

## Response to Stefan Rossbach's

### "Understanding in Quest of Faith"♦:

#### The Central Problem in Eric Voegelin's Philosophy

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Stefan Rossbach's essay is a work of outstanding intelligence, research, and ambition, and the questions it raises about Voegelin's self-understanding and work are, it seems to me, very important, and demand a more-than-casual response. Let me begin by identifying what appear to me to be the most admirable aspects of his analysis.

First, it presents what I think is a brilliant analysis of the role that mysticism plays in Voegelin's work, and how it functions as a *via negativa* protecting Voegelin from the dangers of religious or philosophical absolutism. He lays out lucidly Voegelin's commitment to this *via negativa*, which is a permanent openness to the abyss of the divine Unknown, as the philosopher's way of resisting the closure of final answers, systems, theologies, etc. Second, Prof. Rossbach's contention that Voegelin's of the category of gnosticism as applied to modern thinkers arose above all from his recognizing in the concept of *gnosis* a flexible notion that could cover a range of "systems of closure"♦ that provide final answers to the Mystery seems to me quite convincing. The point for Voegelin lay not in remaining true to the distinctive features of classical gnosticism, but in having categories that illuminated the lust for final answers to the Mystery of reality and existence. On Rossbach's critique of Voegelin's use of gnosticism *per se*, his research and elaboration (here and in earlier essays) are perhaps the best that has been done.

Then there is Rossbach's treatment of Voegelin's career-long philosophical struggle to come to terms with the phenomena of Jesus and the Gospels, with Christian experiences, insights, symbols, theology, visions, and visionaries. Rossbach plumbs the depths of unpublished letters in the Hoover Institute archives, while discussing the relatively abbreviated treatments of Christianity and St. Paul in the published work, to make a convincing case that Voegelin found many partial answers and insights into his understanding of Christianity while never--perhaps until days before his death--being fully satisfied with his philosophical penetration of the problems. Personally, I stand with Fred Lawrence in disagreeing with what he calls Rossbach's "inference"♦ "that until the every end of his life Voegelin was unwilling to submit to the materials of Christian [experiences and symbols]"♦ ( Lawrence , 17). But Rossbach has done a remarkable job of collecting and laying out pertinent materials regarding Voegelin's "life-long tussle with Christianity"♦ ( Lawrence , 3).

On two lesser issues, Rossbach also details how Voegelin's identification of the term *metaxy* as a technical term developed by Plato is not supported by the Platonic texts; and again, he details how unwieldy and unfocused was Voegelin's use of the term "vision"♦ in his late writings. Rossbach is accurate and lucid on both points, but his discussion of the term "vision"♦

is the more significant contribution. The issue regarding Plato's use of the term *metaxy* is a well-tilled field in Voegelin scholarship, one that no major Voegelin scholar has failed to address. And perhaps needless to say, this familiar issue has essentially nothing to do with whether Voegelin's development of the term *metaxy* into a technical term for describing the In-Between of the human condition is philosophically illuminating and profound.

Much more could be said in praise of Rossbach's essay. But time is limited. So now I turn to what I see as problems in this erudite and ambitious piece of research.

I think it will not be unfair to investigate Prof. Rossbach's essay, and especially the question of its unifying thematic, by using the same interpretative approach that he himself employs in it, to investigate the overall character of Voegelin's work: that is, what are the interesting "loose ends" and "failures" in Rossbach's analysis?--where by "loose ends and failures" I mean not unresolved problems, but rather incompletenesses and, in my view, misleading comments concerning Voegelin's work that can be found in the essay. It's possible that this method could throw some light on this complex and overarching interpretation of Voegelin's life-work.

