness and alienation brought on by adherence to blind creeds. Although the adoption of these fragmenting sentiments should be tolerated for the sake of

²¹⁰ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda—The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 39-40.

freedom, there are healthy reasons for our unwillingness to condone them based on a love of liberty. In short, liberty becomes, for open selves, an imperative against consumerism or any other impulsion that reduces selves to one or another of their useful functions.

Paradoxical considerations arising from this view are a result of experiencing the cultural efficacy of ironic relations in the globalized makeup of American-generated images and artifacts. The American media sends the signal that “you have to be yourself” at all costs, because that is the only way to be “one of us,” i.e., the chosen. (It is reminiscent of the problem of being “cool,” which comes down to not caring what others think about you because actually you *want* to be included and recognized. But this kind of inclusion cannot be achieved by conforming to any set category –whether it is racial or national or even cultural. The person who would be chosen must *choose himself or herself*.) Seeking to be mindful of *both* conscious and unconscious elements involved in our actual *and* potential cultural experiences functionally describes the open selves as they strive to achieve and spread.

My argument is not intended simply to accept passively a culture bent on comfort or the satisfaction that derives from the consumption of commodities. As Tocqueville warned: “If men ever came to be content with physical things only, it seems likely that they would gradually lose the art of producing them and would end up by enjoying them without discernment and without improvement, like animals.”²¹¹ The point is rather to solidify the potential prospects within entertainment as a way to enliven, enrich, and cultivate rituals throughout culture. With the hangover of Victorian moralizing and Christian ethics, we continue to struggle to recognize what good or positive elements derive from our consumer-based society. The impact of this hangover creates a hyper-consciousness of moral wrong-doing, which may lead to grim or pessimistic

²¹¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler, vol. 44, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2005), 294.

outlooks. From such a viewpoint, it appears as if there is nothing of genuine note about the popular culture aside from its mediocrity and waste. What are the fruits of these so-called superficial endeavors and how can we, or how *have* we, benefited from them?

In fact, sustained efforts throughout the industries of entertainment have spawned positive characteristics of cultural development. What are widely considered to be vices have mysteriously broken through traditional barriers and have given us cause for hope. Along with the drone of advertisements telling us to consume more is an imperative that says: “put yourself in a position to have a choice about things that affect you.” Could it possibly be, ironically, that our cultural vices can be virtuous while our virtues turn to vices?

Our popular entertainment rituals also have the effect of differentiating the cultural symbolic forms, like religion, science, art; these rituals widen and sharpen our possibilities for mutual engagement. Also, the enactment of these forms through such visible and visceral mediums has led to active, vibrant interactions among otherwise rigid or static cultural forces. Political conventions, for example, must conform themselves to the requirements of entertainment because they are televised. Some might say that this superficializes or even degrades the political process, but the people who say that should investigate what political conventions were like *before* they were televised. Similar to the ways in which propaganda becomes democratized in a liberal society, entertainment has the tendency to work as a process normalizing cultural symbolisms. Entertainment opens the processes of power by bringing them into the domain of the spectacle. Social class and status structures are thus made far more precarious when such spectacles connect us with new people, in new ways. These potential relations are elusive and hard to characterize, but unconsciously, a moral right-doing often pervades such enjoyment of superficial contrasts and incongruities. The open self is being

produced. People want to see the good guys and the underdogs prevail. They identify with the triumph of right, and that always means the triumph of freedom.

In spreading open selfhood as fundamental, freedom is valued for its own sake, which, as Whitehead argues, is an opportunity. The way to “progress is founded upon the experience of discordant feelings. The social value of liberty lies in its production of discords.”²¹² The differences among those who watch a political convention, or a football game, or a musical concert are productive of freedom. The anticipation of novel forms, such as in the mode of hybrids between high and low culture, becomes real as a harmonizing of identities and values under the contrast of freedom.

Through the interaction of high and low culture, the conscious and unconscious developments unfold in ways that add to the richness of social, experiential value. Entertainment mediates these possible relations by portraying their interchange through sports, music, movies, and other rituals. Experiencing these events contributes to transmuted cultural symbols at intense enough levels to be transformed into novel hybrids. I am referring to Whitehead’s development of “transmutation” in *Process and Reality*. He defines transmutation as “the way in which the actual world is felt as a community, and is so felt in virtue of its prevalent order. For it arises by reason of the analogies between the various members of the prehended [felt] nexus, and eliminates their differences. Apart from transmutation our feeble intellectual operations would fail to penetrate into the dominant characteristics of the things.”²¹³ These modes of symbolic transformation add to or subtract from the cultural relevance of identities and practices and how they become variously associated. A cultural hermeneutics of ironic American exceptionalism

²¹² Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, (New York: Free Press, 1967), 257.

²¹³ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality, Corrected Edition*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York, Free Press, 1979 [1929]), 251.

denies the raw division between high and low culture in the traditional sense, and also blurs the categories of publicity and privacy. No real division exists. Horizons of intermediate possibility constitute, increasingly, more of our conscious symbolic matrix which we aspire to represent “being American” by taking the love of freedom to be fundamental. But open selves identify with this in-betweenness, which is the heart of the paradox of freedom (this is Voegelin’s notion of *metaxy*). For Niebuhr and Schelling, paradox is the criterion of truth; finite creatures do not discover truths which pose no further problems, but only truths which do.

The ironies that develop with the contingencies of pop culture stem, at least partly, from giving equal value to both high and low forms of culture. There is a productive effect in mixing, indifferently, these traditionally distinct domains. One is not necessarily subordinated to the other and everything can be appropriated in either elitist or popularist fashion. There is a strange caché when the highbrow ballerina goes slumming, or when the school of hard knocks teaches Park Avenue what is “good.” Having our personal lives interpreted privately or publically is inevitably more probable under conditions that make cultures more interconnected and interdependent. Our personal status can be easily altered through social networking and other modes of pursuing interests.

The open self assumes that the lines between the public and the private cannot be so neatly and cleanly divided, given how much they are intertwined. The open self does not expect or need much privacy. It is not easy for an open self to distinguish privacy from secrecy. Similarly, within the modes of entertainment, both low and high cultures transmit values and initiate new hybrid forms. No necessary order guarantees that these novel expressions will amount to anything or be transformative of consciousness—even for those who actively pursue or produce them. But these cultural artifacts, images, and symbolic gestures have a widening

appeal and influence. As we live our lives in public, our *selves* spread to fill the space available. The open self is permeable.

Social divisions still dominate the politics and economics for much of the globe, and this has prevented rapid adjustment of the class structure. The “irony of the separate peoples” emerges by considering what it would be like for the other to be put in one’s own position. What would the view of the world, according to the values and purposes of those who have been socially estranged from us, look like? Here, for example, the Palestinian considers what it would be like to be a Jew, or vice-versa, but in the context of *being Americans*. Could a guy named Bernie Rosenblum and one named Jamal Muhammed form a rock band? Well, why not? Could one be the quarterback and the other the wide receiver of a football team? Why not? As popular culture gets introduced to the dynamics of certain groups, this type of interchange of roles and values can add to our interpretative horizons about others. Through exposure to pop culture, more of this sort of exchange is occurring amongst groups, and leading, ironically, to the possibility of constructive dialogue. Where the Israeli and the Palestinian cannot communicate, they can nevertheless pass and receive, play bass and drums, play the reverse parts in a theatrical production and film, or defend the same goal in a soccer match. Difficulties or obstacles lie not in a lack of interaction but in having to convince others to see beyond the limitations of their own stereotypes; how such limitations compromise the integrity of an experience.

Because of the potential we have for living through the experiences or portrayals of others, there is a sense in which our lives become hauntingly public. This can cause problems. So much is this the case that an industry of experts or clinical psychologists fills the afternoon television lineup or the grocery-store isle newsstands with advice for you to heed. In rushing to judgment regarding the lives of others and the interplay of the public and private dynamics, we

become engrossed in our own constructs. Corporations and institutions continue to research and produce more efficient models of generating profiles and tracking devices on people from an array of backgrounds. As technological dependence grows and holds sway over how we approach the world the division between the private and public will fade, doomed to be irrelevant.

Living our lives in public allows for open selfhood but does not cause it. New forms of closed selfhood also emerge. One can possibly still enjoy his or her own solitude but not without the anxiety that it may be easily trespassed. Like the operation of coin and paper currency, there may not be much of a need for the distinction between public and private; open selves minimize it. Needless to say, a democratic culture of entertainment blurs the distinction between public and private domains. It should be recognized as “playing politics” whenever Democrats and Republicans attempt to essentialize issues by turning them into public versus private debates. If we are to deal with the experiences of the world then we have to be prepared to change our tune.

Given the ironic character that cultural factors take on through entertainment, for example, there are certain forms of discourse that bring out these relations. The use of sarcasm, for example, not only breaks the ice, in most cases, but is an example of drawing out what is concealed on the part of the interests of the engaged subject(s). While formulating such propositions, the ability to stimulate hidden meanings or relations moves us closer to our own unconscious dispositions. Closely linked to irony, laughter can be a sign of empathy and has a deep connection to both moral right and wrong-doing. These are two of many forms of discourse that call attention to the presence of ironic relations. The concealing and revealing structures of consciousness can often help in determining how personal acts should be interpreted. This process can serve as an effective tool in strategic behavior or through just raw manipulation, but

what someone is *really* thinking is often concealed –not only to others in their environment, but occasionally the concealed thought even eludes our own self-recognition. Sarcasm is the humorous drum which stirs up those sentiments that drive our most intense moods about certain issues or situations. When we are drawn to these prevalent aspects of experience, there is the potential that our thinking will be transformed, after encountering new cultural patterns. Acts of sarcasm seem to rise to the surface of one’s unconscious acts in ways that disclose ironic knowledge and its importance. The impression that ironic meaning has to emerge from a dramatic or epic account is an exaggeration which undervalues the episodic duration of such experiences. The content of experiences in sarcasm may affect an immense amount of data, which can be religious, moral, scientific, or aesthetic.

