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Jürgen Gebhardt

Eric Voegelin's Socratic Project. The
Noetic Origins and the Intellectual
Intentions of the *New Science of Politics* –
A Study in Intellectual History



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Intellectual History

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Jürgen Gebhardt

Eric Voegelin's Socratic Project. The Noetic Origins and the Intellectual Intentions of the *New Science of Politics* – A Study in Intellectual History¹

I. A Scholar at the Crossroads: The Walgreen Lectures

On February 20, 1950 Eric Voegelin received an invitation from Professor Jerome G. Kerwin, Chairman of the Charles R. Walgreen Foundation for the Study of American Institutions, to deliver the Walgreen Lectures at the University of Chicago. In view of the accents that had been set in political theory in earlier lectures by Leo Strauss and Jacques Maritain this invitation marked a surprising academic recognition for Voegelin as a theoretician of politics.

American institutions constituted the thematic focus of the Walgreen lectures but historical-theoretical topics were also permitted. At a critical juncture in Voegelin's work that had emerged in 1948/49, and with regard to the aforementioned lecturers who had preceded him, Voegelin took advantage of this thematic latitude to go beyond the confines of his previous work in the history of political ideas in order to distinguish himself as a political theorist. He therefore chose to present to his academic public fundamental aspects of the systematic theory of politics which he had first formulated in 1948/49 in applications to two foundations for research funds.

¹ This paper is a revised version of the lecture „Das Sokratische Projekt Eric Voegelins. Geistige Ursprünge und intellektuelle Intentionen der *New Science of Politics*“ delivered at the Workshop „60 Jahre *Neue Wissenschaft der Politik*“, held at LMU Munich on Nov. 22/23, 2019. It was translated by William Petropulos.

An additional reason for Voegelin's scientific positioning was that his publisher (Macmillan since 1944) was pressing him to complete the MS and publish the projected three volume *History of Political Ideas* (in the following, *History*). In February 1948 Macmillan had sent Voegelin an extremely critical report by an anonymous expert who had examined the form and content of the *History's* first two volumes from the standpoint of American 'main stream' scholarship. While recognizing the "scholarly quality" of Voegelin's work the critic had called into question Voegelin's entire hermeneutical-theoretical conception of 'political ideas' as well as the work's politics, history, and language. The critic wrote: the book's perspective is "different from that of English and American writers." It is "the perspective of a mid-European bred in a country with a Roman Catholic background."²

In his confidential reply to the publisher Voegelin denied the critic's philosophical competence. But he conceded: "I have confined myself to an incidental exposition of the theory on occasion of the emerging problems."³ Months later, on December 7, 1948, he submitted a report on the state of the manuscript that reveals that he was still at work on the second volume and revising the third. Decisive in our context, however, is his note that in 1946/47 he had completely rewritten the first volume. In December he wrote: "By now, the whole analysis and theoretical construction is completed."⁴ I will go into more detail concerning this fundamental remark on the *History*, for it is noteworthy that, in a letter to Friedrich Engel-Janosi written on the same day that he wrote his report

² "Report on Voegelin's *History of Political Ideas*," in Eric Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence 1924-1950, Collected Works*, vol. 29, ed. Jürgen Gebhardt (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 713. [Hereafter *Collected Works* will be abbreviated *CW*.]

³ *Ibid.*, 554.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 583-84.

to the publisher, Voegelin expressed some doubts concerning his hermeneutical-theoretical project:

“Do we understand history, or not? Or, can we perhaps understand history if we have a universal interpretation? Or, is it perhaps so that, at the end of the day, the entire effort that I have made to bring some order into the history of the political mind is nonsense?”⁵

Here, in exemplary fashion, Voegelin’s self-doubt also reveals the fundamental motive of his life as a scientist (*wissenschaftliche Existenzhaltung*): the epistemologically open question concerning the nature of the historico-political world. As I will demonstrate, this motivation opened a way of thought which was further differentiated into a number of paths along which Voegelin’s research approached its object.

As early as December 31, 1947 Voegelin told Alfred Schütz that he felt completely isolated and had no one with whom to discuss the issues that concerned him since they went beyond the horizon of the interests of his old friends who were experts in legal theory or in economics.⁶ In his reconstruction of the pre-history of Voegelin’s commitment to a systematic theory of politics, Peter J. Opitz has touched only briefly on its biographical and institutional context and on an important professional moment that influenced its course.⁷ But these aspects should be taken more fully into account.

At the time Voegelin was professor of political science at a provincial state university in the Southern United States without the right to direct doctoral dissertations. With a dozen treatises and essays he had already distinguished himself as a historian of ideas and was becoming known in the professional political science associations. He was also searching for a

⁵ Eric Voegelin to Friedrich Engel-Janosi, December 7, 1948, in *CW* 29: 585.

⁶ Voegelin to Alfred Schütz, December 31, 1947, in *Ibid.*, 543f.

⁷ Peter J. Opitz, Eric Voegelin’s *The New Science of Politics*. Kontexte und Konturen eines Klassikers. *Occasional Papers*, XL (Munich: 2003).

position at a better university. Following an invitation by the political science department of Yale University Voegelin lectured there on March 12, 1948. But a few months later – due to the opposition of begrudging colleagues – it became clear that the expected invitation to join the faculty would not materialize. In the following year the experience was repeated at the New School for Social Research where Voegelin had been under consideration to succeed the departing Leo Strauss. And the same thing happened a third time at John Hopkins University where he lectured on April 5, 1948. It is therefore no surprise that Voegelin resolved to travel to Europe in order to gain intellectual distance from the constraints he had experienced in America and to engage in a lively exchange of ideas with like-minded spirits whose work had already played an important role in the development of his own thought. His first attempt to travel to Europe did not meet with success. An invitation from the University of Vienna on April 22, 1948 opened up the possibility of taking part in a summer school organized by Friedrich von Hayek with expenses paid by the Rockefeller Foundation. But while the foundation agreed to finance Voegelin Hayek passed him over by limiting the participants to economists.⁸

In August 1948 Voegelin applied simultaneously to the Rockefeller and Guggenheim foundations for travel funds and support for a trip to Europe during his sabbatical between January and September 1949. In the Rockefeller Foundation application Voegelin announced that following the completion of the *History*, he would devote himself to work on a “system of politics”. In this connection he analyzed a constellation of thought that had emerged in the field of the history of ideas.

⁸ Voegelin to Schütz, May 2, 1948/ May 18, 1948/ May 21, 1948, in Eric Voegelin und Alfred Schütz, *Eine Freundschaft, die ein Leben ausgehalten hat: Briefwechsel 1938-1959*, ed. by Helmut Wagner and Gilbert Weiss (Konstanz: UVK, 2004) 326f./ 328f./332. See also: Voegelin to Robert Heilmann, May 19, 1948, in *A Friendship in Letters 1944-1984*, ed. Charles R. Embry (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2004), 53.

Voegelin pointed to an intellectual movement of international importance which, after the First World War, had laid the foundations for “a new science of politics.” As evidence of this movement Voegelin listed twenty scholars – we know their names because Voegelin referred to them and their work in his scholarly applications – and who, Voegelin asserted, were engaged in a movement to restore a philosophy and science of politics on the basis of a Christian or a Platonic-Aristotelian foundation. Voegelin referred to this movement as “the only bearer of a common Western tradition.” At the time Voegelin wrote these words they were a catch phrase in American intellectual discourse where it was maintained that in the event of a communist seizure of power in Middle and Western Europe this tradition would find itself in mortal danger. Thus, Voegelin’s project was entirely in line with the intentions of the foundations interested in rehabilitating intellectual life in Europe.⁹ It is not clear whether the foundations found Voegelin’s argument unconvincing or, for other reasons – perhaps a change in the foundations’ policy or the insufficient professionalism of the applications themselves – but, whatever the reason, Voegelin’s applications were rejected.¹⁰ In a letter to Henry A. Moe of the Guggenheim Foundation in August 1948 Voegelin emphasized that, following the completion of his *History*, he planned “to concentrate on the systematic exposition of a philosophy of politics and history.”¹¹ With reference to this application Moe informed Voegelin on August 28, 1948, that the Foundation would not decide on his application until March 1949, a date

⁹ Quoted in Peter J. Opitz, Eric Voegelins *The New Science of Politics*, 36-37.

