

Eric Voegelin, Philosopher of Consciousness

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THE SUBTITLE OF Eric Voegelin's *Anamnesis* is *Toward a Theory of History and Politics*.¹ In one respect it appears to be a contrived redundancy by a philosopher who sees politics not separated from history, but intimately bound to it. Indeed, in Voegelin consciousness emerges out of history (events) and thus establishes the field of politics.

Given the cant and the rhetoric that accompany most works of politics these days, Voegelin's cosmological understanding of history and politics seems vainly grandiose, almost hubristic. And with few exceptions, the corpus of his work lacks the combat-readiness that seems fashionable in this era of ideological confrontation. But this is only because Voegelin takes the combat to another level, both higher and deeper than the banalities that occupy most "intellectuals."

To deny that Voegelin is not combative because he largely ignores the "relevant" issues of the day is to deny his philosophy of consciousness which is, by method and conclusion, explicitly autobiographical.² Seeing many of these issues as manifestations of a corrupted

whole, Voegelin confronts the spiritual crisis of our age in which he found himself a near-victim with Hitler's rise to power.

Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) belonged to a rich legacy of emigrants to America (like Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt) and spent his enormous intellectual powers trying to grasp not only the crises of ideology (of which Nazism and Marxism were the most monstrous manifestations), but also the spiritual breakdown that paved the way for these human redefinitions. These crises were merely part of what Voegelin considered the perennial tension between man's search for certainty about the meaning of history and his place in it. Thus Voegelin is part of that noble group of thinkers who thought in terms of millennia, epochs of spiritual definition, breakdown, and redefinition. His effort to grasp the different phases in this human odyssey was driven by a Herculean commitment to understand humanity.

Voegelin was raised briefly under the stability afforded him by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then the tentative democratic surge of the Weimar Republic, and he reached intellectual maturity in the shadow of Nazism. Yet his field of investigation was not confined to this event or crisis, as a single crisis had helped shape other great philosophers,

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Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, for instance. He was not even constrained by cultures, traditions, or epochs. This is even evident in his first major book, published in 1928, a study of the "Form of the American Mind" (entitled *Ueber die Form des amerikanisehen Geistes*). But clearly the near collapse of Western civilization due to the rise of the new "political religions," *Ersatzreligion* as he called them, gave urgency to his work and the way he approached it. Henceforth, he would expand the horizon of his thought to include the entire cosmos, man's relation to the order of all Being.

The publication of *The New Science of Politics* (1952) secured his reputation in the English-speaking world. His excursus on order, and the gnostic forces arrayed against it, reached grandiose proportions with the publication of *Order and History* (1956-74, with the fifth volume made available in 1989). But the extraordinary erudition and linguistic skills he acquired were now directed toward defining humanity in terms of the consciousness of one man's place in it. He begins with the solitary philosopher.

Anamnesis is a coinage by Voegelin from the Platonic *Mnemosyne* which, understood philologically, suggests memory, or remembrance. It can be juxtaposed to *Lethe* (forgetfulness) in Hesiod and *Ameles*, from which we get our word amnesia, or forgetfulness of the soul. For Voegelin it forms the retrospective of the philosopher who connects himself by way of mnemonic experiments to the definite, concrete experiences of others. These experiences, through the philosopher's consciousness as such, form the *Homologia*, the common bond of humanity.

This bond is formed out of a definite past—those others in human order of which we are but a finite moment—and an indefinite future, formed from the ground of all Being; the resting place of the soul which searches for complete-

ness. Here one is reminded of Saint Augustine's assertion that "the seat of the mind is in memory." Of course the soul aims toward the future, the tentativeness of the unknown; but the past (hence, remembrance of what was) serves as a reckoning that sets limits to action. For Voegelin this reckoning is rendered in Plato's *Metaxy*, the in-between of temporality and the ground of divine order, the cosmos. For the philosopher, hence philosophy, there are limitations on truth, where it can be located. This is exactly why the philosopher must begin with his own consciousness first, to keep it from drifting aimlessly into dangerous speculations. Indeed, one should note the rise and decline of mental constructions which claim a "truth," each of which quickly falls out of fashion among the intellectuals.

Voegelin's anamnestic experiments are designed to situate the philosopher between the no-more (beginning, *arche* of order) and the not-yet (the divine order of the cosmos). This is the source of the philosopher's consciousness, what Voegelin terms the "divine ground." There is an existential tension here, not a polarization of opposites which drives the individual into an immediacy characteristic of most existential thought. Instead, Voegelin understands this tension as the ground of moral (hence, human) reckoning, the very source of the individual's ontological status, his *phronesis*. It is a decidedly political quality, the *sine qua non* of politics, because it connects the individual consciousness to one's ancestors, to those who ordered the history of being through their search for the divine order. This is the *cosmologia*, the order of all Being in which man (or a man) is but a part. This necessarily sets limits to philosophy, since much of what people do is "out of order." It is the philosopher's task to understand the disorder as dangerous deviations.

One such deviation, which so thoroughly characterizes modernity, is the belief in science as the ordering principle, the search for finality, hence the end of action. Here we get Hegel's *Idea* as the principle of order as well as the ordering principle; consciousness as a reflection of itself. More dangerously, of course, is Marx's materialism as the principle of mental order, the mind as the subjectification of material objects.

