Cognitive and Existential Truth in The *Theory of Governance*

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I. Introduction

The term "cognitive and existential truth" is not found in Voegelin's early work, but what it expresses is present from the beginning, namely the fact, that the search for truth involves the entire person. As far as I can see, the term was used for the first time in 1961 in a review of the works of Arnold Toynbee. Voegelin writes that in the course of the life work of a philosopher one can identify in his texts "cognitive resting points which reflect the view of reality that has been gained at the respective stage in the existential advance toward truth". But if one views these respective "resting places" as "results" or as "information" one creates artificial opposites that blind one to the unity of the philosophical quest, for this is found in the motivational depths of the philosopher's soul, and not in any stage of the textual record separated from this inner movement1 [1] . Indeed the reader who wishes to understand a philosopher's thought, must try, as Voegelin wrote in 1943, "to penetrate the intellectual-historical Gestalt" of the other thinker to the "point of transcendence, and through such a penetration to school and clarify one's own embodiment of the experience of transcendence"2 [2] .

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1 [1] Eric Voegelin, "Toynbee's History as a Search for Truth" (1961), in: *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 11, Published Essays 1953-1965*, ed. with an Introduction by Ellis Sandoz, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000, 100-113, here 100f.

2 [2] Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis: On the theory of History and Politics*, in: *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 6, ed. with an Introduction by David Walsh, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002, 56.

As I said, this insight into the cognitive and existential nature of the search for truth was with Voegelin from the beginning. In his dissertation, written at the age of twenty-one, he states that when the philosopher's intuition plumbs the depths of reality, his explorations stretch the boundaries of language. Naturally, following such an experience, the philosopher can compose a text in which he discusses the intuitive experience. But in so doing he must use the language that was developed to treat worldly things. And, in applying the language of worldly "things" to matters that are neither "things" nor "in" the world, he must speak in analogies. In order for the reader of such texts to understand what the author is trying to express, the reader must also have his own intuition of the ground of being; for only then can he recognize the intention of the philosopher's language symbols, and not mistake them for information concerning world immanent "things"3 [3] .

Both in Voegelin's earliest texts, as well as in the writings of his middle and later years, we find this concern for the cognitive and the existential as equally important aspects in the search for truth. In *The Theory of Governance,* written between 1930 and 1932, we find the first extensive treatment of meditation. I therefore now turn to this text.

II. The Theory of Governance4 [4]

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3 [3] Eric Voegelin, "Interaction and Spiritual Community" (1922), in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 32, *The Theory of Governance and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1921-1938*, ed. with an Introduction by William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss, Columbia; University of Missouri Press, 2003, 19-141, here 64-67.

4 [4] In: *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, vol. 32,* 224-373. References to this volume will appear in the text in parentheses ( ).

In its printed form *The Theory of Governance* is a text of 150 pages, divided into three chapters5 [5] . Chapter one begins with the statement: "The determination of that which a person essentially is takes place, when the attempt is made with adequate means, in a fundamental form of philosophical thinking" called "meditation" (226). In this chapter Voegelin analyzes texts from St. Augustine, Descartes, Edmund Husserl, and Max Scheler.6 [6]

How does the meditation proceed? In the meditative exercise the individual explores all realms of being with the intention of overcoming mere worldly being in order to enter into living contact with the divine ground, an experience in which, simultaneously, the meditating individual discovers himself as a person. The unity of the cognitive and the existential is found in the fact that the goal of Augustine's search is not a concept of God, but the experience of the *amor Dei* itself (227).

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5 [5] Written in Austria between 1930-1932, *The Theory of Governance* was not published in Voegelin's life time. Like his works, *Race and State* and *The History of the Race Idea*, both published in 1933, *The Theory of Governance* grew out of Voegelin's dissatisfaction with German political science and *Staatslehre*, disciplines which he criticized for not going to the roots of the spiritual phenomena out of which political order arises. See: *The Idea of Race*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 2, ed. with an Introduction by Klaus Vondung, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999, here, 1-7. Voegelin's criticism of the theories of positive law, that is of thinkers who believe that they need not penetrate to the depth of the spiritual source of law, begins as early as 1924. See: Dietmar Herz, *Das Ideal einer objektiven Wissenschaft von Recht und Staat: Zu Eric Voegelins Kritik an Hans Kelsen*, *Occasional Papers*, no. III Eric-Voegelin-Archiv, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universtitaet, Munich 1996.

His criticism of political science conducted under the shadow of positivist metaphysics is at the center of his criticism of Max Weber and of political science in the "Introduction" to *The New Science of Politics* (1952).

6 [6] For a detailed analysis see: William Petropulos, "The Person as Imago Dei" in, Glenn Hughes, *The Politics of the Soul*, Rowman & Littelfield, Lanham, 1999, 87-115, esp. 91-102..