¹⁰ Voegelin to Engel-Janosi, January 1, 1949, in *Correspondence Voegelin-Janosi, Voegelin Papers*, Hoover Institution Stanford; Box 11 File 8. [Hereafter the Voegelin Papers at the Hoover Institution Archives will be abbreviated to HIA-EV, and Box and File abbreviated to B. and F.]

¹¹ Voegelin to Henry Moe, August 20, 1948, in *CW* 29: 571-577. Here 572.

that would be too late for Voegelin to complete plans for the 'spring term'. A new application to the Guggenheim Foundation on October 1, 1949 requesting support in 1950 contained a detailed "plan for work", demonstrated consistency in the project's structure, and articulated a clear scientific direction. For this, now successful, application Voegelin had obtained the weighty recommendations of, among others, two renowned American political scientists – William S. Elliott of Harvard and Francis Coker of Yale.

In this proposal Voegelin precisely formulated the scientific goal of the intended research: "The overall aim of the work will be the restoration of the classic, that is, of the Platonic-Aristotelian range of a theory of politics."¹² As I will demonstrate, the conditions for the possibility of a political science *per se* were summarized in the final version of the *History's* chapter on Aristotle. This political-theoretical recourse to antiquity enlarged the civilizational and historical context of the *History* into a projected study of "types of historically successive political cultures" that extend from the pre-historical period to modern Western civilization. The study of types was augmented by a systematic-hermeneutical section, "a survey and evaluation of the main types of philosophy of history which try to interpret the manifold of political cultures as unfolding with an intelligible meaning". The final chapter was devoted to the structural analysis of the Western crisis. It is worth noting that, with Voegelin's originary semantic reference to "political culture", he introduced a concept that later, in the mid-1950s, found its way into American scholarly discourse. Voegelin's research program presented the foundation with a far reaching claim:

"I can only point to the fact that, to the best of my knowledge, nobody has attempted such a systematic theory during the present generation. The last major undertakings of this kind belong to the

¹² Quoted in Peter J. Opitz, Eric Voegelins *The New Science of Politics*, 39.

time of Max Weber and Pareto, that is to say, they belong in their conception to the beginnings of the century.”¹³

Voegelin’s self-confident assertion to be the systematic theoretician of politics in the tradition of Max Weber for his generation determined the contents of the six lectures, and especially of the *Introduction* that was added later. Peter J. Opitz is certainly right to emphasize that, in particular, Voegelin’s exposè for the Guggenheim Foundation contains *in nuce* the underlying idea of *The New Science of Politics*.

To some extent the theme of the Walgreen Lectures was a compromise between the specifications of the organizers and Voegelin’s own suggestions. On the one hand, Voegelin’s proposal to discuss the problem of representation was accepted – this in contrast to his alternative theme that would have explored the origins of political science in Hellas. However, as Voegelin’s recent essay on Marx came to Kerwin’s attention, and he asked for a treatment of the Marxian system in the lectures, Voegelin declined. But he promised to deal with Marxism in the context of his discussion of the rise of modern Gnostic mass movements. The result of these negotiations were six lectures in which, under the title of “Truth and Representation”, Voegelin skillfully wove each of his original suggestions for a theme into the lectures. This was accomplished by drawing on the materials he had gathered in his history of ideas’ studies and connecting them with his theory of the symbolical evocation of political community and to his understanding of the ancient world’s approach to the question of representation, as well as to his critique of the ideological make up of modernity. In the final analysis one can say that Voegelin stuck to the theoretical claim to restore political science – a theme that was first treated in the book’s *Introduction*. In a letter to Engel-Janosi Voegelin characterized the lectures as “a decent systematic study of the

¹³ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 41.

foundation of political science in the platonic sense (which incorporates a philosophy of history).”¹⁴

One has to agree with Peter J. Opitz when he writes that any serious examination of the *New Science of Politics* must be oriented to the coordinate system outlined above. But, in my view, that does not mean, that “in taking a look at the genesis of the projected ‘theory of politics’, [we see] that the work conducted in the years preceding it – including work on the *History* and on the project that he ceased to work on in 1930–appear as preliminary studies”, which he now took up again and further developed into a “new stage of insight.”¹⁵ Here I must raise a caveat. For it appears doubtful to me that the *New Science*’s expressly formulated program of a reconstruction of the social sciences can be understood simply as the imminent and logical development of Voegelin’s earlier work.

Indeed, I believe that the opposite is true: the Walgreen Lectures signal Voegelin’s revision of his position of the contemplative observer – the skeptical antipode to the political world. Voegelin dropped this theory in favor of a science of politics in which the potential for practical action that is inherent in the philosophical knowledge of order is asserted in society with an authoritative claim to validity. In order to explain my thesis concerning the turn in Voegelin’s position, in what follows I will draw attention to decisive moments in his thought in the mid 1930s that would contribute to the formation of Voegelin’s later reflexive self-understanding.

¹⁴ Voegelin to Engel-Janosi, March 29, 1951, in *Selected Correspondence 1950-1984*, CW 30 (2007), ed. with an Intro. by Thomas Hollweck, 72-74. Here 74.

¹⁵ Quoted in Peter J. Opitz, Eric Voegelins *The New Science of Politics*, 39.

II. On the Loneliness of the Contemplative Thinker

Around 1930 Voegelin's scientific work began to focus on his epistemological conception of a *geisteswissenschaftliche Staatslehre*. He had already taken sides in the great debate over the methods and directions of German *Staatsrechtslehre* and had opposed normative Positivism, in particular in the form that his teacher Hans Kelsen had given it. Working from this politico-theoretical position, in 1936 – and amidst the critical internal and external crisis of the Austrian republic caught up in the field of tension between totalitarian and authoritarian forms of the state— Voegelin presented in his study *The Authoritarian State* his concepts of political and philosophical order. In a critical confrontation with the leading legal doctrine of the state Voegelin examined the problem of state order in general and of the Austrian situation in particular and demonstrated the capacity of an explicitly *geisteswissenschaftliche Staatslehre* to subsume political reality under a scientific concept, beyond the positions of the conflicting parties. In the *Foreword* (written in 1935) Voegelin refers to the faith in the myth of knowledge which manifests itself in the dramatic confrontation of the theoretician with reality and which reveals to the reader “whether the struggle for the transformation of reality into truth end[s] in victory or defeat.”¹⁶

With this scholarly monograph Voegelin demonstrated that he was an independent theorist of the Austrian state and constitution who, beyond any theory, and due to his examination and criticism of the prevailing *Staatslehre*, as well as through his ordo-political position, was involved, whether he wanted to be or not, in fundamental academic and political conflicts. Whatever the particular occasion may have

¹⁶ Eric Voegelin, *The Authoritarian State, An Essay on the Problem of the Austrian State, CW 4* (1999), ed. with an Intro. by Gilbert Weiss (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri, 1989), 48.

been for the self-reflective theoretical meditation that took place immediately following the book's publication, Voegelin soon embarked on a radical personal re-orientation with regard to his understanding of the existential relationship between science and politics. This ultimately led to a philosophical revision of his thought that took him beyond the confines of his own *Staatslehre*. In an extensive dossier he addresses the question of the "originary difficulty of the science of the state": Propositions which are designed to satisfy the demands of scientific thought find themselves in constant conflict with the non-scientific ideas that dominate the scholar's socio-political milieu.

