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Education and the Open Soul

In this paper I will discuss how Eric Voegelin's understanding of existential openness to transcendent being, which is drawn from his encounter with Platonic philosophy, helps us to understand the challenges facing the academy today and proffers reasonable, yet demanding, responses to them. I try to show what existential openness is and why Voegelin thought it was necessary for a scientific understanding of reality and education. Voegelin's broad, character-focused understandings of science and of education provide an interesting alternative to the narrower, cognitional paradigms that are characteristic of the contemporary academy and have give rise to confusions regarding the value of certain studies and practices within institutions of higher education. In keeping with Voegelin's (and Plato's) *modus procedendi*, I will first sketch out—somewhat casually—a few indications of the disorder that inheres in the academy and contemporary education. Then I will treat Voegelin's understanding of existential openness and describe its importance for the practice of science. In the process, I will suggest some concrete pedagogical norms that may be derived from Voegelin's conversion-centered understanding of education. In the last section, I will discuss some of Plato's and Voegelin's practices of existential openness that are important for reforming modern education and science.

Before beginning, I should state that in this paper I will often gloss over important distinctions between education, science, and the academy, treating their respective disorders as manifestations of a single pathological condition. Although this procedure may prevent us from examining some interesting particularities, it is not entirely opposed to Voegelin's own effort to identify the universal root of disorder by examining the common features of our experiences. Moreover, Voegelin understood science to be “the search for the truth concerning the nature of

the various realms of being” which is the natural inclination of man.¹ Science reveals the importance of education—the art of turning individuals to this quest, or facilitating their appropriation of the character that is necessary for arriving at the truth of existence—and obliges individuals to try to educate others. This does not mean that Voegelin thought that every intellect was capable of rigorous theoretical activity; what it does mean is that the broad scopes of science and education are normatively bound up with each other in the concept of the existential quest. Thus, the lack of precision incurred by my glossing over their distinctive characters will, I hope, be justified by gaining a better sense of how the two become almost indistinguishable at times in Voegelin’s thought.

I. The Current Situation

In a recent article entitled “Offensive Political Theory,” Andrew Rehfeld addresses whether and in what role political theory belongs within the discipline of political science. This question, he argues, has become acute in light of the fact that several respected political science departments have removed political theory from their curricula, prompting a swift reproach from a number of scholars.² Besides concerns over disciplinary schism, Rehfeld argues that other factors contribute to the question’s importance such as theorists’ own hesitance to refer to themselves as political scientists, issues of resource allocation and hiring, and the lack of consensus on the definitions of politics, science, and political science and on whose opinions such a consensus should reflect.³ In other words, the significance of the debate about political theory extends to scholars’ self-identities, quantifying the worth of knowledge, and the critical standards of science.

¹ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952) p. 4.

² Andrew Rehfeld, “Offensive Political Theory,” *Perspectives on Politics* 8 (June 2010): 465-86.

³ Andrew Rehfeld, “Offensive Political Theory,” p. 466-68, 474-79.

Although Rehfeld's article may overstate the particular case of political theory, it points to the general confusion in which the academy finds itself. Some hot button issues facing the academy are whether to prioritize teaching or research, whether theory or practice should predominate and in which disciplines, what role the "humanities" should have alongside the "hard sciences," and how and why individuals who often disagree about what knowledge is and whether it is possible are to cooperate in order to disseminate it to the next generation. Stated thus, these questions seem benign and quite reasonable, but often the way they are approached is colored by, as Rehfeld says of his own motivation for writing, an "ongoing lack of engagement, suspicion, and animosity."⁴ Often academic discourse degenerates into ideological clashes, such that individuals refuse to consider each other's argument seriously before dismissing it and words and phrases are often employed inconsistently or even meaninglessly. Questions about the state of the academy are not new, but seem more urgent of late given the widespread conflicts between and within departments and disciplines and the practical situation that more students exit the university bearing with them the enormous debt required to fund "student services" but less knowledge to show for it.⁵ Many students have neither the knowledge nor the technical capacity to secure employment—if positions are even available—with compensation sufficient to repay their debt.⁶ On the lowest, material level, then, one wonders if university education is helping or hurting students and society. Thus, it appears that the academy is in a state of disorder and confusion with regard to its processes and purposes. But like many other contemporary

⁴ Andrew Rehfeld, "Offensive Political Theory," p. 478.

⁵ See the Intercollegiate Studies Institute's Civic Education Study, which shows that students are leaving college with less knowledge than they had upon entering. Also see, Ross Neher, "Art and Delusion: Unreality in Art School," *Academic Questions* 23 (Spring 2010): 177-124, at 122: Speaking of the fine arts, which he thinks can be generalized to "liberal arts programs in practically every college in America," Neher argues that "Those who get teaching jobs at the higher levels will perpetuate the indoctrination of leftist ideology endemic to academe and have as their mission the rooting out of every last vestige of Western culture."

⁶ Ross Neher, "Art and Reality: Unreality in Art School," p. 118.

institutions which have lost sight of their *raison d'être*, the academy presents a disorder that seems to be insufficiently understood.

These conditions are similar to those which Voegelin, writing throughout almost the whole of the twentieth century, addressed repeatedly and forcefully. He argued that situations such as these call for a thorough reconsideration of the principles of institutions in light of an overarching human end.⁷ Voegelin sought to discover universal principles of order in the history of order and the order of history; that is, he studied humanity's historical attempts to discover and to instantiate right order, trying to penetrate to the ontological and existential cause for such activities. He found that the discovery and instantiation of right order requires a particular existential condition or mode of human existence, which he referred to as openness. Its opposite, existential closure, inhibits right order and creates disorder all levels of human existence. Voegelin's examination of Plato's monumental—and “almost miraculous”—efforts to restore order to politics and education factored prominently into his conclusions about the importance of existential openness. Although Voegelin's diagnosis of the problem and formulation for its remediation are highly plausible and substantively unique, they have not received the scholarly attention they deserve. In this paper, therefore, I will suggest that Voegelin's concepts of existential openness and closure speak to our attempts to understand science and education and that becoming existentially open is crucial to restoring order to them.