Here is a first problem, as I see it. Prof. Rossbach directs our attention to a certain pride and self-assertiveness that often imbued Voegelin's writings, especially when he seemed to take on the mantle of the isolated prophet condemning a disordered age for its lack of wisdom and justice. I think there is no doubt that Voegelin felt called upon at times to speak out in a manner of prophetic witness, and assumed the authority to do so. But Rossbach goes interestingly further on this point. He describes Voegelin as manifesting **"a desire to be right" when everything and everyone else is proven wrong** (13). There is a disquieting note of hyperbole in this sentence, and I think it is significantly symptomatic. Of what? Of Rossbach's emphatic assertion, in the same passages where this sentence occurs, that Voegelin persistently saw himself as immune from the social disorders, disease, or corruption that he decried--that he set himself apart as pure and untainted. To quote Rossbach: "For Voegelin 'crisis' was always and exclusively a social phenomenon, and personal immunity was a distinct possibility if not an obligation. The 'pride' we are referring to in this context corresponds to the philosopher's unwillingness/inability to contemplate the possibility that his own thought could be a symptom of the very disease he had diagnosed in the social environment" (14). Now, this sentence, for me, raises more than a red flag; it raises a red circus tent and invites us all inside. When I read these sentences of Rossbach, I immediately recalled numerous passages in Voegelin's works that contradict these statements and their implications. Within five minutes I had found two such passages (and in the published and unpublished writings one could, I believe, find dozens). But just consider these: First, from *Order and History III: Plato and Aristotle*: "Society can destroy a man's soul because the disorder of society is a disease in the psyche of its members. *The troubles that the philosopher experiences in his own soul* are the troubles in the psyche of the surrounding society, which press on him" (123-24). Again, in his "Immortality" essay, Voegelin writes: "There is, first, the tension between existence in truth and the deficient modes of existence. This is the very tension in which the philosopher lives and moves himself. *His concern is, therefore, not with truth as a bit of information that has escaped his contemporaries, but as a pole in the tension of order and disorder, or reality and loss of reality, he experiences as his own. His existence comprehends the disorder by which he feels repelled as much as the order to which his*

*desire moves him* (66, emphasis mine). There are many other such passages that could be mentioned. Why does Rossbach ignore them? Here is at least an incompleteness if not a misdirection.

A second incomplete aspect of Rossbach's analysis concerns his discussion of Voegelin's treatment of Christianity, and of the divine Incarnation in Jesus. Rossbach concludes the following: first, that, for Voegelin, **"if Christianity is purged [of] gnosticism (as understood by Voegelin), nothing is left"**; and second, that **"Voegelin's system can render the Incarnation meaningful only as a manifestation of the *metaxy*"** (21). It seems to me that these statements are misleading in their incompleteness and oversimplification. In his chapter on "The Pauline Vision of the Resurrected" in *The Ecumenic Age*, and in his essay "The Gospel and Culture," Voegelin indicates that he regards the maximal differentiation of the truth of human existence in the divinely grounded cosmos to have been revealed through epiphanic events involving the appearance and impact of Jesus the Christ. He approvingly summarizes the Pauline vision by stating that Jesus is

the creature in whom God can incarnate himself with the fullness (*pleroma*) of his divinity, transfiguring man into the God-man (Col. 2:9). The whole creation that is groaning can be redeemed . . . The symbolism of the man who can achieve freedom from cosmic Ananke, who can enter into the freedom of God, redeemed by the loving grace of the God who is himself free of the cosmos, consistently differentiates the truth of existence that [had] become visible in the philosopher's experience of *athanatizein* [immortalizing] (*OH III*, 316).

Two radical facts are here affirmatively implied, and explicated elsewhere in Voegelin's work, about the epiphany of the Incarnation. First: The "maximal" differentiation of the truth of existence culminating in Jesus reveals not only a divine ground who creates the universe *ex nihilo*, but reveals also that each person is the equally loved creation of this transcendent radical Creator to whom he or she is uniquely related. The epiphany of Jesus articulates, for the first time and radically, representative meaning in history down to level of the individual person in his or her responsive participation in divine reality. From this epiphany, as Voegelin mentions elsewhere in numerous contexts, has developed Western teaching on the unique and irreplaceable worth, or dignity, of every human being. While both Greek philosophy and the Christian vision of existence present a "theomorphic" understanding of human being, it is only the Christian vision of *imago Dei* that establishes the *absolute spiritual equality* and *equal spiritual dignity* of all human beings, a recognition that underlies all later political affirmations of universal human dignity and universal human rights. Thus, for Voegelin, the Incarnation has a meaning far surpassing what Rossbach allows, when he writes: "Voegelin's system can render the Incarnation meaningful only as a manifestation of the *metaxy*" (21).