Voegelin's search for divine order is a search for completeness, which can only end at the very horizon of consciousness—the beginning (*arche*). This is how Voegelin de-professionalizes philosophy, by arguing that the meditative experiences create the "biography" (the *human* life) of the philosophizing consciousness in the sheer "awe of existence." This is an adaptation of Aristotle's "wonder of everything that is as it is," the foundation of the philosophical quest, the search for order. This is contrary to opinions (*doxai*) which take the world as a given, or take being for granted, none of which is capable of transcending the immediate sensual world of temporality (usually located in the "sense" of the thinker who articulates it). With these opinions, eternity is compressed into time which, politically speaking, forms the egological ideas of history (for example, Marx and Freud).

Here Voegelin's willingness, even relish, to combat the deformations of reality is apparent. His philosophy of consciousness confronts the various school philosophies as an adversary. It is not something given to man by others, not something immanent in history; it is not subjective, idealistic, or psychological, what Voegelin sees derived from the *libido dominandi*. Indeed, it requires "the analyst's willingness to reach out into all dimensions of the reality in which his conscious existence is an event, it will depend on his desire to know." This certainly forms the "elitist" strain to

Voegelin's thought.

The "desire to know" is a self-chosen activity. The lack of courage to locate one's presence in the divine ground leads to self-exclusion from the "process" of humanity. It is not inherent in nature or historical development. It stands outside the glib categories of human progress, whether couched in the language of materialism (Marx), rationality (liberals), or social development (psychologism). Contrary to the "Equalitarian Holyrollers" (as Voegelin calls them), who have contrived systems of thought (whether gnostic or apocalyptic), Voegelin's "existential virtue" (Aristotle's *phronesis*) is an individual act. The "desire to know" is a "ceaseless action of expanding," a "permanent effort in responsive openness to the appeal of reality." But above all else, it is "avoiding the self-destructive phantasy of believing the reality of which it [consciousness] is a part to be an object external to itself that can be mastered by bringing it into the form of a system."

But Voegelin confronts the system-builder at another level. For this consciousness—the "desire to know"—exists within the solitary individual. He is not an abstract type for the spinning-out of material (Marx) or rational (Voltaire, *etc.*) theories of human development. While discrete, he is concrete, but his consciousness allows for humanity temporally and transhistorically. It is not bound by the ordinance of time. By participating, the meditative consciousness has an integrative function because it goes beyond the personal to the "social, and historical existence of man." This is what Voegelin calls the "flowing presence" in the *metaxy* (tension of being). It requires the rejection of time as a constraint on consciousness.

Voegelin's theory of consciousness is further coupled to the world, hence politics, through the language of the community (and the symbols of reality it

conveys), as each member shares his consciousness—philosophizing as a plural/political phenomenon. This becomes a meditative sharing of being, and hence the beings of human community.

In as much as the consciousness of philosophizing is no “pure” consciousness but rather the consciousness of a human being, all philosophizing is an event in the philosopher’s life history—further an event in the history of the community with its symbolic language; further in the history of mankind, and further in the history of the cosmos.

But Voegelin’s “elitism” takes another twist that puts him at odds with the egalitarians. The philosophizing consciousness (of individuals) connects with other such consciousness in mutual *agnoia* (ignorance) which, when grasped as such, forms the participatory mode of being human by transcending its material, finite limitations. *Agnoia* thus forms an agonal spirit; being human requires a special effort.

Voegelin’s adaptation from Aristotle and Plato makes this formulation difficult to compress. But the sheer “wonder of everything” forms the ground of humanity through the dim awareness that I am part of an order only a portion of which is comprehensible to me (ignorance), which leads me to humanity because of my desire to understand, not myself but my existence within the order of the cosmos.

But it is through Plato that Voegelin is able to locate the finite character of a man (the particularity of a single soul) who can live in existential tension. Plato’s *diamonios aner* is, “a man who consciously exists in the tension of the in-between (*metaxy*), in which the divine

and the human partake of each other.” The God-man relation is thus arrived at through Plato’s *thnetos*, the spiritualized man “who stands over against the immortal gods.”

This is why Voegelin’s humanity requires courage, a philosophical apprehension of one’s finiteness within the cosmological order. But it is the only way humanity is possible, the only way to avoid (or confront) the reductionism and the parochialism of the modern era: race, class, mind, body, nation, state, subjectivism, objectivism. Such particularizations are mental fabrications, mere cognitive escapes (or palliatives) from the order of which man is a part. It should not be any surprise that such narrow enterprises lead to human slaughter when incorporated into political movements; humanity is not their field of expression.

It takes courage to confront one’s self with a reality whose origin precedes time and whose completeness in the divine can never be fully known. On the one side, the participating consciousness (in the reality of Being) is bound by that which cannot be knowable (hence, the need for philosophy), and on the other side by that which irrupts from the divine into the temporal (hence, the need for revelation—pneumatic experiences). From within these poles lies justice, a theory of right, which is the only source of human redemption. Pointing toward the first leads to gnostic corruption; pointing toward the latter leads to apocalyptic nightmares.

Eric Voegelin’s *Anamnesis* is a complex matrix symbolizing the search for soul through the enormous gifts of one man. We should be grateful for its reissue in paperback.

1. Translated and edited by Gerhart Niemeyer, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 213

pp. \$9.95 (paper). 2. Cf. *Autobiographical Reflections*, [1989].