II. Voegelin on existential openness:

Voegelin's scholarship and personal quest for right order was motivated by a pressing practical concern: namely, his aversion to mass murder. Observing the political atrocities of the twentieth century, he was compelled to discover how so-called “reasonable” people were

⁷ Voegelin was not concerned to study institutions as particular, functional entities; he was, rather, concerned to uncover the assumptions about the meaning of human existence that account for the creation of institutions—understood broadly—and how institutions themselves support or erode those assumptions.

impervious to arguments that clearly proved the impossibility of justifying political violence in terms of a *human* good. The operative principles of political theory and practice, Voegelin determined, were deformed and needed to be reoriented toward the principles of order generally. This demanded a fully theorized scientific critique, but the version of “science” accepted and taught in Continental universities was in no condition to offer such a critique: it too had become deformed such that it could be enlisted to support the totalitarian and ideological political milieu. The deformed science lay at the core of social education with the result that most sophisticated Europeans renounced commonsense and accepted totalitarianism as a reasonable means of securing peace and prosperity. Neither ethical nor rational appeals were sufficient to convince people that killing en masse was not only morally abhorrent but plainly opposed to the end for which such practices were undertaken. In order to discover the cause and remedy for these deformations, Voegelin turned to philosophical anthropology by way of extensive comparative and historical investigations of individuals’ and societies’ symbolic self-interpretations of the meaning of existence. Therein he discovered that the deformations could be traced to certain (improper) responses to “religious experiences,” the agitating experiences of transcending forces of order and disorder suffered by all individuals at the deepest levels of the psyche.

Religious experiences may take various forms, but the one Voegelin most frequently discussed was man’s experience of “his existence as being natural (*creatürlich*) and, therefore, questionable.”⁸ For Voegelin, the characteristic and inescapable activity of human beings, individually and collectively, is to struggle to understand (and to instantiate) the meaning of their existence, the question that manifests itself in the religious experiences. In these experiences the

⁸ Eric Voegelin, *The Political Religions*, trans. Virginia Ann Schildhauer, in *CW* 5:30.

transcendent ground of all being (i.e. God⁹) penetrates or irrupts into human consciousness, inviting man to become aware, though perhaps only in the depths of consciousness, of the tensional and contingent character of his existence. What this amounts to, Voegelin found, is God's delicate drawing, a "pulling" or a "pressing," of the individual human psyche toward itself, revealing itself as transcending ground and offering an opportunity for the individual soul to unfold its potentiality to discover "what lies beyond all the imperfections of limited existence, beyond knowledge of particulars toward the true as such, beyond particular enjoyments toward the good as such."¹⁰

In *Anamnesis*, Voegelin stated that "human nature at its core is the openness of the questioning knowledge and knowing question about the ground. Through this openness, beyond all contents, images, and models, order flows from the ground of being into man's being."¹¹ The proper order of human existence depends upon a proper existential response to the order of reality (Voegelin's deliberately ambiguous term¹²) that reveals itself to human beings according to its own *logos* in the religious experiences. The response must be *existential* since reality and its transcendent ground, he argued, are not primarily "objects" to be known but that which makes human knowing possible through its drawing, substantiating presence "in" the (non-subject) "knower." Reality is, therefore, not exhausted by cognition, the act of intentional consciousness; rather, it becomes luminous to human consciousness that opens itself to the influx of the transcendent ground's ordering force. In this way, human consciousness participates more intensely in reality and becomes more adequately attuned to the fullness of reality that it intends.

⁹ At times, I will use "God" to signify the divine ground of being because of the ease of incorporating it into prose. Voegelin did not identify "God" with any particular religion and did not attribute to God any personal qualities, preferring to characterize God simply as the One, the Beyond, the Divine, or mystery.

¹⁰ Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981) p. 270.

¹¹ Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, trans. and ed. Niemeyer, p. 86

¹² Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, trans. and ed. Niemeyer, p. 164.

To know reality and live well therefore requires a certain character or existential mode that consists in being “open,” receptive, or willing to suffer the opportunity presented in the religious experiences and *actively allowing* all dimensions of one’s experience—thought, will, attitudes, speech, actions, and so forth—to be informed by the transcendent force of order. The knowledge one gains in openness consists in discovering human beings’ limited place in the structure of reality: they exist permanently in the *metaxy*—Plato’s symbol for the existential tension between divine and human, immortality and mortality, order and disorder—and the meaning of human existence lies in searching for the meaning of existence by searching for the divine ground. Following Plato, Voegelin often referred to existential openness as *philia*: “the order of the soul as the loving quest of truth in human response to the divine drawing from the Beyond; the divine-human movement and countermovement of love is the source of man’s knowledge concerning his existence in truth; and since it is the source of truth, it has to become the noetic center from which the philosopher can explore [reality].”¹³ Existential openness is akin to the attitudes of faith, hope, and love that become definitive for action and thought.

Modern science and education (considered either in terms of the powerful influences of society or as the formal training delivered by academic institutions) were, Voegelin found, generally characterized by immanentist and secularist attitudes that were averse to admitting the crucial roles of faith, hope, and love in the process of human knowing. Instead, modern science and education overemphasized mastering a type of thought at the expense of promoting the development of good character, thus severing the “bond between reason and existential *philia*, between reason and openness toward the ground.”¹⁴ The modern deformations arose either

¹³ Voegelin, “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation,” in *CW* 12: 333. For Voegelin’s Plato, the order of the soul as a loving response to reality is an analogue to the cosmic order, which emerges out of the loving interactions of the whole.

