

## History as Horizon: Eric Voegelin's Philosophical Wissenschaft

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Chapter 3 of *The Ecumenic Age* is called "The Process of History". There, Eric Voegelin reviews the ancient notions of "cosmos," "*oikoumene*," and "*okeanos*," the parameters of an understanding of reality in which the radical division between this world and God is not a large factor yet. It is that moment when Alexander sets out to conquer the "*oikoumene*," and Voegelin asks what forms the background of Alexander's desire to conquer the entire known human world. He finds that there is a model of the cosmos behind this desire that looks somewhat like this: "This cosmos has spatial extension and temporal duration. But it has them in the perspective of the habitat. The cosmos is not an object in space; extension and duration are the dimensions of reality as experienced from the habitat inside the cosmos. These perspectival dimensions are neither infinite nor finite, but extend toward an 'horizon,' that is a border where heaven meets earth, where the world is bounded by the world beyond. In the Ecumenic Age, this experience of the 'horizon' was still compactly symbolized by cosmogonic, theogonic and historiogenetic speculations, by the myth of the creation of then world, by the myth of the Okeanos as the boundary of the Oikoumene, and so forth. Moreover, the horizon is movable. As long as it compactly symbolized through configurations in space or events in time, the boundary line can be pushed farther out ins space through the expansion of geographical and astronomical knowledge, and farther out in time through the expansion of historical, evolutionary, geophysical, and astrophysical knowledge. However, though the horizon is movable, it cannot be abolished. Even when the horizon recedes so far that space and time become the eikon of the spaceless and timeless ground of being, the experience of the horizon is not "superseded," or explained away as an "illusion," for no enlargement of the horizon carries us beyond the boundary line. It is true, though, that every such enlargement can cause a so-called "spiritual crisis," because there are always the literally minded who will misunderstand a change of the boundary symbolism under the pressure of expanding knowledge as an abolishment of the boundary and, with the boundary, of its divine beyond. This is especially true for the expansion of the astronomical horizon after Galilei which has become one of the contributive causes of the vulgarian belief that man is no longer living in the cosmos but in a "physical universe." (p.202 f.)

As far back as Homer's *Odyssey* the symbolism of the *oikoumene* bounded by the *okeanos* forms the symbolic matrix in which human existence plays itself out. Somewhere "out there" lie the Islands of the Blessed, and it does not really matter whether the *oikoumene* with all its inhabitants is conquered and controlled as a territory. What matters, rather, is "the experience of the 'horizon' as the boundary the between the visible expanse of the *oikoumene* and the divine mystery of its being."

It was with this passage in mind that I formulated the title of my paper: "History as Horizon." What Voegelin says here about the receding horizon in the context of the ancient ecumene has not ceased to be relevant in our time when the horizon has receded so far that it seems almost to have dropped out of sight itself. But, as Voegelin points out himself, just because the horizon seems to be receding into infinity, it cannot be abolished. We still live in the cosmos, as Voegelin never tired of pointing out, and it is only if we lose sight of this fundamental truth that we lose sight of ourselves.

In a very basic way this passage not only sums up Voegelin's vision of reality but also provides us with the key to an understanding of the method of his scholarship or, to use the German term his *Wissenschaft*. I don't think it is necessary to go into the differences between the English terms science and scholarship and the German word *Wissenschaft* before this audience. But it may be necessary to point out that the rational systematic exploration of the whole of reality of which we think when we hear words such as "science" and *Wissenschaft* is itself an affirmation of our common human nature, even though we should not lose sight of the historical and cultural differences in which this exploration is undertaken. The context of *Wissenschaft* in the German-speaking cultures will therefore differ from that of the English-speaking cultures, yet never to the extent that members of the ones cannot understand and judge the validity of scientific work in the others. The absurd aberrations of a German physics or a Soviet biology brought this point home once and for all. Voegelin himself has a biographic background that places him squarely inside the theoretical and methodological debates relating to the humane and the social sciences that took place in Germany around 1900 and that are linked to such names as Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel, to name only three of the most prominent ones.