Entertainment relies heavily on forms of sarcasm and other such tropes, especially within marketing and advertising, appealing either to elusive emotions or contrasts to which consciousness is receptive. It is no surprise that those moments of enjoyment from a sarcastic quip usually leave others thinking they have discovered our “soft side” or our laid back moments. Preferring, for the sake of this argument, to think of it as an orientation of openness, we can say that sarcasm contributes to our openness to alien sensibilities. Those who practice moral extremism with the presumption of universal judgment stand with a type of “humorless pretension,” as Niebuhr warns. Unable to interact on this level, advocates of dogmatic and narrow types of American exceptionalism find it more and more difficult to poke fun at their own interests. And they expect the true “patriots” to join them in this over-commitment to making the necessary sacrifices to serve their cause. Having the ability to laugh at ourselves makes it less probable that we will over-react in these objectionable ways.

This can be an initial response to establishing companionship with one another, and rendering us capable of feeling each other's suffering. There are a few rituals, like sarcasm, that allow us to consider alternative perspectives under similar circumstances, drawing us to evaluate our own attitudes. From the perspective of open selves, parochial contentment should be brought to the forefront of the ironic and comic. In a world where others' lives are praised or ridiculed publically, how ironic is it that we struggle more and more to examine and find ourselves?

When it comes to touting an orientation toward the world as open, many exaggerate or fail to grasp the extent to which they live out a commitment to the love of freedom. There are those who love liberty sincerely and make the self-sacrifices for this commitment, but they are few and far between. How Americans actually live and socialize may be misconstrued, given the richness of its varied symbolism and values. Appearances often do not match the realities. Much of the spirit of materialism and self-interest has undoubtedly contributed to these polarizing capacities for social injustices. After accounting for historical necessities, we recognize the personal hang-ups that have scarred many minority citizens, for example, to the point of identifying only with their "own" people and rituals, this being a subset of American citizens that stands over against the nation as a political unit. Racial animosities persist more in Americans' actual experience, but ironically less in their *virtual* interactions. By virtual "interactions" I mean to include the forms of entertainment that Americans export to the world. Through the spreading of images, the consumption and production of cultural icons and artifacts, entertainment rituals provide ways in which the importance of race is minimized or even made negligible.

As I have argued, segregation and racism remain a part of the American identity in the twenty-first century, but much of the racial consciousness is dominated by blind hatreds and ideological creeds, while most American cities remain divided and mirror overwhelmingly

segregated demographics. For many white Americans from rural communities or the northwest, for example, their experiences of diversity come through the cinema, or the music and sports of popular culture. While attending schools in which most of the students come from similar backgrounds, students living in monolithic communities, it will be very difficult for such students to resist a crude parochialism. Access to social networks and media outlets have facilitated a complex of images suggesting a wider nexus of cultural participation. Even wall posters idolizing certain pop icons can help to enrich our impoverished and narrow views of other cultures.

My aim is to suggest that this is very much the case for American minorities as well. Given how various social conditions shape the US, the importance of entertainment cannot be overlooked in maintaining the pluralism that Americans claim to value so highly. I interpret entertainment as a type of “partaking” in cultural rituals in ways that allow for freedom and do not press for an over-investment of individual selves as participants or spectators. It appears that the sharing of culture occurs more through virtualization or high and low cultures or modernist and traditionalist values spawn novel hybrids. Through the creation of cultural hybrids in entertainment, Americans—minorities and the status quo alike—serve the causes of freedom, openness, and tolerance.

Entertainment, understood as cultural rituals, are propositional in character, hybrid entities that act as “lures for feeling.”²¹⁴ Common characteristics of entertainment do not wholly determine the experience at even a generic level. The emotional content in the experience integrates with transmuted forms as additional components to be (self-)determined.²¹⁵ What a

²¹⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality, Corrected Edition*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1979 [1929]), 25, 87.

²¹⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality, Corrected Edition*, 85

percipient entity brings to an experience conditions the intensity of the enjoyment felt. Therefore, the percipient's value of enjoyment is an open question, depending in part on the role of self-valuation. In vernacular language, there are no wholly novel perceptions; all are shot through with the inertia of past valuations. "Enjoyment" refers to the way concrete experience leaves open the "might-have-been" of experience. Our various experiences of appropriating entertainment allow for this kind of free-play between actualities and possibilities as a mixture in our factual lives.

Thought struggles and fails to capture fully the degrees to which we are affected by entertainment venues involving the transmission of feelings. The effect goes below the level of consciousness, but not below the level of imagination. Imagination trades on feeling as well as conscious decision. In our imaginative capacities there is nascent hope that more people will be able to resonate with the joys and sufferings of others through empathy portrayed in pop culture.

The dynamics of race and gender in popular culture, for example, attest to the increasing sacrifices and successes of minorities as indispensable pioneers in furthering the causes of "America" (the ideal, not the place). Without the growing enthusiasm for music and sports opportunities, for example, how would African Americans and other non-whites believe it really is possible to "make something" of themselves? These rituals have brought pride to the disinherited, to people otherwise excluded from the privilege surrounding them. Since the traditional categories of aesthetics and culture have been traversed, we should reconsider how our narratives get appropriated by those beyond the physical shores of the USA. The pluralism American culture promotes and exports *resists* narrowly ideological views, even when concomitant practices are lagging behind in America.

We cannot account for this love of freedom on the basis of social factors and demographics alone. Social capital is more adequately realized with not just the commodification or moralizing of entertainment but also in emphasizing its cathartic powers to provide an emotional cleansing and possibly even a sense of fulfillment. People usually speak of music as therapeutic and certainly it can be, but there is more. The various tropes of pop cultural icons and images stimulate discourses and activities, and creates the complexes of symbols and interpretations that can help to ease social apathy and ignorance. Americans, regardless of differences in backgrounds and talents, can contribute to entertainment rituals and cultural hybrids symbolic of our love of freedom. An ontology of these events postulates that neither possibility nor actuality is necessitated by or held as derivative from the other. One views the past through possibilities or factors which can undergo a new arrangement—what will be anticipated in actuality through partaking in old forms in new ways.

The contemporary proliferation of information technologies and commercial globalization has helped to spur the emergence of entertainment as a symbolic form capable of its own intrinsic relatedness and achieving its own satisfactions. According to Susanne Langer it was Whitehead who defined entertainment “as what one does with one’s freedom.”²¹⁶ Other forms such as, politics, economics, science, or religion (to name only a few) have been transformed through cultural maintenance and various mediums of entertainment. Langer notes that:

. . . entertainment is not essentially frivolous, like amusement. The latter is a temporary stimulus, the “lift” of vital feeling that normally issues in laughter. It is generally pleasant, and sometimes erroneously sought as a cure for depression. But entertainment is any activity without direct practical aim, anything people attend to simply because it interests them. Interest, not amusement nor even pleasure, is its watchword. Social conversation, table talk, is entertainment. It may be the gross humor of the smoking

²¹⁶ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 405.

room, the chatter of the cocktail party, the famous breakfast conversation of Oliver Wendell Holmes or the more famous table talk of Mohammed. Entertainment is not in itself a value-category. It includes both pastime and the satisfaction of imperious mental needs; but, trivial or serious, it is always work of the mind.²¹⁷

Thousands of examples might be given, but one needs only to consider what happens to preachers who insist upon carrying their sermons past kick-off time on Sunday to grasp how the religion of football has impinged upon the religion of Christianity. Entertainment serves as matrices for the observance and performance of cultural rituals rooted in a mythic consciousness of experiences. The practices of traditional culture have become submerged in new mediums through the enhancement of information technologies. A higher or more intense aesthetic balance can be achieved through the “re-enaction of vivid experiences”²¹⁸ as artistic or expressive and imitative forms. This type of sublimatory nature of entertainment gives vagueness toward any personal commitment of the ritual, making it possible to divide its enjoyment into either a presentational or discursive symbolism (see chapter one). According to Langer’s conditions, since entertainment involves intentionality or “work of the mind,” its discursive relevance tends to demonstrate but that need not be the case.

Adding to the richness and intensity of emotional content “cultural interests are [enhanced by] those areas of funded experience which evoke a continuing interest in the criticism and revision of concepts based upon novel experiences and more subtle rationalizations.”²¹⁹ Entertainment largely serves in this capacity as popular culture takes on a more dominant role in social consciousness. The immersion in the sports, music, or movie rituals and mythic consciousness marks what Americans represent symbolically to the globe. The auspices of entertainment sustain an unquantifiable influence over our lives, which many leaders

²¹⁷ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 404.

²¹⁸ David L. Hall, *The Civilization of Experience—A Whiteheadian Theory of Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1973), 92.

²¹⁹ Hall, *Civilization of Experience*, 127.

and politicians continue to neglect or downplay. Similar to the way many students approach entertainment in the classroom, these ever-pervasive cultural rituals remain unconscious forces.

For example, one of the stereotypes students live with today is that they want to be entertained—that the way to convey lesson plans should incorporate the “bells and whistles” or technologies which are already so much a part of the fabric of our lives. Given that students will become easily bored, teachers are encouraged to find ways to utilize new software or programs as in the case of “smart-boards.”

This general sentiment illustrates the condition entertainment and popular culture plays for our society. As a rule no one discusses this preference because of its antagonism with our expectations about learning. But it is widely held as the standard preference that leads to higher retention-rates or better evaluations. Educators are constantly threatened by the lack of substance in their classrooms if students are not feeling like they are being entertained. As an unspoken rule there is significant pressure for popular mediums to be implemented as a test of one’s quality of teaching. Accompanying these individual instances are the institutional pressures setting more of the agenda for higher education. Colleges and universities are committing more resources and attention to the sporting and extra-circular aspects of their missions. Higher educational institutions cannot be viewed as simply offering degrees anymore. They serve the dual function of offering events and social comradery, which has led to their operations being characterized more as “edutainment.”