¹⁴ Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, trans. and ed. Niemeyer, p. 98.

because individuals had become insensitive to the deep psychic movements, the capacity for apperception having atrophied after disuse; or individuals who were sensitive to the religious experiences fearfully or pridefully rejected the tension of existence that is revealed therein. Recognizing the ontological and existential implications of the tension revealed in the religious experiences, such individuals had decided, even unconsciously, that were unacceptable. Still, the human psyche longs for its divine ground. So in place of the genuine *realissimum* that reveals itself to open individuals, a partial (and more congenial) image of reality masquerades as the *realissimum* in the consciousness of existentially closed individuals.¹⁵ In this way, closed science becomes incapable of providing genuine insights into reality.

The term “openness” has acquired negative connotations in recent times, especially since Allan Bloom’s prominent critique of American society and education linked the attitude of openness (meaning relativism) to contemporary decline.¹⁶ Therefore it is crucial to emphasize that Voegelin’s conception of existential openness 1) is based on a theory about the permanent order and structure of being, 2) assumes that human existence has a proper, natural *telos*, and 3) is intimately bound up with epistemic optimism. Existential openness is *the* proper order of human existence; it can be known to be such and through it one knows that knowing is possible.

As a result of their openness, individuals will attempt to articulate their psychic experiences in symbolic language in order to generate *further* insights into the structure and substance of the psyche.¹⁷ Human knowing and attunement are *processes* that occur in concrete consciousnesses that exist in particular historical contexts and have specific sets of linguistic and experiential tools with which to engage the existential quest. Moreover, what individuals discover about the transcendent ground is that it will *always* transcend human consciousness.

¹⁵ Voegelin, *The Political Religions*, in *CW* 5: 32.

¹⁶ See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

¹⁷ Voegelin, “Reason: The Classic Experience,” *CW* 12: 272.

Therefore, while the fixed structure and end of reality prevents openness from degenerating into relativism, it includes within it a mystery, to which human consciousness must be open. Only by recognizing that they will never achieve a certain or final understanding of reality will human beings be able to increase the intensity of their participation in reality and its transcendent ground and experience the unfolding of the soul toward its full potentiality, which is tantamount to blessedness.¹⁸ The tolerance for mystery was, in Voegelin's view, another point on which modern science and education proved to be grossly deficient.

III. The Scientific Importance of Existential Openness

Before turning to an examination of Plato's practice of openness, it will be useful to spend some time explaining the importance of existential openness for scientific inquiry. While openness may seem important for spiritual or religious life, the modern tendency to specialize and compartmentalize human activity may obscure its crucial role for science. For example, individuals might concede that scientific integrity requires one to admit the existence of an uncaused cause. But even though this intellectual commitment may affect how individuals organize their lives, the supposition (or even the firm conviction) that divine reality exists and affects human beings does not necessarily qualify as *existential* openness to divine reality. And in many instances, individuals whose encounter with the divine is primarily speculative do good science and make good political decisions. Thus it remains to show why one must have a loving orientation toward transcendent reality in order to engage in genuinely scientific activity.

Part of the confusion arises because Voegelin's conception of science is so much broader than modern models that stress a rigid empiricism or logical method. For Voegelin, Plato was

¹⁸ Since all reality participates in the ground, existential openness is sometimes best understood as an orientation toward reality in a general sense that encompasses all the partners in the community of being. This condition of openness (or closure) is *existential* because it depends on an individual's having a specific character, in which one's longings, will, attitudes, thoughts, speech, and actions conform to (or reject) the structure of reality as their principle and intention. Eugene Webb uses this word to describe the condition of attunement to the divine ground.

the founder of political science: “the science of human existence in society and history, as well as of the principles of order in general.”¹⁹ He differentiated two fundamental principles of order, over and against previous deficient understandings, which still hold true today. This monumental scientific accomplishment was possible precisely because Plato was existentially open to reality and its transcendent ground. Therefore, in the following sections I will try to show that for Voegelin existential openness was necessary for science, especially political science, because it enables us 1) to understand reality, especially social and political reality, 2) to manage the scientific quest, 3) to recognize the limits and potential of human knowledge and action, and 4) to treat and communicate with others in a manner appropriate to the nature of science and of politics. In this way we will see that robust science is an existential quest and, since instruction in robust science is the object of education, we will discover that genuine education depends upon teachers and learners becoming existentially open to each other and to the transcendent ground. Teachers must be open and encourage students to become open because the principles of order are comprehensible only if one is properly oriented toward reality. Science itself, in other words, determines how its transmission to others must occur.

A. Existential openness as a requirement for a proper understanding of reality

In *The New Science of Politics* Voegelin argued that political science began with Plato’s discovery of 1) the anthropological principle—the principle that the city is man writ large (*Republic* 368c-d) and 2) the measurement principle, which asserts God as the Measure (*Laws* 716c) in opposition to Protagoras’ formulation that man is the measure.²⁰ Outside of these enduringly true principles, any interpretation of reality is deficient; before Plato discerned these principles, political *science* did not exist, meaning that the true political art and order did not

¹⁹ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, p. 2.