This position is the basis of Voegelin's fundamental criticism of Max Weber's value free social science: it is an auxiliary science for politics. "Its selection of problems was determined by the politician's goals and intentions: the scholar's and the politician's interests moved in the same direction and they divided the work between them." But the conflict that arises does not stem from the all too close contact between science and politics in the form of a confrontation between the conscientiousness of the scholar with his superior cognitive powers and the unscrupulousness of the person engaged in practical affairs. Rather it comes about precisely because the distance between contemplation and its object also creates a distance between the scientist and the acting person. And when scientific judgments fail to conform to the political actor's dogmas, the scientist encounters resistance. If the disagreements grow too large the political actor will prevent further contemplation by any means necessary.

What then defines the way of life (*existentielle Haltung*) that is constitutive for science? "By its very nature, ... contemplation draws the human being out of his entanglement with nature and society. ... He consciously takes a position on the border, outside the realm of becoming, and observes it in deep contemplation (*Anschauung versunken*) as it unfolds before him

in order to discover its origins, grounds, and forms – its wherefrom, why, and how.” In the same way that political action is an expression of human activity, so are the manifestations of the life of contemplation. Where they differ is in their “existential content”: the life of contemplation “constitutes[s] a negation of politics.” Thus, from “the time of antiquity, the conflict between political life and the life of contemplation has been present in European communities.” [...] “Plato, the contemplative-active thinker in the spirit of the statesman, believed that he had solved the conflict when he ascribed power to ideas and envisioned a state that would be governed by the wise”. [...] “The German *Staatslehre* followed Kant, Schiller, Hegel and Schelling in the pursuit of the endlessly distant goal of an apolitical community of reason, the fruit of the political efforts of humankind”. For the present Voegelin finds that a democratic citizenry that lives as politically intense a life as the Greek Polis did or as the United States does, will “not tolerate the individual who detaches himself [from society] and responds by excluding him. For, what withdraws itself from the state, is opposed to the state: “All thought about the state is potential treason – the fate of Socrates.”

Notwithstanding this historical conflict, the intentio of the life-transcending *vita contemplativa* is the act of a human being and, as such, is intertwined with the life that it negates. For it is tied to life in so far as contemplation expresses itself in scientific and philosophical propositions and through the communication of its results it strives to gain supporters—not just for the life of contemplation in general, but for the results of its specific mediations.¹⁷ Only under this condition, can theory, rooted in the nature of man, make a well-founded and important contribution to the community. In 1936, in his

¹⁷ Voegelin, Ms. (1936?), *Die ursprüngliche Schwierigkeit der Wissenschaft vom Staat* 1d-f, in HIA-EV, B 55, F 11. Cf. Jürgen Gebhardt, “Zwischen Wissenschaft und Religion. Zur intellektuellen Biographie in den 30er Jahren”, *Politisches Denken. Jahrbuch 1995/96* (1996), 223-304.

examination of the relationship of adult popular education, science, and politics, under the conditions of the new order of the Austrian State, Voegelin explained this view with reference to the, in his mind, religiously connotated struggle of *Weltanschauungen*. Already in his reflections on the foundations of *Staatslehre* Voegelin had begun increasingly to refer to decisive moments in the classical-Christian tradition. Now in his self-reflection concerning the nature of the theory of contemplation, he explicitly professed the fundamental principles of “occidental science”. The:

“question of what the essence of science is, cannot be answered by supplying a list of its contents or methods, but only with reference to a specifically possible orientation of man to *theoria*, to *contemplatio*. In this we follow Aristotle’s opinion that *theoria* is the faculty of the *theiōtaton* in a human being, the spirit. From this determination of essence we can shed light on the laws of meaning concerning the relationship of the theorist (in the classical sense) to the practices of communal volition, and communal thought and action.”¹⁸

Like the practitioner of politics, the theoretician is, of necessity, tied to the community. But beyond community interests lies the theoretician’s effort to grasp the “essentially infinitely widening of his horizon, a survey of the world; among all great Western thinkers this survey has the goal of grasping the order of the world in its articulation all the way to its origin in God.” Here Voegelin takes a step that would be decisive for his further thought and, with reference to Jacques Maritain, identifies the substance and *telos* of contemplative theory as the mystical contemplation of God. The *fruitio Dei* is “the secret motive of all genuine ‘theoretical’ orientation”.¹⁹ In this way Voegelin grounded hermeneutic epistemology in metaphysics.

¹⁸ Eric Voegelin, “Popular Education, Science, and Politics” in *Published Essays 1934-1939*, *CW* 9, ed. with an Intro. by Thomas W. Heilke (2001), 79-90. Here 86. [A few changes were made in the translation. W.P.] The original text: “Volksbildung, Wissenschaft und Politik”, in *Monatsschrift für Kultur und Politik*, 1. Jg., H. 7, 1936: 554-603.

¹⁹ *CW* 9: 86-87.

In view of the situation of the state and cultural politics of his time which were being torn apart in the conflicts of the various *Weltanschauungen*, Voegelin sees the functional value of critical-theoretical thought in its “openness to the world.” On the one hand, in view of the diversity of the forms of human socialization, theoretical openness works against the demonic closure of a society, whether in the form of a divinization of the people or of a class. But, on the other hand, in the eyes of the community the autonomous contemplative thinker’s fundamental criticism of the form of life dominant in a community and its spiritual orientation is a scandal. In the final analysis it is an alien and dangerous “element of decomposition.”

Voegelin confronted this issue directly. For, as the proponent of such a theory, he was increasingly engaged not only in theoretical conflicts but also in very practical ones. In an article in the *Neuen Freien Press* on November 7, 1937, he raised the question: “What May People Be Allowed to Know?” In other words, the critical case of Socrates now loomed as a possibility:

“Great difficulties for a perfect organization of loyalty arise from the fact that people are not only political beings, but are also equipped with an apolitical mental existence. And people who have made it their profession to seek knowledge of reality without regard to social and political tabus are a particular nuisance.”²⁰

And universally:

“Every political culture, that has at the same time developed a scientific culture, is faced with the problem of protecting its [political] organization of loyalties from [subversion through critical] knowledge.” In times of crisis this brings the sciences of history, and of the state and society, into a difficult position, for it is not permitted that certain things become known: Wise men have therefore drawn the conclusion that many things should be said only

²⁰ Erich Voegelin, “What may People be Allowed to Know” in *Ibid.*, 118.

within a small circle and certain things should be told to no one, as Plato has shown in his VII. Letter.²¹

In a certain sense this skeptical position concerning contemplative science may owe a debt to the political constellation of the time. However, beyond this, it expresses the spiritual (*geistig*) form-principle of Voegelin's scholarly existence which, in critical distance to the bustling and inchoate activity of the political world, hermeneutically interprets the forms of the manifestations of human existence in society and history in critical-skeptical distance.

III. The Hermeneutic Heuristics of Understanding the World and the Platonic-Socratic Question

The contradiction between the scholar's knowledge of reality and the dominant self-interpretation of a society shaped the concept of Voegelin's next two major theoretical projects, *The Political Religions* (1938), written while he was still in Europe, and the *History of Political Ideas* which he worked on in the first years of his emigration. Both works share the same hermeneutical and theoretical methodological orientation (*Theorieansatz*). Nevertheless, it can be shown that with regard to Voegelin's self-understanding, there remained a contradiction in his approach that he was first able to resolve in *The New Science of Politics*.