The social tension that develops through the rapid spreading of low culture is the emphasis placed on mediocrity as a major engine of social capital. One need not be excellent to be open, but if there is any hedge against the rapidity and ubiquity of change, it lies in rising above mediocrity. Yet, we promote lifestyles and mentalities that largely value and esteem the

superficial above all else. A strong irony lies in how serious and with what levels of intensity we are willing to view a game or movie, promoting a culture analogous to Plato's serious-play. People are appalled to discover, for instance, that some college basketball or football coach earns more and is in higher demand than administrators of the school where he coaches. Even the President of the United States doesn't command a salary equal to that of the coaches at middling universities.²²⁰ High or elitist culture sets a top premium on merit, status, and long-standing relations. Obviously, there is less of a possibility for social mobility as well as an ability to question the leading cultural interpretations of the day.

The American heritage is one that embraces interpersonal worlds of meaning. Undoubtedly, Western history has endured a rapid democratization of information and propaganda. As Ellul has argued, this trend has stifled or made less critical our abilities to filter or resist these mediums in healthy ways. Hence, contemporary selves are more prone to be shaped by a new fad, given the forces at work. We are hesitant and appear to be more concerned with offending another out of respect of tolerance. One will struggle to find this laxness in traditional societies marked by a cascade of social preferentialisms. Having the ability to rise and fall much more easily, and in some sense, being more vulnerable is the price paid for the loss of high culture.

There are several recent examples that could be used to illustrate the rise and dominance of synthesizing low and high culture, from the various venues of entertainment. Under the extremist rule of the Taliban and Islamic Sharia, for example, it was forbidden to listen to music outside of the times when it was proscribed. Ironically, using the same modernist tactics as the infidels, al Qaeda and other fundamentalist networks have turned to rap videos and other forms

²²⁰ Craig Robinson, Obama's Brother-in-law, makes 750K per year as the Oregon State girls basketball coach; Obama makes 400K as president.

of cinematographic propaganda in order to boost their levels of recruitment. By mixing in Jihadist sentiments with hip-hop beats, they believe they have the advantage in enticing the multitude of Arab youths to hate and help take down the West. Intertwining traditional or indigenous ways of life with modernist modes of being in the world makes for strange bed-fellows. The outcomes get more intense and dynamic as we continue to generate hybrids of high and low cultural features. The willingness to engage the same processes and agencies provides a ground for analogous cultural engagement capable of generating harmonies and disharmonies, that are mutually foreseeable or knowable.

We are not in a post-traditional world but that does not minimize the friction which has emerged between Western interpretations and different aspects of modernity. The plentitude of ways of life Americans seek to protect evokes principles which we aspire too that do not embrace the necessity of “us vs. them” consciousness as a prerequisite for the security of freedom. Various rituals comprise different degrees or levels of self-othering processes as a possibility for overcoming an imbalance of consciousness in appraising our place in the social world. Prior to identifying with a certain people or way(s) of life there is the ground which must give way to the otherness of the other, but only as a necessary condition because in itself recognizing this is never sufficient. Experiencing the dynamic of the self-other relations becomes constructive of freedom the more the estrangement between them is dissolved into a heterogeneous continuity. Once consciousness is differentiated to the levels of the self and other overlapping, where “one has the potential to be either,” then cultural relations are not only viewed contingently but unconscious forces become less able to be ignored. The impact of realizing the fluidity between various cultural features in a multilateral world having enhanced efficacy on our lives has a frightful yet seductive appeal. A more interrelated world impinges on

the norms we adopt and alters them in ways which leave culture non-static and capable of being created or destroyed. One's traditions or customs are continually being threatened by modernist trends; they cannot sit idly under such circumstances and they will be thrust into the fray of cultural, mutual relevance. The social relations and fabric of the world is growing such that its subtleties are as puzzling as they are informative.

Intermixing races, or national customs, is a delicate matter, which continues to haunt us as real, and as shaped by contemporary diversity and pluralism. Many of the images and artifacts represent the *fictionalizing of the other* which distorts cultural value and leaves one vulnerable to supporting ideological rubbish. The edifice of these perverse types of attitudes is built upon over-extending one's commitment to his or her own views as exemplary, either over others' meanings or cultural symbolic forms or interests. Warping the symbolic process of transmuting an array of estranged experiences does lead to the adoption of impoverished modes of interpretation, with minimal or negligible cultural value. Ironically, there is great value in these deranged views, for the sake of freedom and for the growth of individual fiber. We live in a world of entertainment, where people have the choice and responsibility to propagandize themselves with contingent consequences. As Ellul argued, citing the distinction made between "direct" and "indirect incitement" by Harold Lasswell, "direct incitement is that by which the propagandist himself acts, becomes involved, demonstrates his conviction, his belief, his good faith. He commits himself to the course of action that he proposes and supports, and in order to obtain a similar action, he solicits a corresponding response from the propagandee."²²¹ When propaganda gets democratized its effectiveness works through the visceral "presuppositions and myths." Ellul writes: "There is some tacit agreement: for example, a speaker does not have to say that he

²²¹ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda*, 16.

believes “man is good”: *this is clear from his behavior, language, and attitudes, and each man unconsciously feels that the others share the same presuppositions and myths.*”²²²

A new hope can be discovered in people who take on the otherness of the other, working to overcome much of the estrangement and alienation of globalization. If these “fringe” aspects (to employ James’ term) of our prevalent cultural entertainment rituals are neglected, and technological sophistication is viewed only economically, politically, or even apocalyptically, then open selfhood is merely substituted for an earlier mythos. Ironically, if a people or culture takes itself too seriously they will verge on cultivating exclusivist myths, substituting the love of freedom-as-fundamental for some predestined requisite, some eschaton immanent in its epic account of itself. Unlike simple entertainment, such cultures will take pride in rituals, which are all-or-nothing, and not simply a personal partaking by the individual in solitude.

Section 3: The Paradoxes of Freedom through an Inclusive Eschatology

Politically, Woodrow Wilson promoted a program of global outreach capable of absorbing all the elements of a pluralistic world for the sake of sustaining freedom. This position is known in the literature as Wilson’s “idealistic internationalism,” or more recently termed, “Wilsonianism.” As the dominant framework, Wilson used this vision to shape US foreign policy during World War I and in the failed attempt to establish the League of Nations, under the famous Fourteen Points. Wilson was awarded the honor of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1919 for his

²²² Ellul, *Propaganda*, 41, emphasis added. Ellul notes on p. 39, “By presuppositions we mean a collection of feelings, beliefs, and images by which one unconsciously judges events and things without questioning them, or even noticing them. This collection is shared by all who belong to the same society or group. It draws its strength from the fact that it rests on general tacit agreement. Whatever the differences of opinion are among people, one can discover beneath the differences the same beliefs—in Americans and in Russians, in Communists and in Christians. These presuppositions are sociological in that they are provided for us by the surrounding milieu and carry us along the sociological current. They are what keeps us in harmony with the environment.”

tireless efforts to establish justice in a conflict-ridden era. While participating in the Paris Peace Conference and negotiating the Treaty of Versailles, Wilson pursued freedom, granting statehood to previously oppressed nations as an equitable measure. The doctrine of neutrality prior to the US entry into that war, is what Wilson subscribed to in seeking to keep the US out of the tumultuous conflict and, ironically, was the reasoning behind entering the war, following upon certain acts of German aggression.

But there are several ways in which Wilson's story and his example serve as a case study for this cultural hermeneutic of ironic American exceptionalism. We too currently have a different story to tell about the love of freedom to which Americans are committed, from the inside-out as compared with the outside-in. The conflicting profiles —inside-out and outside-in— can be damaging and misleading as to the role Americans play in generating the cultural complexes that are symbolic of freedom and this difficulty leads to an under appreciation of their value. Wilson's experiential struggles in living out what seemed possible and desirable to him is a microcosmic representation of what this version of American exceptionalism conveys overall.

As one of the first successful attempts to sell an esteemed image of American love of freedom to the world, Wilson presented Americans as he *envisioned* them rather than how they really. He saw a world full of possible Americans and did not notice the distance between actual Americans and their idealized love of freedom. This is what it *really* means to label Wilson an idealist. But his idealism was strained by the discriminated preference he gave to descendants of white Europeans as embodied Americans.

But Wilson's idealism does not imply some global or Hegelian notion; it simply speaks to the ideals of American freedom and personhood. Freedom is the centerpiece of the American exceptionalism Wilson promotes without any messianic prerogatives. He is not asserting "the

end of history” or other nonsense like that, but the radical notion that anyone can choose to be American or a part of the exceptional people. And one becomes American in performing a ritual of his or her own discretion, while yoking it with the symbolic meaning of freedom as fundamental. The variation among the rituals is so vast that Wilson refers to them simply as the “dreams” one brings to American shores, but the common point of orientation is in the working out of one’s destiny. As a mythic consciousness of open selfhood, Wilson understood and articulated its basic structure from a political point of view. Clearly his motivations can be called into question given the controversial moves he had to make as President and the requirements of being a leading global diplomat. Even with these limitations, Wilson can be credited with boldness in arguing for such dynamic ideas, especially for his day and age. Readers will have to make out for themselves what kind of figure they deem Wilson to be; my goal is to simply draw out his powerful notions of what it *means* to be American and how this is tied to being in the service of humanity. In the spirit of Wilson’s mission to cultivate freedom throughout the world, Americans as open selves recognize the adventurous element crucial to such a quest. For example, “Wilson infuses [Thomas] Paine’s notion of the United States as a bastion of freedom with missionary zeal, arguing that what makes America unique is its duty to spread liberty abroad. ‘I want you to take these great engines of force out onto the seas like adventurers enlisted for the elevation of the spirit of the human race,’ Wilson tells U.S. Naval Academy graduates. ‘For that is the only distinction that America has.’”²²³

Now I do not interpret this notion with an intramundane purpose, associated with missionary work. Again, as I have stressed, open selves are not in the business of working to convince others to follow or believe in their causes. One can *really* persuade by way of example

²²³ Uri Friedman, “‘American Exceptionalism’: A Short History,” *Foreign Policy Magazine*, July/August 2012,

and need not acting out from force. Lost selves, such as the examples I have given, seek this type of false companionship in engaging others from merely a self-righteous standpoint. Wilson provides a notion of service to the world based on not only being-with-others but largely for the sake of the nourishment of others. To use the Christian analogy (which is meant only as a guide here), an American of unmerited privilege is encouraged to work for the good of the meek and poor. Wilson firmly believed this was possible through the spreading of democracies in places dominated by authoritarian governments.