²⁰ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, pp. 61-70.

either. But in order to discover these principles, Plato not only had to assume that “there is [a transcending] order of being accessible to a science beyond opinion,” but also had to have an experiential insight which could the soundness of the assumption.²¹ Voegelin argued thus:

An insight concerning being must always be really present—not only so that the first steps of the analysis can be taken, but so that the very idea of the analysis can be conceived and developed at all. And indeed, Platonic-Aristotelian analysis did not in the least begin with speculations about its own possibility, but with the actual insight into being which motivated the analytical process. The decisive event in the establishment of *politike episteme* was the specifically philosophical realization that the levels of being discernible within the world are surmounted by a transcendent source of being and its order. And this insight was itself rooted in the real movements of the human spiritual soul toward the divine being experienced as transcendent. In the experiences of love for the world-transcendent origin of being, in *philia* toward the *sophon* (the wise), in *eros* toward the *agathon* (the good) and the *kalon* (the beautiful), man becomes the philosopher.²²

Plato’s insights into reality were possible because, to a greater degree others, he “opened his psyche to the truth of God” such that God’s truth “formed the psyche of man into receptivity for the unseen measure.”²³ For Voegelin, therefore, knowing reality scientifically requires a proper ethical and moral relation to the ground that is the Measure in addition to a keen intellect.

Education in Voegelin’s thought consists in cultivating the habit of lovingly allowing oneself to be informed by transcendent reality so that scientific understanding is possible. Science requires a genuine existential conversion toward the true source of order—the Platonic *periagogé* toward the *agathon*. This conversion reveals that education (Platonic *paideia*) is the art of turning others toward the truth that requires that all aspects of human existence be judged in light of the eternal paradigm of order.²⁴ To know the truth of order and to become ordered one must undergo the experience of *thanatos*, the force that makes souls “desirous of stripping

²¹ Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), p. 13.

²² Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, p. 13-4.

²³ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, p. 69.

²⁴ Voegelin, *Plato* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), p. 115.

themselves of everything that is not noble and just,” of *eros*, “the positive desire for the Good,” and *dike*, the “virtue of right superordination and subordination of the forces in the soul.”²⁵

Contemporary education and pedagogy must then, by this account, seek to cultivate in students attitudes of faith and humility, grounded in their experiences of longing for something beyond themselves. Reality simply cannot be known unless one experiences the tension of knowing something unknown (or not knowing something known) that illuminates the direction toward order. So teachers must try, as Plato’s Socrates did with his interlocutors in the *Gorgias*, to tap into students’ *pathema*: the deep psychic core of suffering that has the truth of an immediate experience and reveals the common human condition of existence in the *metaxy*.²⁶ In sensitivity to the *pathos*, the transcendent ground reveals itself, enabling individuals to recognize that right order exists and to apperceive the guiding, existential significance of the key question of science: Who is man?²⁷ Tapping into the *pathema* is achieved by “illuminating truth by opposing it to untruth,” that is, by evoking images of order and disorder that will stir up the psychic longings for transcendent truth and activate luminous consciousness.²⁸ Of course, this means that educators themselves have to have undergone the conversion, for only those who have experienced the living, ordering force of the transcendent ground are willing and able to “spiritually rejuvenate themselves through procreation in the souls of young men, that is, through loving, tending, and developing the best in them.”²⁹ Plato opposed his true education, consisting of efforts to awaken souls to reality and to develop a community of *pathos*, to the sophists’ efforts to obscure reality and to achieve private advantage by keeping discussions on the level of definitional analysis or intellectual banter.

²⁵ Voegelin, *Plato*, p. 12-3 and *The New Science of Politics*, p. 65.

²⁶ Voegelin, *Plato*, p. 29-30.

²⁷ Voegelin, *Plato*, p. 24.

²⁸ Voegelin, *Plato*, p. 63.

²⁹ Voegelin, *Plato*, p. 13.

A second reason why existential openness is necessary for understanding reality is that Plato's discovery of the two scientific principles of order depended on his openness toward social and historical attempts to understand reality. Plato's insights were not made "in a vacuum"; nor did they emerge from an arbitrary conglomeration of historical accidents; and they certainly did not amount to a complete rejection of previous understandings of order. Rather, Plato "drew the sum of a long development."³⁰ Science emerged out of an orderly, if mysterious, process of divine-human encounters and encounters between human beings who were able to apperceive in others' expressions of order the common divine presence. Plato engaged the quest for wisdom as a common, historically evolving endeavor aimed at an inclusive, integrally spiritual and physical end. Being open to other individual's contributions reveals its necessity for scientific discovery in the process: the long, preparatory development was itself a process in which earlier individuals responded openly to the movements of the divine ground. Plato's open sensitivity to the manifestations of the divine movements symbolized in the traditional formulations of order enabled him to resist the temptation to dismiss categorically them as primitive, thereby neglecting the important insights they achieved. But at the same time, his attunement to the divine paradigm of order enabled him to judge which of the older insights were inadequate to reality. Plato revealed and resisted the inadequacy of the earlier formulations without derailing into the arbitrary and unscientific neglect of various experiences of order, which was the hallmark of his sophistic contemporaries. In this way we see that critical political science discoveries required, on the part of human beings, a common and constant openness through which the divine reality could manifest its wisdom to humanity.

Some practical lessons can be gleaned from Plato's openness to the historical attempts to discover and to instantiate right order. First off, educators must have and encourage their

³⁰ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, p. 68.

students to develop a willingness to learn from others, even those who lived in more primitive times or who had a more limited capacity for expressing their insights. Plato showed the importance of this especially in his sympathetic, yet not uncritical, treatment of the old myth. Students must penetrate to the psychic motivations of a thinker's work, even if they represent a different religious or political tradition, which requires submitting themselves to another. And the academy must be open to a variety of methodological approaches and offer "the opportunity to think freely and engage in open dialogue with others."³¹ Plato, after all, "played" with different symbolic forms, exploring their advantages and limitations. Moreover, the willingness to learn from others will, by extension, mitigate the tendency to view one's own insights as final that naturally accompanies the experience of heightened attunement to the transcendent ground. Again, Plato's example is instructive for he did not hesitate to revise his initial formulations in light of new (old) insights into the structure of being; in his mature writings his works become increasingly mythic and reflect a more sober view of the human condition.