In part *The Political Religions* came to be written due to the fundamental spiritual and political crisis of European civilization. Voegelin's analysis of this crisis is informed by a theory of 'political religiosity' that is supported by a history of civilization. Under the title of "Die Staatsbriefe der Mongolenkhane" [The Diplomatic Correspondence of the Mongol Khans] (1936) Voegelin examined – for the first time

²¹ Ibid.

and exemplified by the sacred order of the Mongol Khans – the intention of a politico-religious structure of an historical complex of order in the light of a theory of universal history. Subsequently, in the *Political Religions* Voegelin developed the central thesis of political community that is built on the integral unity of power, legal organization, and religious order, and which Voegelin describes with the concept of “political religion”. In a *tour d’horizon* of universal history he reconstructs the manifestations of “political religions” from the Pharaohs, through the religion of the Polis and the medieval empire, up to the modern state and the mass movements of Communism and National Socialism which substitute the *Theiotatum* of the historically given high religions with an inner-worldly *Theiotaton* and make sacred a nation, a class, or a race. Historically, the inner-worldly religions emerge out of the transformation of the Christian idea of community into the idea of an inner-worldly collective which understands itself to be a sacred order *sui generis*. The book ends with this judgment which irritated, among others, Thomas Mann. For, although the book’s *Preface* points to the ultimate and decisive reason why the world is in a grave crisis, namely, due to the secularization of the spirit, and although all important thinkers agree with this diagnosis, nevertheless, an answer to the crisis would require a healing through religious renewal, something which to a large extent could only be inaugurated by great religious personalities. And even with regard to this point, the skeptical judgment remains valid. For:

“[i]n the full light of history stands the political-religious tragedy of Socrates, the man who was called by the divine voice of his daimon and the charge by the oracle at Delphi to conduct a political-religious reform in his polis and was destroyed by its resistance.”²²

The contradiction between the scholar’s knowledge of reality and the socially dominant understanding of a society also

²² Eric Voegelin, *The Political Religions*, in *Modernity without Restraint*, *CW* 5: 19-74, ed. with an Intro. by Manfred Henningsen (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2000). Here 44.

shaped Voegelin's original conception of a single volume *History of Political Ideas*, which was intended to replace George Sabine's popular *History of Political Theory*. The following remarks by Voegelin – let me make this clear – refer to the original *Introduction* to the *History*, written in 1939, and which – so I will demonstrate – once again explicitly discusses the problem of political theory in the spirit of Voegelin's reflections in the 1930s, with which we have already become acquainted. Thus, in his 1946 response to the author of a critical report on this earlier version of the *History*, Voegelin underlines the fact that the “principles of interpretation which I use were developed after the breakdown of an attempt to write a systematic theory of politics (around 1930).”²³

Voegelin's hermeneutic conception of the *History* is based on a concept of the “political idea” which is specific to him. The “political idea” is an evocative power that creates order and which, by virtue of the magic of the myth, evokes the political community in a form analogous to the structure of the cosmos. The political idea creates a political cosmion. This principle of construction has determined the history of the occidental world from its beginnings in the Assyrian and Egyptian empires up to the contemporary modern national state. The history of the West is interpreted as a process – rich in its varieties – of the evocation of political order. Voegelin's analytical approach changes the meaning of the term “political idea” and with it the conventional tie between “political theory” and “political idea”.

According to Voegelin, the term ‘theory’ is generally used in an indefinite and arbitrary manner, often as a synonym for “political idea”. Voegelin formulates the concept more precisely “as meaning contemplation, *theoria* in the Aristotelian sense:“

²³ Voegelin to Francis Coker, May 1, 1946, in CW 29: 464.

“... it would be the product of detached contemplation of political reality. Political theory in the strict sense obviously must be a very rare phenomenon in history. It is doubtful if an attitude of complete detachment has ever been obtained at all, and certainly there is no continuous process by which a theory of politics evolves and grows into a system, as theoretical physics does.”²⁴

“Every serious attempt of contemplation will meet, therefore, with the resistance of the political forces in the cosmos as soon it receives publicity and influence.”²⁵

The thoughts of even the deepest thinkers are embedded in the reality of the cosmos in which they live. “Aristotle is limited by the existence of the polis, Thomas by the idea of the Christian empire, Bodin by the French nation state.” Political theory in this sense would not question the value of the analogy of the cosmos.²⁶

“And the individual thinker who cannot resist the intellectual temptation to explore this delicate subject matter to the limit will probably be reluctant to hand over the results of his inquiry to a larger public, [...] for reasons that it would be difficult to explain here and now. Anyway, we know of [...] historic instances, as in the case of Plato, that the theorist did not tell all he knew and we may safely assume that the most important results of political theory never have, and never will, become known except to the more or less happy few.”²⁷

This thought, let me note, is in accord with the distinction that Strauss made between exoteric and esoteric knowledge.

Voegelin sent this Introduction to Max Mintz, who commented critically:

²⁴ Eric Voegelin, *Introduction to the History of Political Ideas*, in *History of Political Ideas*, I. *Hellenism, Rome, and Early Christianity*, CW 19, ed. with an Intro. by Athanasios Moulakis (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 225-239. Here 231.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 232.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.

“You are writing a history of political ideas, in which – to a certain degree – you include political theory. If you do not intend to develop a political theory of your own when you interpret the theorists, what prevents you from listing the motives that prevented them from sharing their ultimate results to the many? Or, do you want to suggest that, to the extent that the writer of history must also be a theoretician, he must also share the theoretician’s discretion?”²⁸

In response Voegelin tried to explain that what is at issue here is the “existential problem of theory in the Aristotelian sense of the term.” “Theory is not just a statement about objects but a way of life [*Lebenshaltung*] in regard to them.” Radical contemplation is in itself ambivalent. On the one hand it implies a withdrawal from political reality; on the other hand it takes action by publishing the results of its thought. This leads to the question:

“Isn’t an attitude of radical contemplation self-contradictory? Perhaps it is immoral because it destroys the magic of the idea, which is the soul of praxis. And as long as life is lived it is only possible within the magic of the idea. The practice of contemplation is strictly individual, solitary, and cannot construct a social order; therefore should it not, as Plato maintained, be kept a secret, at least as far as its most disturbing results are concerned? But then again, it must be cultivated because otherwise every idea that emerges at some point in history would have to remain sacrosanct and could not be criticized. But, this again, would be immoral, because it would make moral development toward higher forms of social order impossible. What would be the result: that ‘progress’ with a good conscience would only be possible if a thinker were clever enough to criticize and to destroy, and at the same time stupid enough to believe that he himself had found the solution to the problems through his new magic? For Plato the answer is that it is forbidden to record the wise man’s secrets in writing.”

Voegelin added that this problem was all the more important to him because:

“in the chapter on the Greeks I am faced with the question of whether, in the analysis of Plato, I should discuss the problem of his secret or not. The principle of the platonic solution: the

²⁸ Max Mintz to Voegelin, March 22, 1940, in *Correspondence Voegelin–Mintz*, in HIA-EV B21 F33. [Trans. W.P.]

institutionalization of contemplation at the summit of a spiritual hierarchy, which the 'people' are to believe in the 'myth', is of course a problem for all times, and I would not like to pass over it in silence."²⁹

Mintz advised Voegelin to delete the passage, and added: "I would suggest that you treat the problem historically and theoretically in the chapter on the Greeks."³⁰ Voegelin obviously took this advice and revised the original chapter on the Greeks that Mintz had read. He also revised the chapter on Plato in the same way, much to Mintz's satisfaction, who called the chapter beautiful (*wunderschön*) and emphasized in particular the reference to Voegelin's comparison of the relationship of the *Politeia* to the *Nomoi* to the relationship between the *Sermon on the Mount* and the Church.³¹ This means that Mintz worked with an analysis of Plato, that at least in this point, is identical with the reconstruction of an undated handwritten chapter on Plato, "The Myth of the Soul", that was published by Peter J. Opitz.³² In a few decisive points, which I can only touch on briefly here, the text shows that in thinking through the conditions for the possibility of a Platonic science of politics Voegelin entered uncharted spiritual and intellectual territory.

²⁹ Voegelin to Mintz, April 11, 1940, in *CW* 29: 243-245. Here 244f.

³⁰ Mintz to Voegelin, April 21, 1940, in *Correspondence Voegelin–Mintz*, HIA-EV B21 F33 [Trans. W.P.]

³¹ Mintz to Voegelin, October 13, 1940, *Ibid.* [Trans. W.P.]