*Naturwissenschaften*, *Geisteswissenschaften*, *Sozialwissenschaften*, *Rechtswissenschaft*, and *Stawswissenschaft* define some of the areas in which the exploration of reality in German-speaking cultures was undertaken, and the young Voegelin saw himself for quite a while placed in at least the three latter ones, yet even then defying too narrow confinement in either one of these. This "interdisciplinary" side of Voegelin owes no small part to his early exposure to the American academic environment in the 1920s and consequently a very early awareness of the historical differentiations that had taken place even within the common Western heritage. We should not forget, though, that Voegelin came out of the tradition of German *Wissenschaft* and that he received very important impulses from it which, in turn, informed and enhanced his work as a political theorist in this country. After his arTival in the United States, he, like so many other exiles, had to look for employment. In his applications Voegelin would always refer to the "Theory of Government," the *Herrschaftslehre*, with a considerable sense of accomplishment. The *Herrschaftslehre* was written at about the same time as the lesser known fragment *Staatslehre als Geisteswissenschaft* in which its author deliberately made the connection between the outlook of the then prevalent German *St.aatslehre*, perhaps most prominently represented in the work of Carl Schmitt, and the other branches of the German *Geisteswissenschaften* that manifested themselves in philosophy, art history, literary criticism, sociology of religion, and other not strictly legal or political sciences. In a summary of the projected work, Voegelin directly refers to the developments in those areas and promises a new kind of *Staatslehre* that analyzes already existing works dealing with *geisteswissenschaftliche* problems in the light of developments in the aforementioned areas. The works of Rigel, Woelfflin, and Dvorak in art history, the philosophical sociology of Simmel, and the literary studies of the Friedrich Gundolf, a disciple of the great poet Stefan George, set the parameters considered relevant to a study of politics. Here Voegelin saw himself as breaking new ground, by connecting the major disciplines of German *Geisteswissenschaften*, as they had reached new heights in the 1920s, with the rather conservative *Staatslehre*, thus trying to breathe new life into a discipline whose failure as an *episteme politike* was to become only too evident in the wake of the Nazi take-over of public life in Germany. In a kind of advertising blurb Voegelin told the prospective publisher that the work would not only appeal to sociologists and political scientists (in the narrow German sense) but also to readers interested in "basic questions of *Geisteswissenschaften fiberhaupt*", i.e., readers of the philosopher Dilthey, the historian Rothacker, and the educational philosopher Spranger. In

his introduction Voegelin deals with the concept of *Geist* and, in this context, explicitly ties himself to Georg Simmel's major philosophical statement *Lebensanschauung* of 1918. It is impossible to summarize here the major ideas of Simmel's work, but one can bring them on a relatively simple formula: Life is a process; it is at the same time a flowing out beyond itself and limited by the boundaries of individuality. (The topic of Voegelin's dissertation) The acts of life transcending itself are visible in the historical sequences of generations, in the formed realities of individuation, culminating in the self, and in something Voegelin calls in good German fashion *die geistigen Welten* which somehow can dissociate themselves from the stream of life and follow their own laws, refusing to be brought back under the rule of immanent life. They are the organizing forces that join isolated contents into a unified one; through them life turns away from its own automatism and turns toward the idea. The "stuff" that constitutes the world, the "world-stuff" is never there "in itself" but already has forms, belongs to a certain "world", be it the world art, religion, state, eros, economics, and that "real world" that is by no means formless itself but has its own forming principles, depending on what we mean when we say "real world." Do we mean the world of science or of everyday life with its manifold relationships? To quote Voegelin: "The formless world-material can never be a datum of experience, for datum already implies formed material; it is a boundary concept of dialectical speculation on the intellectual forms of the world which in their diversity nevertheless retain their referentiality to unity of the stream of life." If I had to emphasize one thing that characterizes Voegelin's thought from the time of his days as a student of Othmar Spann's to the 1930's it is the tension between the unity of the stream and the diversity of its intellectual and spiritual manifestations. It is the latter that fascinates Voegelin the thinker and Voegelin the scholar, the *Wissenschaftler*. How free, creative action, the world of the spirit counterbalances organically bound, self-sufficient life - that is the problem that interested him. Voegelin sees in the fact that the spirit has its own vital depth, its own *Tiefenschichten*, the fundamental legacy of the German philosophy of the spirit. Schelling, as we see here, provides the essential formulations of this dialectic that pervades thought from the time of Herder to that of Max Scheler. With explicit reference to Scheler's small book of 1928 *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* Voegelin speaks of a revitalization of this classic understanding of spirit and he juxtaposes modern philosophical anthropology and Anglo-American social psychology.