For Voegelin, this last point was especially important given the ideologically-charged culture in which he found himself, for such existentially closed individuals tended to forget or to reject the reality that human existence *always* partakes of disorder even as it engages in the existential quest for order. It should be noted that while a willingness to learn from others helps one to comport oneself in a manner coherent with the perpetual disorder of human existence, it does not ensure it. The attitudes of willingness to learn from others, to play, and to revise one's thoughts promote science only to the extent that they are outgrowths of the foundational openness that Platonic education seeks to foster, but must be cultivated by the student himself. Absent the student's own apperception of the ground, these attitudes are more akin to polite

³¹ Eugene Webb, "Eric Voegelin and Literary Theory," in *Politics, Order, and History*, eds. McKnight, Hughes, and Price (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 513.

conventions than means for facilitating attunement to reality. In other words, education's primary concern should be to enable individuals to develop the capacity for sensing the ground that enables them both to appreciate and to criticize others' contributions to the quest for order.

A third reason why existential openness is crucial to a proper understanding of reality is because attunement to the ground provides a stable reference point so that words and other symbols, which are *de facto* incapable of perfectly conveying the reality they signify, can be employed meaningfully between individuals. Language and communication must be grounded in a participatory ontological experience if its signification of reality is to be adequate and constant. Therefore, the two *true* Platonic principles of order are incomprehensible unless one shares in the psychic sufferings that gave rise to them. It follows that if one does not grasp the principles in their fullness, one's deductions from them will fall short of a scientific understanding of reality. Openness to reality also guides how one conveys insights to others, urging formulations evoke similar psychic experiences in order to extend the scientific endeavor. Education must therefore foster the common experience of reality becoming luminous in the individual psyche that provides the intelligible foundation of communication rather than focus on definitional precision or doctrinal mastery. And education must, if undertaken out of concern for the psychic health of other partners in the community of being, constantly emphasize the limitations of language and the importance of apperception for the instantiation of right order.

From the foregoing remarks, it should be clear that both the historical inception and continuation of science require existential openness. For Voegelin, science emerges out of philosophic wonder, the desire to discover the enduring unity beyond the great variety of particulars that attracts man to it. This impulse itself reveals the intimate relation between the suffered movements of a transcendent something and science, which is revealed to be a way of

life rather than a type of thought: “This luminous search in which the finding of the true answer depends on asking the true question, and asking the true question depends on the spiritual apprehension of the true answer, this is the life of reason.”³² Because man is moved to and guided in scientific inquiry by the divine presence, “entry into truth must be by means of faith and concern rather than by a method promising certainty or even a calculable probability. . . The thinker must ultimately take the risk of entrusting himself to reality as to something with coherence, order and intelligibility, which reaches to man as he reaches toward it.”³³

B. Existential openness helps us to manage the scientific quest

Voegelin’s own experience proved that individuals may pursue knowledge and even arrive at useful conclusions without being motivated primarily or consciously by philosophic wonder. They may, for example, engage in inquiry out of habit or for the prestige it entails. But for Voegelin this activity certainly is not robust science and may even be anti-scientific. Science, by its nature, requires a rational account of its own activity, in terms of its beginnings in, continuation through, and direction toward the ground of being. So long as the pursuit of knowledge is merely habitual or instrumental to an immanent end it will not meet the criteria for *rationality*, which is necessary for thematic (to say nothing of existential) consistency.

In order to justify science, the divine-human participation and must be explored in all of its fullness, that is, as a motivating, sustaining, and guiding force and as the proper end of human existence. Since the method of inquiry proceeds from the nature of the object of investigation (*viz.* the divine-human participation), rational science—science that is able to account for its own activity—must be conducted in openness to the psychic apperceptions of the divine ground. To be sure, such an exploration requires formal cognitive analysis, but it must begin and end, as it

³² Voegelin, “The Gospel and Culture,” in *CW* 12: 175.

³³ Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981) p. 271.

were, in the meditative openness to guidance of the divine ground if it is to have a solid empirical and ontological underpinning, a theoretically sound trajectory, and an awareness of its inherent limitations. The meaning of existence one discovers in openness to the ground provides the basis for selecting what should be studied, as well as why and how. Finally, science—especially *political* science—hardly makes sense absent an account of man himself, for whose good science is undertaken. Therefore, openness to exploring the divine reality is also crucial to fleshing out the purpose of science as a distinctively *human* activity.

Absent existential openness, therefore, science proceeds into irrelevant areas, becoming overwhelmed in the enormous volume of data its methods produce and finding itself incapable of making determinations of relative worth. The inquirer-by-habit's loss of reflectiveness and insensitivity to the divine ground also closes off important venues of investigation and results in arbitrary conclusions. The same holds for investigation driven by prestige, but amplified inasmuch as its practitioner is unaware of or rejects the limitations of *metaxy* existence and the dependence of human knowing on the divine ground. Here, rationality is violated by the implicit denial of the reality of experience of the tension of existence, the direction of one's activity by a misguided desire, the misunderstanding of the process of human knowing, and the deficient conception of the structure of being. Other deficient modes of pursuing knowledge could be added, but these two should suffice to prove existential openness's importance for ensuring the validity and reliability of scientific inquiry and its conclusions.

These conclusions are significant for evaluating educational institutions and practices and speak directly to the concerns about locating political theory that were raised in Rehfeld's article. Specifically, they indicate that a decision to include or exclude political theory (or any other subject) from a department's curriculum should be made on the basis of whether or not it

clarifies the structure of reality that science intends to illuminate and provides an adequate account of its own activity. “Relevant in science is whatever contributes to the success of this search. Facts are relevant in so far as their knowledge contributes to the study of essence, while methods are adequate in so far as they can be effectively used as a means for this end.”³⁴

Therefore, other concerns that factor into a curricular decision, particularly those such as departmental cohesiveness, individual scholars’ identities, or resource allocation, are to be subordinated to the primary concern about how a decision will impact the scientific quest.