Instituting systems or forms of government has today become risky business for the US, which widely viewed as a self-aggrandizing superpower. During Wilson's presidency and during his service in world affairs, the US could afford to advance the cause of freedom politically. It was relatively unscarred by both the war and the colonial adventures of the Europeans. Such cannot be said today. It was because of the devastating conflicts that deflated any hope for peace and prosperity, but still more due to the Wilson administration's doctrine of neutrality that many were looking for a "savior" and America took on that role. But as Niebuhr notes, one of the elements of American irony is that:

a strong America is less completely master of its own destiny than was a comparatively weak America, rocking in the cradle of its continental security and serene in its infant innocence. The same strength which has extended our power beyond a continent has also interwoven our destiny with the destiny of many peoples and brought us into a vast web of history in which other wills, running in oblique or contrasting directions to our own, inevitably hinder or contradict what we most fervently desire. We cannot simply have our way, not even when we believe our way to have the "happiness of mankind" as its promise.²²⁴

There is a stark difference between Americans today as compared with Wilson's age, since we are currently seeing the backlash of poor statecraft in the hotbed of the Middle East, in places like Afghanistan and Iraq.

²²⁴ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 74.

Currently, we are facing an age of uncertainty as global political structures begin to settle in based on the events since the 9/11 attacks. Not only did our response to al Qaeda's operation create something of a power vacuum in the Middle East, but the US-led, War on Terror, mainly by the Bush administration exacerbated the difficulties. The 'us vs. them' mentality has reemerged as the American agenda where "freedom fighting" instead of "freedom loving" becomes the cause by which we serve and engage the world. By promoting the values of Western democracy and capitalism, the misguided aim of freedom fighting is to set the global mandate for defeating extremism. As intellectuals like Bacevich have pointed out, we have endured an overreaction, which was common during Wilson's own day, of matching violence with violence. There is the danger that fighting on behalf of freedom and equality can turn into a type of extremism that hypocritically ends up inciting reactions similar to the ones they initially found condemnable.

So driven by a "cause," many Americans became blinded by patriotic enthusiasm as if it were a call to vengeance. An essential question which confronts us all, then, including future generations who will look back on it, is whether or not the military campaigns and other security measures like Guantanamo Bay were *necessary*. Many of our politicians believed that measures like fighting the Taliban of Afghanistan were necessary, but when it comes to Operation Iraqi Freedom, opinions are much more uncertain. The lack of United Nations support for the Iraq war did not deter the Bush administration from going ahead with their agenda as freedom fighters, but it came at the cost of jeopardizing multinational cooperation and American global leadership. As the self-proclaimed "defenders of freedom," neoconservatives in the Bush administration argued that we need to spread democracies around the world, especially in the Middle East, and to combat Islamic fundamentalism. Such action was deemed necessary for sustaining not only

the interests of the US but those of the larger free-world. In this view, unlike Wilson's, democracy is conflated with foreign policy and various security initiatives as underpinning the desire for freedom and prosperity.

Wilson's political idealism has been wrongly associated with Hegel's notion of the full exemplification of spirit through the state as the historical embodiment of the Idea. Such interpretations have also argued for the "end of history" once such a rationalized, bureaucratic system of government is achieved. I take these interpretations to be heavily ideological and not representative of Wilson's radical views on what it entails to be American. The account offered by Wilson seems to emphasize ironic subtlety over the presumptuous consciousness of dialectics. Here we are guided by Niebuhr over Hegel in denying that the triadic structure of exceptionalism is dialectic—it is to be interpreted ironically. Wilson articulates a symbolization of American identity in accord with Voegelin's suggestion of an inclusive eschatology. He not only argues that America means more than just the place but that anyone has the possibility of being American. To be American is to be open to the love of freedom. That is why one does not even have to live in or *like* America to be "American," Wilson radically contends, because all that is required is that the dignity of persons be respected in their freedom. Through a complex repository of human expression, open selves engage the enterprise of mobilizing creative advance for a civilization among various cultural interests and aims. This articulated vision of Wilson's regarding what it means to be a freedom-loving American lies at the heart of Ironic American exceptionalism. Conditions of identities, purposes, and values may be necessary but they are not sufficient for one's freedom. That is what Wilson comes to accept and promote through his vision of American politics and the inexplicable or contradictory ways freedom is manifested. Freedom is not a power humans can steer or even possess; rather, as Heidegger

notes following Schelling, “Freedom not the property of man, but rather: man is the property of freedom.”²²⁵ Wilson gave this ontological insight a political interpretation in his notion of what it means to be American. The possibilities and ideals of freedom become embodied as a locus of opportunity and symbol of one’s dreams having concrete efficacy. But there was a larger cultural context and Wilson stood at the beginning of a movement through which the culture of American exceptionalism, not just its politics or military prowess, would drive the democratization of the world.

The world did not learn the meaning freedom by the way Americans fought wars or carried out diplomacy and trade, but by consuming and believing the images, in sights, sounds, and even tastes that Americans created in response to how they actually lived. Perhaps Americans would have preferred that the world choose the works of Gershwin over the Big Mac and Madonna, but that kind of control does not come with the commitment to open selfhood. Ironical relations characterize the degree to which Americans symbolize themselves as respectful of equality and freedom.

Domestically, or from the inside-out perspective, Americans struggle with segregation, bigotry, and extremism in many social areas like all other peoples. Traditional categories and values come with the same historical baggage. The institutions of slavery, incarceration, and euro-centric-led exploitation are haunting the American legacy. Many continue to point out how it is hypocritical or ironic that the US serves as a global leader for liberty and human rights given its own failings. When Americans actively seek to fulfill this role they risk acting out of sense of false moral superiority. For unlike such cases as South Africa, where atonement and reconciliation have been pursued, the US has not addressed its past injustices with such a

²²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Schelling’s Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*, 9.

concerted effort. A great example of this ambiguity comes from the symbolic life of the Confederate flag following the Civil War. There are many who claim still today that the Confederacy was victorious over Lincoln's Union and the flag serves as a reminder of this Southern heritage. In professing their pride for the South, sympathizers mostly attempt to dissociate from its oppressive practices. Under this interpretation the flag and what it represents is sanitized out of historical pride. But it shows Americans seek opportunities for righting the wrongs of the past, in subtle ways.

Given the diversity and plurality of what we call here "American identity" (where this includes non-Americans who accept the essential ideals), ironic relations are vital and efficacious not only in the activities of our daily lives but in the metaphysical description of the cultural landscape. Ironic relations entail hidden or unforeseen contingencies in our actions, for which we are responsible because they are foreseeable. As Niebuhr foretold, irony is a more transparent trope than tragedy, especially when it comes to the interpretation of moral acts. Yet, irony also contributes to the heightening of our cultural appreciation and awareness. It is a telling category, able to account for the dynamic exchanges between high and low cultural transmissions. Of the leading interpretations of American exceptionalism, currently none has taken seriously the importance of entertainment of cultural elements contributing to our social consciousness. The standard criticisms have failed to capture what Americans represent symbolically to the rest of the world. Another deficiency from which contemporary accounts of American exceptionalism suffer involves the lack of a clear philosophical and hermeneutical basis. There is the danger of a cultural parochialism by either the advocates or opponents of this exceptionalism. Critics of American exceptionalism typically begin with a popular perception that Americans believe they hold themselves to different (and lower) moral standards than other

nations, that Americans are a law unto themselves and that they need not live under the types of constraint that characterize the lives of other peoples.

The most important engagement with others involves a *balance* of high and low culture, in which the highest of human cultural achievements are not allowed the necessitarian and imperious seat of judgment over low culture, nor vice versa. I think it is obvious that the products of low culture have a more direct access to the unconscious relations operative within the shared life of a people—one learns more about the American unconscious from the blues than from the Metropolitan Opera. But neither is dispensable for an open self. In short, the hybridization of low and high culture has the power both to bring ironies to our common consciousness and also to raise those ironies to the level of moral lessons we may assimilate for the benefit of the entire human race. The Gershwins and Heywards boldly and controversially adapted opera to the blues for a folk opera in *Porgy and Bess* in 1935, which is resisted by the upper crust for three generations, but finally in 1985 was performed at the Metropolitan Opera. The mix of dance and artistic styles in *An American in Paris* would be another good example, but there are tens of thousands beyond these clear and conscious efforts at mixing, example that exist on the fringe of the consciousness of their creators, but which come to resonate with the great global audience of “Americans,” understood in the Wilsonian sense. If high culture tends to become imperious, low culture tends to achieve very little over the long run, contributing to the destruction of culture rather than its maintenance and creation. The open self is obliged to work in the space between, not hesitating to bring the cultural unconscious into consciousness, showing that what was believed necessary was not, and that what was knowable but largely unknown in a thick historical present was both valuable and discoverable for those who wanted self-knowledge and moral direction keenly enough to carry on all three dialogues.

Section 4: Culture as a Catalyst of Divine Providence

There is a large level of messianic consciousness revolving around the issues of exceptionalism. Assessments on the prospects of American exceptionalism vary from the cynical and negative to dogmatic exceptionalisms depending on the cultural interest one decides to emphasize. It is this broad tendency of championing American privilege that I seek to take issue and offer an alternative cultural interpretation defending the exceptionalism of being American. The issue of what being an American entails in a conflict-ridden, pluralistic world at the dawn of the twenty-first century is as controversial and intriguing as ever. Much of the globe is concerned with not only the shifting power structures amongst nations, corporations, and international institutions but what the roles of Americans should be has come under question regarding the barrage of identities and normative values. American exceptionalism is the latest version of the “chosen people” recognized by much of the world in the form of their approval or despising of what Americans symbolize and embody. The time is ripe for us to give a philosophical account of what being an American entails and what its form of exceptionalism means for those with an outside-in perspective. The appropriation of American values and purposes globally is not only a hot-topic currently but the issues that it involves are of dire importance in such unstable times of history.