It would be worth giving a detailed account of the argument of the *Stawslehre*, but it is not my intention here to propose exactly the kind of German *Wissenschaft* that Voegelin himself tried to de-provincialize ever since his first-hand acquaintance with American and - later - French scientific culture. A simple glance at the table of the *Swatslehre* ~ table of contents suffices to show that Voegelin's idealistic science of the state - as close as it may in some ways have been to ideas propagated by conservative thinkers like Carl Schmitt and Hans Freyer - is in fact a search for alternative models, for instance the French and American models of popular-democratic or republican forms of government. At the same time, Voegelin also never abandons his search for the spiritual substance underlying these different political cultures, and one might well argue that it is this search that sets his work apart from the conventional treatments of political culture as it represents a kind of German core in Voegelin's thinking, that of the struggle between the freedom of the spirit and the spirit's tragic, since inseparable, connection with the realm of unconscious, Stoff or matter. The appeal that especially Schelling's work had for Voegelin, appears to me a sure sign that the German cultural heritage kept tugging on him well into his years in the United States. Likewise, Voegelin's sharp eye for what he called Nietzsche's

"immanent mysticism" indicates to me that Nietzsche's was a conflict Voegelin understood only too well himself. In lamenting the breakdown of imperial Christianity into the parochial cultures of Europe, Voegelin remained close to the Romanticism of a Novalis and more recently a Hermann Broch. Yet he never succumbed to this Romanticism, as is sometimes implied by his critics, for he preferred variety over monotony, difference over unity. Moreover, we cannot stress enough that Voegelin, the scholar, the scientist, whatever designation we assign to him, had little love for any form of preoccupation with methodology. What the Germans at regular intervals indulge in, the so-called *Methodenstreit*, was something Voegelin found profoundly boring and utterly silly. But it would also be wrong to insist that the younger Voegelin did not grapple with the theoretical problems and the methodological issues of the disciplines he was interested in, sociology, theory of law, political science, and, yes, philosophy. His criticism of, say, Kelsen's Pure Theory of Law, however, indicates best where he drew the line: no theory must be allowed to become so general, so abstract that it loses its experiential content. I read in the notes I took in his Munich lectures on the theory of consciousness and the question of political reality - they were taken at the time when the German edition of *Anamnesis* was published - some of the definitions with which he liked to open his lectures and seminars. There I find: 1. "Theoretisieren Ober Erfahrungsmerkmale bedeutet, daß man Ober das Erfahrungsmaterial hinausgeht und nach dem Grund von etwas fragt." (Theorizing means that one goes beyond what is experienced and that one asks about the reason or ground of something). 2. Philosophie: Denken aus der Existenzhaltung der Offenheit zurn göttlichen Grund. Das ist Philosophie als historisches Ereignis. (Philosophy: Thinking with the existential attitude of openness toward the divine ground. This is philosophy as an historical event). 3. Theorie: Philosophische Denkakte in Beziehung auf einen bestimmten Gegenstandsbereich. (Theory: Philosophical acts of thinking in relation to a certain subject area). One cannot put the matter more simply without oversimplifying. And yet it becomes clear how these three definitions are related to my initial quote about the horizon. It all begins with experience. In order to become experience it must be put into a frame of reference. It must be connected to other experiences, but it may also become more, *i.e.*, the material for an act of questioning in terms of something that is not directly given in the experience, its ground, its *aition*, as Aristotle would say. And only this act can properly be called theorizing. This is a very important point, since there are critical voices, Peter von Sivers in Salt Lake City comes to mind, who take Voegelin to task about the theory of consciousness he restated in volume V of *Order and History* in his meditations on the beginning. The paradox of consciousness which manifests itself in the dichotomy of intentional consciousness, subject - object consciousness, and the It-reality which embraces both leads to question what, if anything is really experienced in the field of the It-reality. Sivers accuses Voegelin of latent Kantianism, because he sees him operating with a notion of experience that neatly separates the intentional consciousness of the subject and the "notexperientiable" Beyond, in other words, the Kantian thing-in-itself that can be thought but not be experienced. (Sivers, "The 'Non-Experientiable' Ordering Force: reflections on the Kantian Baggage of *In Search of Order 0115*") Again, I only want to allude to the problem here and leave the full discussion of the problem to some other occasion. In terms of the question of my paper, the nature of Voegelin's concept of *Wissenschaft*, Voegelin's late formulations do not appear at odds with his earlier thought in which the problem of individual consciousness and a supra-individual kind of consciousness or unconscious plays a pivotal role. I have attempted to show in a recent article how this problem of consciousness became a central one for him around 1944-45, how he tried to solve it with the philosophical arsenal he found in the work of Schelling, and how dangerously close it brought him to the kind