C. Existential openness enables us to recognize the limits and potential of human knowledge and action

Voegelin emphasized that reality, as a whole and in its distinctive aspects (*viz.* the partners in the community of being), cannot be comprehended as an object because it is a something in which man participates. This means that political, social, and cosmic reality transcends human consciousness and will remain fundamentally mysterious to human beings. But by their immediate participation in reality, human beings are capable of substantial knowledge of it. In order to realize these fundamental truths about the structure of human existence and to recognize their consequences for the potential and limits of human knowledge, one must, Voegelin thought, be open to the transformative insights that arise from the psychic movements. Therefore, because a scientific understanding of science must recognize, and in its practice respect, what science (as a human activity) is capable and incapable of achieving, its practitioner must be existentially open to the forces in which the order of being reveals itself.

Existential openness is also crucial to scientific integrity and progress because its orientation toward transcendent truth engenders an attitude of willingness to criticize and revise methodological approaches and assumptions and to entertain the possibility that reality will

³⁴ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, p. 5.

reveal itself more fully and in ways yet unknown to man. If “scientific” methods or assumptions fail to cohere with and illuminate the reality they intend, the existentially open individual will see the discrepancy and endeavor to correct it rather than persist in error. “Scientific” formulations that do not admit of either the limits or potential of human thought and action may be rejected as false, thus promoting a better understanding and ordering of the human condition.

D. Existential openness enables us to treat and to communicate with others in a manner appropriate to the nature of science and of politics

Existential openness enables one to recognize the common, transcending ground of all reality and to discover that the proper end of every individual human being is attunement to that ground, which is the core concern of Voegelinian and Platonic science. Thus the open individual apperceives his common humanity with others and that all features of his temporal existence—including his treatment of others—will be judged in light of the divine order. For Voegelin, then, the reality that every human being participates in and is oriented to the divine ground is the ultimate basis of the moral and ethical consideration for others that undergirds philosophers’ (and educators’) attempts to awaken others to the divine paradigm of order. Therefore, even more than supplying the end of science, openness as a mode of existence is absolutely critical for the proper practice of science, which by its very nature depends upon collective (if not always cooperative) action, and in which both the ontological unity and distinctiveness of the partners in the community of being is made explicit and experientially intense. Engaging in scientific activity intensifies the significance of existential concern for others inasmuch as its first principle is an end that is common: reality. Absent a genuine moral and ethical concern for the other partners in the community of being, science becomes absurd. As Voegelin said,

Political science goes beyond the validity of propositions to the truth of existence. The opinions for the clarification of which [scientific] analysis is undertaken are not merely false: they are symptoms of spiritual disorder in the men who hold them. And the

purpose of analysis is to persuade—to have its own insights, if possible, supplant the opinions in social reality. Analysis is concerned with the therapy of order.³⁵

For Voegelin, then, genuine science requires a spirit of openness toward others that urges one to encourage others to become existentially ordered, or open to reality, as well. According to Voegelin, Plato's scientific efforts were bound up in an "act of salvation for himself and others."³⁶ Science thus requires that one try to educate others by helping them to undergo the conversion that orients them to the ultimate good; but this activity is not possible unless one has been open to the conversion oneself. Openness to the ground, therefore, reveals the existential upshots of science: science is a socially active force because the order of reality it intends requires instantiation in the human psychic substance. Although I have already suggested some ways in which pedagogy should be informed by openness to the ground, these can be specified by examining how Plato, the educator (and learner) *par excellence*, conducted his own existential quest and tried to open others to it.

IV. Plato's existential openness in practice

A. Plato's attention to concrete reality

Voegelin identified several features of Plato's philosophy that indicated that his quest for order was an open response to reality. First of all, in Voegelin's account, Plato's efforts to understand how individuals and societies ought to be ordered emerged out of his opposition to *concrete disorder*. His philosophy was the "expression of a man's resistance to a social corruption which goes so deep that affects the truth of existence under God. Philosophy thus," according to Voegelin, "has its origin in the resistance of the soul to its destruction by society."³⁷ The dialogues, Voegelin determined, were motivated by the actual historical events and ideas of

³⁵ Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, p. 15.

³⁶ Voegelin, *Plato*, pp. 68-69.

³⁷ Voegelin, *Plato*, p. 68.

Plato's time, especially the sophists' influence, Alcibiades' fateful expedition in Sicily, the political vacillations between oligarchy and democracy, and the execution of Socrates.

Although his attention to concrete ideas and events may at first seem unconnected or even antithetical to openness to the transcendent ground, the opposite is true. Inasmuch as the observable character of all being reflects the order of its participation in the transcendent ground, concrete realities provide a widely accessible gateway into the existential quest, and the willingness to consider them in this way evinces Plato's attitude of open partnership with the *entirety* of being.³⁸ By beginning from these "external" ideas and events, concretely experienced in common with other Athenians, Plato laid the foundation for a shared quest, whose fruits were to be enjoyed in common. That is, he treated subjects that would possibly evoke psychic sensations of order and disorder in others so that they would desire to undergo the catharsis of *thanatos*. Even as Plato's quest became more reflective and anamnestic, he treated the concrete disorder which, for our purposes, indicates that science and education must always concern themselves with remediating concrete disorder through *peitho*, or persuasion.

Philosophy is a public, open activity aimed at transforming lives through persuasion rather than indoctrinating a particular teaching with no practical impact. Therefore, as educators try to awaken souls to the truth of order, they would do well to begin from common experiences which provide a basis from which persuasion may become effective. Plato's beginning with such experiences also had the effect of establishing his premises openly so that corrections could be made easily, another crucial pedagogical practice. Thus, Plato's emphasis on concrete personal and social issues demonstrated that his key concern was to understand reality on its own terms and with others.

