

Eric Voegelin's Achievement

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THE TITLE OF this article may raise some eyebrows. Is it not too early to talk of Voegelin's achievement? His crowning work, *Order and History*, is only partially realized. Six volumes were announced, three have been published. True, *The New Science of Politics* (1952) presented a kind of preview of the entire undertaking. It identified the problems, coined key concepts, roughed in an outline of the major investigation. But a *Programmschrift* is not the true measure of a scholar's achievement. At this point, there can be only a provisional appraisal. Such an appraisal, however, makes sense for a number of reasons. First, Voegelin's work has already had a certain shaping influence on political science. Many of his ideas have attained wide currency. The name Voegelin stands for something that has an unmistakable identity. To recall the substance of this identity is useful on the eve of the completion of volume IV of *Order and History*. For volume IV, to be titled *In Search of Order*, will be a concluding volume. It will cover

the materials originally intended for volumes IV-VI; it will also systematically present Eric Voegelin's philosophy of order.

In his previous work, Voegelin has refused to adopt any "position." He has seen problems, raised questions, and pursued the quest for truth through the analysis of materials. In volume I, the materials of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and, above all, Israel occupied his intention. The next two volumes contained the study of Greece's record. The questions of human order led him to inquire from those who in time of crisis arrived at deeper insight of what man could live by. Never did he approach these materials with a preconceived conclusion. Never did he try to prove a point. He would follow the quest wherever it would take him, finding what he could find, and resting content to leave certain unsolved problems unsolved until further study. Thus until now Voegelin has insisted that he had no philosophy to proclaim.

In the course of his studies on volume IV, this has changed. This volume, first planned

as a study of "Empire and Christianity," eventually broadened to cover all examples of a type of political order which Voegelin has called the "ecumenical empire." The characteristic feature of these empires lies in the fact that large power structures appear, first without a corresponding spiritual or mythical order. Extending over areas that cover different religions and even civilizations, these empires are forced deliberately to cast around for a religious-philosophical orientation in order not to fall into chaos. Some of the problems which he encountered are outlined in Voegelin's article "World-Empire and the Unity of Mankind" (*International Affairs*, vol. XXXVII, no. 2, April 1962). In the ecumenical empires, various extant possibilities of order are compared and weighed. The entire problem of order thus comes up in a different way from that in which it presented itself, for instance, to the authors of the Memphite Theology, or to Plato. In the course of the "mixing of gods," the experiences of order tend to be symbolized through conceptual speculations rather than myths. Abstract systematization introduces questions of a more abstract kind. These materials forced Voegelin to work his way through to his own solutions of key philosophical problems. Some of these special studies he published, for example, "Das Rechte von Natur," in *Osterreichische Zeitschrift für Öffentliches Recht* (vol. XIII, no. 1-2, 1963), dealing with the problem of natural law. Volume IV thus promises to be a major event: the first systematic political philosophy since the positivistic destruction.

In view of the special character of this new and last volume of *Order and History*, a preliminary stock-taking is not inappropriate. The opening up of masses of material that used to lie beyond the confines of political science, the raising of new questions, the cultivation of novel methods have already

made a certain place for Eric Voegelin a matter of record. What is remarkable, above all, is that Voegelin's achievement is not founded primarily on the work of professional political scientists of our age, but rather, on that of classicists, orientalist, egyptologists, biblical scholars, patrologists, and philosophers. In this sense, the title for his 1952 publication, *The New Science of Politics*, may be misleading. It evokes Vico's *Nuova Scienza* and its claim to new invention of a hitherto non-existing way to knowledge. Unlike Vico, Voegelin meant, not that he himself had founded a new science, but rather had pulled together the widely scattered results of a "process of re-theoretization" that had been going on in different sciences for the last half century, and, gaining momentum after the first World War, "today is moving at a breath-taking speed" (*New Science of Politics*, p. 3). In other words, it was in sciences other than political science proper that the study of order turned from a positivistic approach to research under the guide of theory. Professional political scientists on either side of the Atlantic failed to take advantage of these achievements. Voegelin alone perceived that in the restoration of theory to the study of society a reconstruction of political order was made possible. The company of professional political scientists around him is therefore very small. The majority of Voegelin's colleagues in the American Political Science Association would have difficulty even in recognizing the relevance of the questions he is asking. The fact that they also ignore, and have failed to keep step, with the theoretical advances of the other sciences of society is sad but undeniable. The vaunted interdependence between political science and other supplemental disciplines seems to have vanished at this point.