The living spirit in its contact to the divine ground is the real life of the person. For this reason Descartes refers to it as the earthly equivalent to the beatific vision of God (244).

Voegelin begins his first chapter with the meditation of St. Augustine because to this day it remains the classical model for investigations into the essence of the person and time (226). But why does he end the chapter with Max Scheler? It is because it was the intention of Scheler's philosophy of religion to free Augustine's insights from the encrustations of tradition and modern subjectivity in order to present these insights in a manner that the contemporary world can understand. In the tradition of St. Augustine, Scheler argues for the practice of meditation as the way to the cognitive and existential knowledge of divinity7 [7] .

Chapter Two is concerned with the "powerful and the powerless person" (255). The powerful person is the individual who has entered more intimately into contact with the divine. Such a person "also manifests what transcends the self" (261). On the other hand, the powerless person is the one who can only gain insight into what is morally right through the mediating authority of those who have entered into direct contact with the divine ground. Voegelin underlines the fact that the person who issues commands cannot be the sole source of their validity for, in that case, the ruler would come between the subject and the subject's own relationship to the divine. Rather, Voegelin maintains, the relationship of commanding and obeying is rooted in a larger, "super-personal moral reality" which can only be realized in the co-operative acts of both the ruler and the ruled (262).

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7 [7] Max Scheler, *On The Eternal in Man*, Trans. By Bernard Noble, London 1960, 12-13, 30.

The third chapter, on the "Basic Types of Theories of Governance" builds on the insights gained in chapters one and two. It begins with a critique of Max Weber's use of a juridical model of governance because such a model offers a mere mechanical description of ruler-ship in which the reality of the moral person is ignored. Voegelin contrasts this rejected model with the actual state of affairs in governing relationships which is that both the ruler and the ruled are engaged in the joint realization of a moral whole (278).

. Since the person is only really a person ("ganz bei sich selbst" (261)) in the living relationship to the divine ground, any form of domination on the part of one person by another endangers the dominated person's direct relationship to the ground. This is the source of the evil inherent to all ruler-ship. Therefore, the deepest questions involved in a theory of governance touch upon the matter of theodicy.

The rejection of Weber's theory, and the presence of good and evil at the root of governance, brings the investigation to the question: beyond mere coercion, what is the moral and spiritual power found at the center of governance (279)?

This question implies the further one concerning the constitution of the human being. Here Voegelin turns to Othmar Spann8 [8] because, according to Voegelin, "in the field of sociology it is Othmar Spann who has considered the constitution of human existence with the utmost clarity

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8 [8] Voegelin wrote his dissertation under the direction of Othmar Spann. The Viennese sociologist played an important role in Voegelin's thought during his student days, and for at least ten years afterwards. Voegelin records that it was in Spann's seminars that he was introduced to Plato and classical Philosophy. The theme of the openness to the ground, which Voegelin deepened with his knowledge of Bergson, James, Scheler, and others is a basic insight of Othmar Spann's sociology. See: *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 32, 2-3.

and rigor" (279). The human being is not a closed being. Human consciousness is open to a "super-personal spiritual reality ("�berpersonales geistig Reales")9 [9] .

Following the framework outlined by Spann, Voegelin finds the most adequate expression of the spiritual nature of the human being in Descartes' *Meditations* (283), repeating the point he made in chapter one: The human being is only really alive in the soul's touching of the infinite divine in mystical experience. What we "know" about the human being, when we turn back from the mystical experience to the knowledge of the world of things, is not fundamental: For, "in reality human existence cannot be grasped in an objectifying mode of thought, but only in the existential movement of thought, in which it becomes present to itself" (287)10 [10] .

Voegelin examines modern theories of governance that arose in the wake of the French Revolution which, having destroyed traditional forms of government, threw the human being back on "the naked constitution of existence" (303). The aristocratic authors of such theories still thought that they knew what ruler-ship was, and therefore felt no need to look at the existential constitution of the rulers, but concentrated instead on the existential constitution of the

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9 [9] Quoting Spann, Voegelin continues: "The fundamental ontological state of affairs is that 'spirit is contained in a higher whole by virtue of its being reflexively connected to and contained within a higher spirit' "(279-280). Inspiration and ideas ("Eingebungen and Einf�lle") are the experiences in which the higher super-personal spirit manifests itself in human beings. Voegelin quotes Spann *in extenso*: " 'We cannot do anything directly to produce 'ideas'; they come unconsciously and unbidden�. The spirit lives from inspiration; in inspiration spirit itself is created. The inspiration works through us, and in so doing, we come into being'" (280).