It is my contention that ironic American exceptionalism is historical evidence of the power of divine providence acting through culture, on the basis of generalized openness to the salvation of the world. This is a non-dogmatic exceptionalism which embodies an inclusiveness uncharacteristic of traditional exceptionalisms, where the possibility of the chosen people has been pluralized. I have emphasized this transformation by tracing the historical development of exceptionalism from its pre-Hebraic and Hebraic forms up to today, which I refer to as “post-

Hebraic.” This narrative does not imply that the new form is superior to the Hebrew account. Rather it is an extension of those teachings. By calling upon the blessings of God, open selves acknowledge *devotion to others* as the work of providence. This is post-Hebraic “hospitality,” as it were. Ironic exceptionalism does not culminate in the triumph of only one’s own people and leaders, but rather it fulfills the original covenant, that all the nations shall be blessed through the chosen people. Although the compactness Hebrews’ ancient parochialism makes possible the symbolic differentiation of exceptionalism experienced today, which has been extrapolated, expanded, adapted and reworked hundreds of times.

The master stroke of the ancient covenant was always that it might genuinely be fulfilled, even if no mortal could grasp how God could do it. Schelling and Voegelin recognized the epitome of exceptionalisms in the paradoxical history of Abraham as the “wanderer” or figure of “uncanny *dis*-placement.” Abraham is the man who stands as the symbol of redemption or one who leads out of the narrows, the dire straits of ancient sensibilities and toward an axial age — and here lay the possibility for the freedom and salvation of a people, and through *that* people, *all* people. For Abraham, like Moses, Israel’s promise land signifies a commitment to the love and hope for the liberation of one’s people without self-arrogation—for they weren’t allowed to enter that land themselves. A hallmark of ironic American exceptionalism, where one’s “people” is potentially anyone, is an uncanny hospitality, an invitation to a promised land that is the unique holding of the invited other. “Give me your tired, your poor,” for they are the other who make me as I am.

Voegelin praises Jeremiah the prophet who blames Israel for their own downfall by preaching “the terrible truth: that the existence of a concrete society in a definite form will not resolve the problem of order in history, that no chosen People in any form will be the ultimate

omphalos of the true order of mankind.”²²⁶ This does not eliminate the need for a chosen people. It pluralizes the notion as open-ended and ironic American exceptionalism aspires toward this invitation. Anybody can be deemed a part of the privileged people and to be American is to recognize this. The thought of freedom is to be devoted to the life of others.

Love of freedom as fundamental is the leading cause of America’s calling to be in service to all humanity, according to Wilson. American exceptionalism is not institutional, constitutional, or political on this view, but it is cultural, entailing an array of interests. The world is then seen as full of potential Americans, a point that is overlooked or denied in contemporary theories of globalization. The fact that the world is full of potential Americans does not imply an “us vs. them” mentality, since the conversion of non-followers is not what is intended. Rather, America itself, because it exists, because by its creed it must strive for what is good and right and free, symbolizes the chosen people of the world while recognizing that anybody can be American. Hence, any race or ethnicity can be a part of the exceptional people, something that is a unique milestone in recorded human history. Granted, this is a myth, but it is an indispensable myth. A mythic consciousness which is inclusive of all the peoples of the earth has not, up to now, won the day when compared with those exceptionalisms bent on nationalistic, ethnic, or exclusivist tendencies.

Ironic American exceptionalism emphasizes the role and value of culture above all else – politics, economics, even military might is first a matter of culture. Salvation, or the issue of a people being saved, does not come through religion or politics but through the broader category of culture itself. But this is not mere relativism. Given the nature of irony as a built-in limit for

²²⁶ Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, 491.

our interpretations of historical judgments, Niebuhr suggests that this “recognition” should not “lead to a betrayal of cherished values and historical attainments.”²²⁷

Freedom as an expression of the American open self can be read in some ways as a response to Heidegger’s fundamental ontology of Dasein’s authentic resoluteness. Under Heidegger’s philosophy, being-toward-death is the condition of Dasein’s finitude as one’s ownmost possibility. I have already argued that Heidegger’s account of freedom is embedded in Dasein’s historicity, which is the plaything of fate, or at least of destiny. Heidegger offers an example of living one’s life authentically through the possibility of being-toward-death by proclaiming one should choose or embrace death as one’s own. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger contends that one is to live one’s life as if it were a work of art. The event of death evades Dasein’s readiness because its exact moment of arrival will always remain a mystery. Death is always approaching without ever having arrived. It is a condition of Dasein’s finitude. This ontological dilemma can be overcome through artistic compensation, substantiating one’s being for an aestheticized analogue of Dasein—living his or her life as a work of art. One aspires to live authentically in defining one’s life through personal death.

When Heidegger elaborates on “world-building,” accomplished as a work of art, he uses the Greek example of constructing a temple for a dwelling of the gods. “Human beings only come to understand their outlook on themselves when it becomes articulated by and focused in a work like the temple.”²²⁸ This allows Dasein to choose its own death. As a hermeneutical lens this is not only consistent with Heidegger’s epic philosophizing, but falls in line with a tragic interpretation where Dasein’s purpose comes in fulfilling a prefabricated destiny. As Heidegger scholar Piotr Hoffman writes: “By having a fate, destiny, and a hero, I can act with *loyalty*

²²⁷ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 143.

²²⁸ Carol J. White, “Heidegger and the Greeks,” in *Blackwell Companion to Heidegger*, 122.

toward my historical past, the inauthentic Dasein—a Dasein bent on finding secure acceptance within the ever-shifting trends of the “they” world—will remain disloyal to its past and helpless to resist the tyranny of the “they.””²²⁹

If we insist upon a dramatic rather than an epic philosophical stance, the “they” become not the tyrannical obstacles to our authentic being, but they become us as we are they, not the other, but the other that is my ownmost possibility. The they-self need not be shallow; it may instead be the ultimate expression of my finitude, to be embraced and welcomed at any cost to my so-called authenticity (which, in truth is nothing but self-serious narcissism—that I am chosen and no one else). The sentiments and orientations of post-Heideggerian continental philosophy are marked by a tone of tragic-heroic pathos, which was only amplified through the events of the Great World Wars. I want to suggest that much of philosophy would be greatly enhanced if we challenge these sentiments and their accompanying narratives. The mythic consciousness of open selves in ironic American exceptionalism seeks to offer such resistance in relying on Niebuhr’s and Voegelin’s drama-centered historiographies. In a major sense then, the prevalence of open selves can be read as a viable alternative response to Heidegger’s fundamental ontology of Dasein. Open selfhood denies Heidegger’s contention that our ownmost possibility is being-toward-death. Instead, it is the choice of one’s salvation or redemption as the ownmost possibility for an open self. “Being open to God’s love means being a self that is open to the light of grace, and, through grace, what may be impossible one day might be possible at another time.”²³⁰ The hope for divine salvation characterizes the eschatological attitude of the American ethos. Voegelin identified this orientation in James’ and

²²⁹ Piotr Hoffman, “Death, Time, History: Division II of *Being and Time*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Heidegger* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 213.

²³⁰ Wayne Cristaudo, “Diagnosis and Salvation: Revolution, History and Augustine in Eric Voegelin’ and Rosenstock-Huessy,” Eric Voegelin Society Meeting, September 4, 2010, 4.

Peirce's treatment of God as a pragmatic response. Against the rationalized or dialectical versions of God in modern organized religions, Voegelin interprets God in the mode of the American open self with the following description:

All intellectual rigor has dissolved, leaving the soul in a landscape of infinite security. It is not solitary, beyond it there are friendly powers in diverse gradations of size and generality, with never an end in sight. Beyond the farthest reach there are ever more remote and greater ones. The wanderer never comes up against a boundary where the embracing security stops. The involution of the universe and humankind expressed in the dialectic is dissolved and unfolded into naively structured historical courses in a finite time. God himself has such a history—and the human being is not alone but is open to him and continuously approaching him. *The demonic nature of individualism, the suffering loneliness and skepticism, which lead us to plumb the depths of the present moment, have all dissolved. Knowledge has itself changed from an act that in mysterious ways brings together the self and the world into a nonmysterious, finite, temporal process of pure experience.*²³¹

The juxtaposition between salvation and death stems from the differing orientations of Heidegger's and Voegelin's respective philosophies. Voegelin does not make *Angst* central to the human condition in his philosophy, but rather the *metaxy* or the struggle of the tensional in-between resembling the ironic paradox of Niebuhr and Schelling. The salvation of the world is to call on providence in the abyss of freedom and this is the finitude stressed in Voegelin's reading of Peirce and James. In more romantic and heroic fashion, Heidegger presents an existential analytic of Dasein's finitude saturated in *Angst*, a self burdened by "being-in-the-world" and given over to "chatter" or "idle talk" of the crowd. Cassirer and Voegelin sustained a harsh conclusion of Heidegger's philosophy as a pseudo-personalism which fails to account for the transpersonal. According to Cassirer, "the 'impersonal' does not consist merely in the pale, diluted social form of the average, the everydayness of the 'they,' but in the form of transpersonal meaning. *For this transpersonal, Heidegger's philosophy has no access.*"²³²

²³¹ Voegelin, *CW1*, 62, emphasis added.

²³² Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, 202, emphasis added.

Voegelin was more hostile toward Heidegger's philosophy claiming it works one up into a "linguistic delirium," even characterizing him as a "peculiar German oddball."