Voegelin himself would not consider it a *capitis diminutio* if one pointed to the foun-

dations of his achievement in other thinkers. Thus the "leap in being" is a concept of Bergson's to whose *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* Voegelin concedes top ranking among the works determining relevance and direction of scientific inquiries. The theoretical exploration of Gnosticism, including the exploitation of the concept of Gnosis for the understanding of modern ideologies, was pioneered by men like Hans Jonas, Urs van Balthasar, H. C. Puech. New concepts in the study of Greek philosophy and their civilization were achieved by Werner Jaeger, Bruno Snell, E. Peterson. At the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, H. Frankfort, J. A. Wilson, and Th. Jacobsen created new concepts in the interpretation of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Their accomplishments, and those of the Uppsala school, made possible a good part of Voegelin's volume I. So did the biblical studies of von Rad, H. J. Kraus, A. Alt, and G. Widengren, to name a representative few. The theoretical problems of history were at least raised, if not solved, in the works of K. Loewith, J. Taubes, and H. U. van Balthasar. Without such advances of specialists in the study of human society, there probably would have been no *New Science of Politics*.

Still, it is Eric Voegelin who could see that all of these isolated accomplishments could be pulled together, that together they added up to a renewed true science of human order. It was he who perceived what would have to be done, what questions would have to be asked, what preliminary investigations completed before the questions could be answered. He thus drew up a comprehensive program for the new science:

The understanding of ontology as well as the craftsmanship of metaphysical speculation had to be regained, and especially philosophical anthropology as

a science had to be re-established. By the standards thus regained it was possible to define with precision the technical points of irrationality in the positivistic position. For this purpose the worlds of the leading positivistic thinkers had to be analyzed with care in order to find their critical rejections of rational arguments; one had, for instance, to show the passages in the works of Comte and Marx where these thinkers recognized the validity of metaphysical questions but refused to consider them because such consideration would make their irrational opening impossible. When the study proceeded further to the motivations of irrationalism, positivistic thinking had to be determined as a variant of theologizing, again on the basis of the sources; and the underlying religious experiences had to be diagnosed. This diagnoses could be conducted successfully only if a general theory of religious phenomena was sufficiently elaborated to allow the subsumption of the concrete case under a type. The further generalization concerning the connection of degrees of rationality with religious experiences, and the comparison with Greek and Christian instances, required a renewed study of Greek philosophy that would bring out the connection between the unfolding of Greek metaphysics and the religious experiences of the philosophers who developed it; and a further study of medieval metaphysics had to establish the corresponding connection for the Christian case. It had, moreover, to demonstrate the characteristic differences between Greek and Christian metaphysics which could be attributed to the religious differences. And when all these preparatory studies were made, when critical concepts for treatment of the problems were formed, and the propositions were supported by the sources, the final task had to be faced of searching for a theoretically intelligible order of history into which these

variegated phenomena could be organized. (*New Science of Politics*, p. 25)

Here it becomes clear as a part of what larger and widespread effort of scholarship Voegelin regards himself, and what tasks he has set for himself.

It may be necessary to dispel the impression that Eric Voegelin might have been content to work already extant results of specialized scholarship into a quilted pattern. "Preparatory studies" were required, to be sure, and he took the fullest advantage of them. But Voegelin himself, far from merely reporting what others had done, moved into a number of fields and achieved advances in them. His construction of Plato, for instance, is an original work that has taken its place in the first rank of great interpretations of Greek philosophy. Israel's history in volume I of *Order and History* is a triumph of creative scholarship which has been acknowledged as such by the specialists. Here, as well as in the analysis of the Greek *polis* and in still other respects, Voegelin first had to make himself a master of specialized disciplines, their philological problems, their standing controversies. Voegelin thus is not a mere synthesizer. His achievement is a double one: on the one hand he reconstructed standards of relevance and concepts underlying studies of real significance; on the other hand, he pursued these studies to the level of concrete detail in various historical and cultural situations on which he has succeeded in throwing new and powerful light. A thorough appreciation of Voegelin's specialized achievements is beyond the frame of this article, which must focus on the overarching concepts that Voegelin created for the whole of his work.

This general achievement can be represented best by the two concepts which combined gave the title to his work: "Order," and "History." In the above quoted pro-

grammatic statement Voegelin assigns to a construction of history the crowning rank. "The order of history is the history of order," so he defined himself the nature of this construction. In constructing history, he first had to re-create a suitable concept of order.