³² Peter J. Opitz, ed. *Eric Voegelin, Plato's Myth of the Soul*. Transcribed by Elisabeth von Lochner, *Occasional Papers*, XX (Munich, January 2001).

IV. Platonism in Politics

The evocation of the political cosmion – in analogy to the cosmos – through the magic power of the “political idea” is at the same time relativized by the form of the myth that is present in the person of Plato. Thus, Plato’s work is unique and of lasting importance. For Plato does not formulate a system of political theory whose primary function is to lay the “foundation of an empire.” His work is “the first great approach to a theory in the technical sense of the word. This event is assuredly accepted as a gift from heaven; all of a sudden political theory begins.”³³ With Plato Voegelin revised his understanding of the role of political theory: it becomes an evocative function in the creation of order. In large measure *The Seventh Letter* loses its meaning as a reference to secret knowledge that is not to be discussed openly, and, instead, is in essence understood to articulate the self-understanding of an elitist communitarian society of like-minded souls.

“The basic principle of Plato’s political theory is the parallelism between the soul and the polis. The myth of the cosmos as a hierarchy of souls is transferred on the theoretical level into the methodological axiom that the structure of the political events corresponds to the structure of the human soul.”³⁴

This is not a question of analogy or parallelism:

“But the order of the polis is the order created out of the order of the soul; not of anybody’s soul but of the soul of the philosopher-king. And the soul of the philosopher-king is the ordering principle of the polis, because it has been transferred through communication with the order of God into the earthly reality of that divine order.”

“This new formula establishes the mystic contemplation of God as the basis of the science of man not only for Greece but also for later antiquity and for the Christian World”. With a glance at the Apostle Paul and the problematic of the *Sermon on the Mount* and the Church, Voegelin writes:

³³ Ibid., 15.

³⁴ Ibid., 17.

“Theoretical achievement in political science is determined by the degree in which the scientist himself is a mystique who is able to penetrate to the a-dogmatic contemplation of Divinity, or, if he is not a mystic himself, by the degree to which his work rests on a mystic culture and the ontology developed by it. ... The Platonic mythical creation could have the influence on Christianity which they[sic] actually had, because the Christian civilization is also based on mystic (contemplation?) and the elaboration of a view of the world which is closely related to the Greek theory.”³⁵

“The theory of Plato had the features of his mysticism, but it has the limitations imposed by his task as a statesman in the polis-world of the 4th century BC.”³⁶

The 1940/41 text marks a change in Voegelin’s understanding. He resolves the relationship of tension between the solitary thinker’s radical contemplation and political reality in favor of the obligation of the theoretician, by virtue of his knowledge, to make the form and content of the evocation of order in the social cosmion the immediate object of theory. As Voegelin noted in 1942, “(b)y the experience of social disorder the human mind is provoked to create order by an act of imagination in accordance with its ordering idea of man.” Plato was defeated by the disorder of the Polis “but the *Republic* stands as the first theoretical system of social order in the Western world.”³⁷ Consequently, in the chapter here under discussion, Voegelin comes to the conclusion:

“A sound political science would presuppose a well elaborated anthropology, a science of human nature in all its aspects, biological, psychological and spiritual. This rule has remained the guiding principle of political science from Plato up to this day.”³⁸

³⁵ Ibid., 16f.

³⁶ Ibid., 17.

³⁷ Eric Voegelin, *The Theory of Legal Science*, in *The Nature of Law and Other Legal Writings*, CW 27, ed. by Robert Anthony Pascal et al., with an Intro. by Robert A. Pascal and James Babin (Baton Rouge: LSU, 1991), 95-112.

³⁸ Peter J. Opitz, ed. *Plato’s Myth of the Soul*, 18.

Here again we see confirmed the tie between the personality of the contemplative thinker and the claim that there is a scientifically demonstrable knowledge of things. And Voegelin's self-reflexive insight is also confirmed – unlike the contemplative radicalism that he maintained in the 1930s – that political science is possible only in so far as the life of the mystic is understood by the scholar himself. In this sense, in a letter to Alfred Schütz, Voegelin explained his understanding of the nature of research into intellectual history. The principle philosophical goal of a history of ideas:

“ must be to understand the historical expressions [*Ausformungen*] of the spirit as variations on the theme of experiences of transcendence [...]. The primary purpose of the historical meditation is to penetrate the other thinker's spiritual-historical Gestalt to the point of transcendence and, in such a penetration, to school and clarify one's own expression of experiences of transcendence.”

In this sense “spiritual-historical understanding is a catharsis, a *purgatio* in the mystical sense of the word with the personal goal of the *illuminatio* and the *unio mystica*.”³⁹ Voegelin's reflection and self-reflection on the meditative complex – here and later – explicitly refers to the principles of the hermeneutic exegesis of the symbolic language (*Formsprache*) of human experiences on the border between the world and transcendence. It also led to Voegelin's recourse to the mystically connotated “Platonic-Augustinian meditation” which caused some interpreters to view Voegelin as a “mystical philosopher” and to interpret him theologically.⁴⁰ The paradigmatic relevance of experiences of transcendence in the anamnetic reflections of Augustine and Descartes follow objectively from their exemplary importance for philosophy *per se* as “an order of symbols that enables man to understand

³⁹ Voegelin to Schütz, September 17, 1943, in *CW* 29: 363-379. Here 373.

⁴⁰ Frederic Lawrence, “The Problem of Eric Voegelin, Mystic Philosopher and Scientist”, in *International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Eric Voegelin*, ed. by Stephen A. Mcknight & Geoffrey L. Price (Columbia: Univ. Of Missouri Press, 1997), 53.

his place in the world."⁴¹ However, and beyond any form of Augustinianism, in Voegelin's own anamnestic experiences undertaken in 1943 he revealed his own "*radices* of philosophizing." The anamnestic experiment narrates and meditates twenty of his own early childhood memories whose content "may on principle either move back from present problems and their excitations, in order to find the occasions on which the excitement erupted, or [...] may move forward from the excitations and the memory of their occasion, toward present problems."⁴² In 1946 Voegelin pointed out to J.E. Palmer that the occasion for his anamnesis was the question, whether the Cartesian type of meditation can provide a legitimate approach to a philosophy of the spirit.

"I denied the legitimacy on the ground that the life of the spirit and intellect is historical in the strict sense, and that the determinants of mature philosophical speculation have to be sought in the mythical formation of the mind in experiences of early youth. In order to prove my point, I made anamnestic experiments on myself and collected twenty-odd such early experiences which determined my later metaphysical attitudes."⁴³

Up to now little attention has been devoted to this biographical information. But Voegelin considered it to be of such importance that, on leaving Munich in 1969, he gave each of his associates a copy of the text. The anamnestic experiments are therefore important, both for the development of Voegelin's hermeneutics of theoretical consciousness (*bewusstseinstheoretische Hermeneutik*) in the years that followed as well as for the development of his personal concept of the mysticism of world-distance (*Mystik der Weltdistanz*).

⁴¹ Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis. On the Theory and History of Politics*, CW 6, ed. with an Intro. by David Walsh (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2002), 83.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴³ Letter of Voegelin to J.E. Palmer, November 5, 1946, in CW 29: 479.