Voegelin claims the question of death is not the central or driving force of the philosophy of open selfhood as it is for Heidegger. Therefore, one's true free act can consist of many rituals insofar as they are circumscribed as symbolic of the sacredness of the holy, or in the form of worship toward the divine. But salvation involves even more than this. One recognizes being saved or found to be in the Lord involves a reciprocal and mutual engagement, such that the mercy or justice of God is also revealed. Theophanic consciousness, or what Voegelin calls the divine-human encounters, entails the grounding and developing of spiritual personality which Heidegger dismisses as something like a dead humanistic medieval, scholastic encounter with the question of Being. Therefore, he downplays the role of the community in preserving the memory of the dead, as an ironic symbol for the presence of the absent, and absence of the present. For what else is a "moment of silence" designed to be? This role of the community, on my reading of Voegelin and Wilson, acting as a link between the past and future comes closer to the desired "authentic resoluteness" than anything Heidegger prescribes.

Wilson did not believe or argue that any *nation* (politically or geographically defined) stands as the harbinger of freedom because such a view would entail a short-sighted nationalism. Rather, America embodies a symbolic significance wherein the *love* of freedom is cultivated for the sake of the destiny of all persons, regardless of race, religion, age, or affiliations. The love of liberty is no more a foreign policy strategy than it is a fitting campaign slogan. The exceptionalism(s) promoted most recently compromise in crucial ways the heart of Wilson's ironic standpoint. There is no false sense of superiority which Wilson is attempting to protect and spread as we find in the Bush Doctrine, or in the rhetoric of many current leaders. In the minds

of the people of other nations, America represents more of a place where people from different walks of life come together and share their stories about getting lucky or having the possibility of realizing opportunities. It is not to be thought of as the place “we” built that can be squandered, but where we bring our dreams and hopes along with our fears. The historical legacy of America is too complex and interwoven to arrive at some ground for moral superiority by which we rule other nations.

This study presents an ontology of culture and philosophy of history capable of being theoretically justified. As a hypothetical hermeneutics of culture, it is offered for the sake of challenging existing approaches as being overly narrow and ideologically motivated. Those who subscribe to dogmatic versions of American exceptionalism argue for a renewal of culture rooted in a distant past or future. I am referring to apocalyptic fantasies which will defeat evil for all times, or a romanticized nostalgia for an exceptional ancient civilization, like the Greeks and Romans. And in these cases the feeling toward and interpretation of current trends lead to the anxiety that America’s greatness has been lost.

In contrast, I argue for the value and benefits of ironic American exceptionalism rooted in open selfhood during a time when ridicule and pessimism outweigh any hope for its prospects. Being an American exceptionalist, on this view, means that one is loyal too and holds as fundamental the love of freedom over all other considerations. Wilson articulated this attitude and believed in a shared respect and dignity of all persons as the symbolic hallmark of “the American way,” regardless of differences among the people. The “American” is not an official citizen or resident of the US, but is now a person with a certain kind of heart, desire, will, destiny. This mythic consciousness of open selves stands as a symbol between the possible and actual—there have been *actual* open selves in history who deemed it *impossible* that such

freedom could be realized on a wide-ranging social scale. Historical examples of open selves were rare before the end of the eighteenth century, when the conviction that democratic ways of life can be established and promoted came to be solidified.

Despite the ontological reality of exceptionalism even in the age of globalization, a philosophical ontology of exceptionalism has never been articulated. Exceptionalism traces back into the practices of humankind from time immemorial. There is clear evidence to suggest pre-Hebraic notions of the “chosen born” or those who are sacrificially ordained, even in the Far East. Prior to the covenant of Abraham and the promise of the land of Judea, exceptionalism is symbolized through the rites and rituals of, for example, offering one’s first fruits—including the fruit of the womb—to the gods. These rituals were not always mere appeasements but were sometimes expressions of gratitude or of redemption for wrongs. The idea that one’s own God or gods were superior to those of one’s neighbors goes back at least to the Egyptian Middle Kingdom.²³³ But the Hebrew exceptionalism is an advance, blending agrarian and nomadic cultures into a civilization that can sustain what I would “serious leisure, or disciplined play – relations clearly ironic in their tensions.

This is where the significance of the Abraham-Isaac story stands as a major turning point in human religious consciousness and its forms of exceptionalism. Commanded to sacrifice Isaac on a rock in the land of Moriah, Abraham is beckoned the Lord’s angel providing a ram and sparing his son. Remarkably, this event stands for a major transition, as a moment when the divine is further internalized in the myth of a people by establishing the new ritual over the old. Previous forms of exceptionalism never entailed the inclusion of an entire nation or people and all its tribes. Not only is the Hebrew covenant an example of exceptionalism being pluralized but

²³³ See John A. Wilson, “Egypt,” in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, eds. Henri and H.A. Frankfort (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977 [1946]), 37-39,

it marks a turning point where God is offered the best from the chosen people living rather than dying. The death ritual is replaced with the Hebrew form of exceptionalism predicated on the devotional life.

When people identify American exceptionalism with Puritanism and Winthrop's famous phrase, "a shining city on a hill" they are espousing a view of the "new" covenant, but still modeling the Jewish epoch. They associate a moral or religious superiority in the policies and destiny of America which justifies our greatness to other nations. But this version of a chosen people is too narrow and distorted to be applied to the American eschatology aspired to by open selves.

American exceptionalism is not rooted in the destiny of a nation or in the obsession with "collective interests." Its basis lies in a love of freedom that resists such dominant initiatives, i.e., the narrow forms of the chosen people. These narrow forms preclude the cultural relevance of Voegelin's "plurality of middles." Voegelin means that the beginning-beyond or origins-destinies are mysteries for every people, every race. We are all in search of our origins and our ends. Anybody can be a part of the chosen people on this view, so long as one recognizes that anyone can potentially constitute "one's own people." This openness to all possible others creates cultural relations that contributes to our personal, social, and cosmological growth and development. This position does imply that just anything or anyone will fit the ideal. It takes more than relativism to realize exceptionalist American values.

Salvation, or the issue of a people being saved, does not come through religion or politics but through the broader category of culture itself. Given the nature of irony as a built-in limit for our interpretations of historical judgments, Niebuhr suggests that this "recognition" should not

“lead to a betrayal of cherished values and historical attainments.”²³⁴ According to Randall Auxier, Niebuhr provides an “interesting framework for understanding history” and provides much-needed “reconstruction of irony” as a viable alternative to Rorty’s ironism.²³⁵ The “reconstruction is required because sometimes we do things that are morally wrong without knowing, without actually achieving a good epistemic position to learn why our actions are wrong and why their consequences are so terrible.”²³⁶ In articulating the benefits of irony as an interpretative lens, Niebuhr and Auxier examine only one side of the coin involving moral action—wrong doing. My aim is to highlight those successes and positive aspects stemming from cultural hybrids capable of divulging the openness necessary to keep the subjective and narrow characteristics of our own viewpoints in check. There is an unconscious and ironic right-doing involved in the dynamics of pop culture, engaging values and identities in unsettling ways, supplementing us with the “recognition that ‘the other,’ that other form of life, or that other unique community is the limit beyond which our ambitions must not run and the boundary beyond which our life must not expand.”²³⁷

Through a Schellingian reading of Niebuhr’s appropriation of irony, one senses how *being* the other is already a reality or viable possibility given our cultural context. Schelling goes further than Niebuhr with his philosophy of hauntedness, asserting that one is already involved in a transformative link in which he or she *is* the “other”—not just being a “boundary” or mirror through which one sees oneself but an integrative experience circumscribing what is possible for

²³⁴ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 143.

²³⁵ Auxier, “Ironic Wrong Doing and the Moral Arc of the Universe,” 6-7.

²³⁶ Auxier, “Ironic Wrong Doing and the Moral Arc of the Universe,” 6.

²³⁷ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 138-39. Niebuhr also adds: “A too confident sense of justice always leads to injustice. In so far as men and nations are “judges in their own case” they are bound to betray the human weakness of having a livelier sense of their own interest than of the competing interest. That is why “just” men and nations may easily become involved in ironic refutations of their moral pretensions.”

our personhood. Emphasizing the dynamics of genuine relations through a *non-mutual* exchange of possibilities is an improvement on Niebuhr's treatment of dyadic contention in the form of the external. The cultural matrices of American pop culture promote a wider nexus of possible identities and values which are contributing to a less estranged or alienated people. An unconscious or ironic *right*-doing pervades the wide ranging, hyper-consciousness that criticizes and sometimes even condemns the culture in some fashion, while being immersed in it. Trends like obsessions with court TV, a whole industry of crime and Law and Order shows, or scandalous reports on the downfall, death and demise of entertainers and superstars come quickly to mind.

Will we continue to poison the world with our superficial cultural mainstream, which will lead to further resentment of America? What positive aspects can we attribute to our commitment to the cultivation of entertainment that will give cause for hope? As our obsessions grow stronger regarding the sports and entertainment complexes, it may be reasonable, if unusual, to presume we are doing more good than harm for the world. But one would not get that impression from the general sentiments. Underneath the sweeping indictment of our culture's proneness to self-gratification are the possibilities for us to be in the service of humanity, as Wilson argued. American history can be seen from one general pattern to be a catalyst for the intense engagement between high and low cultures, creating hybrids of new communities – communities that break the imperiousness of gated communities of high culture while elevating the dignity and humanity of those whose connection with our cultural unconscious is more direct and less mediated by the trappings of power and success.

The American dream, if it could be summed up in any general sense, is the likelihood that you are or will become the other. This is a good thing that can not only teach people about who

they think they are but also help them to be less likely to take it for granted. Taking advantage of these opportunities (our own unmerited prosperity) is overall what Americans have been called to do. It is through America's promotion of this engagement between high and low culture that we build a resistance to becoming dogmatic about our own traditions, achievements, and ways. Rather, we are in the process of creating new cultures through these generic and novel hybridizations, new forms that are capable of sustaining more intense selves. For instance, in promoting democratic *and* non-democratic forms of cultural values, America can act increasingly to generate and respect "foreign" cultures instead of destroying or leveling them. Open selves can afford to learn about closed societies without judging them in advance. The revelation of this cultural energy as a way of respecting freedom reaches into the core beliefs of open selves, such that they cultivate a pluralization of exceptionalism. It is not any individual nation or people who can be accredited with the exclusive eschatological standing of the chosen few amongst humanity. Rather, no single culture can be held to be the catalyst of divine providence, but providence chooses culture itself, rather than nation, in its richness and various manifestations.