Third, notice the first words of this sentence: "Voegelin's *system* can render the Incarnation . . ." (emphasis mine). As his essay develops, Prof. Rossbach makes a point of referring repeatedly to what he calls "Voegelin's system"--knowing, of course, that Voegelin

himself would reject this phrase as a deliberate impertinence. But let us ask: what is the "system" of Voegelin's being referred to here? Late in his essay, Rossbach writes: "Voegelin's insistence on the ultimate mystery of Reality and its divine ground does *not* reflect the 'humble access' of meditative prayer but the assertion of a system that has a paradox at its centre, specifically the 'paradoxical experience of non-experientiable reality', or in other words, the experience of the *metaxy*, of existing 'in-between' immanent and transcendent being (26). Are we to understand that the notion of *metaxy* is the foundational concept of a philosophical "system"--with all that the word "system" implies, that is, an analytically complete set of interpretive categories which, at least heuristically, yields a final set of answers to basic questions about existence, thereby releasing the philosopher of the need to push forward toward further insights that may well upend, or demand significant alteration of, this established set of interpretive categories? It appears that Rossbach's answer to this is, Yes. But Voegelin was notoriously a philosopher whose work continually changed direction, who dropped the use of categories found to be unfit, who started over repeatedly, discovered new and more adequate terms for what he was attempting to analyze, then discarded those in favor of those he considered more adequate yet--a philosopher whose work is so open-ended that it permanently resists fitting into the category of any existing philosophical school of thought, and whose explicit bedrock principle is the impossibility of *ever* finding final answers or symbolic categories for interpreting the cosmos, or the human situation in it, since human thought and being remains always in participational relation to a divine Beyond that finally eludes all thought and language. What then, we may ask, is to be gained by asserting that the concept of *metaxy*--which is simply a basic fact of existence--is the basis of a "system," or by describing Voegelin's life-work, so unconvincingly, as a philosophical system?

Here I think we can gather the omissions and misrepresentations that seem present to me in Rossbach's paper together into a set of data that reveals a pattern. It seems to me that we can find in them a possible key to the unity of his essay.

Let us ask ourselves: what is the story about Voegelin that Prof. Rossbach tells? It is the story of a man who cannot experience a conversion to Christianity. From the essay's first pages that deal with Voegelin's relationship to Christianity, through the middle section describing Girard's accounts, in regard to his book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, of novelist conversions at the conclusion-of-writing their books and Girard's own conversion at-the-end-of-writing *his* first book, to the final paragraphs of Rossbach's essay, where we find a Voegelin *conscious that he is filled with the sin of pride* but who still at the last, on his deathbed, cannot convert and find genuine faith and humility, Rossbach tells a story that makes a coherent whole, and that explains Voegelin in a way that runs counter to how Voegelin himself has presented himself to us in his work, and how Voegelin scholars have heretofore typically interpreted that life and work. But how is this new way of viewing Voegelin's life, and his life-work, to be made unifyingly convincing? Certain facts will need to be highlighted, and others will have to be occluded.