The self-reflective exploration of the metaphysical roots of his own theory of order (circa 1943) connects objectively (*sachlogisch*) the material analysis of the post-Christian situation of crisis in Europe with the immediate and very personal question of self-commitment to the *officium sapientis* as the preserver of the spirit (*Bewahrer des Geistes*) in a de-spiritualized political world. If, as we saw above, at one time the contemplative thinker's awareness of his alienation from society shaped the specific hermeneutic of Voegelin's history of ideas as the heuristics of political evocation, now in working through the material of subsequent studies, Voegelin saw that this position had become untenable. And it had become untenable because it had become increasingly clear to Voegelin that the political evocations of the cosmion are manifestations of political ideas that emerge out of the multi-formed power (*Wirkmächtigkeit*) of the human personality in its entirety in the struggle of the imagination to create order. As early as Voegelin's *Introduction* to the study of political ideas in the Middle Ages, political ideas were set in the Platonic context that we discussed above. Voegelin wrote: the "political evocation of the empire based on the evocation of the spiritual Christian community" reveals:

"that the evolution of the Platonic soul is equivalent to evolutions in the Christian period that stretch over centuries. Medieval spiritual political theory is, therefore, not an isolated phenomenon. It appears unique only if we ignore the spiritual foundation of Plato."⁴⁴

Historically, the crisis of the decay of the Christian evocation at the beginning of the modern era under the pressure of counter-speculative inner-worldly forces meant that the evocative moment of the spirit could now only be represented by the spiritual realism of individual political thinkers such as Dante, Machiavelli, Bodin, Vico, or Schelling. As Voegelin in the course of his examination of the beginnings of modernity

⁴⁴ Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas*, II, *The Middle Ages to Aquinas*, CW 20, ed. Peter von Sivers (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1997), 37-38.

states: the spiritual realist “is moved by the spirit and is able to produce an order of values out of his immediate spiritual experiences.”⁴⁵ Consequently in 1944 Voegelin spoke of “Platonism in politics:”

“as the attempt, perhaps hopeless and futile, to regenerate a disintegrating society spiritually by creating the model of a true order of values, and by realistically using the material for the model the elements present in the substance of society.”⁴⁶

If Voegelin later spoke of a period of “indecision if not paralysis”, it was not due solely to doubts about the heuristic approach to his history of political evocation but also—and equally important—to considerations concerning his own self-understanding as a scholar who, in the course of these critical years, would commit himself to the order-creating critical political science in the sense of the public mandate of Platonic political theory. Thus, in 1945 he stated that more is at stake than a simple history of theories. And in a discussion with Leo Strauss in 1950 he demoted such histories to conventional “histories of dogma”. On the other hand, the history of ideas is:

“a history of existential transformations in which the ‘truth’ comes to sight, is obscured, is lost, and is again recovered. A history of political ideas, in particular, should investigate the process in which ‘truth’ becomes socially effective or is hindered in such effectiveness.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas*, III. *The Later Middle Ages*. CW 21, ed. David Walsh (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1998), 70. Cf. Jürgen Gebhardt, “Erfahrung und Wirklichkeit – Anmerkungen zur politischen Wissenschaft des spirituellen Realismus”, in *Philosophie of Order*, ed. by Peter J. Opitz and Gregor Sebba (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 332-344.

⁴⁶ Eric Voegelin, “Nietzsche, the Crisis and the War” in *Published Essays 1940-1952*, CW 10, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia: Univ. Of Missouri Press, 2000), 126-156. Here 142.

⁴⁷ Voegelin to Leo Strauss, January 2, 1950, in CW 30: 41f. Here 42.

In the light of this framing of the question the history of ideas was transformed into a “comprehensive systematic critique of politics and modern civilization.”⁴⁸

V. The New Science of Politics as a ‘Platonic Science of the State’

As I explained above, *The New Science of Politics* (hereafter referred to as *The New Science*) documents a revision of Voegelin’s project. The Walgreen Lectures must be recognized as a theoretical new beginning. Voegelin understood them to be a “systematic study on the foundation of a political science in the Platonic sense.”⁴⁹ But, in my view, this formulation in no way implies a departure from the principle of a hermeneutic ‘Geisteswissenschaft of Politics’. On the contrary, it asserts that its theoretical claim to validity can be traced back historically to Plato’s work – as Voegelin presents it in the revised and final version of the chapter on Plato in volume three of *Order and History*.

The Platonic departure is already present at the beginning of the chapter on *Gorgias* in volume three of *Order and History*:

“‘War and Battle’ are the opening words of the *Gorgias*, and the declaration of war against the corrupt society its content. [...] The battle is engaged in a struggle for the soul of the younger generation. Who will form the future leaders of the polity: the rhetor who teaches the tricks of political success, or the philosopher who creates the substance in soul and society?”⁵⁰

This is the call to battle that Voegelin heeds:

⁴⁸ Voegelin to H. McCurdy, October 8, 1945, in *CW* 29: 449f. Here 450.

⁴⁹ Voegelin to Friedrich Engel-Janosi, March 29, 1951, in *CW* 30: 72-74. Here 74.

⁵⁰ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, III, *Plato and Aristotle*, *CW* 16, ed. Dante Germino (Columbia: Univ. Of Missouri Press, 2000), 78.

“The transfer of the Authority from Athens to Plato is the climax of the *Gorgias*. [...] The transfer of authority means that the Authority of Athens, as the public organization of a people in history, is invalidated and superseded by a new public authority manifest in the person of Plato.”⁵¹

“The revelation of the divinity in history moves on; the authority rests with the men who live in the friendship with God...”⁵²

In 1950, when Voegelin interrupted his work on the *History* at a critical point in order to prepare the six Walgreen lectures, he situated himself in the Platonic tradition with the programmatic announcement that the “theorist is the representative of a new truth in rivalry with the truth represented by society.”⁵³ This is the decisive new approach in *The New Science* and the answer to the Platonic-Socratic question. The final revision of the study on Plato, whatever its place on a timeline of Voegelin’s work, places Plato at the center of Voegelin’s reflexive reconstruction of the history of the symbolic explication of the order of man and society. “There is a clear sense in which Voegelin identifies with Plato and found himself in the ‘Platonic position’.”⁵⁴

“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.”⁵⁵

„The Truth of the philosopher is discovered in the previously analyzed experiences of Socrates–Plato. ... Truth is not a body of propositions about a world-immanent object, it is the world-transcendent summum bonum. When through the experiences of the Socratic-Platonic type, eternity enters time, we may say that ‘truth’ becomes historical.”⁵⁶

⁵¹ Ibid., 93.

⁵² Ibid., 99.

⁵³ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 70. CW 5: 144.

⁵⁴ Dante Germino, *Introduction*, in *Order and History*, III, CW 16: 25.

⁵⁵ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, III, 91.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 41.

This is the critical yardstick for the truth which is at the center of *The New Science*: the question of the representation of truth. Starting with the elementary political science concept of “representation” Voegelin proceeds to the historically and empirically demonstrated concept of existential representation which symbolically expresses the unity that endows society with meaning and which ultimately demonstrates society to be the “representative of a transcendent truth”. This complex of societal truth is followed by the concept of “transcendental truth” which answers the question: “what is the truth that is represented by the theorist, this truth that furnishes him with the standards by which he can measure the truth represented by society? What is the source of this truth that apparently is developed in critical opposition to society?”⁵⁷ At this point the question can be objectively treated within the framework of a theory of history. If, in principle, the understanding of the doctrine of evocation in the ancient orient, ancient Greece, Western Christianity, and in nation-state modernity was the eternal return of the same, now with the concept of the “historicity of truth”, it becomes possible to map the field of the emerging typology of truth: The experience of “cosmological truth” which the earlier empires represented, was replaced by the “anthropological truth” of ancient Greece in the platonic-Aristotelian experiential complex. This in turn was decisively enlarged by the emergence of the “soteriological truth” of Christianity. This philosophically and historically demonstrated transcendent truth brings “ultimate clarity concerning the *conditio humana*” – a claim which Karl Jaspers made for the Axial Age, although, as Voegelin points out, Jaspers did not take into account the “soteriological truth” of Christianity.

⁵⁷ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 53. CW 5: 130.

VI. The New Science of Politics: A Reply to Max Weber

Following the completion of his lectures in January/February 1951 Voegelin edited the manuscript for publication under the title of “The End of Modernity. An Introduction to the *New Science of Politics*.” Peter J. Opitz has pointed out that this wording does not appear in the lectures themselves nor in the *Introduction* that was added for the book publication. It first appeared in 1952 as the title was chosen because it provided an effective clarification for the public concerning the book’s programmatic intention. The *Introduction* now brought the author’s scientific-theoretical claim before a larger scholarly public and – it may be assumed – was also meant to be a reply to David Easton’s fundamental critique of the historicism of the history of ideas school in academic political theory. Easton made his argument in the February 1951 issue of the *Journal of Political Science* under the title of “The Decline of Political Theory.” Voegelin replied to this criticism in the first section of the *Introduction*: “Political theory and philosophy of history. Decline of political science and restoration.”