³⁸ For Voegelin, this would be an important distinction between Plato and the ancient gnostics and Christians who desired to escape from physical reality.

The importance of Plato's openness is clearer when examined in light of the sophists' activity, which was motivated by the desire for power and prestige. To that end, the sophists tried to establish their intellectual superiority over others by concocting irrefutable abstract problems and then constructing even more abstract solutions to them—proving of the non-existence of being, for example, which plainly violated the most basic tenets of commonsense. They also employed rhetorical techniques in order to shift their audience's view away from the concrete and observable, the structure and existence of which point toward the transcendent order that belies the immanent assumptions of their arguments (and mode of existence). In Plato's *Gorgias*, Voegelin found an accurate portrayal of the "rightist or leftist intellectuals" of his own time who "misuse[d] the rules of the game, who by irrelevant profuseness [sought] to avoid being nailed down on a point, and who [gained] the semblance of victory by exhausting the time which sets an inevitable limit to a discussion."³⁹

The symptomatology of disorder that Plato developed is useful conceptual tool, but Plato was always concerned to connect the symptoms to the psychic experience of disorder so that the apperception of order could occur. This is because "In suffering and resisting the soul discerns the directions from which the pulls come. The darkness engenders the light in which it can distinguish between life and death, between the helper and the enemy. And the growing light of wisdom illuminates the way for the soul to travel."⁴⁰ To awaken others to the luminosity of suffering, Plato dramatized how the sophists' neglect of the common, concrete experiences in favor of privatized abstractions evinces a break with reality that necessarily corrupts ordered thinking. Commenting on *Gorgias* 486d-522, where Callicles tries to assert the false position

³⁹ Voegelin, *Plato*, p. 26.

⁴⁰ Voegelin, *Plato*, p. 63.

that the good and the just consist in the “self-assertive expression of the stronger nature,”⁴¹

Voegelin argued:

The position of Callicles has a fundamental weakness, characteristic of this type of existentialism. Callicles does not seriously deny the relative rank of the virtues. He is not prepared to deny that courage ranks higher than cowardice, or wisdom higher than folly. When he identifies the good with the strong, he *acts* on the inarticulate premise that there exists a pre-established harmony between the lustiness represented by himself and the social success of virtues which he does not discern too clearly but to which he gives conventional assent. Socrates, in his argument, uses the technique of pointing to *facts* which disprove the pre-established harmony and involves Callicles in contradictions between his valuations and the consequences of his existentialism.⁴²

The sophists’ closure to concrete ideas and events—the facts—must be hidden through rhetoric, but reality will burst through even the most intricate rhetorical defenses, revealing itself in existential contradictions. From the Platonic standpoint, proper pedagogy will employ conceptual pairs that will illuminate both order and order and proper education will enable an individual to recognize and to resist contradictions as evidence of existential disorder

B. Plato’s recognition that the psychic movements are the crucial source of knowledge concerning order

Voegelin emphasized that Plato’s quest for order not only took account of the concrete “external” features of reality but also, and much more importantly, was grounded in the “internal” concrete features, that is, his deep, psychic experiences of order and disorder.⁴³

Therefore, Plato concerned himself with the concrete, historical situation of Athens primarily because he recognized its deleterious effects on the (ontologically prior) individual and collective psychic substance, the health of which depends upon attunement to the divine order. Only in a

⁴¹ Voegelin, *Plato*, p. 34.

⁴² Voegelin, *Plato*, p. 35. (my emphasis).

⁴³ Although I am distinguishing between “external” and “internal” features of reality, for Voegelin as well as for his Plato, no such distinction exists apart from the individual consciousness. Reality is a unitary entity although human beings perceive it through different modes of consciousness, which give it appearance of having different aspects. In Voegelin’s late terminology, thing-reality (reality as an object of thought) is perceived by intentional consciousness while It-reality (reality as the non-object structure in which a non-subject knower participates) is perceived by luminous consciousness. Consciousness in the mode of reflective distance perceives and keeps in one’s attention the distinctive, yet unitary, modes of consciousness and reality

secondary way, but not for that reason an insignificant one, did Plato's philosophic efforts engage the disorder of pragmatic affairs such as the breakdown of institutions and civic cohesiveness and the consequent risk incurred to physical existence. Plato's willingness to explore the psychic movements was motivated by more than a concern for methodological pluralism. Rather, Plato explored the internal experiences of order and disorder because, inasmuch as they emanated from the divine source of order, *they were the surest empirical source of the crucial, formative knowledge concerning how one ought to conduct one's life*. On this point, Voegelin's reading of Plato differs significantly from that of other twentieth-century interpretations that viewed Platonic philosophy as an immanent quest for a correct cosmology, understood to be without practical or ethical consequence.

Voegelin's Plato personally suffered under the sense of being, by virtue of his existence in a corrupt society, "in supreme danger (618b), because [his soul] might enter into community with evil (367a)."⁴⁴ Despite the anxious, disturbing character of the suffering, Plato responded to it with "the desiring knowledge and knowing questioning" that Voegelin also described as faith, hope, and love toward the unknown ground of reality that is the source of all goodness.⁴⁵ Plato thus proved his openness to an obliging transcendent source of order and wisdom for, according to the analysis of the Platonic symbols, one must conclude that "the source of the [directional] help is hidden; we can only say it is There."⁴⁶ Neither man himself nor his society is the source of the most important knowledge. Moreover, Plato's sensitivity to the divine communications is augmented with the active, wondering pursuit of order that occurs in partnership with the mysterious influx of reality that provided the initial insight. In this way Plato showed that his primary concern was not to distinguish himself from other partners (here, God) in the community

⁴⁴ Voegelin, *Plato*, p. 84.