First, this scenario, or drama, will only work if Voegelin sees himself as immune from existence in untruth, as immune, that is, to sinfulness--so that, at the end of his life, he can discover his sin of pride and at last find faith. Thus, all the many passages in Voegelin's writings where he clearly proclaims his own existential implication in the disorders and ills of his time, his repeated avowals of participating inescapably to some degree in existence in untruth, must be

ignored. Second, the scenario depends upon Voegelin being unable to existentially submit to Christian experiences and symbols, and being unable to existentially respond to the Incarnation in a way that bears witness to the uniqueness of the Christian epiphany. Thus, all the passages in Voegelin's work--such as the great passages on faith in *The New Science of Politics*, and on spiritual judgment in *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* and the analysis of Plato's *Gorgias*, or the repeated references to T. S. Eliot's lines on the Incarnation from *Four Quartets*, and to Augustine's emblematic passage in his *Enarrationes in Psalmos* on leaving Babylon through the affections of the heart--which stand as testimonials to Voegelin's personal experiences of being drawn by grace and redeemed from pride by a God of Love--must be left out of the analysis. Third, and most important, the scenario only works if Voegelin's entire philosophical exodus is only mistakenly self-understood as a *fides quaerens intellectum*, a process of faith seeking understanding--for otherwise Voegelin would at the end of his life be finding a furthering and deepening of faith, not a continuing incapacity for genuine faith. Thus, his life-work must be, in Rossbach's telling, the intellectual's adherence to a set of principles that make up a system of an already established pattern of understanding that seeks to grasp the heart of faith, only to be frustrated over and over again. And therefore, Voegelin's continual allusions to his own philosophical journey as a pilgrim's progress, where faith, hope, and love draw him onward through a life of continually broadening and self-correcting understanding, must be discounted as mistaken self-interpretation and, ironically, as assertions of pride. And his philosophical *oeuvre* must be categorized, as a whole, as the opposite of faith seeking understanding; that is, as understanding in quest of undiscovered faith. Only then does the scenario make sense. And we can be left, as denouement, with pondering the fact that Voegelin the philosopher avoided the word *sin*, choosing instead to write only of "existence in untruth.❖

It seems to me, then, that the loose ends in Rossbach's presentation of Voegelin's work make up a coherent configuration. They serve to present and buttress a thesis that allows Prof. Rossbach to stand apart from other Voegelin scholars and present a startlingly original analysis of Voegelin's work as not at all a matter of *fides quaerens intellectum*, but simply the work of another systematizer, who fits reality investigated to the measure of his already settled-upon ideas. Of course in such a presentation, Voegelin's rich philosophical achievements--the ones that have caused his work to change not a few lives--must remain mostly unmentioned. Highlighting them would spoil the effect.

I offer this response to Prof. Rossbach's paper, in genuine respect, as merely a thought-experiment--one way of interpreting what seems to me to be a fascinating mixture of brilliant scholarship, outstanding passages of overarching interpretation, and highly problematic lacunae. If my thought-experiment has any merit at all, it cannot help but suggest one last question: Why should Prof. Rossbach devote so much attention, effort, and scholarship--even unto a thorough study of the vast unpublished writings--to a philosopher whose self-interpretation, use of critical terms, and analysis of crucial civilizational experiences, ideas, and symbols are, in his view, so faulty? It can't be because Voegelin is a profoundly *influential* philosopher. And if it is because Voegelin is, in his opinion, a truly important philosopher, that opinion does not, at least to me, come through clearly in reading his essay.

A few last comments on Voegelin's non-employment of the term "sin,❖ but rather "existence in untruth,❖ as a fundamental philosophical term. As Kierkegaard has made

abundantly clear, "sin" is not a philosophical category. In Kierkegaard's philosophical writings, sin is indeed discussed--but in categories proper to philosophical analysis. The Catholic philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan does the same thing: we find in his philosophical analyses the fundamental notion of *bias*. Later Lonergan informs us, in an appropriately theological context, that this *bias* is what is religiously or theologically called "sin." In other words, Kierkegaard and Lonergan approach the concept of sin in a *heuristic* fashion, using equivalent terms suitable for varying degrees of differentiated meaning, depending on the topic and the point of view of analysis. Voegelin can be understood to be doing the same thing: that is, as addressing "sin" in language suitable for the types of analyses in which he happens to be engaged. And further, the normatizing correlative to sin is *repentance*; and there are many passages in Voegelin's work that testify to his own posture of repentance (and lamentation) as he presents his work as a philosopher's effort to help repair the social wrongs in which he himself is inevitably implicated.