of collapse of the two "consciousness" into an idealistic meta-consciousness that mirrors the gnostic *pleroma* and led Voegelin to his later indictment of Schelling as a Gnostic. (Hollweck, "Mythos und Geschichte: Zur Genesis von *Order and History*, *Occasional Papers*, XIX, Munich: Eric-Voegelin-Archiv, July 2000.) Schelling's "unconscious," Hegel's *List der Vernunft*, Schopenhauer's "will," Vico's "providence," all of these are part of the same equation that had already appeared in the Simmel-inspired title of Voegelin's dissertation on unity and duality.

How important the problem remained to Voegelin may be documented by citing a passage from a paper entitled "Configurations in History," a contribution to a symposium on the philosophy of history in 1961, in which Arnold Toynbee participated as well. There Voegelin reviews the patterns he is to work out in detail in the *Ecumenic Age* and the category of *exodus* that brings about the movements constituting the ecumenic age and thus what we now call history. Voegelin concludes his remarks by pointing out that the "configurations in history" are in fact history itself. All we have are the patterns; without them we do not have history. But then there is one more troubling question, Voegelin continues: "Who is the subject of this history?" And he adds immediately: "Obviously it is not single human beings. Obviously it is not single concrete societies, like the Roman Empire, since these patterns apply to India and China as well. Obviously it is not simply civilizations. The only possible answer seems to be that it is mankind. Mankind has history, and in mankind appear such configurative patterns. But this will not do either, since, as I mentioned before, the idea of man is only an idea, and not a reality. Mankind is not a given thing." And Voegelin goes on to say that this idea is the result of certain experiences of revelation or illumination that is then extended to all people, even those who do not have such experiences. We can come to only one conclusion: "Therefore mankind does not exist, and cannot be the subject of history. It is not an empirical object. This would suggest, therefore, that ultimately the subject can only be Being in the most general sense, Being itself; that everything that happens and which we call history, including our idea of mankind, is a happening in Being itself, which is behind all specific things and all specific happenings. This means that the subject matter, the matter in which all these formal elements occur, is not a datum, and that the classical metaphysical categories of form and matter do not apply at all. But in this way the subject disappears, and we have left only relations" (Voegelin, 41). A fascinating thought indeed, as Voegelin himself does not hesitate to mention; the similarities to the problems of theoretical physics were quite evident to him.

What we need and what we have is a return to cosmology in the real sense of the word. We need a philosophy of the cosmos. "[And] in this philosophy of the cosmos all sorts of things happen, yet we are unable to describe, to define, or to delineate a subject to which they happen. They are simply events in Being." (Voegelin, 43) Apart from the Heideggerian tone of this passage, what strikes me is the ease with which Voegelin can give up the subject, which is after all the locus of all these experiences that constitute history. This is something that deserves far more attention than it has received so far. I truly believe that it is the problem *per se* that preoccupied Voegelin in one form or another throughout his life, that made him turn his interest away from mathematics to the social sciences and finally to the study of history. (Of course, the mathematics is not lost.) The level of abstraction in Voegelin's thought is perhaps highest in the earlier work, it becomes less in the "History of Political Ideas" and it becomes a higher, yet more translucent abstraction in *Order and History*. The origins in German *Geisteswissenschaft* are never far away, but they do ultimately not come to rule Voegelin's work. *Geist*, spirit,

transcendence, they denoted once the experience of the non-experientiable. The cosmology of the late Voegelin abandons the subject as the center, but retains it as the parameter without which the everything else becomes meaningless. The receding horizon with which I introduced these remarks is after receding from something. That something is the subject, but what it is that is receding, that is what matters, not the subject from which it is receding. Why does it matter? This is the question of a philosophical theory of reality. But the answer to the question, incomplete as it will always remain, is neither a matter of sudden illumination nor of the abstraction of thought. It requires that we actually go out in the direction of the horizon, as though we could reach it, knowing that we cannot. That is what Voegelin would have called *Wissenschaft* in as understanding of his thought.