Voegelin's concept of order is a far cry from what most contemporary political scientists would mean by this term. Voegelin re-created the classical notion that political order is an essay in human self-interpretation. This means that the problems of political order can be rightly understood only as one adopts the position of the self-interpreting man, looking out on life, as it were, from the inside, trying to illumine from within the reality of self and of the larger manifestations of being. The perspective is that of man participating in a whole in which he knows himself embedded without, however, being able to look on it from the vantage point of a completely detached outsider. Man thus explores himself, but he does so necessarily in a setting of larger realities that transcend his person, his community, and even the race as such. Political order inevitably involves symbolizations and speculations concerning these transcending realities. As man relates his own fleeting existence to something that he experiences as foundation, he finds meaningful orientation possible. Among the relativities of what is merely contingent, man looks for more solid pegs on which to fasten his understanding of existence and action. Voegelin's great achievement is to have restored the scientific character of political science, the science of order turning on speculations about transcendent reality.

Science always rests on a foundation of experience. Political science is no exception. It cuts itself off ideologically from experience only as it willfully excludes the typical experiences of the transcendence.

Because such experiences normally and inescapably occur to men, are typically shared by many, and can be conceptually clarified and systematized, we have the possibility of an *epistémé politiké*, a disciplined exploration of human existence in the light of the whole of being, which, cast into forms of public truth, can become political order.

On the basis of this restored concept of the science of political order, Voegelin broke through the parochial narrowness of political studies. The object of political science now is political order everywhere, as far as recorded evidence reaches. Not merely the West, the Romans and Greeks, but also the ancient structures of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Israel, as well as India, China, Mongolia, and the Arab world were included. If pre-conquest America was left out, the reason was only the absence of any written records. Wherever man has attained a form of existence by formulating his understanding of being, the universe, and himself, of "God and man, world and society," there are the proper materials for political study. Voegelin could undertake this kind of study because he had developed the "critical concepts for the treatment of the problems." He thus was able to recognize significant distinctions which positivist scientists were unable to see. He could assign to certain speculations a rank of "technical superiority," and identify in others elements of fatal irrationality. Such distinctions do not derive, as some detractors of Voegelin have charged, from this or that orthodoxy. Rather, they are based on fully developed scientific criteria of intellectual craftsmanship and comprehensiveness. A political theory which deliberately omits known empirical evidence about man and life, excludes relevant questions, begins with a "position" which it is determined to uphold, does not meet the standards of ra-

tionality. Among other attempts to discover the criteria of order, one that succeeds in differentiating and thus in discovering new aspects of reality must be accorded superiority. In any case, political thinking has a claim to the title "theory" only when motivated by a selfless love of truth. When political ideas root in a willfully chosen "position" to which a system of facts is made subservient, they constitute a perversion for which Voegelin has reserved the term "ideology."

Whether or not one agrees with Voegelin, here is the stuff for a rational discussion of political order. There are criteria of relevance, distinction, and evaluation. Voegelin has made it possible for our time to re-orient itself in terms other than ideology, personal chiliarism, shoulder-shrugging pragmatism, or blind traditionalism.

Voegelin's creation of "critical concepts for the treatment of the problems" has made it possible to include in the study of political order all the materials regarding man's political self-interpretation, from various times and parts of the globe. A full understanding of all these varieties of political order called for a construction of their relation to each other on a time scale, in other words, of the order of their history. Voegelin's work on the problems of an "intelligible order of history" has culminated in an achievement that has been compared with Toynbee's. In my view, however, it will still guide man's thinking on history when Toynbee will be remembered only as a compiler of materials.

The "order of history" emerged in the studies of different types of political order. At a certain period, a widely prevalent form was that of the "cosmological empire," in which the rhythmical pulse of nature, the cycle of fertility, divinities, and the political ruler were tightly packed into an undifferentiated ordered cosmos. An-

