

Eric Voegelin (1901-1985)

IF THERE IS any modern thinker who can be said to have engaged in the pursuit of truth in the spirit in which Plato carried on that pursuit, that thinker is undoubtedly Eric Voegelin. "The philosopher," Voegelin wrote, "is man in the anxiety of his fall from being and philosophy is the ascent toward salvation of Everyman. . . . Plato's philosophy. . . is not a philosophy but the symbolic form in which a Dionysiac soul expresses its ascent to God." For Voegelin, as for Plato, philosophy is not a doctrine of right order for truth can never be expressed in abstract propositions. The philosopher is the man who resists the forces in society which seek to corrupt him and alienate him from the true order of existence and reality. "Half the battle is won when the soul can recognize the shape of the enemy and consequently knows that the way it must follow leads in the opposite direction." Truth lies at the level of experience and in the last analysis is self-authenticating.

Eric Voegelin was born in Cologne, Germany on January 3, 1901. When he was a young boy he moved with his family to Vienna, Austria. He entered the University of Vienna in 1919 and received his doctorate in 1922. He wrote his doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Hans Kelsen. In 1924 he was awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship for two years of study in the United States. He attended the lectures of John Dewey at Columbia, of Alfred North Whitehead at Harvard, and of John R. Commons at Wisconsin. While in the United States he became acquainted with the works of George Santayana and William James. These persons exercised a considerable in-

fluence upon his thinking. As a result of this experience he wrote a book entitled, *On the Form of the American Mind*. Voegelin discovered in America an intellectual climate which still had its roots in Christianity and classical culture. These had been missing, he said, in the intellectual world in which he had grown up.

In the summer of 1938 he left Austria. He taught at Harvard University, at Bennington College, and at the University of Alabama. He then moved to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge where he remained as a distinguished professor for sixteen years. He returned to Germany in 1958 and taught at the University of Munich until 1969, when he retired. He returned to the United States and was for many years associated with the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. He died at the age of 84 at Stanford on January 19, 1985.

Voegelin wrote many books and innumerable articles. Although he considered himself primarily as a political scientist his interests ranged widely over the fields of philosophy, law, history, theology, comparative literature, and archeology. He became an expert in the ancient civilizations of the Near East, China, and India. He taught himself all the languages he needed to conduct his research. Eric Voegelin was a man of great learning and intellect. There are

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few men, if any, who could match his erudition.

In *The New Science of Politics* (1952), Voegelin wrote: "The analysis will . . . proceed to an exploration of the symbols by which political societies interpret themselves as representatives of transcendent truth. . . . An inquiry concerning representation, if its theoretical implications are unfolded consistently, will in fact become a philosophy of history. To pursue a theoretical problem to the point where the principles of politics meet with the principles of a philosophy of history is not customary today. . . . Nevertheless, the procedure cannot be considered an innovation in political science, it will rather appear as a restoration, if it be remembered that the two fields which today are cultivated separately were inseparably united when political science was founded by Plato."

The New Science of Politics served as a kind of prolegomenon to Voegelin's monumental work, *Order and History*. The four volumes already published are *Israel and Revelation*, *The World of the Polis*, *Plato and Aristotle*, and *The Ecumenic Age*. A fifth volume to be entitled, *In Search of Order*, will be published shortly. Voegelin was reading proof on this volume when he died.

Unlike Hegel, Comte, Marx, Toynbee, and other philosophers of history, Voegelin contended that no one can say with certainty what the precise meaning of history is, or where history is going, but he is certain that history is the revelation of God's way with man. "History creates mankind as the community of men who, through the ages, approach the true order of being that has its origin in God; but at the same time,

mankind creates this history through its real approach to existence under God." It is man's partnership in being which is the essence of his existence. The meaning of history, discovered by the 'leap in being,' "reveals a mankind striving for its order of existence within the world while attuning itself with the truth of being beyond the world, and gaining in the process not a substantially better order within the world but an increased understanding of the gulf that lies between immanent existence and the transcendent truth of being." The ultimate purposes of history are unknown equally to the men of all ages. Voegelin is especially critical of thinkers like Marx who want to "stop history" with their formulation of its meaning.

Ellis Sandoz rightly characterizes Voegelin's work as "revolutionary" and compares it to the revolutions of Copernicus and Newton in cosmology and physics. It is revolutionary in the sense that Voegelin rejects all the major intellectual movements of the modern world, i.e., Marxism, Freudianism, Hegelianism, secular humanism, all the variants of positivism and atheism. He rejects any thinker who insists that he has a monopoly on truth. Voegelin's thought is grounded in common sense and reason. By reason he does not mean post-Cartesian reason but the kind of reason that can be trusted only when it is allied with the love of the Good. It is the reason that is common both to man and divine Being. Voegelin differs from most modern thinkers in that he takes God seriously. There is no better guide to an understanding of what is wrong with our society, nor a better guide to the course we must follow if we wish to restore our humanity.