The advantages of generating cultural hybrids, virtual integration, and the like, as rituals are concealed, but present. The enrichment of our cultural manifold has done much to disclose that these vices of the present are more than just vices. More will become known about the dynamics involving such precarious cultural engagement, but it is not all bad. The time is overdue for people to accept that. American exceptionalism in the ironic sense, spawning the myth of open selves, continues to lead in developing the examples, methods, and techniques that defend us against ideological extremisms. But these efforts do not come without the negligence and mistakes of Americans who seize the opportunity as an excuse for a national triumphalism.

In order to cultivate the mythic consciousness of open selfhood and in order to learn the lessons of history, we need to recognize the exceptional nature of this cultural spirit without championing ourselves as the privileged or exceptional people.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, Thomas. "Dewey's Denotative-Empirical Method: A Thread through the Labyrinth." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 18 (2004): 248-56.
- . "Eros and Spirit: Toward a Humanistic Philosophy of Culture." *The Pluralist* 5 (2010): 18-44.
- Anderson, Doug R. *Philosophy Americana: Making Philosophy at Home in American Culture*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006.
- Arieli, Yehoshua. *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966.
- Armitage, David. *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Auxier, Randall E. "A Very Naughty Boy: Getting Right with Brain." In *Monty Python and Philosophy*. LaSalle, IL: Open Court Press, 2006, 65-81.
- . "Ernest Cassirer (1874-1945) & Suzanne Katherina (Knauth) Langer (1895-1985)." In *Handbook of Whiteheadian Process Thought, Volume 2*. Eds. Michel Weber and Will Desmond. Ontos Verlag Publishing, 2009, 552-70.
- . "The Glimmer Twins." In *The Rolling Stones and Philosophy: It's Just a Thought Away*. Eds. Luke Dick and George A. Reisch. Chicago: Open Court Press, 2011, 3-26.
- . "Imagination and Historical Knowledge in Vico: A Critique of Leon Pompa's Recent Work." *Humanitas* 1 (1997): 26-49.
- . "Irony Wrongdoing and the Arc of the Universe," Keynote Lecture, presented at the 36th Conference on Value Inquiry, held at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, April 18, 2010. Unpublished ms.
- . *Time, Will, and Purpose: Living Ideas from the Philosophy of Josiah Royce*. Chicago: Open Court Press, 2013.
- Bacevich, Andrew J. *The Limits of American Power—The End of American Exceptionalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008.
- Baker, Stannard. *Woodrow Wilson: Life and Letters, Youth 1856-1890*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1927.
- Barber, Benjamin R. *Jihad vs. McWorld: How the Planet Is Both Falling Apart and Coming Together and What It Means for Democracy*. New York: Ballantine, 1995.

Bell, Daniel. "The End of American Exceptionalism." *National Affairs*, Fall 1975.

Bellah, Robert N. *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*. New York: Signet Classics, 2000.

Bergson, Henri. *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Translated by R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley. Brereton Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1935.

Bernstein, Richard J. "Heidegger on Humanism." *Praxis International* 5 (1985), 95-114.

Boudieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson, 241-58. New York: Greenwood Press, 1984.

Breen, T. H. *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People*. New York: Hill & Wang Press, 2010.

Brightman, Edgar Sheffield. *Moral Laws*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1933.

Brooks, Stephen. *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Obama*. London: Routledge Publishing, 2012.

Cassirer, Ernst. *Kant's Life and Thought*. Translated by James Haden. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

----- . *The Myth of the State*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974 [1947].

----- . *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 1: Language*. Translated by Ralph Mannheim. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955.

----- . *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 2: Mythic Consciousness*. Translated by Ralph Mannheim. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955.

----- . *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 3: The Phenomenology of Knowledge*. Translated by Ralph Mannheim. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.

----- . *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 4: The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*. Translated by J.M. Krois. Edited by Donald Phillip Verene and J.M. Krois. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

Ceaser, James W. "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism." *American Political Thought* 1 2012, 3-28.

Cherry, Conrad. Ed. *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretation of American Destiny*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Clinton, Robert Lowry. *God and Man in the Law*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1997.

Commager, Henry Steele. *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1977.

Cooke, James J. *The All-Americans at War: The 82nd Division in the Great War, 1917-1918*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999.

Copleston, Frederick. *A History of Philosophy*, 8 Vols. New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1965.

Cooper, Ron L. *Heidegger and Whitehead: A Phenomenological Examination into the Intelligibility of Experience*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1993.

Crèvecoeur, Jean Hector de. *Letters from an American Farmer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Crouter, Richard. *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics, Religion, and Christian Faith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Dallmayr, Fred. "An End to Evil? Philosophical and Political Reflections." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60 (2006): 169-86.

----- . *The Other Heidegger*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Danto, Arthur C. *Andy Warhol (Icons of America)*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

----- . *The Abuse of Beauty—Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*. Chicago: Open Court Press, 2003.

----- . *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: a Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Dávila, María Teresa. "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr's 'Moral Ambiguity' to Contemporary Discussions on the Morality of Intervention and the Use of Force in a Post-Cold War World." *Political Theology* 5 (2004): 177-99.

Day, Jerry. *Voegelin, Schelling, and the Philosophy of Historical Existence*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003.

Deneen, Patrick J. "Cities of man on a Hill." *American Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (2012): 29-52.

-----, *Democratic Faith*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Dewey, John. *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. New York: Henry Holt, 1920.

Douglass, Frederick. "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" (1852). In *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, edited by Philip Foner. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999, 188-206.

Ebenstein, William. Ed. *Modern Political Thought the Great Issues*. New York: Rinehart & Company, 1959.

Edwards, Jonathan. *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, edited by John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003

-----, *The True Nature of Virtue*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960.

Ellul, Jacques. *Propaganda—the Formation of Men's Attitudes*. Translated by Konrad Kellen and Jean Learner. New York: Vintage Books, 1973.

Eubanks, Cecil L. and David J. Gauthier. "The Politics of the Homeless Spirit: Heidegger and Levinas on Dwelling and Hospitality." *History of Political Thought* 32 (2011): 125-46.

Faber, Roland, Brian G. Henning, and Clinton Combs. Eds.. *Beyond Metaphysics? Explorations in Alfred North Whitehead's Late Thought*. New York: Rodopi B.V. Amsterdam, 2010.

Fackenthal, Jeremy D. "The Problem of Coming to Terms with the Past: A Post-Holocaust Theology of Rememberance." PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2012.

Farr, Gregory. "'Eric Voegelin's Theory of Intentionality In Consciousness and its Pragmatic Influences.'" PhD diss. Prospectus, Boston University, 2005.

Friedman, Uri. "'American Exceptionalism': A Short History." *Foreign Policy Magazine*, July/August 2012.

Froman, Wayne J. "Schelling's *Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom* and Heidegger's Thought." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1990), 465-80.

Fukuyama, Francis. "The End of History." *National Interest* 16 (1989), 3-18.

Gebhardt, Juergen. *Americanism: Revolutionary Order and Societal Self-Interpretation in the American Republic*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993.

Gingrich, Newt. *A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters*. Washington, D.C., Regnery Publishing, 2011.

Gontier, Thierry. "The Open Society, from Bergson to Voegelin." American Political Science Association. September 9, 2012.

Gordon, Peter E. *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Griffin, David. "Whitehead and Niebuhr on God, Man, and the World." *The Journal of Religion* 53 (1973), 149-75.

Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Translated by William Rehg. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.

-----, "Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism: Schelling's Idea of a Contraction of God and Its Consequences for the Philosophy of History." In *The New Schelling*. Ed. Norman and Welchman. Trans. Nick Midgley and Judith Norman. London: Continuum Press, 2004).

Hall, David L. *The Civilization of Experience, A Whiteheadian Theory of Culture*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1973.

Hamilton, Alexander, James Madison, John Jay. *The Federalist Papers*. In *Great Books of the Western World*. Translated by George Lawrence. Vol. 43, Eighth Ed. Ed. Mortimer Adler. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2005.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Heidegger, Martin. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Translated by Richard Taft. 5th Ed. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997.

-----, "Letter on Humanism." Translated by Frank A. Capuzzi and J. Glenn Gray. *Basic Writings*. Ed. David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993 [1947], 217-65.

-----, "The Origin of the Work of Art." Translated by Albert Hofstadter. In *Poetry, Language, and Thought*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971, 17-87.

-----, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of Human Freedom*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985.

Hill, Christopher. *The World Turned Upside Down*. New York: Viking Press, 1972.

Hill, Jason D. *Becoming a Cosmopolitan: What It Means to Be a Human Being in the New Millennium*. Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2000.

Hodgson, Godfrey. *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.

Hooper, Sydney E. "Whitehead's Philosophy: 'The Higher Phases of Experience.'" *Philosophy* 21 (1946), 57-78.

Hrezo, Margaret and William E. Hrezo. "The Politics of the "Open" Self: America in the Cinema of King Vidor and Robert Altman." *Studies in Popular Culture* 32 (2010),

Hughes, Glen. *Mystery and Myth in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Huntington, Samuel. *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster Publishing, 2004.

Ignettieff, Michael (ed.). *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Inwood, Michael. *A Heidegger Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

Johnson, A. H. "The Social Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead." *The Journal of Philosophy* 40 (1943), 261-71.

Jones, Judith A. *Intensity: An Essay in Whiteheadian Ontology*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998.

Kammaen, Michael. "The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration." *American Quarterly* 45 (1993): 1-43.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1987 [1790].

Keller, Catherine and Anne Danielle. *Process and Difference: Between Cosmological and Poststructuralist Postmodernisms*. Edited by Catherine Keller and Anne Danielle. Albany: State University of New York, 2002.

King, Jr., Martin Luther. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Ed. James M. Washington. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986.

Kraus, Elizabeth M. *The Metaphysics of Experience—A Companion to Whitehead's Process and Reality*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1998.

Langer, Susanne. *Feeling and Form—A Theory of Art*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.