cient Egypt and Mesopotamia are cases in point. Against their background, then, came significant discoveries: the discovery of the soul, that of a God of righteousness, that of eternity, that of life after death. Where such discoveries had been made, peoples were seized by a "new truth" which had turned their life in a new direction and lifted it to a higher plane. Thus the distinction between types of political order is more than a taxonomic one. It leads to the discovery of something Voegelin calls a "leap in being." One day, peoples, or rather, a particular people, found itself confronted with new insights, new symbols of reality, new visions of life, in the light of which the old order faded and became unlivable. Lest he live "improperly" man felt compelled to re-orient himself. Thus he experienced, in Voegelin's words, a "turning around, the Platonic *periagogé*, an inversion or conversion toward the true source of order." The leap of being thus involves a new order of existence, something which by comparison must clearly be called "higher" than the preceding order. In the total record of political order, certain peoples and places can be identified as steps or movements toward a higher insight into life's meaning. As the movements of these people communicated themselves to all mankind, they must be considered representative. Such "leaps in being" make possible a distinction of "before" and "after," of "higher" and "lower." The succession of types of political order in time is not without meaning. While one cannot consider all of history as an intelligible data, lines of meaning are discoverable in the time sequence. A movement through time in the direction of a *telos* becomes evident and forms a legitimate and necessary object of speculation. History appears in an indistinguishable maze of meaningless events, as certain moments stand out fraught with profound

and lasting significance. These moments, capable of being linked with each other, can be characterized as irruptions of the transcendence into man's existence, the impact of the eternal on time. In this sense Voegelin remarks that only a people under God have history.

Voegelin's construction of the order of history is not yet completed. Vast reaches of humanity still have to be included in the picture. The new volume will deal with the problems of a third type of society, the "ecumenical empire." Many theoretical difficulties still remain. Voegelin himself would probably consider the task no more than half finished. One can already be sure, however, that he will succeed, that he has succeeded, even though at present we have only a fragment of the full structure.

The order of history has been the West's besetting difficulty, ever since Voltaire demolished the last vestige of the Augustinian construction, in the form of Bossuet's *Histoire Universelle*. Into the void rushed ideological substitutes, each more eager to impose its will to change things than the other. The first was Turgot's teaching that impersonal forces linked by a universal causal nexus brought forth out of all human activities, even the most destructive ones, the automatic progress of "the total mass of mankind." Turgot was followed by Condorcet, Fourier, Saint-Simon, Herder, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, Comte, Spencer, Spengler, Toynbee, to name just the more prominent among the creators of historicist ideologies. For two centuries, the West never got over the original shift of the subject character from man to History itself. The process of "becoming" was construed as if it were a substance, certainly as something that propelled itself according to its own laws, men being nothing but its products or adjuncts. Hence we now are in the habit of saying "history decrees . . .," "history moves . . .," "in accordance

with history . . . ,” etc. Those who desired to study human affairs hoped to find the key in an exploration of this mysteriously forward moving force, history. That is true not only for Marx, but, through Comte and Mill, for the entire Western intelligentsia. All modern ideologies, including those that created the aggressive totalitarianisms, have substituted the knowledge of history for ontology and ethics. In this sense the remark of a French Communist cannot be gainsaid who taunted a Western intellectual with the devastating: “Whom do *you* have to oppose to Hegel?” Maybe not yet, but certainly within a few years, we shall be able to reply: “Thank God—Eric Voegelin.”

The difficulty of this achievement appears in relief when one surveys other contemporary attempts to come to grips with the order of history—Loewith, Collingwood, Maritain, Lampert, to name a few. One cannot simply go back to Augustine. To hang the entire concept of history on to a structure of sacred events was possible then but is not possible now. Eric Voegelin has returned to Augustine in constructing the order of history on certain life-shaping experiences that happened to men in certain times and places, rather than on an assumption of forward pushing forces. In a number of respects, however, he has gone beyond Augustine. Beyond Augustine is his method, disciplined and critical scientific concepts. Beyond Augustine, too, is his range of evidence. Beyond Augustine, finally, is his craftsmanship. Like Augustine, Voegelin explores, not the meaning of history, but evidence concerning the meaning of time appearing *in* history. Although the evidence does point to movement in a certain direction, Voegelin does not falsify it through an assumption of automatic progress. Nor does he admit the ideological twist that makes the perspectives of meaning in history meet

at a point *within* time when man’s destiny shall be fulfilled. Methodically as well as empirically, a rational order of history can be construed only in terms of an eschaton, a terminal point, located beyond time. It is such a concept of history that alone makes possible an idea of mankind that does not deteriorate into the substitute-for-God notion of humanity set up by Comte as the proper object of worship.