⁴⁵ Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, trans. and ed. Niemeyer, p. 168, 184.

⁴⁶ Voegelin, *Plato*, p. 62.

of being, but rather to heighten his participation with them; his great philosophical accomplishments were accompanied by an acute sense of the limitations of human existence.

Voegelin found that over the course of his life and through his repeated efforts to explore the divine-human movements of his psyche, Plato became increasingly attuned to the complex structure of reality. In Voegelin's view, this accounts for the trajectory of the Platonic corpus (from the *Gorgias* through the *Laws*) toward more poetic and religious themes. As Plato penetrated more deeply into the depths of consciousness, he found that myth and poetry were the appropriate means of exploring the structure of reality and the way toward the transcendent Beyond. "The *Timaeus*," Voegelin argued, "marks an epoch in the history of mankind in so far as in this work the psyche has reached the critical consciousness of the methods by which it symbolizes its own experiences. As a consequence, no philosophy of order can be adequate unless the Platonic philosophy of the myth has been substantially absorbed into its own principles."⁴⁷ What this means for education and teaching is that knowledge emerges from myth, the medium which, by blurring the lines between spiritual and material, eternity and temporality, and knowledge and ignorance, is able to generate clearer insights into the structure, purpose, and meaning of human existence. Myth is the language of the psyche attuned to God. Education in the fullest sense must, then, enable one to become fluent in its tongue.

IV. Voegelin's open encounter with Plato

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Voegelin's efforts to understand Plato centered on appropriating Plato's point of view. This required him to understand the traditions Plato's culture had inherited, the political situation in which Plato lived, and the meanings of terms in common usage on the level of the psyche's participation in reality so that he could sense the way they shaped Plato's perceptions of order and disorder personally and in his society. One

⁴⁷ Voegelin, *Plato*, p. 183.

commentator describes Voegelin's approach as an attempt to penetrate to an author's "motivating center," to join his soul with the author's soul through meditation in order to arrive at a common understanding of the reality that both partners experience. This meditative union of an interpreter's with an (existentially open) author's soul means that the interpreter appropriates the author's existential quest to his own by allowing the author's psychic experiences of reality to stir up in him similar experiences, a process abetted by his own imaginative recreation of the author's experiences and anamnestic activity.

Voegelin thought, of course, that penetrating to Plato's motivating center was possible because he assumed the unity of being and that the common feature of humanity was its orientation toward the ground of all being. This assumption and the interpretive method based upon might seem dogmatic, but the opposite is true. Voegelin's effort to understand the author from his own point of view exhibited a willingness to be taught, and even to have his character formed, by someone who not only lived at a different historical time but also could not receive instruction from him. In a real sense, Voegelin incurred a debt of gratitude to his Hellenic instructor which he would never be able to repay. This is even more significant in light of Voegelin's willingness to admit that historical and contextual factors impact our ability to approach the most important knowledge, so neither what Plato helped him to learn (and what he would convey to others) regarding the existential quest nor what he discovered about the substance of Plato's symbolism was a final articulation of the truth of order. Voegelin's knew that his interpretation and lifelong engagement with the Platonic corpus was merely a gateway to or a step within humanity's ongoing quest to understand a mystery. Still, Voegelin knew that he could, and was indeed obliged to, play his role in the unfolding of truth, which he undertook

by considering the collective wisdom and ignorance of humanity's quest for its transcendent ground that is preserved in historical records and accessible through meditation.

V. Relevance for today and Concluding Remarks

Voegelin sensed in Plato's writings an acute awareness of and sensitivity to transcendent ground that could reorient modern science and education to its eternal end. Out of his openness, Plato recognized that social and noetic disorder had their roots in "the pride of human wisdom" that abhors "existence in obedience to the god."⁴⁸ And he discovered the remedy in philosophy—the loving quest for the divine ground of being, which transforms human existence in the image of God. Voegelin therefore found in the Platonic practice of openness a model for resisting disorder and creating order in his own time. The Platonic insights could not speak to all aspects of modern disorder, which had developed out of phenomena unknown to the ancients. But since "the basic situation of political science" and of reality were unchanged, many of the insights—especially concerning science and education—could be employed in the modern context for the restoration of order.

Moderns would have to come to understand science as the effort to understand the principles of order that derive from the structure of reality and normatively oblige men's character. By becoming attuned to the deep psychic movements of order, individuals would come to understand what is worthy of attention in the short period that human beings exist temporally and, because by attunement the structure of reality becomes luminous in human consciousness, they would discover the appropriate methods for scientific inquiry. What education and science required was an existential conversion to the true source of order that makes all human knowing possible. Once the conversion is undertaken, a number of pedagogical techniques and aims emerge as universally important for learning. These include

⁴⁸ Voegelin, *Plato*, p. 7.

cultivating a loving and humble spirit, a willingness to learn from others and to seriously engage various methods of inquiry, to revise one's conclusions, and to admit the impossibility of final formulations. Also important are the emphases on persuasion and being clear in one's formulations, which are effected by using language that points back to concrete reality and psychic experiences with order and disorder. All of these aim at instantiating a deep sense of the community of being and the importance of instantiating the divine paradigm of order in human existence.

If Voegelin's concept of existential openness is relevant to the current situation facing the academy, as I think it is, we would do well to incorporate some of these attitudes into our efforts to understand and to improve it. Assessed in light of Voegelin's robust conception of science and education as the means by which individuals become aware of and fulfill their ontological end, quibbles over disciplinary boundaries indicate pervasive closure to the ground and blindness to what the true aim of the academy should be, *viz.* to promote a community of understanding whose attunement to the ground can make reason a socially effective ordering force.