Voegelin takes up the question as it was formulated by Easton and deals with it fundamentally in the form of a confrontation with the thought of Max Weber – the thinker who for Voegelin was always the authoritative representative of modern positivist social science. He takes Weber at his word and begins with Weber’s scholarly credo, that science, “in the name of intellectual honesty (*Rechtschaffenheit*)” claims to be “the only possible form of the intellectual contemplation of the world.”⁵⁸ Voegelin responds to Weber with the thesis of restoring political science to a state that can do full justice to this claim and not, like Weber, merely resorts to the limited claim of having “faith in the value of scientific truth that

⁵⁸ Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, I. ed. Johannes Winkelmann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1972), 569.

brings theoretical order to empirical reality.”⁵⁹ Voegelin’s counter-project determines “the meaning of science as a truthful account of the structure of reality, as the theoretical orientation of man in his world, and as the great instrument of his own position in the universe.”⁶⁰ Throughout this scientific dialogue Weber is Voegelin’s partner. Therefore Voegelin begins with a critical assessment of Weberian science: “Thus far the work of Weber can be characterized as a successful attempt to disengage political science from the irrelevance of methodology and to restore it to theoretical order. The new theory toward which he was moving, however, could not become explicit because he religiously observed the positivistic taboo on metaphysics.”⁶¹ Or, to put it apodictically: In Voegelin’s self-understanding, he has brought the Weberian way to the truth of science to its completion.

In this manner the truth of science that has its foundation in the symbolical explication of Platonic-Aristotelian experience – “anthropological truth” – comes into play. It was historically completed in the “soteriological truth” of the Christians, in so far as the transcendence of human-being was proclaimed in the Church’s constitution of a mystical community of the faithful. When we look at this symbol complex of the manifestations of transcendent truth in history we see the legitimation of the turn that Voegelin’s thought took in the 1930s with its commitment to “Occidental Science”. Its essential content now becomes clear: there is a “strict correlation between the theory of human existence and the historical differentiation of experiences in which that existence has gained its self-understanding”, the horizon of which is metaphysically determined. To the extent that the “differentiating

⁵⁹ Max Weber, *Soziologie – Weltgeschichtliche – Analysen – Politik*, ed. Johannes Winkelmann (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1968), 260.

⁶⁰ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 5. CW 5: 91.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 21. CW 5: 104.

experiences” of the ancient philosophers and the Christian *patres* articulated the multi-dimensional reality of God, man, and nature, “theory is bound to move within the historical horizon of classic and Christian experiences”.⁶² In *The New Science* Voegelin develops a theory of the order of man and society that is exclusively Euro-centrally legitimized. It is “a Western symbolism because Western society has received its historical form through Christianity.”⁶³

As I have shown, Voegelin’s theoretical foundation of science is a re-theoretization of science that builds on Max Weber’s approach. Voegelin understands his work to constitute a restoration of the “dignity of a theoretical science”, i.e., a “theoretization which starts from the concrete, historical situation of the age, taking into account the full amplitude of our empirical knowledge”.⁶⁴ Thus, it is not a question of a literary Renaissance of a Platonic or Augustinian tradition – which some of Voegelin’s critics, not entirely without grounds, wished to believe (and some still do). Rather it is a theoretical overview of the manifold forms in which a theoretical renewal of the humanities (*geisteswissenschaftliche Disziplinen*) have become manifest, the breadth of which is associated with such names as Toynbee, Jaspers, Cassirer, and Hauriou. And it points to thinkers whose works are motivated by a similar intention such as Strauss, Arendt, Jouvinal, and Oakeshott. Finally, it is a science that must take into account the progress that has been made in the scholarly disciplines of ancient and medieval history, archeology, oriental studies, and theology. For this reason Voegelin is able to speak of a “state of science” that has empirically so expanded the horizon of history that a philosophical enquiry into the human problems of order is now possible. From this insight emerges the

⁶² Ibid., 79. CW 5: 152.

⁶³ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, II, CW 15: 90.

⁶⁴ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 2f, CW 5: 89.

knowledge-guiding principle of the interdependence of the progress of knowledge in the empirical sciences and the systematic cognitive-reflexive analysis of the historical materials.

Here, I return to the main theme of my reflections: Voegelin's intellectual self-understanding and, what is intimately connected to it, his self-understanding as a scholar. Voegelin's turning away from radical contemplative-individualism comes clearly into focus when we again consider his position in 1939. At that time he wrote:

“Political theory [...] has hardly a chance to be developed otherwise than by the efforts of outstanding individuals; it is almost impossible to advance it by a cooperative effort of scholars, by traditions in schools, or by gradual elaboration of problems through continuous generations of scholars”.⁶⁵

This is due to the fact that in order to function institutions of teaching and research require a social consensus which, as the failure of the Socratic-Platonic project demonstrates, political society will not permit.⁶⁶ That is – in my view – the decisive point in the transformation of Voegelin's understanding of science that we find in the *New Science of Politics*: “Science is not the singlehanded achievement of this or that individual scholar; it is a cooperative effort. Effective work is possible only within a tradition of intellectual culture.”⁶⁷

If, in the 1940s fragment on Plato Voegelin had argued that scientific knowledge in the last instance is based on the precondition that the scholar is a mystic or at the very least that his life has been formed by “mystic culture”, now he speaks more reservedly of metaphysics as the “process in which the philosopher explicates in rational symbols his various

⁶⁵ Eric Voegelin, Appendix A: “Introduction to the History of Political Ideas”, in *CW* 19: 233.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 23. *CW* 5: 105.

experiences, especially experiences of transcendence”.⁶⁸ Here we see the results of his 1943 anamnetic reflections. He informs Cook, that he proceeds from neither theological nor metaphysical presuppositions. But as a “critical scientist I have to accept these facts of order, whatever my personal opinion about them would be”. Whether one is an agnostic or religiously attuned has nothing to do with Voegelin’s theoretical approach. And Voegelin adds: “I am not clear myself about my own state of sentiments in such an approach.”⁶⁹ It is significant that, with regard to the question of the mystical aspect of the scholar’s existence, Voegelin later calls upon Max Weber as a witness. In the conclusion to his 1964 lecture on Weber Voegelin refers to a discussion between Max Weber and his wife, which she records in her biography of her husband. To her question whether he could imagine himself as a mystic, he replied:

“It may well be that I am one since I have dreamed more in my life than one should really allow oneself to, thus I am really no where entirely at home. It is as though I could just as easily withdraw from everything.”⁷⁰

Voegelin comments: “That is a splendid formulation of the Pauline *hos me*, the as-if-not of the Christian counsel: ‘Be in the world, but not of it. Live in the world as if you did not live in it and belong to it’ ”(cf. I Cor. 7:29-31). With this formulation, which is not completely Christian but only expresses the possibility that one can withdraw from the world, Weber is close to another thinker who lived at the beginning of this time of tension – Thomas More. In his *Utopia*, the wanderer, who in his wandering all over the earth is seeking true order and the meaning of life, says to his friend

⁶⁸ Voegelin to Thomas I. Cook, December 30, 1953, in *CW* 30: 187f.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Eric Voegelin, *The Greatness of Max Weber*. In *CW* 31. *Hitler and the Germans*. Translated, ed. with an Intro. by Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press 1999), 257-273. Here 273. [Translation slightly altered. W.P.]

in the dialogue: “Wherever I am in my wandering it turns out that I am always equally far from God”.⁷¹ With these words that conclude Voegelin’s lecture on Weber he expresses a truth that was also articulated by Hugh of St. Victor in his *Didascalicon*: “Omnis mundus philosophantibus exilium est.”⁷²

VII. Beyond Modernity

The original title of the Walgreen Lectures, “Beyond Modernity”, pointed Voegelin’s auditors to the spiritual-political crisis of the Western world, the intellectual overcoming of which can be described in terms of a movement to renew science. In programmatic terms: the restored science spiritually and intellectually overcomes the ideas of order that have been decisive for the constitution of western modernity. This position is entirely in keeping with the sense of Voegelin’s fundamental criticism of modern civilization which increasingly had come to shape his history of ideas concept in the *History*. However, the decisive Walgreen lectures put the nature of modernity to the test of the current “state of science” in the form of a scientific fundamental critique of Western civilization and the crisis which was caused by an anti-philosophical and anti-Christian “Gnostic truth” – the continuous working principle that has constituted social order in modernity. Now, in the light of the truth to which the intellectual honesty of science is committed, the prevailing falsehood of gnosis in all its volatile historical manifestations is subjected to critical analysis.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Hugo von St. Victor, *Didascalicon* III, caput XIX.