-----, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*. 3rd Ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lipset, Seymour M. *American Exceptionalism: A Double Edged Sword*. New York: W. W. Norton & Inc., 1996.

------. "Still the Exceptional Nation?" *The Wilson Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2000): 31-45.

Livingston, James. *The World Turned Inside Out: American Thought and Culture and the End of the 20th Century*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010.

McDonald, Lee Cameron. *Western Political Theory: The Modern Age*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962.

McGrath, Sean J. "Schelling on the Unconscious." *Research in Phenomenology* 40 (2010), 72-91.

Madsen, Deborah. *American Exceptionalism*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

Makkreel, Rudolf A. "From Authentic Interpretation to Authentic Disclosure: Bridging the Gap Between Kant and Heidegger." *Heidegger, German Idealism, & Neo-Kantianism*. Ed. Tom Rockmore. New York: Humanity Books, 2000.

------. *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant—the Hermeneutical import of the Critique of Judgment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Marty, Martin E. "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Irony of American History: A Retrospective." *The History Teacher* 26 (1993), 161-74.

McDougall, Walter a. *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Publishing, 1997.

Morgan, Edmund S. (ed.). *Puritan Political Ideas 1558-1794*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003.

Murrin, John M. "A Roof without Walls: The Delimma of American National Identity." In *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*. Eds. Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward Carlos Carter. Chapel hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987, 333-48.

Nayak, Meghana V. and Christopher Malone. "American Orientalism and American Exceptionalism: A Critical Rethinking of US Hegemony." *International Studies Review* 11 (2009), 253-76.

Neville, Robert Cummings. *The High Road Around Modernism*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.

-----, "A Letter of Grateful and Affectionate Response to David Ray Griffin's *Whitehead's Radically Different Postmodern Philosophy: an Argument for Its Contemporary Relevance*." *Process Studies* 37 (2008), 7-38.

-----, *Normative Cultures*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

-----, *Reconstruction of Thinking*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981.

Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History*. New York: Scribner Book Company, 1979.

-----, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935.

-----, *The Irony of American History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

-----, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930.

-----, *The Self and the Dramas of History*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955.

Niemeyer, Gerhart. *Between Nothingness and Paradise*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971.

Nordholt, J. W. Schulte. *Woodrow Wilson: A Life for World Peace*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Parker, Theodore. *The Great Battle between Slavery and Freedom*. Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1856.

Pearson, Frederic S. and Simon Payaslian. *International Political Economy: Conflict and Cooperation in the Global System*. Boston: McGraw-Hill College Press, 1999.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks. 8 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-66.

Petrakis, Peter A. and Cecil L. Eubanks. (eds.). *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns: Searching for Foundations*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004.

Pieterse, Jan Nederveen. "Hyperpower Exceptionalism: Globalisation the American Way." *New Political Economy* 8 (2003), 299-319.

Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Ranieri, John J. "Grounding Public Discourse: Voegelin's Contribution." In *The Politics of the Soul: Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience*. Ed. Glen Hughes. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 33-64.

Royce, Josiah. *Basic Writings*. 2 Vols. Ed. John J. McDermott. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

-----, *California: From the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948 [1886].

-----, *The Problem of Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968 [1914].

Rorty, Richard. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Sandoz, Ellis. *The Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981.

Sargent, Lyman Tower. *Contemporary Political Ideologies: A Comparative Analysis*. 11th ed. Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999.

Schalow, Frank. "Traces of Love Inscribed by Deeds: The Question of immortality of Schelling's Ethics." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 25 (1997), 243-56.

Schama, Simon. *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution*. New York, Ecco Publishing, 2006.

Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von. *The Abyss of Freedom: Ages of the World*. Translated by Judith Norman. Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

-----, *Clara or, On Nature's Connection to the Spirit World*. Translated by Fiona Steinkamp. Albany: SUNY Press, 2002.

-----, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy: The Berlin Lectures*. Translated by Bruce Matthews. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007.

-----, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*. Translated by Mason Richey and Markus Zisselsberger. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007.

-----, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*. Translated by Andrew Bowie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

-----, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. Translated by Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt. Albany: SUNY Press, 2006.

Shafer, Bryon. *Is American Different?: A New Look at American Exceptionalism*. New York: Clarendon Press, 1991.

Sherburne, Donald W. *A Key to Whitehead's Process and Reality*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1966.

Sherover, Charles M. *Time, Freedom, and the Common Good: An Essay in Public Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

-----, *Heidegger, Kant, & Time*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971.

Shinn, Roger L. "Realism, Radicalism, and Eschatology in Reinhold Niebuhr: A Reassessment." *The Journal of Religion* 54 (1974), 409-23.

Sloterdijk, Peter. *Bubbles: Spheres Volume I: Microspherology*. Translated by Wieland Hoban. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.

-----, *In the World Interior of Capital: Towards a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*. Translated by Wieland Hoban. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013.

-----, "The Operable Man: On the Ethical State of Gene Technology." *Goethe-Institut Boston*, 2003, July 27, 2012.
<http://www.goethe.de/uk/bos/englisch/Programm/archiv/2000/enpslot200.htm>

Stickers, Ken. "We Liberal, Ironic Hypocrites: Situating Rorty in the History of American Democratic Thought." Paper Presented at University Opole, Poland, July 31, 2013.

-----, "Logics of Similitude and Logics of Difference in American and Contemporary Continental Philosophy." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 20.2 (2006): 117-23.

Szakolczai, Arpad. "The Spirit of the Nation-State: Nation, Nationalism and Inner-worldly Eschatology in the Work of Eric Voegelin." *International Political Anthropology* 1 (2008), 193-212.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. In *Great Books of the Western World*. Translated by George Lawrence. Vol. 44, Eighth Ed. Ed. Mortimer Adler. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2005.

Trepanier, Lee and Steven F. McGuire. (eds.). *Eric Voegelin and the Continental Tradition: Explorations in Modern Political Thought*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011.

Tucker, Robert. (ed.) *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: Norton Press, 1978.

Tuveson, Ernest Lee. *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.

Tyrell, Ian. "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History." *American Historical Review* 96 (1991), 1031-55.

Verene, Donald Phillip. "Vico's Influence on Cassirer." *New Vico Studies*. Volume 3 (1985): 105-111.

-----, *Vico's Science of Imagination*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.

Vico, Giambattista. *Autobiography*. Translated by T.G. Bergin and M.H. Fisch. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1944.

-----, *New Science*. Translated by T.G. Bergin and M.H. Fisch. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

Voegelin, Eric. *Autobiographical Reflections*. Ed. Ellis Sandoz. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989.

-----, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Ed. Paul Caringella, Jürgen Gebhardt, Thomas A. Hollweck, and Ellis Sandoz, 34 vols. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990-2009.

-----, *Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man*. In *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 26. *History of Political Ideas*. Vol. VIII. Ed. David Walsh. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999b.

-----, *Hellenism, Rome, and Early Christianity*. In *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 19. *History of Political Ideas*. Vol. I. Ed. Anthanasios Moulakis. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997b.

-----, *Hitler and the Germans*. Trans. and Ed. Detlev Clemons and Brendan Purcell. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999a.

-----, *In Search of Order*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987.

-----, *The Later Middle Ages*. In *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 21. *History of Political Ideas*. Vol. III. Ed. David Wilson. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998d.

-----, *The Middle Ages to Aquinas*. In *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 20. *History of Political Ideas*. Vol. II. Ed. Peter von Sivers. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997a.

-----, *The New Order and Last Orientation*. In *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 25. *History of Political Ideas*. Vol. VII. Eds. Jürgen Gebhardt and Thomas A. Hollweck. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999c.

-----, *On the Form of the American Mind*. In *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 1. Trans. Ruth Hein. Ed. Jürgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995.

-----, *Religion and the Rise of Modernity*. In *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 23. *History of Political Ideas*. Vol. V. Ed. James L. Wiser. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998b.

------. *Renaissance and Reformation*. In *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 22. *History of Political Ideas*. Vol. IV. Eds. David L. Morse and William M. Thompson. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998c.

------. *Revolution and the New Science*. In *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 24. *History of Political Ideas*. Vol. VI. Ed. Barry Cooper. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998.

------. *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*. Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2004.

------. *Selected Correspondence, 1950-1984*. In *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 30. Ed. Thomas A. Hollweck. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007.

Walt, Stephen M. "The Myth of American Exceptionalism," *Foreign Policy Magazine* (November 2011), 189,

Webb, Eugene. "Eric Voegelin's Faith (or Atheism?): A Comment on Maben Poirier's Critique," *Appraisal* 8,2 (October 2010), 42-56.

Weisenbeck, Jude D. *Alfred North Whitehead's Philosophy of Values*. Waukesha, WI: Thomas Press, Inc., 1969.

Whitehead, Alfred North. *Adventures of Ideas*. New York: The Free Press, 1961.

------. *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1954.

------. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. Corrected Edition. Edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: The Free Press, 1978.

------. *Religion in the Making*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1996.

------. *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1985.

Wilson, John A. *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*. Eds. Henri and H. A. Frankfort. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977 [1946].

Wilson, Woodrow. "Address on Latin American Policy to the Fifth Annual Convention of the Southern Commercial Congress." In *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*. Vol. 28. Ed. Arthur S. Link. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

------. *The Politics of Woodrow Wilson—Selections from his Speeches and Writings*. Edited by August Heckscher. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1970.

Winthrop, John. "A Model of Christian Charity." In *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry*, edited by Perry Miller. New York: Columbia University Press, 1956.

Wirth, Jason. *The Conspiracy of Life-- Meditations on Schelling and His Time*. Albany, N.Y.: Suny Press, 2003.

Wolin, Sheldon. *Politics and Vision—Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1960.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: HarperCollins. 2001.

VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Myron Moses Jackson

philosophos80@gmail.com

Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Bachelor of Arts Political Science, August 2004

Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Master of Arts Political Science, December 2010

DissertationTitle:
 Ironie American Exceptionalism and the Myth of the Open Self

Major Professor: Randall E. Auxier