One may ask how Voegelin himself looks upon his work and its meaning. He has not expressed himself, in so many words. But a passage in the third volume of *Order and History* may provide a clue. In a comment on the *Gorgias*, Voegelin describes Callicles in his confrontation with Socrates:

. . . we feel the tension increasing towards the point where Callicles is co-responsible, through his conniving conduct, for the murder of Socrates and perhaps of Plato himself. The social conventions, which Callicles despises, are wearing thin; and the advocate of nature is brought to realize that he is a murderer face to face with his victim. The situation is fascinating for those among us who find ourselves in the Platonic position and who recognize in the men with whom we associate today the intellectual pimps for power who will connive in our murder tomorrow. (*Order and History*, III, p. 37)

Voegelin thus sees himself “in the Platonic position,” i.e., engaged in a restoration similar to that undertaken by Plato, and confronted with the intellectual hostility of those who cling to ideologies. It has already been pointed out that he does not consider himself alone in this enterprise. He is one among many minds who have recently begun to counterattack the intellectual decay of the West. The “Platonic position” was that of the philosopher, the political scientist who finds that the founda-

tions of genuine science are all but buried beneath the destructive rubble of willful irrationality. The destruction, in our time as well as in Plato's, takes the form of numerous ideologies, among which the varieties of Positivism are the most pervading. Positivists, like Callicles, are "advocates of nature," entrenching themselves behind the seemingly impregnable position that confines the name of science to natural science and reality to phenomena. An important part of human experience, namely all experience of transcendence, is declared beyond the pale of scientific inquiry. The inquiry into human order as an "illumination from within" has been abandoned, and a mere quantitative analysis of data obtained by observation of man from without has been declared the equivalent of truth. A fallacious dichotomy of facts and values, acts and ideas has been set up, giving rise to the quick blossoming of alleged "behaviorist sciences." Genuine theory of political order fell victim, first to discouragement, then to downright destruction. The destruction which Positivists have wrought is great in all disciplines, including the natural sciences, where neglect of fundamental theoretical work at the top goes hand in hand with a rush of massively financed "projects." Nowhere, though, has the destruction of theory had as fateful results as in the realm of political order. It is no exaggeration to say that since the middle of the last century, political science as a disciplined theoretical inquiry into the foundations of human order has ceased to exist, while its place has been taken by that kind of busy work which a friend of mine is in the habit of calling "the counting of manholes."

The void left by the demise of political theory did not remain empty for long. The ideologies rushed into the breach. More than thirty years ago, Hermann Heller demonstrated in painstaking detail the direct

connection between the absence of genuine political theory and the rise of Fascism and National Socialism. The parallel with Communism need not be belabored.

The destructive effect of Positivism stems from the fact that Positivism, itself an ideology, is grimly resolved to exclude from reality what nevertheless is part of reality, and to forbid to theorists any inquiry about questions which nevertheless are being asked. From positions of great academic power they control research and ban anything resembling Plato's *epistémé politiké*. Once theory is destroyed, its reconstruction is extremely difficult. Political scientists by themselves could not achieve it, if philosophy denied itself the task. Actually, philosophy began to pull out of the night of the soul by the turn of the century. Gradually, a new awareness of theoretical problems spread to other disciplines. The above quoted passage from *The New Science of Politics* both describes what has been done and maps what needs doing. High on that list of priorities is the "elaboration of a general theory of religious experiences." In other words, man's questioning about the transcendence had to be moved back into the focus of a science of political order. An excellent beginning in that direction was made in the study of Gnosticism during the last forty years. Nineteenth-century works had collected masses of information. Only recently, however, have a number of scholars created the critical concepts through which the relevance of Gnostics from the problems of human order could be comprehended. Gnosticism then became recognizable as a pattern of religious speculation that flourished in Antiquity, had a revival in the late Middle Ages, and plays a dominant role in the modern political ideologies. Such studies enabled Voegelin to throw light on the deepest sources of disorder in our times by applying the newly

obtained concept of Gnosticism in the analysis of current political movements.

One can now say that the reconstruction of theory, and thus of potential order, has progressed quite far. On the other hand, as Voegelin pointed out in an article called "Religionsersatz" (*Wort und Wahrheit*, Jan., 1960), the creation of ideologies has slowed down. The turn for the better may, of course, be too late to save our civilization. At any rate, there is no assurance that, because Plato prevails over Callicles, Athens will flourish. This much is secured,

though: the destruction of theory by the modern sophists has been foiled. The discipline of the "arduous way," of love for truth, the awareness of the real source of order, the "things that belong to our peace," have not sunk into definite oblivion. On behalf of all of us, a courageous few, among whom Voegelin stands in the first rank, have the right now to say: "Posterity may know we have not loosely through silence permitted things to pass away as in a dream."