Basically Voegelin takes up the theme of the 1938 *Political Religions* and situates it in the material context that had increasingly come to shape the tenor of the *History* in its reconstruction of the historical development of the European crisis. In Voegelin's investigation of the destructive tendencies of "The People of God" – in the chapter of that name in the *History* – he came to the conclusion that "Gnosticism", in form and content, is a comprehensive and overarching historical phenomena (*geschichtliches Gesamtphänomen*).⁷³ With the discovery of gnosis in the 1940s Voegelin found the key to understanding the critical turn of the West toward inner-worldly religion – an object of his theoretical interests years before. In one sense gnosis was a random discovery. The concept first turns up in Voegelin's work in 1946/47 in the second version of the chapter on "The People of God." Here Voegelin continually refers to Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Die Apokalypse der deutschen Seele* (1937-39) – a new edition of volume I appeared in 1947. However, since up to this time Voegelin had not quoted Balthasar's early work, I conjecture that Voegelin's source for the concept was a later work by Balthasar, the small volume, *Irenäus: Die Geduld des Reifens* which appeared in 1943. Voegelin bought this work in December 1945 at the Harvard Bookstore. There he read: "The Gnostics tear Christ into two parts: into a mortal man and into a spirit that is not susceptible to suffering. Only where matter, the body itself, is divinized, can the human being be redeemed."

"Gnosis originates, each time new, in all phases of spiritual development in the West where the human being, who has grown weary of the life of faith ludicrously tries to gain power over faith

⁷³ Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas*, IV, *Renaissance and Reformation*, CW 22, ed. David L. Morse (Columbus: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1998). Here: *The People of God*, 131-214. A first version with this title was written in 1941/42. It has no reference to Gnosticism or to Gnostic phenomenon. Eric Voegelin, *The People of God*, 1941. *Occasional Papers*, XXXVII (2. revised ed. Munich, April 2020), ed. with an Intro. by Peter J. Opitz.

and, in place of redemption through God who descends into 'commonality', posits the man, who steps out of 'commonality' and strives to ascend in self-redemption."⁷⁴

Voegelin acquainted himself with the scientific literature on the subject and proceeded according to his method: After working through the current state of scientific knowledge on gnosis, he subjected the material to the cognitive-theoretical process of reflective analysis. This resulted in the knowledge that the notion of self-redemption – the guiding principle of gnosis – is fundamental for the understanding of all of the anti-Christian apocalyptic messianic movements in the West. Thus Gnosticism is the ultimate cause of the Western crisis.

I don't want to repeat here what is already well known. Let me therefore proceed directly to the consequences for Voegelin's philosophy of history: namely the construction of a cultural cycle of world historical proportions. In this construction the cycle's highpoint is marked by the appearance of Christ; the pre-Christian high civilizations and cultures make up the cycle's ascending movement and the modern Gnostic civilizations constitute its descent.⁷⁵

It is in this sense that Voegelin speaks of "The End of Modernity". Naturally, the question remains: "After Gnosticism what?" And this question explains why, of necessity, the idea of the cultural cycle disappears from Voegelin's theory. For, following Voegelin's rigorous tying of theory to the work of the empirical sciences, a thesis emerges that radically transforms his former position in favor of a new type of universal "ecumenic humanity" which is embedded in an all-encompassing world-historical structure that originated in the Ecumenic Age – the era of the emerging axial tensions between mundane and world-transcending order. "Obviously,

⁷⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Einleitung in Irenäus von LYON – Geduld des Reifens*, ed. Urs von Balthasar (Klosterberg: Schwabe & Co., 1943), 13.

⁷⁵ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 164. CW 5: 221.

the question of the subject of history, previously discussed within the context of the Western Ecumenic Age, now imposes itself on the level of a global mankind.”⁷⁶ In this context Voegelin revised his general thesis concerning Gnosticism, in particular the identification of modern gnosis with ancient gnosis, which had become an object of the scholarly criticism of his work. To the extent that inner-worldly religious movements of self-redemption are manifestations of a multifaceted Gnostic-apocalyptic symbolism in modernity, gnosis, so Voegelin in 1976, “is one component in the historical structure of modernity but no more than one.”⁷⁷

Voegelin’s provocative *Introduction* to the published lectures speaks of a re-theorization of the discipline on the basis of a new science of order whose contours had now become clear. As I have remarked, some of Voegelin’s opponents, and also some of his supporters, point to this statement as evidence that Voegelin is a thinker radically opposed to modernity. A word of clarification is called for here: In the *Forward* to the German edition Voegelin explains that he chose the title *The New Science of Politics* following the example of Vico who, in opposition to the dominant science of his time, undertook to restore political science in the classic sense. Voegelin had already discussed Vico’s position in his chapter on Vico in *The History*.

“A new Science is set off against an old science, and the counter position assists us in defining the ,modernity’ of Vico’s thought. The

⁷⁶ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, IV, CW 17, ed. with an Intro. by Michael Franz (Columbia:2000), 376. Cf. Jürgen Gebhardt, “Offene Horizonte – offene Fragen. Eric Voegelins hermeneutisches Experiment der universalhistorischen Vermessung des politischen Ordnungsdenkens”, in *Staaten und Ordnungen*, ed by Hans-Jörg Siegwart (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2016), 175-193.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Klaus Vondung, “Gnosis und Apokalypse als Interpretamente im Werk von Eric Voegelin”, in *Staaten und Ordnungen*, ed Hans-Jörg Sigwart (Baden-Baden: Kosmos, 2016), 121.

term modernity has no absolute connotation and has been used consecutively in order to designate various phases of post medieval Western intellectual history”⁷⁸

According to Vico the complex of ideas which emerged in the 17th century and became dominant in the following centuries are old ideas. However, this complex is:

“still very much alive in our time. The fact that this aggregate of sentiments and ideas was exploded intellectually and spiritually through the work of Vico 1725 does not mean that we do not have to suffer to this day from its consequences in Progressivism, Communism, National socialism, and world wars. And the rise and unfolding of the ,new science’ in the course of the centuries does not mean that it has found wide acceptance. On the contrary the label modern in popular opinion attaches to the ideas that Vico considered old in 1725 rather than to the science that he had founded.”

Nevertheless: “modern political science in the sense of Vico’s new science is a comparatively insignificant island in a sea of ‘old’ ideas.”⁷⁹

I therefore conclude that political philosophy, and not just Voegelin’s, is itself a modern form of discourse. It reflects the modernity within modernity and as such represents a self-reflexive modernity. Voegelin, Strauss, and like-minded representatives of modern political philosophy did not revolt against modernity – something they are often accused of – but tried to call modernity to cognitive self-enlightenment.

⁷⁸ Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas*, VI, *Revolution and the New Science*, CW 24, ed. with an Intro. by Barry Cooper (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998) 146f.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

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