10 [10] In the "objectifying mode of thought" we find ourselves in the symbolisms and language of things, and our statements about the human being are mere conjecture because such statements do not emanate from the only real experience we have of the human being from the "inside", from spiritual acts (286-287).

individuals of the newly enfranchised class, to which they opposed (304). They therefore argue that governance under political freedom is designed only to achieve what governance under the lack of freedom already accomplished: it provides a safe haven in which the common man can go about his daily business (310). Later 19th century theories investigate the existential constitution of the leaders who will provide this safe haven for the common man. The latter type of theory follows the problem of evil into the abyss of the ruler who shoulders responsibility for the one who is ruled, thus cutting him off from his own free decisions concerning good and evil. In Nietzsche's case such a theory renders morality itself superfluous. In Dostoyevsky's legend of "The Grand Inquisitor", evil takes the form of the knowing betrayal of morality on the part of the leaders in order to provide the illusory "safe haven" in this world for those who are not among the elect.

Both of these theories, so Voegelin, lose sight of the fact that co-operative acts of command and obedience are necessary in order to realize the moral whole that encompasses both rulers and ruled.

The high point of *The Theory of Governance* is reached in Voegelin's consideration of the political theory of the historian, Frederick Wolters, whose understanding of governance was made in contemplation of the German symbolist poet, Stefan George.

Wolters' theory attempts to explain how, despite all differences between the ruler and the ruled, they are relatively equal in their relationship to spirit; the ruler too is a servant of the spirit and his example of service is a model to those who serve him (337-338).

Voegelin's discussion of Wolters, or more precisely, Stefan George, underlines the spiritual, non-objective nature of political reality, and applies the insights gained in chapter one, concerning the nature of the person discovered in the theoretical mode of existence, to the structure of politics itself. In Wolters' words: "[I]n the unity of the creative spirit, matters at the level of the space-time continuum do not reach into the last conditions of humanity" (342). The political science that takes its starting point in the openness of the human being to divinity, thus overcoming modern theories of the human being that posit a closed consciousness, is, in Voegelin's words, an explicit return to Plato and classical philosophy11 [11] .The bond of participation between the ruler and the ruled is given in the fact that both acts of commanding and acts of obedience are co-operative acts in the interest of realizing the moral substance of the divine ground which both the rulers and the ruled share equally. The difference between the ruled and those who rule is not to be found in their bodies and souls, but in their reason (353-354).

The emphasis on the degrees of reason as the difference between human beings, brings us back to the theme of meditation which Voegelin discussed in chapter one: The determination of what a person is, takes place, when the attempt is undertaken with adequate means, in a fundamental form of philosophizing that goes by the name of meditation. I will therefore conclude with a few words on the structure of the meditation and the search for existential and cognitive truth.

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11 [11] This theme is developed in relationship to the works of Sir Thomas Elyot. Elyot's thought is "based on the paradigm of the Platonic state". He "penetrates to the core of the problem of governance, as it was not done again with equal clarity until Wolters---through Stefan George--found it again" (356).

<u>III. Conclusion The Search for Existential and Cognitive Truth and the Structure of the Meditation</u>.

       The structure of the meditation is found in Plato's parable of the cave, where the pull of the divine accounts for the philosopher's turning away from shadow to light. Voegelin understands the Christian *conversio* as a more differentiated account of the same experience. At the outset of the meditative journey, and the journey spans a life time, the individual thinks that it is his search. As the search progresses he realizes that, in reality, his act is a response to the divine call to turn from the mere creaturely aspects of life, toward the eternal. In Christian terms this is the turn from the *amor sui* to the *amor Dei*. Indeed the point of this turn, the *conversio*, at the mid-point of the search, marks its real beginning. The meditative complex of questioning-response to the divine pull is a unity, but, in the course of the meditative exercise, the understanding of what constitutes the beginning and the end of the meditation changes as insight is gained into the role of the divine ground that preceded the temporal beginning. In other words: In sight of the meditation's spiritual end (telos), one looks back on its temporal beginning and knows it for the first time, for one has (re)-discovered it in the light of the meditation's true beginning, the *amor Dei* which drew the individual to his meditation in the first place.

       The structure of the meditation follows the structure of reality, mirrors the relation of partnership between creature and creator, and is therefore the form of philosophizing that leads to discovery of the self in the reflection of the divine ground.

       What are the implications of the meditative structure, which mirrors the movement of reality, for reading a philosopher's life work? In 1943 Voegelin enjoined the reader to penetrate to the author's "point of transcendence" in order for the reader to school his own experiences of

transcendence. Applied to the task of trying to understand the life work of a philosopher this would call for the meditative reading of his later texts for an understanding of the philosopher's most differentiated experience of the human and divine poles of the meditation. Because the "point of transcendence" is not a "position", but an experience, cognitive and existential, to read in this manner is not to "impose" a later "position" on an earlier one, but to follow the structure of discovery itself.